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**McGRATH, SISTER ALBERTUS MAGNUS  
(Marion Cecily McGrath)**

January 4, 1911–October 8, 1978

PROFESSOR, HISTORIAN, FEMINIST

Marion Cecily McGrath, professor of history, feminist, and author of *What a Modern Catholic Believes about Women*, was born on Chicago's South Side, the last of seven children and the fourth of four daughters of Michael George and Nora (Keane) McGrath. Her parents were born in different towns of County Waterford, Ireland. They emigrated to the United States and met in Chicago, where they were married in 1892. Before her marriage, Nora Keane was employed as a cook for a well-to-do family. Michael McGrath worked as a salesman, providing a modest living for his large family.

Marion McGrath attended first Visitation and then St. Basil Grade School, skipping grades three and six, an early indication of her lively intelligence. She was twelve years old when she entered Visitation High School in 1923. She enrolled at Rosary College (became Dominican University in 1997) in River Forest, Illinois, in 1927 and graduated with a B.A. degree in 1931. Her areas of interest and concentration were history, English, Latin, and mathematics.

The Sinsinawa Dominican nuns exerted a profound influence on McGrath. From first grade through college she had been taught by these well-educated women, and it did not come as a surprise to her family and friends when McGrath decided to enter the Sinsinawa Dominican Congregation. Mother Emily Power and Mother Samuel Coughlin, the first two elected leaders of the congregation, placed a heavy emphasis on study and on excellence in teaching. Sinsinawa Dominicans taught at every level in schools throughout the United States. Sought by pastors trying to respond to the educational needs of the fast-growing immigrant church, they served in parish schools; the sisters also established educational institutions of their own, including Rosary College, founded in 1922 for Catholic women in the Chicago area.

After graduating from Rosary College, McGrath entered the Dominican novitiate at Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, taking the name Sister Albertus Magnus at the suggestion of the novice mistress who must have recognized in McGrath an independent spirit of inquiry. McGrath easily identified with her namesake, the thirteenth-century Dominican scientist and educator.

Sister Albertus Magnus first taught at Edgewood High School and at Edgewood College, Sinsinawa Dominican-sponsored educational institutions in Madison, Wisconsin. While continuing to teach history, English, Latin, and mathematics in the high school, and history and sociology at the college, she was asked by her religious superiors to enroll in the history department of the University of Wisconsin in 1937 for advanced study. In their emphasis on doctoral studies and in their choice of secular universities, the Sinsinawa Dominicans were forerunners in what would become more common among American sisterhoods only after Vatican Council II (1962–65). By 1947, twenty-seven Sinsinawa Dominican sisters had earned Ph.D. degrees and 184 had earned M.A. degrees from outstanding universities both in the United States and abroad, including Oxford University, England; the University of Fribourg, Switzerland; Yale and Columbia universities.

In Madison and at the university, Sister Albertus Magnus found herself in a milieu of progressive and reformist thinking and New Deal politics. As a lifelong Democrat, McGrath breathed easily in this atmosphere. Her research focused, however, not on American history or politics, but on modern Europe. She earned an M.A. in 1942, writing her thesis on Great Britain and the Weimar Republic; for her doctorate in history and English, completed in 1947, she wrote on the nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic movement.

In 1946, McGrath joined the history department at Rosary College, River Forest, Illinois. Seventy-three Sinsinawa Dominicans had faculty appointments at the college; others staffed the all-girls Trinity High School in the same village. McGrath became part of an extensive educational network of women re-



FIG. 75. Sister Albertus Magnus McGrath, at far right wearing glasses, and student sisters, Rosary College (now Dominican University), c. 1960.

ligious who supported and mentored one another. At the same time her appetite for learning was not sated; during summer sessions she studied in Fribourg, Switzerland, where Rosary College ran a junior-year-abroad program in conjunction with the university, and at Columbia and Harvard universities. The financing of such study among Sinsinawa Dominicans was possible because of simple living arrangements in convents and the combination of part-time study with teaching assignments. Any earnings from teaching not absorbed by their modest living needs were sent back to the motherhouse and placed in a common fund.

In 1965–66 Sister Albertus Magnus McGrath was granted a research fellowship at Yale Divinity School, where she studied the apostolate of women after the Industrial Revolution. Her interest in the history of women in Christianity paralleled the new research in women's history by secular scholars and the emergence of the women's movement. McGrath gave the keynote address at the national convention of Kappa Gamma Pi (Catholic women's graduate honor society), held in Chicago June 30–July 2, 1967. The convention theme, "Catholic Women Leaders—Genesis and Exodus," was the right context for McGrath's address, "Emphasis on Excellence, with Love and Anger." Here McGrath introduced, for the first time, ideas later fully developed in her book, *What a Modern Catholic Believes about Women* (1972). McGrath exhorted her audience to direct their energies toward civic and intellectual problems in the United States at the highest levels and to reject associations that were intellectually mediocre and morally shoddy. During this period McGrath continued to teach; her students selected her for Rosary's Excellence-in-Teaching Award in 1969.

McGrath's consciousness of discrimination against women predated the second wave of feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. A convergence of factors in the 1960s served to deepen her convictions and her determination to speak out for justice for women in church and society. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was one factor. Called by Pope John Paul XXIII, the council redefined the church in relation to its own members, to the world, and to other churches and religions. It precipitated a renewal of revolutionary proportions in every aspect of church thought and practice: liturgy, ministry, the exercise of authority, the role of the laity, and the understanding of religious life. Pope John Paul XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* recognized the changing role of women. He identified as one of the signs of the times women's determination to claim in both domestic and public life the rights and duties that befit human dignity.

The council was taking place at the same moment that the civil rights movement and the women's liberation movement were gaining momentum in the United States. Sister Albertus Magnus welcomed and helped popularize and disseminate the ideas unleashed by these three intersecting forces. Going further than the church fathers at the Second Vatican Council, she turned a critical eye on the institutional structures of the church as they affected women's struggle for self-determination. In a 1974 interview in *St. Anthony's Messenger*—"Are Women Oppressed in the Church?"—McGrath answered with a resounding "Yes"; and she did not hesitate to call herself a propagandist whose energy was often directed to challenging oppressive male structures in the church.

Based on solid historical research, *What a Modern Catholic*

*Believes about Women* had a powerful impact on women religious and laywomen alike. McGrath reveals the contempt with which women have often been treated in clerical circles despite declarations by the hierarchy of the equality of women and men as children of God. Jesus claimed women as friends and called them to be disciples, but she reminded her readers that the institutional church gradually eliminated women from official service as the organization and structure came to resemble that of the Roman Empire. In the book's final chapter, "Women as 'Niggers' of the Church," McGrath characterizes the Catholic Church as "over-protective of women on the one hand, and, on the other, as the land of the perpetual putdown of the feminine" (p. 100). McGrath used the derogatory term "nigger" to underline that damaging stereotypes kept both black persons and women of every race subordinate and servile. McGrath challenges the ban on the ordination of women, argues persuasively for a change in the tradition, and although not optimistic about how long such transformation would take, positions women to be "instruments of the Spirit to hasten this development in the direction of justice and love" (p. 115).

Already a popular speaker, after the publication of her book McGrath was sought after by sisters' councils and councils of Catholic women throughout the United States. Sisters' councils were formed after Vatican II to bring together women religious from various United States congregations to discuss adaptations of their ministries and community life and their changing conception of themselves as women and as religious. The mood of the times was one of excitement, discovery, growth, of courage, eloquence, and vision. Women religious were ready, but change was also painful, confusing, and conflictual. Sister Albertus Magnus played an important role in the dialogue among religious during this period of profound self-examination, serving as a trusted and inspiring role model. She also communicated to laywomen what was occurring among women religious.

On the national level, McGrath became an advocate for equal educational opportunities for women. Long aware of the inequities women experienced in higher education, she participated in 1971 in a month-long institute sponsored by the United States Office of Education. In *ex-CHANGE*, a Sinsinawa Dominican magazine, she publicized the information she had absorbed. In this way she linked her readers with the larger movement to strengthen federal support of higher education and equal opportunity for women. Although an ardent feminist, McGrath was valued by the Archdiocese of Chicago for her passion for justice and her objectivity. She served on the Chicago Archdiocesan Board of Conciliation and Arbitration in the 1970s, playing a leadership role within this body that considered parish disputes ranging from financial and personnel issues to theological and liturgical ones.

McGrath was an early member of the National Assembly of Women Religious (later the National Assembly of Religious Women—including both nuns and laywomen). In 1974 McGrath participated in discussions at Rosary College on the ordination of women in the Catholic Church that were initiated by Mary B. Lynch. McGrath attended the Women's Ordination Conference in 1976 and, by this date, was seen as a leading voice for Catholic women. Chicago Catholic Women, a feminist organization, selected McGrath to chair a meeting of the women

in Chicago for the purpose of gathering testimony to be transmitted to the National Call to Action. This position placed McGrath in the center of a supercharged, emotional debate within the church, since the Call to Action was a nationwide assembly of Catholics called by the bishops in the United States and charged with the responsibility of hearing from all sectors of American Catholicism.

McGrath, a member of the National Organization of Women (NOW) and an ardent proponent of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), went public—rare for religious women—with a pro-ERA advertisement in the *Chicago Sun-Times* that featured her photograph accompanied by the quote, "Sometimes I think Illinois seems almost past praying for when it comes to equality for women" (McGrath Papers, Sinsinawa Dominican Archives). Catholic laywoman Susan Catania—mother of seven daughters, lawyer, and member of the Illinois General Assembly from 1973 to 1983—was the principal sponsor of the ERA. After McGrath's death, Catania, chair of the Illinois Commission on the Status of Women, wrote to her colleague on the commission and president of Rosary College, Sister Candida Lund, that "the best way for us to honor her [McGrath] is to carry on with her crusade for equal rights for women in the Church and for the women's movement in general" (Catania to Lund, October 23, 1978, Rosary College Archives).

World peace was another social and political issue that engaged Sr. Albertus Magnus's dedicated attention; she was a member of the Catholic Association for International Peace. In 1958, she was invited to participate in a symposium sponsored by the ecumenical Church Peace Union, entering with evident delight into the wide-ranging discussion of foreign policy and world affairs.

In the last two years of her life, Sister Albertus Magnus began to show signs of what would later be diagnosed as chronic hydrocephalus. She fell on several occasions and developed a fear of falling. She spent much of the time from 1976 to 1978 at St. Dominic Villa, the Sinsinawa Dominican nursing care facility located in Dubuque, Iowa. She died at the nearby Mercy Health Center after a fall. She is buried at the cemetery at Sinsinawa Mound, Wisconsin.

The Eightieth Illinois General Assembly passed a resolution in memory of Sister Albertus Magnus McGrath on November 28, 1978, recognizing her work for the ERA and for women's rights in the church. McGrath exercised a profound influence on successive generations of students during her thirty-year tenure at Rosary College. She challenged her women students, especially, to use their intelligence to its fullest capacity and to use their hearts, daring, and instinct to transform unjust social structures.

*Sources.* The Sister Albertus Magnus McGrath Papers are in the Sinsinawa Dominican Archives, Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, and in the Rosary College Archives, River Forest, Illinois. At Sinsinawa, papers include correspondence, photographs, her writings, articles about her, reviews of her book, her lectures, and notes. There is also a Personal File with information on her family, mission assignments, obituary, and death certificate. A file at Rosary College Archives contains correspondence, press releases, faculty briefs, contracts, information on the Scholarship Fund set up in her honor, and the tributes delivered at her Memorial Mass Ser-

## McGrath

vice. Works by Sister Albertus Magnus McGrath include "Great Britain and the Weimar Republic" (master's thesis, Univ. of Wisconsin, 1942); "The History of the Anglo-Catholic Movement 1850–1875" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Wisconsin, 1946); *What a Modern Catholic Believes about Women* (1972), reprinted as *Women and the Church* (1976). An interview with her conducted by Jack Wintz, O.F.M., appears in the February 1974 issue of the *St. Anthony Messenger*.

KAYE ASHE, OP

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