FORCE OF HABIT: THE CONSTRUCTION AND NEGOTIATION OF
SUBJECTIVITY IN CATHOLIC NUNS

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There was also a Nun, a Prioress,
Her way of smiling very simple and coy.
Her greatest oath was only ‘By St Loy!’
And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.
And well she sang a service, with a fine
Intoning through her nose, as was most seemly,
And she spoke daintily in French, extremely,
After the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe;
French in the Paris style she did not know.
At meat her manners were well taught withal;
No morsel from her lips did she let fall,
Nor dipped her fingers in the sauce too deep;
But she could carry a morsel up and keep
The smallest drop from falling on her breast.
For courtliness she had a special zest,
And she would wipe her upper lip so clean
That not a trace of grease was to be seen
Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,
She reached a hand sedately for the meat.

Geoffrey Chaucer
Prologue, The Canterbury Tales
(Chaucer, c. 1386)
DEDICATION

For my parents
the first of my educators

and

for Nuns

who taught me to

read

write

and

play music.
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This research owes its inspiration to the many Nuns I have worked with professionally, to their stories of perseverance, dedication and commitment, often in the face of great personal struggle. I wish to acknowledge the Nuns who participated in this research, who generously told their stories, offered hospitality and reflected on their lives, at times laughing and crying as they did so. I thank each one of them for being part of this study. I also express gratitude to the Orders of Nuns in Australia and New Zealand who contributed funds, in-kind support, enthusiasm, encouragement and praying hearts to the research, and to the Australian Conference of Religious for use of their resources. Particularly I am indebted to my own Religious Order, the Sisters of St Joseph, Lochinvar, to the Leadership Teams and to individual Sisters for their interest in and assistance with the study, and for encouragement throughout its progress.

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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTIFICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Megan P. Brock
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ABSTRACT

While a woman’s identity is constructed on multiple sites, it is the Catholic Church which constructs, regulates and ascribes meaning to the life of the Catholic Nun. In this thesis, which adopts a Foucauldian and feminist approach, an examination of six important Church texts relating to Nuns’ lives identifies three dominant discursive constructions of Nun, namely the Nun as called by God, to sacrifice her life, and to work for the Church in its mission. Individual and focus group interview data from a sample of 43 Nuns in Australia and New Zealand is examined for ways in which Nuns negotiate such constructions in their experience of being Nuns. The Church’s discursive truths of what it is to be Nun, learnt during the process of subjectification of the Novitiate or training process, continue to be taken up by Nuns in this study. Functioning as the Institutional Self, they position themselves as docile Church women, loyal to the Church and its mission. However, they also resist the Church’s truths and material practices for their lives, functioning as the Individuated Self, a self refusing to be regulated by such truths and material practices laid down by the Church. Nuns in this study show evidence of adopting fluid positioning, functioning neither wholly as Institutional Self nor as Individuated Self, since they give accounts of both taking up and resisting the Church’s constructions of Nun. However, it is in the position of resistance that they contribute to the creation of new notions of what it is to be ‘Nun’, namely the Nun as an autonomous woman, exercising personal agency in her life, and working not necessarily for the Church, but for the poor and the marginalised in the world.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an examination of the dominant discursive constructions of Nun in the Catholic Church, and of the ways in which a sample of Nuns in Australia/New Zealand negotiate such constructions in their lived experience of being Nuns. Nuns in Australia/New Zealand today live their lives in the context of multiple and contradictory discursive constructions of Nun, fleshed out partly by representations and images of Nuns which exist in Church and society. Little is known of the relationship between the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun, and the lived experiences of Nuns in Australia/New Zealand. Indeed, there is no empirical research examining these issues in relation to Nuns in Australia/New Zealand.

Although the term ‘Nun’ has a specific, narrow application in church law, it is used in this thesis to refer to Religious Sisters belonging to Orders which live and work in the world. Since the canonical distinction between ‘Nun’ and ‘Religious Sister’ is rarely understood outside the Catholic Church, the commonly used term ‘Nun’ will be adopted through this thesis when referring to Religious Sisters. There is a language known to and understood by Nuns, but not necessarily by others even within the church, which is intrinsic to Church discourse for Nuns and which is used throughout this thesis. A list of Church terms specific to the life of Nuns, together with a brief lay-person’s explanation appears in Appendix A.
In this Chapter, a brief overview of the background to the research, including representations of Nuns in society and the emergence of Orders of Nuns in the Church’s history will be presented. Against this background, the research question, the research method and the epistemological framework for the thesis will be outlined. The Foucauldian notion of subjectivity and ways in which Nuns in this sample experienced the process of subjectification in becoming a Nun are then explored. Finally the researcher analyses her own positioning within the research, introducing her reflexive voice as the ‘Insider’s Voice’.

1.1 Background to the research

This is important research for the Catholic Church in Australia/New Zealand in its exploration of the experiences of the Australian/New Zealand Nun participants, particularly at a time when new membership of Orders is dwindling significantly (Barnett, 2005; Ebaugh, 1993) and questions are being asked worldwide, as well as in the Australia/New Zealand context, about whether particular Orders might cease to exist, and how this could be avoided (Barnett, 2005; Briggs, 2006). However, this present research has significance beyond the Catholic Church. Nuns in the Church are also women. While some studies have explored the experiences of women in other patriarchal religious systems (Baraitser, 2006; Daly, 1999), Nuns as women whose lives are situated in and regulated by the patriarchal institution which is the Catholic Church, have not been the focus of empirical research to the same degree. In taking a critical feminist approach to both Church documents and Nuns’ accounts, this study explores
issues of sexuality, gender and embodiment for women whose lives are defined and regulated by powerful male authority within the Church, an institution which sets a “singular discourse for women” (Weedon, 1997), a discourse which positions women as subordinate to men (O'Brien, 2005). This research applies a Foucauldian analysis of Church documents, to locate the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of woman as ‘Nun’, and also to explore individual Nuns’ negotiation of subjectivity within the patriarchal institution of the Church.

1.1.1 Representation of Nuns in society

Although it is the Church which defines and regulates the lives of Nuns, they are also represented in different ways in society through film and media. In spite of the fact that there are fewer Nuns in the Western world than there once were (McLean, 2003), the lives of Nuns hold a fascination in society. Images of Nuns, particularly those dressed in habits, continue to be presented in print media, on television, in films and on the internet (Matthews, 1999; Morris, 2005, 2007; Wolff, 1991). For many decades, Hollywood has fed the curiosity and interest in Nuns with numerous films about them, though there have been changes to the way in which Nuns have been represented (Matthews, 1999; Wolff, 1991). While the Nun was represented as serene, self-sacrificing, domestic servant of God and the Church in films such as The Bells of St Mary’s (1945), The Nun’s Story (1959), and The Sound of Music (1965), she was also depicted as politically active in The Trouble with Angels (1966) and as the fearless advocate in Dead Man Walking (1995), a film based on the published diary recollections of a Nun.
working with prisoners on death row in a USA prison (Prejean, 1996). Other films such as Agnes of God (1985), Sister Act (1992, 1993) and the TV series The Flying Nun (1967-1970), have presented Nuns as either subjects of laughter and ridicule, or as trite and superficial, able to be imitated by anyone who simply donned a habit, but bearing little resemblance to Nuns in real life (Sullivan, 1999).

Representations of Nuns as objects of ridicule and humour are prevalent in popular culture and on the internet, in sites such as www.thejokeyard.com, www.sex.com.au, and www.ehumorcentral.com, which represent Nuns as simplistic, naïve, old fashioned, infantile and irrelevant to the world. The following is an example of one such representation, sent as a joke to the researcher over the internet by friends who were not Nuns, but who knew of the research study.
The humour in this pictorial representation of Nuns circulating on the internet derives from the juxtapositioning of body images. The Nuns, seated on stools at a drinks bar, are dressed in black, their habits fully covering their female bodies, rendering them shapeless and undefined. The complex head-dress completely covers the hair and head. Except for their faces and hands, their female, sexual bodies are hidden from view, protected from the gaze of the world and hidden even from themselves. Clearly recognizable as Nuns by their habits, their bodies are represented as devoid of sexuality, sexual desire and sexual expression. It is incongruous enough that habited Nuns are pictured on stools at an outdoor drinks bar, but the absurdity and humour in this representation of Nuns arises from the fact that they are perched on sexy-legged bar stools.
Nuns in habits are represented here as not having body parts except face and hands. They do not have legs fully visible, let alone legs that are sexually alluring, or provocatively presented in seamed or patterned stockings and stiletto heels. The legs of the Nuns in this image, glimpsed between the provocative legs of the bar stools, are covered in black stocking, long black habits and black, low-heeled shoes. The angle of the photograph, defining the outline of the bar stools as well as drawing attention to the Nuns’ buttocks, represents the Nuns as sexual women, a positioning at odds with the notion of the Nun as called to live a life of sexual sacrifice. Represented here is the notion of the Nun as part virginal, docile and self-sacrificing and part real, sexual, female-bodied woman. Here, the habit is only part of the ‘truth’ of the Nun’s life. The viewer is invited to laugh at the absurdity of the Nun represented as sexual, embodied woman.

While such representations of Nuns circulate in society, it is not the media or the internet or public opinion, however, but the Church which determines what it is to be a Nun, and what are the ‘appropriate’ material practices for Nuns’ lives.

1.2 Positioning of Researcher

As a psychologist with many years’ clinical experience of working with Nuns, amongst others, my interest in and dedication to the research arose in the first place, and has been sustained throughout, by my exposure to the stories, passions, and struggles of Nuns’ lives. This research has also had an impact on me as a Nun, and has raised issues
of my own subjective positioning (Heron, 2005) in relation to the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun. Values, ideas, and assumptions about the world of Nuns, shaped by my own involvement in that world, as well as by what I bring to and take away from the research, is explored and described through a process of personal and epistemological reflexivity throughout the thesis.

In the course of this research, my voice as the researcher, the ‘outsider’s voice’ has been in conversation with the ‘insider’s voice’, my voice as a Nun (Eppley, 2006; Pillow, 2003). In examining the writings of Amish culture by a member of the Amish community, Eppley (2006), argues that for a researcher, neither the insider nor the outside position is fixed, but rather the researcher adopts a ‘fluid’ positioning. As a Nun, adopting a ‘fluid’ positioning in this research, I bring my own body, its voice, its experience, its emotions, its struggles to this research. My own experience of the research has been recorded as field notes throughout its every stage. In this way, I am included in the research (Humphreys, 2005), visible to the reader (Bolam, Gleeson, & Murphy, 2003), and stand respectfully alongside the Nuns who have entrusted their voices and their stories to this research.

There are times in this thesis when I will speak as Nun, rather than as researcher. While giving voice to the Nun participants, I will also give voice to my own experience in a process of critical reflection which “allows readers to ‘speak back’ to the text and engage in questioning that is different from the dialogue possible in simple confessional-
tale or truth-claim accounts” (Pillow, 2003). So in this thesis, at the end of each Chapter, I will speak as Nun, as ‘The Insider’s Voice’.

1.3 ‘Nun’ within the framework of the Church

While Hollywood and the media represent Nuns in particular ways to the world outside the Catholic Church, the discursive constructions of Nun, the “coherent system of meanings” (Parker, 1992) which create the discursive object, ‘Nun’, and which is embodied in both written and spoken texts, arise within and are constituted by the Catholic Church itself. The discursive truths about Nuns, about what it is to be a Nun, how Nuns are to present themselves to the world, how they should and do position themselves in relation to the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun, are examined in this present study through a Foucauldian/feminist analysis of specific Church texts relating to their lives, and of accounts that Nuns in Australia/New Zealand give of their experience of being Nuns.

In Foucauldian terms, truths and knowledge within society have a history, one which is “closely related to the way in which operations and relations of power have been transformed” over time (Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000). Truth and knowledge, thought of in these terms, are not static, but develop and change over time as a function of the power of the institution to regulate the lives of individuals within it. The construction and material practices of ‘Nun’ have also changed over time, particularly since the Second Vatican Council, a meeting of all the Bishops of the world, known as
and referred to in this thesis as Vatican II, which took place in Rome from 1962-1965. Before Vatican II material practices such as wearing uniform dress called ‘habits’, living communally in buildings known as ‘convents’, having limited contact with the world outside the convent, adopting a new name upon becoming a Nun, and so on, were universally applicable to Nuns worldwide (Abbo & Hannan, 1952; MacGinley, 2002).

Since Vatican II, which directed Nuns to adapt their lifestyle, dress, and relationship to and engagement with the world beyond the convent (Abbott, 1966), material practices of their lives have changed and been adapted to local conditions in which Nuns live and work. Many Nuns in Australia/New Zealand, as in other parts of the world, for example, no longer wear habits; many do not live communally in convents, and others work outside the Church altogether (Wittberg, 2000). Women who became Nuns before or at the time of Vatican II experienced a life characterised by material practices which demanded conformity and uniformity (Abbo & Hannan, 1952), with very little room for the expression of individuality. In the more than 40 years since Vatican II, the material practices of Nuns’ lives have continued to adapt and change, sometimes attracting attention in the media and the disapproval of Church authorities (Australian Catholic Bishops, 1998; Briggs, 2006; Morris, 2007).

This thesis focuses on Nuns in Australia/New Zealand belonging to Apostolic Orders in the Church. Apostolic Orders of both women and men, whose members engage in works of the Church beyond their convent/monastery walls, emerged from earlier forms of Religious Life and continue to exist alongside Orders which remain enclosed in their...
convents or monasteries and do not engage directly with the world. What follows is a brief summary from their beginnings to the present day, of the emergence of Apostolic Orders of Nuns.

1.3.1 The Emergence of Apostolic Religious Orders

Religious life emerged in the Catholic Church in the Middle East in the early centuries of Christianity (Catholic Church, 1995). The monastic movement of Religious Life, founded by St Benedict in the 5th Century and still continuing today, is characterised by communal living, a withdrawal from interaction with the world and long hours spent in prayer. The 13th Century saw the emergence of Orders such as the Franciscan Friars and Franciscan Nuns, who combined communal living and prayer with moving out into the community beyond their monasteries, to beg for food and alms to sustain their lives. Even as recently as the 20th Century, in the 1917 Code of Canon Law, (Abbo & Hannan, 1952), the Church was legislating for methods of ‘collecting alms’, outlining separate rules for female and male members of Religious Orders. According to the 1917 Code of Canon Law, Nuns should “never be sent out alone … they are to abstain from merely social visits … the modesty owing their state undoubtedly requires not only their avoiding taverns but also their staying away from sporting events, particularly horse races” (Abbo & Hannan, 1952, Canon 624). While male Religious were free to move about unimpeded, Nuns’ ‘modesty’ was said to be in danger if they should frequent sporting or social venues, or even venture outside the Convent alone.
From the 16th Century onwards, new Religious Orders, the Apostolic Congregations, began to emerge in the Church. Their works of teaching, nursing, and caring for the poor and sick, took their members outside their convent and monastery walls (O'Murchu, 1991). The Church acknowledges “the outstanding service rendered by religious families in the propagation of the faith and in the formation of new Churches: from the ancient monastic institutions to the medieval orders, all the way to the more recent [Orders]” (1995, para 927). All 43 Nun participants in the present study belong to Apostolic Orders which were founded either in Europe or Australia during the latter part of the 19th Century and which have given such ‘outstanding service’ in the Church in Australia/New Zealand (H. M. Carey, 1998; MacGinley, 2002; O'Brien, 1997).

1.3.2 20th Century Religious Life

Until 1983 when it was revised, the 1917 Code of Canon Law, the official regulatory law of the Church, legislated for Nuns’ lives. In addition, each Order had also its own particular Rules and Constitutions, approved by Rome, by which specific material practices of Nuns’ lives were regulated. Once the Church had approved these Rules and Constitutions, the Order could, on the Church’s behalf, accept the vows of women becoming Nuns. In this way, the woman’s profession of vows as a Nun became “both a quasi-contract between the [Nun] and God, legally recognized by the Church, and a bilateral contract between the [Nun] and the [Order]” (Abbo & Hannan, 1952, p. 589). The Order’s authority derived directly from the Church which controlled and regulated Nuns’ training regimes, work, movement, dress and lifestyle.
In the 1940’s, Pope Pius XII was urging Orders of both women and men to update professional training for their members, and to modify their Rules and Constitutions. By 1954, an institute of theological studies for Nuns, Regina Mundi, had been established in Rome, an indication at least that Rome was recognising the right and the need for women to study theology, a right previously denied them. At the same time, an Australian Nun was appointed for the first time to the Commission of Superiors-General in Rome (MacGinley, 2002). While Nuns were beginning to be educated both theologically and professionally, at the same time, a Bishop could still, “demand obedience by the imposition of penalties” in all matters to which they were still subject to him (Abbo & Hannan, 1952, Canon 619).

1.3.3 Vatican II and its influence on Apostolic Religious Orders

The Second Vatican Council, (Vatican II), held in Rome from 1962-1965, irrevocably changed the material practices of Nuns throughout the world. Pope John XXIII called together all the Bishops of the world “to give the Church the possibility to contribute more efficaciously to the solution of the problems of the modern age” (Pope John XXIII, 1961, quoted in Abbott, 1966, p. 705). Vatican II addressed itself to all aspects of Church life, including the life of Nuns. According to O’Murchu (1991), a Religious priest and social psychologist, Vatican II in its document on Religious Life, “Perfectae Caritatis” (Abbott, 1966), reaffirmed the ‘theology of Religious Life’. At the same time it urged Orders of Nuns to update their Rules and Constitutions which were
still, however, subject to the official approval of the Church. In addition, Orders were to begin a period of experimentation to update certain material practices of their lives, adapting the way their members lived, dressed and worked so as to be more in keeping with the conditions of the times. Vatican II also urged Superiors to train their members rigorously, not just through facilitating the tertiary education of Nuns, but through encouraging an engagement with the wider world so that they “should be properly instructed in the prevailing manners of contemporary social life, and in its characteristic ways of feeling and thinking” (Abbott, 1966, p. 479). The opportunity for professional, spiritual and theological education experienced by the Australian/New Zealand Nuns who participated in the present research study has its genesis in the thinking and instructions of Vatican II.

1.3.4 Post-Vatican II Religious Life: the Australian/New Zealand context

There are approx 6,350 Catholic Nuns in Australia, and 950 Nuns in New Zealand, most belonging to Apostolic Orders which live and work in the world. In the last 40 years since Vatican II, Nuns in Australia/New Zealand have adapted their dress, changed their styles of living and taken up work in diverse areas beyond the traditional areas of work for Nuns of teaching/nursing/social work. The Australian television series “Brides of Christ” (Chapman, 1991), a fictional program which followed the daily life of a young Australian woman who became a Nun at the time of the Vatican II changes, and focusing on tensions as the Nuns’ community negotiated the changes, attracted a
wide viewing audience and aroused great interest at a time when Nuns were more numerous and more visible in Australian/New Zealand society than they are today.

While the material practices of Nuns’ lives today are markedly different from those of pre-Vatican II times, the Church still defines Religious Life as being distinguished by “its liturgical character, public profession of the evangelical counsels, fraternal life led in common and witness given to the union of Christ with the Church” (Catholic Church, 1995, p. 264). MacGinley (2002, p. 336), in writing about Orders of Nuns in Australia, argues that “those women Religious who assumed the initiative for change clearly indicated that they were contemporary women, part of and in interaction with their own world.” None of the participants in the present study wears a habit, while 49% of the participants live alone, and 16% of them work outside the Church altogether.

However, this is not a situation accepted without criticism on the part of the Church hierarchy. During a five-yearly formal visit to Rome by the Bishops of Australia in 1998, Pope John Paul II expressed disapproval of the ways in which members of Religious Orders in Australia are representing themselves today, and the changed material practices of their lives. The Australian Catholic Bishops published a Statement of Conclusions (1998) which echoes the concerns of the Pope. While this document is addressed to all women and men in Religious Orders, the following comments relate to ways in which this document and its concerns are taken up by Nuns. It speaks to Nuns’ living alone, for example, as “fragment[ing] the life and witness of an [Order]”. Their
Statement also casts a disapproving gaze over the way members of Religious Orders in Australia are living and working, reminding them that:

It is not enough that individual members of [Orders] engage in employment in the secular sphere and find living accommodations singly. It is not enough that religious engage in any work whatsoever, even if they do this 'in the spirit of the founder'. Such general dispersal of members and of energies prejudices the corporate witness of an [Order]. (Australian Catholic Bishops, 1998, para 29)

Implied here is a sense that Religious Life is ‘fragmenting’ at the hands of Nuns who exercise some autonomy in their lives, since Nuns are taking initiatives to move outside the regulation of the Church in seeking work outside the Church and in living singly. The criticisms by the Australian Catholic Bishops also point, in some degree, to the extent to which what is described as the ‘general dispersal of members and of energies’ actually exists. Such ‘dispersal’ is considered widespread enough in the minds of Roman and Australian Church officials, as to warrant a strong criticism from them, and an expectation that Superiors of Nuns’ Orders should deal with what the Church deems to be an unacceptable reality.

The emergence of Orders which live and work in the world, the observable changes in the ways in which Nuns represent themselves in that world and the particular context of Nuns living and working in Australia/New Zealand provides the background against which the research question is focused.
1.4 Focus of Present Study

This thesis addresses the following research questions: firstly, what are the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun, and secondly, how, and with what consequences, do Nuns in this Australian/New Zealand sample negotiate the Church’s constructions of Nun?

The first focus of the thesis applies a Foucauldian/feminist approach, in analysing six important Church texts relating to Nuns’ lives to identify what the Church says it is to be ‘Nun’. The thesis then addresses the second research question, namely, how and with what consequences are Nuns negotiating these constructions in their lived experience of being Nuns. It applies a Foucauldian/feminist approach to the analyses of the interview data of a sample of 43 Nuns in Australia and New Zealand.

1.5 Epistemological Framework

This study adopts a Foucauldian and a feminist approach (Deveaux, 1994; Macleod & Durrheim, 2002). From a Foucauldian point of view, the Catholic Church can be conceptualised as an institution which constructs and regulates the world in which women who are Nuns live and function. The material practices associated with Nun’s lives, such as those related to the communal life, the vows, prayer, finance, governance and so on, are invested with meaning by the Church. They function to regulate the lives of Nuns and to reproduce the Church’s notions of what it is to be a Nun. Before
examining this argument in more depth, the major tenets of Foucauldian and feminist epistemology will be outlined.

1.5.1 Foucauldian Discourse Approach

The Foucauldian approach to research proposes that discourses, or systems of meaning, frame and regulate the lives of individuals (Foucault, 1979). Discourses, within which individuals understand and make sense of their experience, are produced and policed by social institutions (Burr, 2003) such as medical, educational and religious institutions. In these terms, it is the institution of the Church which creates the Nun as a discursive subject (Marvasti, 2004), ascribing meaning to her life and regulating her life and exercising power over her through particular material practices it deems appropriate for Nuns.

Power within discourse is said to be pervasive (Bartky, 1997). It resides not only in authority roles within institutions, but it permeates the whole institution, exercising control over individuals, and thereby positioning them as docile ‘subjects’, bodies which “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” within social institutions (Foucault, 1979). The discursive power operates in particular and various ways. Drawing on Bentham’s model of the Panopticon, the system of surveillance designed to control, subdue and render docile the bodies of prisoners in the 18th Century Prison System, Foucault (1979) describes discursive power as operating through external surveillance, as well as through self-surveillance.
Surveillance functions to regulate the behaviour of discursive subjects (Danaher et al., 2000). Certain individuals functioning within institutions or social systems, such as police, Principals in schools, or Superiors in Nuns’ lives, are invested with the function of surveillance, a disciplinary technique for regulating subjectivity and behaviour (Foucault, 1979; K. J. Gergen, 1999). In modern society, surveillance cameras on buildings, roads, public transport and open spaces, casting monitoring eyes over individuals, convey, like the Panopticon (Foucault, 1979), a disciplinary gaze which functions to regulate their behaviour.

However, the disciplinary gaze of surveillance is not only external. Discursive power functions to create individuals who learn to internalise the disciplinary gaze: self-policing subjects who learn to regulate their own behaviour (Bartky, 1997; O’Grady, 2005). The internalised gaze, the internal voice, constantly observes, monitors and casts a critical eye over one’s own behaviour. Once the gaze is internalised, self-surveillance is the most ‘economical’ form of surveillance (Danaher et al., 2000) because there is less need for external surveillance mechanisms to regulate behaviour. The reference points for regulated behaviour, whether monitored by external surveillance or the internalised gaze, are regimes of knowledge or discursive ‘truths’ (Rose, 1996).

Discourses create regimes of knowledge (K. J. Gergen, 1999; Rose, 1996) which work to regulate discursive subjects (Parker, 1992) and which individuals come to believe as ‘truth’. Disciplinary power (Bartky, 1997; Danaher et al., 2000) operates to
confirm, legitimise and reinforce these ‘truths’ which regulate the behaviour of individuals. Representations in popular culture, medicine, psychology and the law, for example, legitimise and reinforce ‘truths’ for women about the ‘good mother’, caring and sacrificing herself for her husband and children (Ussher, 2003), or the ‘good wife’, being sexually available to her husband according to his sexual needs (Potts, Grace, Gavey, & Vares, 2004). In the same way, Church discourse lays down certain ‘truths’ about what it is to be a Nun, truths which are located in the language of texts, and which function to regulate their behaviour. However, the subjectivity of individuals is regulated not only by regimes of knowledge, discursive ‘truths’ but by material practices as well (Bartky, 1997; Rose, 1996).

The behaviours, movements, physical location, dress, and even the body itself, can be regulated by discursive and material practices (Bartky, 1997; Grosz, 1995). Danaher et al (2000, p. 64), speak of modern technologies developed by human sciences as directed towards “analysing, controlling, regulating and defining the human body and its behaviour”. Even the physical layouts of institutional settings, such as the lecture theatre, the court of law, or the church, communicate discursive truths and power relations, which regulate how individuals are expected to function (Weedon, 1997). In a court, for example, ‘truths’ of legal discourse, such as the location of power, how lay people should relate to court officials, how individuals are ranked within society (Danaher et al., 2000), as well as what kind of behaviour is deemed appropriate, can be communicated by the physical setting. Individuals, then, are defined and regulated
within institutions by discursive ‘truths’ and material practices, as discourse functions to exercise control over them.

The individual, the ‘discursive subject’ exists as an effect of the process of subjectification (Davies, Flemmen, Gannon, Laws, & Watson, 2002), the process whereby “human beings have come to recognise themselves as certain kinds of creatures” (Rose, 1996, p. 11). It has been described by Davies et al (2002, p. 23) as a discursive resource whereby “minute accretions of everyday practices can generate sedimentations of lines of force that may also be understood as a state of domination”. Through the process of subjectification a woman, for example, comes to recognise herself and be recognised as a ‘good mother’ in social discourse. In the same way, in the process of subjectification initiated during the Novitiate or training process, a woman entering Religious Life comes to recognise herself and be recognised by others as a ‘certain kind of creature’ who is a Nun.

As discursive subjects, individuals are constructed and regulated by the power and the disciplinary resources of society, and of institutions within which they live. There are, however, a number of discourses available to individuals, a number of different and sometimes competing discourses within which individuals function as discursive subjects (Burr, 2003). The Nun exists, for example, within Church discourse as Nun at the same time as functioning within social discourses as woman, professional worker, or daughter; she functions in the medical discourse as patient, in the economic discourse as consumer and so on. While individuals can take up positioning from other discourses
(Parker, 1992), such alternate discourses also function to regulate the lives of discursive subjects, competing for control of their lives.

Individuals are not only positioned by discourse, but they also position themselves within discourse (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 2002), as they take up or resist ways in which they are constructed by regimes of truth and material practices. How individuals represent themselves, how they are portrayed by others, and how they take up or resist discursive truths, are also discursive practices (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999). While it may appear, then, that individuals’ functioning and behaviour may be fixed by discourse, they can and do exercise agency. Rose (1996, p. 187) speaks of agency as “a distributed outcome of particular technologies of subjectification that invoke human beings as subjects of a certain type of freedom and supply the norms and techniques by which that freedom is to be recognised, assembled, and played out in specific domain”. In exercising agency, discursive subjects, act and speak from different positioning available to them. According to Tracy (2005, p. 188) "a space for agency lies in the ability to traverse, intersect, and hold in tension competing discourses and attendant ways of being." Accounts of individuals’ experiences reflect the way they think of themselves and act as discursive subjects, indicating ways in which they take up or resist dominant discursive constructions of their lives (Hollway, 1984).

One way in which individuals not only exercise agency, but increase the possibility of creating new regimes of discursive ‘truth’, is to challenge discursive truths and
material practices through resistance. However, as Weedon (1997, p.108) has argued, “it may take extreme and brave actions on the part of the agents of challenge to achieve even small shifts in the balance of power” in institutions. The emergence of the discursive subject who is resistant to dominant discursive constructions of the individual, involves that transforming subject in a “subjective movement through which we unmoor our embodied selves from those discourses we have worked on deconstructively to make them unthinkable” (Davies et al., 2006, p. 180). It is in this process of resistance, of deconstruction that the individual, aware of the oppressive power of harmful discourses, works to re-fashion and relocate the self outside of oppressive discursive power, thereby increasing in the process, the social power of newly emerging discursive truths.

Meaning and knowledge are discursively constituted through language (Gavey, 1989, p. 463). Ways in which individuals are positioned and position themselves within discourse, and the consequences of subjective positioning, are made available to the researcher through an analysis of the language of texts (Rose, 1996; Weedon, 1997). The researcher questions the text itself (Parker, 1999), analysing beyond the stories and the accounts of the individual’s experience, exploring how the individual represents herself through the text. In exploring how discourse emerges, how it functions and how it changes, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Parker, 1999; J. A. Smith, 2003; Willig, 2001) maps the world represented by discourse, as well as exploring ways in which individuals negotiate subjective positioning within discourse. In mapping the world represented by Church discourse in relation to Nuns’ lives, the researcher asks questions
like: What are the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of the Nun? How does the Nun take up and/or resist certain discursive truths and regulatory material practices set down for her by the Church? What new ‘truths’ of what it is to be a Nun emerge from Nuns’ taking up the subjective position of resistance? What are the consequences for the Nun of taking up or resisting the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of the Nun?

In the present study, Church texts relevant to Nuns’ lives are examined, to identify from them the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun, that is, what the Church says it is to be ‘Nun’. Secondly, accounts of Nuns’ own experience of being ‘Nun’ are analysed to explore ways in which they negotiate these dominant discursive constructions of Nun, and the consequences of their subjective positioning in taking up and/or resisting the Church’s discursive constructions of ‘Nun’.

Foucault himself, however, in exploring the relationship between power, subjectivity and institutions (Foucault, 1979; S. Mills, 2003), did not take into account the challenges for women negotiating power and subjectivity within patriarchal institutions, such as the Catholic Church (Bartky, 1997; Grosz, 1995). For this reason, then, this thesis will also draw on feminist theory and methodology.
1.5.2 Feminist Approach

Foucault has been criticised by feminist researchers for ignoring the different ways in which women and men relate to and are dealt with by institutions in society (Bartky, 1997). Because in Foucauldian terms, women and men are deemed to be subjected to the same disciplinary practices within discourses, Foucault has been accused of being “blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine” (Bartky, 1997, p. 132). Within patriarchal institutions, men regulate the lives of women. In the Church, for example, all positions of ultimate power and authority are occupied by men. While discursive power does not necessarily reside in particular individuals, but is ‘located in the ordinary’, and circulates through the whole system (K. J. Gergen, 1999), in patriarchal institutions such as the Church, it is men who create the discursive truths which construct and regulate the lives of women, Nuns, within that system (A. J. Mills & Ryan, 2001).

Recent research in psychology has been widely influenced by feminist theory and practice, which continues to develop as a framework for acknowledging the embodied link between epistemology and ontology (Birke, 1999). Feminist research takes into account the experience of women and in particular, the ways in which their lives are constructed and experienced within the context of discursive frameworks regulating their femininity and the woman’s body (P. Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994). Feminist research is not driven by the search for objective truth, even if such a reality exists (Gavey, 1989). Rather, in addressing the relationship between matter,
subjectivity and sociality, feminist research focuses on exploring a diversity of discursive ‘truths’ embedded in the experiences of women and men, and in assisting women and men to express these ‘truths’ (Chouliaraki, 2002). Feminist research argues against the possibility of divorcing the individual from their world, and from the influences of that world on their experience (Chase & Bell, 1994). Research which focuses on women’s experience takes into account that patriarchal social institutions such as the Catholic Church have a particular impact on the experience of women as women. As Gavey (1989) puts it, a feminist hermeneutic in research “uncovers different truths”, truths which are different from the truths created within patriarchal institutions.

Feminist research invariably identifies women’s experience as the focus of study (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998), offering an alternate to the previously dominant epistemology of research in psychology. It strives to “capture women’s lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women’s voices as sources of knowledge” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 783). This present study is thus conducted from a feminist perspective as it focuses on a particular group of women who are Nuns, exploring the experience of their lives, legitimating their voices, their stories and their experiences (Chase & Bell, 1994). This study examines the subjective experience of a group of women whose experience as women normally “falls outside patriarchal frameworks of understanding” (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 191) and whose lives as Nuns are regulated by the Church’s patriarchal framework, where the dominant symbolism is masculine and where there exists a cultural privileging of male over female (Gross, 2003).
The present study, then, adopts an approach which acknowledges Nuns as gendered discursive subjects, women whose lives are discursively constructed and regulated by and within the patriarchal institution of the Church. It applies a critical, feminist focus to the patriarchal, male-privileged Church world in which the Nun’s experience is framed. The Foucauldian and feminist epistemological approaches inform the methodological framework of the research. It is the Church’s discursive construction of Nun, and the negotiation of such constructions by a sample of Nuns that is examined in this thesis. The structure of the thesis is outlined below.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The Thesis is structured in the following way: Chapter 2 presents a review of the empirical literature relating to Nuns, research which, for the most part, emanates from Europe or the United States, and which to date focuses largely on mental health and lifestyle issues for Nuns. In Chapter 3, an analysis of six important Church documents pertaining to Nuns’ lives identifies and examines three dominant discursive constructions of Nun located in these documents, namely the Nun as called by God, to be self-sacrificing and work for the Church. Chapter 4 is a preface to the following to Chapters 5 and 6, outlining methods used for gathering and analysing interview material. Chapter 5 analyses ways in which Nuns in this sample take up the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of their lives, exploring firstly participants’ experience of learning subject positioning as Nuns. The analysis in Chapter 5 is organised under three themes, namely the self as docile Church woman, as loyal Church
woman and as servant of the Church. Chapter 6 examines ways in which participants in this study resist dominant Church constructions of Nun in their lived experience of being Nuns. It explores themes of the self as exercising personal agency, the self as autonomous and the self as woman. The Conclusion draws together the findings of the research, and points to directions in which future research could explore the negotiation of subjectivity within other patriarchal and/or religious contexts.
1.7 The Insider’s Voice

There are many different voices speaking in this research, the voices of the participants I interviewed. However, without the voice of the researcher, there is one important modality unavailable to the reader. It is the voice of the Nun who is researcher as well as Nun. I’m thinking of reflexivity in terms of the skill of playing a Bach organ fugue. I remember my organ teacher asking me during one lesson, to trace the subject, the fugal voice, through the Bach fugue I was learning. The fugal voice is always there, but it needs to be in the mind and consciousness of the organist throughout. It is the organist’s task to allow the fugal voice to be heard wherever it exists at any moment. Just as in a Bach fugue, where the fugal voice speaks and is heard, no matter how hidden, so the researcher’s voice exists in the research. All voices in the research interrelate. All have their chance to speak their fugal voice. If one or other part is denied this chance, there is a thin-ness in what is heard, a lack of consistency, a voice which is lost to the whole. It’s not like a harmony where notes enhance the melody line; it is a fugue where there is a ‘subject’ expressed by different voice parts, where very voice part has an opportunity, a capacity, a right to speak its subject. I too will speak my voice, the voice of the ‘insider’ in this research.

The following records in visual as well as written form, something of my own lived experience of the changed material practices of being a Nun before and since the changes of Vatican II.
The researcher in the late 1960’s

The changes brought about by Vatican II did not reach the Order I joined until the late 1960’s. This photograph of me was taken immediately prior to those changes. The habit pictured above was made of black woollen serge material, heavily pleated across the front and back of the body and was worn in both summer and winter. Our heads were shaved as a sign that vanity had been renounced (Woods, 1901). The upper halves of our bodies were encased in five layers of clothing. Unlike Orders of men where the habit was a single garment worn over trousers and shirts, and which could be removed at the end of the working day or at weekends, our habits were our permanent clothes. We stayed in these clothes from the time of rising early in the morning, until the time of retiring, when we donned long white nightgowns and white night caps to cover our shaved heads. We had no other clothes available to wear except these habits, and our shaved heads ensured that we remained fully habited both in public and in private.
The researcher in late 1960’s, in the ‘new look’

The habit began to change after Vatican II when permission was given for us to grow and show our hair. The habit itself is still long, black and pleated but the head and neck have been emancipated from the cumbersome head-dress. Hair was still short and under control, but visible at the front of a veil which was to be worn at all times, even in the Convent. When the changes finally came, some Nuns had not had sufficient time to grow their hair, so took longer to change into the ‘new look’. Some obvious religious symbols like rosary beads, crucifix and thick leather belt disappeared.

However, the manner of dress was not the only material practice to change at this time. This photograph was taken on a university campus. After Vatican II, Nuns in my Order were afforded the opportunity for tertiary education immediately after the
Novitiate, or training period. The briefcase became the symbol of the Nun’s tentative move from the closed, sheltered life of the Convent into the world of learning and discovery beyond the Convent walls. It was at university as a psychology undergraduate that I was first introduced to Goffman’s work (1961) on total institutions. My short life as a Nun to this point had indeed been characterised by a strict regulated lifestyle, a different name, uniformity of clothing, lack of access to external socializing influences, and tight control structures with harsh internal systems for dealing with infringement of rules and regulations. These were times when unquestioning compliance and blind obedience were valued and rewarded. While at university I sought permission from the Order’s Superiors to join the university choir. Permission was denied since I was at university to study, I was told, not to be distracted with extra-curricular activities.
The researcher in the 2000’s

In January, 2005, forty years after entering the Convent, and dressed very differently from the late ‘60’s, I revisited the same university, this time as a doctoral student attending a research summer school. Since my undergraduate days as a young Nun, I have taught in secondary schools for many years, spent a period of time responsible for the training of young women wanting to join the Order, pursued a career in psychology involving work outside both the Order and the Church, studied and travelled overseas. None of this I could have envisioned in the late ’60’s.

During this recent visit, I stayed on the site where I had lived and studied as a young Nun, but which is now a student residence for young women attending university. The former chapel has become a conference room, devoid of all the furniture and objects of religious practice. A coffee bar replaces the area where Nuns once prepared the chapel for Mass. Reflecting the changed material practices of their lives, the Nuns now live in
duplex-style houses on the site, each one living alone. The houses are simple but spacious, though none has a specially designated chapel as was the case in earlier days. The houses are furnished according to the tastes of each individual Nun and are marked by a refreshing individuality.

The external changes in the material practices of our lives have been obvious, dramatic and, in my view, psychologically healthy. I often wonder how we would have managed our lives if the changes of Vatican II had not happened. While there have been attempts by Rome and even by our own Superiors at times, in the years since Vatican II, to reign us in, to get us back into habits and to restrict our lifestyle again, there has also been a feeling and a belief among us over the years that once the horse-of-change had bolted, so to speak, it would be impossible bring it back.

Anybody I have spoken to about the research has described it as an interesting study. One person made the remark: ‘are there any Nuns left to study? I am wondering at this point, where this study will take me and what other Nuns will make of the findings. I wonder about my own issues, my own feelings of disillusionment with the Nun’s life at times, and my own difficulties in dealing with issues of diminishment and ageing in my own Order.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is an emerging body of empirical research and interest in the area of spirituality (R. E. Ray, 2004; Singleton, Mason, & Webber, 2004), the Catholic Church is a relatively new research focus for psychologists (Kloos & Moore, 2000; McMinn, 2003; Weaver et al., 1994). Nuns, a cohort of women who sit outside the reproductive and family expectations for women in social discourse (Butler, 1999), have been largely neglected in previous research on mental health issues for women in general (Neto, 2003), as well as for Catholic religious professionals (Gafford, 2001).

Just as society represents and misrepresents ideal femininity in the “myth of the consistently super-responsible, calm and happy woman/mother” (Ussher, 2003, p. 399), so too society’s representations of the Nun as simple and free of care, as discussed in Chapter 1, misrepresents distress in Nuns’ lives which is evidenced in the empirical research which does exist. Prior to Vatican II, when Nuns lived regimented lives removed from interaction with the world outside their convents, limited research focused on mental health issues for Nuns. Later studies have examined issues related to changes in material practices of Nuns’ lives during and since Vatican II, including the communal and individual consequences arising from increased freedom in their lives as Nuns.

An examination of the empirical literature on Nuns uncovers certain themes such as lifestyle issues, the effect of diminishment in numbers, adult identity issues, mental
health issues, bodies/sexuality themes, and midlife issues. This chapter examines research on Nuns under each of these themes before focusing briefly on the limited research that exists on Nuns in Australia/New Zealand, and concluding with the reflexivity writing of the researcher.

### 2.1 Lifestyle issues: Dealing with Change after Vatican II

Vatican II required Nuns to review their lives and update their individual and communal practices, including governance structures, relationship with the outside world, and dress (Abbott, 1966), thus beginning a period of transition resulting in upheaval and tension not only between Orders and the Church, but within Orders themselves (Kugelmann, 2005). In a qualitative study using phenomenological methodology focusing on the participants’ lived experience of the transition, Gonsalves (1996), herself a Nun, examined the psychological impact on Nuns’ live of the changes following Vatican II. Gonsalves focused her research on Nuns who had made a ‘free, conscious decision’ to stay in Religious Life during the period of change brought about by Vatican II. Drawing on organisational theory, Gonsalves argues that the changes resulting from Vatican II were organisational, with operational, psychological and social effects on individuals and groups. Having lived through this period herself, and being aware of the painful memories of this period in the lives of many Nuns, she set out to understand how some Nuns were seemingly able to maintain contentment and happiness during this time of organisational change. The participants, 10 Nuns in the USA from 6 different Orders, aged 50-70, who had been in their Orders at the time of Vatican II,
acknowledged in a preliminary interview with the researcher, a present sense of
fulfilment and contentment as Nuns.

This sample of Nuns reported the importance to them of human support inside and
outside their orders, as well as the guidance of mentors who were instrumental in
helping them construct a sense of themselves and their capabilities different from the
ones they had before the structures changed. The changes in Religious Life, particularly
around governance and styles of leadership which were less authoritarian, requiring the
Nuns to move from a state of dependency to the acquisition of a greater degree of
personal autonomy and independence. The Nuns spoke of their exposure to higher
education and of a concomitant broadening of their experiences and interpersonal
relationships as being influential in assisting them to deal positively with the transition
and the changes in their lifestyle. They reported that the meaning of being a Nun was
redefined for them through interaction with the broader world, affecting not just the
redefinition of self, but the redefinition of their relationship with God and with ‘relevant
institutions’ such as the Church and their work settings.

As they looked back thirty years to this period, the Nuns remembered feelings of
sadness and a loss of identity when the former physical markers of their lives as Nuns,
such as their habits and veils, were removed. There was confusion as the old way of
being Nun disappeared, especially since what was to replace the old had not yet been
determined. Five of the Nuns in the sample revealed that they kept wearing the habit as
long as they could so as to avoid the pain of dealing with this loss. Many reported
experiencing sadness and loneliness resulting not only from the loss of their traditional public representation as Nun, but also because many of their peers, mentors and friends left their Orders in the wake of the changes, leaving those who stayed with uncertainty about their personal and group future. New relationships had to be negotiated by Nuns who had been denied relational experience in pre-Vatican II Religious Life. Emerging, experimental forms of community proved difficult for some Nuns to negotiate as individuals found themselves labelled by others in the community as ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’ depending on their personal response to the changes.

Although the Nuns reported having survived the transition time ‘virtually unscathed’ because of the sense each had of a ‘call from God’, individual and group interviews found that the Nuns found difficulty in establishing an autonomous self after years of dependence on external authority before the changes. Although they reported disillusionment and loss of hope at the time of the changes, the Nuns described themselves at the time of the study as experiencing a sense of freedom, realising that their lives were becoming more aligned with those of women around them who were not Nuns. The Nuns reported that the changes of 30 years ago had brought new perspectives, new knowledge and new ways of looking at their lives, though the study does not explore what those changes are, how they affected the Nuns’ present lives or whether the Nuns have changed in other ways in the decades since the Vatican II.

Today, more than 40 years after Vatican II, the religious and social context in which Religious Life is situated is substantially different from what it was in the 1960’s. The
Nuns in Gonsalves’ study were chosen on the researcher’s assessment of their having made a conscious, free decision to stay in the convent at the time of the changes. Although they talked about the decision to stay as one that was consciously made based on their sense of having been ‘called by God’ to be a Nun, they do not expand on what other factors, such as financial security, communal support and status issues may be embedded in living out such a choice now, nor on whether they are actively choosing to continue being a Nun. Another researcher, taking note of the findings of this qualitative study, might ask if Nuns today are continuing to make a conscious, free decision to stay in the convent and if so, what factors are influencing such a decision.

After Vatican II, changed material practices such as dress and greater engagement with the world, gave Nuns an opportunity to develop social identity. One study of an Order of Nuns in the USA uses insights from social psychology to examine the impact of the changes of Vatican II on the social identities of Nuns (Chandler, 2002). In this study, the Nun is considered to have two social identities, that of being a woman religious, that is, a Nun in the Catholic Church, and that of being a member of her own Order. In this study, 500 Nuns from an Order with ‘enclosed’ structures prior to Vatican II, that is an Order with limited contact with the outside world, answered a 300 item questionnaire designed to gather data on identity as woman and identity as Nun. This study reports that Nuns in this Order, who now have greater involvement with the world outside the convent, have to manage multiple social identities, including that of professional woman. While this study recognises the impact of engagement with the world on the ‘construction of self’ of the Nuns, and the ways in which Nuns must
‘juggle’ different social identities, it does not critically examine the ‘construction of self’ set down for the Nun by the Church itself or of its impact on the construction of herself as woman.

In a qualitative study of Nuns in Southern California, Dunn (1993), explored the possible connections between the structural changes brought about by the reforms of Vatican II and the phenomenon of psychological loneliness in Nuns’ lives. Fifteen Nuns in two Religious Orders were interviewed. The research focused on what emptiness means for Nuns, what, if any, are the predisposing factors leading to a sense of emptiness experienced by Nuns, and what strategies the Nuns in this sample employed to deal with emptiness. The semi-structured interviews invited the Nuns to talk about their familial experience as well as their experience of being a Nun both pre- and post-Vatican II times. The participants reported sadness and emptiness as a factor in their lives, but not all reported experiencing loss and emptiness as a result of the changes in their lifestyle during the 60’s and 70’s. This lead Dunn to an analysis of predetermining factors implicated in the Nuns’ experience of emptiness in their lives. She argues that negative familial experiences, such as an alcoholic parent, feelings of abandonment by parents, sexual abuse in childhood, or the death of parents in the early years in Religious Life, play an important part in the Nuns’ reported sense of emptiness at midlife. As to the experience of emptiness itself, 93% of the Nuns interviewed cited relational impoverishment, proscriptive regulations regarding relationships in their training and present intimacy difficulties as contributing to their feelings of emptiness, while the breakdown of the social structures of Religious Life led to feelings of meaninglessness.
The Nuns also reported feelings of failure, loss of self identity, loneliness and emptiness, as well as a sense of themselves as fragmented.

Nuns in Dunn’s study reported a sense of being lost, that ‘the script’ for their lives was no longer appropriate. Dunn makes the comment that the new script for the evolving structure of Nuns’ lives has not yet been written, implying that the script and the writing of it will come from somewhere external to the Nuns themselves. She does not take into account that the Nuns could take ownership of re-writing the script themselves and does not explore this possibility with the Nuns. This may be related to the sampling techniques used in Dunn’s study as Nuns were included in the study on the basis of a self-report of having experienced emptiness, and they may not have the psychological resources or the power to re-write the script themselves. Other Nuns in the Order who would describe themselves as less sad and empty may have had the capacity to do so.

In spite of the positive movements for change in women’s Religious Orders since Vatican II, in some countries there still exist groups of women who live within, and are oppressed by, the old structures. For example, a recent qualitative study has focused on the experiences of Nuns in China (Leung & Wittberg, 2004). Three groups of Nuns in different Chinese cities, all under 35 years of age and still in the training period prior to taking vows for life, were interviewed, as well as Church officials at the Vatican, Chinese Bishops and religious professionals responsible for the formation of the Nuns. The Chinese Orders present an interesting research sample as their isolation from
Western influences and the control exercised over them by the Chinese government, have shielded them from the updating of lifestyle and practices advised by Vatican II experienced by Nuns in the West. Leung’s study argues that as Chinese culture becomes more influenced by the West and by growing consumerism, Orders in China are attracting young women from poor, rural families, who are poorly educated and who have no other chance of advancement in the changing Chinese society.

Leung’s study reports that Nuns in China are still expected to adhere to strict routines and traditional behaviours which characterised pre-Vatican II regimes. Unable to be educated because they do not have the minimal qualifications for entry into institutional education, these Nuns can only work in menial Church-work settings where they become, in effect, the domestic servants of Bishops and priests, who are often unable to pay the Order even a small stipend for the Nuns’ work. Nuns in the Chinese study, women with limited education and low social status, are “vulnerable to discrimination and oppression in Chinese society and within the church itself, where they are often relegated to powerless positions as domestic workers” (Leung & Wittberg, 2004). The study also highlights the inadequacy of the Nuns’ training programs in dealing with their needs as women. Furthermore, their training in Religious Life was directed by older Nuns who have not adapted themselves to the changes in Religious Life advised by Vatican II.

Leung’s research is important in that it examines the factors which continue to contribute to the exploitation of the vulnerability of young women choosing to become
Nuns in China today. It examines the factors which affect the power and status of the Nuns within their patriarchal cultural context, identifying professional education, religious training, leadership competency and screening of candidates as issues which need to be addressed for Nuns in China. Leung argues that Nuns in China are able to bring about change provided they have the material resources to do it, and that the Nuns could do more to help themselves to be effective in their work. There is an assumption that the Church’s overseeing of training and other aspects of Nuns’ lives would assist them to change if governmental restrictions made this more possible. However, this study does not explore the ways in which the Church’s discursive construction of the Nun, as well as the experience of the Nuns in China as poor, uneducated servants of the Church authority, working for low or no payment, maintains them in a state of personal powerlessness.

A recent attempt has been made to understand the interconnection between Nuns’ personal narratives and the collective narrative of the Order which they joined. Brockmeier (2002, p. 11) argues that narrative plays an important part in the life of both individuals and of the organisations to which they belong, since it is narrative which “gives trans-generational, historical continuity and tradition to a community”. Collective narrative further functions to shape, define and enhance cohesion within communities (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000) as well as reinforce the individual’s identity with the group. In a qualitative study using a dialogic retrospection approach, in which participants are interviewed, then review their data and provide feedback to the researcher, Stuber (2000) examined the stories of a local community of Nuns in the
USA. The study attempts to understand how Nuns create meaning in their lives presently in the light of their family background and their decision to enter the convent. In spite of the well articulated narrative evidenced in the Nuns’ Order, identifying values such as self-giving, care, simplicity and love of work, the Nuns interviewed reported that they did not experience a resonance between their own narratives and these values at the time of their entry. In fact, they reported being unaware at that time of their entry of the Order’s narrative which incorporated these values.

The Nuns in this sample spoke of being motivated to join the convent by what they described as a ‘call from God’. They reported that their response to this call gave them a sense of control over their lives, since they saw themselves as having an option to choose other lifestyle options. The particular values of this Order were taken up as the Nuns in this sample began to identify themselves more strongly with the Order’s narrative after they joined the convent. They found meaning in their present lives through their work and through their living together in what Stuber describes as a “total community” (2000, p. 508), one which encompasses every aspect of the Nuns’ lives, and which fosters a sense of inclusion through the telling and retelling of the collective and individual narratives of its members.

While this study makes an interesting attempt to understand meaning in the lives of Nuns, concluding that communal narratives create resources for group cohesion and contribute to a “high sense of community” (Stuber, 2000, p. 515), it analyses data from a narrow, homogenous sample of Nuns who live together. Stuber reports being a close
friend of the Superior, who facilitated the use of the community for this study. She does not critique how this may have influenced the freedom of the Nuns to engage with the study or the implications this fact may have had on the method of data collection, particularly on the feedback session after the initial interviews.

The use of the term “community” in the study is ambiguous. It is used both to refer to the group of women living together in one convent, as well as to the Order as a whole, the term being used interchangeably, without definition. Hence it is unclear whether Stuber is making an attempt to locate or describe the narrative of the local community in relation to the narrative of the larger community of the whole Order or that of the whole Order itself. The number of Nuns interviewed and their ages are not noted and neither is there a critical analysis of the individual narratives of the Nuns or the collective narrative of the community.

Another study focuses on the psychological issue of the establishment and maintenance of adult identity in a context of communal identity and communal living. Religious Life is built traditionally on a model of family, a religious family in which “all the members are united together as a special family in Christ” (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 602) and family imagery is still widely used as a metaphor for the communal life lived by Nuns (CICLSAL, 2002; Pope John Paul II, 1996). According to Qirko (2002, p. 323), “because celibacy in institutionalized setting is an altruistic act for the primary benefit of nonkin, it can be facilitated and reinforced through the manipulation of recognition cues.” Unlike a biological family where loyalty and adherence to family
values derive from kinship ties, Religious Life attempts to maintain loyalty and adherence to altruistic behaviours through particular practices, such as individuals referring to each other using family titles such as ‘sister’, ‘mother’, ‘brother’ and the use of the term ‘family’ for the whole group, thus reinforcing the importance of identification with the group as well as maintaining compliance with material practices deemed appropriate for Nuns.

In an attempt to understand how Nuns describe themselves and in what ways living in community influences adult identity, Gallivan (1994) conducted a qualitative study of 10 Nuns who had been in Religious Life for at least 10 years, drawing on 5 different Religious Orders in the USA. All the Nuns except one had become a Nun before the end of Vatican II and had therefore had experience of the life before as well as after the changes of Vatican II were implemented. All participants were highly educated women who belonged to Orders which gave them a choice as to where and with whom they lived. The Nuns, whom the researcher refers to as ‘co-researchers’, were interviewed and engaged in a two-part drawing task to gain some understanding of how they saw themselves before they entered the convent and how they perceived themselves at the time of the study.

At the time of their entry to Religious Life, all participants in Gallivan’s study described themselves as idealistic, with high self-esteem. At the time of the study, the Nuns reported contentment, an awareness of their strengths, a need for further growth and a sense of continuity in their self identity, as features of their present life. Vatican II
was a significant change agent for these Nuns, who reported discomfort at the time of the changes. At the time of the study, the Nuns reported feeling connected to the wider world through their religious community, educational and work opportunities, leading Gallivan to conclude that the positive identity-shaping factors for these Nuns were their relationship with their religious Orders, community life, work, educational experience and their reported relationship with God.

The Nuns in this study described their relationship with their Religious Orders and with their individual communities as of central importance in their lives. The researcher identifies Religious Life as a social institution, noting that any social organisation holds power in relation to an individual’s identity formation, and that Religious Life would be no exception. While this is a study of the power of a social organisation, namely a Religious Order, to influence self-identity, it is not within its scope to critique ways in which the larger social organisation which discursively constructs what it is to be a Nun, namely the Church, impacts on the individual Nun’s self-identity. Nor does this research aim to examine negative influences of organisational power in the present lives of individual Nuns, or even allow for its possibility.

The method of sampling in this study may account for the low level of responses which challenge or resist the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun. Of the 29 Nuns who were identified as ‘potential co-researchers’, 23 had been nominated by their leaders as being appropriate participants for the research. Furthermore, the introductory letter sent to each of these Nuns noted that she had been nominated by her
Superior as a potential participant. The quantitative survey in this research asked Nuns to rate such items as whether their Order allowed them sufficient freedom in determining their living situation, even though Orders targeted for the research were those determined by the researcher to have given Nuns choices as to where and with whom they lived. The questionnaire is skewed positively towards belonging to the Order, being involved in the Order, being loyal to the Order and being inspired by the Order.

Not surprisingly then, this study reports largely positive results. Gallivan does not critique this aspect of her study, nor does she reflect on the influence of the power of the Superior to control the Nuns’ reporting of their experiences, within a context where Nuns are expected to be compliant and submissive to authority. Gallivan’s own conceptualisation of ‘Nun’ is interesting. In her sampling procedures, she operates out of the notion of Nuns as women whose lives are legitimated with and through the authority of their Superiors. It is the authority in the institution which both nominates and authorises these Nuns to speak. The experience of Nuns not so authorised, not deemed by the Superiors to be actively committed to the Order, may well have produced other interesting data about the interplay between adult identity and community living for Nuns.

Research shows that the changes of Vatican II impacted significantly on the lives of Nuns. While there is evidence of some initial dislocation and difficulties in adapting to the changed material practices of their lives since Vatican II, studies also show that
identification with the Order and community cohesion helped Nuns adapt to the changes, and that their lives are still meaningful in the post-Vatican II times. However, the research in China points to the fact that even forty years after Vatican II, the changes have not been universally implemented and that adaptation to the changes have been affected by both Church and cultural factors. It is not only the lifestyles of Nuns during and since Vatican II which has been the focus of previous research. The growing phenomenon of the diminishment of numbers and the possible demise of Orders, particularly in the Western world, has also been examined by researchers.

2.2 Diminishment of numbers

There is a decline in numbers of Nuns in the Western world, including Australia/New Zealand (Barnett, 2005; Ebaugh, 1993; McLean, 2003; A. J. Mills & Ryan, 2001). Ebaugh (1993), studying the demographic data about Nuns in industrialised and developing parts of the world, argues that world is witnessing the decline of Religious Life itself, which has existed in the Church for 1,500 years. She suggests that social mobility, education and employment opportunity have been factors in women’s choices to join Religious Life in the past, noting that as countries have become more affluent and opportunities for advancement have increased, fewer young women have seen Religious Life as a viable option.

Although it has been argued that the incompatibility of feminist principles and the docile obedience expected of Nuns hastened the demise of some Orders (Steichen,
2001), the phenomenon of declining numbers led Wittberg (1993) to suggest that the diminishment of Religious Orders evident in the USA in the 1990’s, and more obvious today, may be due to the eroding sense of commitment and membership resulting from changed residency practices of Nuns. Her examination of the demographic data from 8 Religious Orders in the USA highlights these changed residency practices, noting that the Nuns are now able to choose where and with whom they lived, and that many are choosing to live alone or in apartments with a small group of other Nuns. While these changed practices may have led to what Wittberg describes as a “healthy way to live” for the Nuns, she implicates these practices in the phenomenon of the demise of Orders of Nuns in the USA. However, the diminishment of numbers of women joining Religious Orders may also be accounted for, at least partly, by competing representations of Nuns in Church and society.

Whether the decline in the membership should be addressed openly in an attempt to boost numbers, remains contentious in the Church context. Zajac (1999) interviewed over 50 Nuns from one USA based order to examine why Nuns entered the convent and stayed, and to understand the nature of community for Nuns. She suggests that the Order of Nuns involved in her study will be to blame for their own inevitable demise because of their having abandoned symbols and rituals, which she sees as central to creating meaning in Nuns’ lives. Having embraced feminist ideology and language, Zajac contends that the Nuns will not attract young women to join their ranks. Nuns in the present day, she concludes, having rejected Roman, male authority, discarded their
habits, and adopted the values and practices of the society around them, are committing “community suicide” (Zajac, 1999, p. 435).

Zajac criticises what she labels a “liberal model” of Nun (Zajac, 1999, p. 436) who is health conscious, refusing to obey orders, presumably from male authority, and are superficial in her commitment to her life. But rather than analysing the emergence and effects of resistance to the discursive constructions of Nun as docile and compliant, suggested by her term ‘liberal model’, she dismisses such resistant representations of Nun. Zajac concludes that Nuns should re-adopt some of the material practices of former times so as to make more traditional representations of ‘Nun’ visible and presumably attractive to young women as a viable life-choice option. Although not a Nun herself, her research leads her to the realisation that Nuns are resisting representing themselves as docile and compliant, but she argues that they should not.

The declining numbers of Nuns is having an impact not only on Orders but on the sponsored works of the Orders which pass into the hands of lay boards of management and lay staffing. Individual Nuns and whole communities can feel disengaged from their previous ministries as former avenues of control over their work are lost due to lack of Nun-resources to service them (Wittberg, 2000). Former corporate works of Orders such as hospitals, schools, and welfare works which afforded Nuns exposure, credibility and financial security, are no longer operated, staffed or even controlled by them because of declining numbers and ageing of members (O'Brien, 2005). The impact of declining sponsorship of institutional work on Nuns’ concept of themselves and how Nuns
construct themselves now outside their traditional institutional work frameworks, have yet to be addressed in research on Nuns.

Limited empirical research focusing on the phenomenon of the declining membership of Orders identifies the changes in material practices, resulting in new freedoms and less visibility in wider society as implicated in the diminishment of Orders. There is a suggestion in the research also that Nuns and their Orders are themselves to blame for declining membership and loss of personnel to continue the work of the Church.

### 2.3 Mental health issues

Much previous research has focused attention on mental health issues for Nuns, such as presumed pathologies which unhappy Nuns were deemed to have brought with them when they became Nuns, including stress, depression, loss of meaning, dysfunctional behaviour and anger. This section will examine research in this field.

#### 2.3.1 Previous pathology

Mental health issues, or what was sometimes described as “anguish” (Vaughan, 1958, p. 73) were reported many years ago in Nuns, including those living in Australia/New Zealand (O'Brien, 2005), as leading to a crippling of their religious spirit. In Australia/New Zealand, it was advised that individual Nuns with mental health issues should simply shore up their relationship with God to enhance their own mental health.
(Sister Mary Philip, 1961). Vaughan (1958), a priest/psychiatrist writing in a journal circulated widely in Religious Orders at the time, noted that there was a level of mental illness among women and men in Religious Life, but there was also a resistance on the part of Superiors to give them permission to access psychological help. From his clinical experience he concludes that “the roots of the disorder spring from those periods of life which preceded entrance into the convent or cloister” (Vaughan, 1958, p. 80). He makes no mention of the possibility notions of what it was to be ‘Nun’ or the material practices associated with being a Nun may have been contributing factors in the perceived pathology of his Nun clients. He argues rather that the individual, characterised by low self-esteem, is responsible for her own condition. He recommends psychiatric psychotherapy as the solution for the problems providing the psychotherapy is delivered by a Catholic psychiatrist, someone who is, presumably, in a good position to understand Religious Life and its demands. There is no suggestion that there could be anything dysfunctional about the context of Religious Life itself, or that Religious Life might not be a healthy environment for some women.

Even earlier, (Jahrreiss, 1942) recorded that the high percentage of schizophrenia and paranoia prevalent in Nuns was due to what was believed at the time, to be an influx of ‘pre-psychotic individuals’ being attracted to this lifestyle. Maddi (1972, p. 121), studying self and conflict in entrants to two female Religious Orders in the USA, concluded that “the defensive attempt to cope with conflict” could play a role in the choice of Religious vocation for most, though not all Nuns. The lives of Nuns prior to Vatican II were immersed in renunciation and denial. An environment of emotional
starvation and restrained interpersonal relationships contributed, in fact, to considerable mental health issues for Nuns (De Maria, 1971).

Nuns who leave their Orders have been regarded as having failed or been unsuccessful as individuals, it being determined that their ‘failure’ resulted from psychological or motivational pathology. Becker (1963), studying personality traits among 18 Nun subjects who were considered successful teachers by their Superiors and others, compared the Nuns’ sample scores against the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) scores of a sample of 28 ex-Nuns who had previously been tested while they were still Nuns. Not unexpectedly, the Nuns who had been rated by their Superiors and by their peers as ‘successful’ teachers scored as normal and well-adjusted on personality scales. The ex-Nuns are referred to in the study as ‘unsuccessful’ Nuns. A significant difference on indicators of depression, psychasthenia, social introversion and schizophrenia was found to exist between the ‘successful’ Nuns and the Nuns who had left the convent. The use of the descriptor ‘successful’ is confusing in this study. In the case of the Nuns, it denotes their professional work competency but in the case of the ex-Nuns, ‘unsuccessful’ denotes their incompetence in being a Nun. Examined in this study are competency indicators between Nuns who stay and Nuns who leave. Furthermore, there is an untested assumption in this study that a successful teacher will be a successful Nun.

Earlier studies examining mental health issues for Nuns have pointed to levels of distress in their lives. In spite of the Church’s direction in the 1917 Code of Canon Law
that “women aspirants are not to be admitted until a careful investigation has been made
in reference to their character and disposition” (Abbo & Hannan, 1952, Canon 544),

studies have identified such distress as either emanating from personal pathologies or as
an indication of the unsuitability of the Nun to live Religious Life.

2.3.2 Stress, depression, loss of meaning

Nuns have also been studied in quantitative research studies in order to provide
control group data against which other sections of the population have been examined,
particularly in relation to stress. Goring (1980) carried out a study in Colombia in which
the MMPI was administered to Nuns, evangelical seminarians and university graduates
so as to determine the widely perceived psychological distress of the evangelical
population in that country. The researcher used the results of the personality test to make
assumptions about the experience of being a Nun for these women. The Nuns scored
lower than either the evangelical seminarians or the university graduates on variables
related to concerns for bodily and psychological health, pessimism, tendency to convert
psychological distress to physical symptoms, ability to form lasting commitments and
conflicts regarding sex and interpersonal relationships. This led the researcher to
postulate that since the Nuns enjoy economic security and are highly prized in their
Colombian culture, their lives are less stressful than those of the other groups in the
study. The study does not attempt to account for the possibility of the Nuns’ lifestyle
impacting on ways in which they responded to the MMPI, or how Nun participants, who
take vows which restrict sexual expression, financial independence and autonomy,
would deal with MMPI questions relating to sex, interpersonal relationships and personal control of one’s life.

An attempt has been made to devise a questionnaire which would test for behavioural responses to stress among Nuns (Meiring, 1985). Group and individual interviews with 7 Nuns from a single Order in the USA enabled the researcher to compile a stress indicator instrument for Nuns. This was then administered to 52 Nuns from one Order, aged 27-78, who had been Nuns for 6-50 years. The instrument was devised to determine not only the factors which caused stress to the Nuns, but also the extent to which they engaged in various stress behaviours when stressed. One of the interesting findings of this study, conducted over 20 years ago, was that 73% of the participants indicated “rigidity in others” and 75% indicated “problems that continue to go on, nothing being done about them” (Meiring, 1985, p. 36) as stressful factors in their lives, while only 23% of the Nuns recorded living the vowed life in community, as the cause of their stress. The researcher interprets this data as an indication that the Nuns accepted the implications and goals of their choice to be a Nun, especially concerning interpersonal difficulties. However, another interpretation of this data is that most of the Nuns in this study could recognise interpersonal relationships in convent life as stress-inducing, but not the factors intrinsic to the life itself, such as the formal renunciation of money, sex and power, and the impact of this renunciation on the life of the individual Nun.
Meiring obtained participants by targeting Nuns who were coming to the Order’s quarterly renewal day at the headquarters of the Order, and the Nuns were told that results in summary form would be made available to them via their Order. Although he states that there were no difficulties in the administration of the stress indication questionnaire, it is to be noted that the sample was drawn from Nuns who were already compliant with the Order’s expectation that they would be present at the renewal program provided for them. There was no attempt made by the researcher to tap the stress indicators and behaviour of Nuns who chose not to attend the program for whatever reason. As noted above in another study (Stuber, 2000), Meiring reinforced the notion of the Nun as obedient and under the control of external authority, by requesting the Superior’s permission to send invitations to participate to individual Nuns, and by revealing the general summary of results not to the individual participants directly, but to their community, headed by the Superior.

Symptoms of distress such as irritability, depression, physical symptoms, compulsive behaviours, interpersonal problems, sense of gloominess, lack of enthusiasm and impaired ability to concentrate and communicate have been recorded among Nuns in the USA (Kenel, 1998). Two groups of Nuns were studied to test the hypothesis that the changes which came about in Nuns’ lives after Vatican II, urging Nuns to update their lives, their dress and their practices, would have reduced the stress levels of Nuns in Orders which took up the changes. One group in this study were Nuns who had not embraced the changes and who were still, in the mid 1990’s, living the traditional life-style of their group. The other group were Nuns whose Order was labelled as
‘transitional’, as having embraced the changes and adapted their ways of living in accordance with the spirit of Vatican II. Open-ended questionnaires were administered to both groups, the results being clustered in categories such as stress in ministry, interpersonal issues, intrapersonal issues and organisational stressors.

Contrary to the findings of Gonsalves’ (1996) study discussed above, Nuns from both groups registered the kinds of stress related to having lived a life devoid of deep relationships, characterised by adherence to rules, commitment to a communal way of life and the expectation of long and hard physical work. Both groups reported high levels of stress associated with balancing community demands with personal preferences. Strategies for dealing with stress were also elicited from the participants and examined. The Nuns in both groups had a variety of strategies at hand for dealing with stress ranging from prayer to physical activity. This sample of Nuns from both the traditional and the more progressive ends of the spectrum which has emerged in the decades since Vatican II, reported stress in similar areas irrespective of the degree to which either group has embraced the change in lifestyle for Nuns.

Kenel (1999) reports that her original study was replicated in India by a psychologist who is a priest, working with a group of 31 Nuns aged 45-63 from primarily rural backgrounds, who were participating in a workshop for Nuns in southern India. The Indian Nuns’ reports of observable signs of stress in Nuns around them, effects of stress in their own lives, and strategies for dealing with stress, were similar to the reports from the USA Nuns with one difference. The Indian Nuns, unlike their USA counterparts,
reported financial problems as a major source of stress. In discussing the replicated study, Kenel reports this additional stressor but does not account for it or examine it. Questions such as why Nuns with a vow of poverty in India should be any poorer or more controlled financially than Nuns with a vow of poverty in the USA are neither raised nor addressed. The Revised Code of Canon Law (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 573), states that “through vows or other sacred bonds according to the proper laws of the institutes, [members of Religious Orders] profess the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience”, confirming the taking of vows by Nuns as universally applicable. However Kenel’s study, like the China research discussed above (Leung & Wittberg, 2004), points to the issue of cultural differences in the particular ways in which Nuns’ vowed lives are experienced in different cultural settings.

Nuns, traditionally, have not chosen where or with whom they lived. This has been determined in the past by the Superiors who have the authority under the Nuns’ vows of obedience to make such decisions for them (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 601). Individual and/or communal isolation and loneliness have been linked in the lives of Nuns. In a quantitative study, Wintemyer (1992) surveyed 289 Nuns in the Archdiocese of Boston, USA, to explore these links. She found a strong statistical correlation between loneliness and spiritual well-being, and not surprisingly, a significant correlation between loneliness and communal support. The study speaks of the Nuns’ loneliness as being ‘spiritual’ in nature, resulting from the Nuns’ sense of disconnection from God as well as from others. Interestingly, the Nuns in this study who had chosen
where they lived and who were involved in decision-making in their Orders, reported experiencing a sense of well-being and communal support.

In a more recent cross-cultural study (Neto, 2003) predictors of loneliness were examined in a sample of students and Nuns in Portugal and Angola, the researcher noting that Nuns are a largely ignored population in terms of research in this area. This was a two part study in which research involving college students was replicated with a sample of Nuns. Recognizing that Nuns’ experience of loneliness is relatively unexplored territory, one aim of the study was to examine the impact of religious commitment and religious engagement on the Nuns’ subjective experience of loneliness, specifically examining whether religious engagement prevents loneliness. Neto argues that while Nuns’ lives could be stressful, their religious commitment and the communal nature of their lifestyle may well ameliorate the impact of loneliness on their lives. Because of the violent nature of life in Angola, the researchers predicted that Angolan Nuns would experience higher levels of loneliness than in Portuguese Nuns. Seventy four Nuns at midlife in Portugal and 105 Nuns at midlife in Angola completed scales measuring loneliness, neuroticism, optimism and satisfaction with life. While the study uncovered higher levels of loneliness in the Angolan than the Portuguese Nuns, compared with the college students, the effect of religious engagement for the combined sample of Nuns was not significant and neither was the interaction between nationality and religious engagement. This study, in combining the Nun sample for analysis, assumes that Nuns are a homogenous sample across cultures, failing to take account of the impact of the values, belief systems and practices of the culture on their lives, or of
possible attempts by Nuns to create a culture-specific way of being Nun in a particular country or culture (Kenel, 1999; Leung & Wittberg, 2004).

Stress, frustration and depression can arise from the conflicting demands of a work setting which on one hand requires Nuns to be assertive, creative and risk-taking, and a personal life setting on the other, where they are expected to be compliant and complacent. This situation is not specific to Roman Catholic Nuns. Women in other denominations which allow women to work alongside men as religious professionals, also experience stress related to working in fields which were previously the domain of men. Rayburn (1991), studying stress and depression in religious professional women across religious denominations, included in the sample of 254 women, a group of 51 USA Nuns. In the quantitative study, the religious professional women completed standardised questionnaires including a Religion and Stress questionnaire devised by the researcher, later refined for non-gender specific use with religious professionals (Birk, Rayburn, & Richmond, 2001), with 10% of the participants from each representative group participating in a structured 10-item interview. Nuns in the study emerged with less indicators of stress and strain than the other religious professional women, exhibiting greater resources, especially cognitive resources, for coping with the stress of their life as religious professional women.

Suggested in this research is the notion that while Nuns have traditionally been considered non-clerical persons in the Church (Catholic Church, 1995, p. 258), and therefore non-threatening to the clerical, controlling arm of the Church, there has
developed a movement among Nuns that is challenging this reality. This creates the potential in them for increased stress not only intrapersonally, within the individual’s experience of being a Nun in the present time, but also interpersonally, within the context of the Church community, where some disagree with the development of a leadership role for Nuns (Kennedy, 1991; Likoudis, 2004; Moran, 1999).

Early empirical literature on mental health issues for Nuns suggests that previous pathologies and/or unsuitability to the lifestyle were contributing factors in their distress. More recent research identifies stress, depression, loneliness, loss of meaning, and a sense of isolation as factors in the lives of Nuns, in spite of the fact that the Church requires them to “become a visible sign of the joy which God gives those who listen to [God’s] call” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 27).

2.3.3 Alcohol Dependency

Nuns are not immune from difficulties which sit outside the dominant discursive constructions of Nun in both Church and society. Just as alcohol dependency in wider society can be overlooked and misunderstood even by health professionals (Fryer, 1998, p. 172), so too it can be ignored by the Order or local community to which a Nun belongs. While women joining the convent may find personal support through community (Maton, 2000), empirical research shows that life in a community of Nuns where one or more member has an alcohol dependency, is stressful for both the Nun and those who live with her.
In a comparative study of the past family history and present community dynamics of 239 non-alcoholic and 160 recovering alcoholic Nuns, Spiegel (1990) found that for both groups, if heavy drinking occurred in the community, it was more likely to be denied than confronted openly. For the Nun there exists the double stigma of being alcohol-dependent woman as well as Nun. Spiegel found that alcoholic Nuns reported interpersonal conflicts as a major source of stress in community living, together with an ignoring and/or lack of awareness by the local community of their heavy drinking. The alcoholic Nuns reported that in their communities, alcohol was seldom used openly by them, that their heavy drinking was accepted, and that the community pretended it was not happening even if they were aware of it.

This is a complex study using non-normed, non-identifying qualitative instruments to examine eight different research questions about Nuns (alcoholic and non-alcoholic), their families (alcoholic and non-alcoholic), differences in religious communities (rules about alcohol, stress, decision making and conflict) and the relationship between family of origin and the present religious community. Spiegel names and addresses alcoholism as a ‘dysfunctional’ behaviour of the Nuns, and highlights some of the inherent stresses in living in community for those Nuns who are alcohol dependent, as well as for those who are not.

Arguing that family function/dysfunction is an important factor in the development of healthy or unhealthy adults, and that the structure of Religious Life can encourage “codependence” which she describes as “individuals who organize their lives, decision
making, perceptions, beliefs, and values around someone or something else” (O’Toole, 1991, p. 1). Her study targeted Nuns who came from alcoholic and non-alcoholic families, to explore stress influences on Nuns who were children of alcoholics. Of the 300 Nuns from one Religious Order in the eastern area of the USA who were surveyed, 84% of the participants responded to the quantitative study. O’Toole makes the assumption, in the absence of data on the numbers of Nuns who are children of alcoholics, that some highly functioning children of alcoholic parents may be attracted to Religious Life because of the existence and legitimating of what she identifies as codependent behaviours, such as sacrificing oneself for others and striving for perfection. Such Nuns, she argues, translate their learned codependent behaviours to the Religious Life context and report physical symptoms of stress. Other symptoms of distress identified in the data were depression, stress-related illness, victimization and difficulty in expression of feelings. Codependency was not associated exclusively with being the child of an alcoholic parent, since 50% of the children of alcoholic parent sample registered distress, and 50% did not. Being abused in childhood was more related to greater physical symptoms of stress and depression in this sample of Nuns, than other factors examined in the study.

O’Toole’s data does not support the assumption that Religious Life can be a safe haven to re-enact familial roles for offspring of parents with alcohol dependency. She acknowledges that the Affect Intensity Measure used in her study may not have been a useful tool, as the Nuns would not have been trained in the convent to express emotion. The Nun participants may not, in fact, have been able to recognise or acknowledge
strong emotion within themselves, because of the denial of emotion in the formational training of Nuns, especially the older Nuns.

O’Toole does raise questions about the older group of Nuns who appeared less willing to express feelings than the younger Nuns. She suggests these older Nuns related their acceptance of stress to the fact that as Nuns, they were trained that they must accept suffering as part of their lives. She assumes that they are now more resilient than the younger Nuns, though she does not explore how they have become more resilient or what effect Convent taboos around dysfunctional behaviour have had on their denial of these realities in their lives. O’Toole acknowledges that the younger Nuns in her sample reported more stress than others, but she attributes this to the limitations on their role as women in the Church, and to the fact that the younger Nuns have not yet internalised the ‘spirituality’ necessary for coping with stress in Religious Life.

Furthermore, O’Toole suggests that co-dependency for Nuns in this sample, leads to depression. But could it be the other way around? Could the depression recorded in her data, be motivating the Nuns to attempt to alleviate their distress by pursuing dysfunctional interpersonal patterns of behaviour in their communities? Her study does not examine how or to what degree, the material practices of Nuns’ lives encourage, reward, or even demand ‘co-dependency’ in the way they are expected to live their lives.
2.3.4 Anger

Although Nuns’ lives are urged by the Church to commit themselves “with deep joy” to their lives of service (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 12), anger has emerged in some research as a problematic reality in the lives of some Nuns. A combined qualitative/quantitative content analysis of the dreams a group of menopausal Catholic women and a group of 48 menopausal Nuns in the USA (Sinnot, 1997) found that one significant difference between the groups studied was the frequency of violent dreams reported by the Nuns. Sinnot hypothesised that a higher percentage of reported history of sexual abuse by the Nuns in her sample could account for this difference, as could the supposed depressive symptoms of menopause. However, this was not borne out by the results of her survey. Sinnot concludes that the Nuns’ aggressive dreams are representations of unresolved and unexpressed anger arising from loss of family connection at a young age, punitive constraints around the expression of anger in the convent setting, chronic over-identification with the ‘good Nun’ persona, grief for lost reproductive opportunities and the lack of appreciation and affirmation from a Church which does not value women.

In the process of subjectification through which a woman is trained to be a Nun, her life is represented as a sacrifice of home, family, career, independence and independent means for the sake of the presumed greater good of working for the Church (CICLSAL, 2002; Pope John Paul II, 1996). According to Sinnot, some Nuns in the present day are increasingly aware of the role of the Church in controlling their lives, their bodies and their economic realities, while at the same time denying them a full role as ministers,
priests, leaders and formulators of policy. She argues that there is an emerging awareness of what could be called the lopsided cost/benefit ratio in their lives in that what Nuns have sacrificed in terms of personal ambition, financial independence and reproductive opportunity far out-weighs the benefit of community support, Church employment and institutional security. It is this imbalance which she sees as giving rise to the anger expressed in the dreams of Nuns in this sample.

Women who are Nuns are in a double bind in relation to anger. Not only is the expression of anger socially unacceptable for women (Piran & Cormier, 2005; Ussher, 2003), it also violates the religious taboos around Nuns’ expression of negative emotion (P. M. Smith, 2004). In a qualitative study of 21 Nuns from one international Order whose foundational work was education, Malone (1991a) addressed the issue of anger and conflict and the meaning Nuns gave to these terms. The researcher hypothesised that while Nuns suppress anger and deny interpersonal conflict, they do not escape the effects of this suppression which presents itself later in various forms of bodily, psychological and spiritual distress.

Malone’s study involved Nun participants from the USA, Central America and Canada. All participants were well educated, each holding at least one degree. The researcher predicted that the cross-cultural differences on issues of interpersonal conflict and anger would be minimal since the Nuns all belonged to the same Order, a ‘cultural organisation’ with common purpose and common goals. Some of the participants, an unnamed number, had become Nuns prior to the changes of Vatican 11 and others had
become Nuns after the changes had taken effect. The researcher hypothesised that those who had become Nuns after the changes would produce different data from the others, particularly in relation to norms and taboos around conflict and anger.

Common themes which emerged in relation to conflict included the Nuns’ expressed fear of conflict, their belief that it was inappropriate for Nuns to be involved in interpersonal conflict, their sense that the governance structures in their Order led to the suppression of conflict, that authority must be obeyed and that peace was to be had at any price. For the Nuns in this sample, the attitudes towards conflict ranged from repression to acceptance, including an ability to deal with the conflict. Nuns spoke of conflict in relationships with their peers, their communities and the authority in the Order. While some Nuns had internalised the norms and taboos around surfacing interpersonal conflict in the Orders, thereby, in Malone’s view, internalising the image of ‘the good Nun’, others expressed difficulty in reconciling their personal norms with those of the Order. Emotions emerging around conflict in the data included hurt, frustration and fear, while reported strategies for dealing with conflict included confrontation, avoidance, cynicism, explosion, and third party mediation.

Malone also explored anger in this sample of Nuns, noting that Nuns are not socialised in their training to express anger. The younger Nuns in the sample reported more negative implications for expressing anger. They feared being labelled as trouble-makers seen as difficult to deal with by the authority in the order. The perceived taboo around the expression of anger emanates, according to Malone, from the representation
of the Nun as stoic woman, who operates from cognition rather than from emotion.

Interestingly, Malone found no difference in descriptions of norms and taboos for Nuns, between those who became Nuns before and after the changes of Vatican II, leading her to hypothesise that changes after Vatican II were merely cosmetic, in spite of this Order’s attempt at organisational change and encouragement of grass-roots responsibility in the years following the Council.

Themes other than anger and conflict did emerge in this research as well. Malone notes these as intrapersonal conflict issues concerning the meaning of life into the future, the decision to stay or leave, constraints of the vows, healthy/unhealthy communal living, the denial of sexuality and taboos around sexual issues and homosexuality. Nuns’ self-esteem also emerged as an important theme. For some in Malone’s sample, self-esteem was enhanced by strategies they had developed for dealing with conflict and anger positively. Others reported that self-esteem had been irrevocably eroded during their period of initial formation. Anger concerning perceived organisational denial of these issues emerged for some participants, and was noted, but was not pursued by the researcher, as the focus of her study was interpersonal rather than intrapersonal conflict.

This is a study of interpersonal conflict within one Religious Order, a study in which the researcher makes assumptions about what is ‘healthy’, that is expressing anger, and what is ‘unhealthy’, namely denial of anger in their lives. It does not attempt to look at sources of intrapersonal conflict or conflict in relation to organisations or groups outside
the Order. The research does not address the effect of the underlying structures of Nuns’ lives on their anger, or the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun which may continue to lock Nuns into denial of conflict and suppression of anger. Malone expresses surprise that Nuns who joined the convent after Vatican II report similar levels of denial and suppression regarding norms and taboos in relation to conflict and anger as did Nuns who were professed after the Vatican II. However, this finding may be a further indication that there is a tension in these Nuns between the changed material practices of their lives and the more traditional representations of Nun in Church and in society.

Malone, a member of the Order being studied, was centrally positioned in the research (Humphreys, 2005). She acknowledges that as researcher, she is also an ‘insider’, attempting to surface the unknown in the group to which she has belonged for over 25 years. She records her ‘love for the [Order]’, and her continuing choice to live out her ‘faith call’ within its structures. She states that in this research, she named the un-named norms and taboos in the hope that structural changes will engender less stressful and what she regards as being more healthy ways of living for Nuns in her Order. The advantages for her of being an insider in the research included that the Nuns spoke openly with her, that she knew their context, and that she was ‘one of them’ even if not known personally to the individual participants. Malone says she recognised that change needed to take place in her Order and it was this desire for change which motivated her study. She argues that Nuns’ lives are still relevant, and that communal living is still viable for her group, provided the Order deals more effectively with the interpersonal conflict and suppressed anger issues evidenced in this study. Interestingly, she overlays
traditional, conservative Catholic language onto the experience of being Nun in her
interview questions, offering the Nun participants the option of nominating their Order’s
‘ten commandments’ for how Nuns should handle conflict and express emotion.

In suggesting that further research could be carried out to test the universality of this
Order’s specific culture, Malone recognises that her study is specific to her Order. While
this study does make an attempt to understand the lived experience of Nuns in relation
to areas traditionally limited by constraint and taboos, it was conducted within a large
international Order which has existed for 340 years, and which had 2,5000 members at
the time of the research. Australian/New Zealand Nuns today typically belong to Orders
which are small, ageing and diminishing in number. Many Nuns in Australia/New
Zealand, living alone or in two’s or three’s, may well experience conflict, not only on
the interpersonal level in their living situation, but on the intrapersonal level as they
attempt to make sense of their lives in a context characterised by ageing, diminishment
and creeping invisibility within Australia/New Zealand Church and society.

The research on anger in Nuns, limited though it is, highlights that Nuns do
experience anger even though there are constraints which prevent the expression of
strong emotion by them. It is suggested in this research that anger in Nuns emanates
from a variety of sources including the constraints of living a life of sacrifice, the losses
associated with the vows, and the expectation placed on them by others as well as
themselves to be a ‘good Nun’.
2.4 Bodies/sexuality

Not only have issues of lifestyle, diminishment of numbers and mental health, been the focus of previous research on Nuns, but also themes relating to body and sexuality. Bodies and sexuality have been taboo subjects in Nuns’ lives (J. T. Chibnall, Wolf, & Duckro, 1998). Nuns are perceived to be, and have been presented in both the Church and society as being, sexless and genderless (Seibold, 2001). Consequently, issues of sexuality among Nuns do not sit comfortably with representations of Nuns in either Church or society, and are not openly addressed. Nuns live a life of chastity (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 573) which demands abstinence from sexual contact with men or women from them ("Perfectae Caritatis" in Abbott, 1966). The notion of the Nun as childlike and simplistic rests partly on an assumption that she is sexually naïve and inexperienced, both before and after becoming a Nun. Examining her experience of counselling lesbian Nuns, Murphy (1986), concludes that lesbian Nuns required counselling to cope with their sexual development within a celibate context of Religious Life commitment and that sexual naïveté, loneliness and reactions to homophobic conditions contributed to the stress they experienced.

While studies on the sexual experience (abusive or otherwise) of Nuns in Australia/New Zealand are non-existent, Chibnall (1998) has confronted this taboo area by examining the sexual trauma experiences of USA Nuns in a national, quantitative survey. Although interested in comparing data on the prevalence of child sexual abuse rates among lay women with that of Nuns, the study also hypothesises that Nuns may be
implicated in the estimated 20% of priests in the USA who, at any one time, are having a sexual relationship with a woman (Sipe, 1995).

One of the interesting features of this attempt at a large scale quantitative study of Nuns in the USA is that only 23% of the Religious Orders contacted to provide mailing lists of their individual members, responded to the request. The low response rate to the request for Orders to be involved in the research raises the issue of Superiors’ control over Nuns’ lives and their freedoms, a power invested in them by the Church (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 596). In spite of a response rate of 68% to a pilot survey on Nuns’ experience of sexual trauma gathered the year before the main study, the response rate for the final survey of was only 46.6% of the survey sample. Chibnall notes that these facts limit the interpretation of the data. Some Nuns in the study were willing and able to provide the data being sought, but many more were not. Given the nature of the data, perhaps that is not surprising.

Chibnall’s research is also interesting in that it explores sexual coercion/violence between women. More than 10% of Nuns who reported sexual abuse had suffered unwanted sexual attention from other Nuns, suggesting that sexual needs, sexual activity and sexual experience, in spite of the prohibitions explicit and implicit in the vow of celibacy, are areas which are causing distress and trauma to Nuns in their experience of vowed communal life. While Chibnall tentatively suggests that depression and anxiety in Nuns may render them vulnerable to sexual exploitation, such as in situations where they are encouraged to engage in individual sessions of mentoring, counselling or
spiritual direction, the study highlights the fact that there is a poverty of empirical studies of Nuns and sexuality. It documents the prevalence of interpersonal dysfunction within religious communities of Nuns, but makes no attempt to explore causal links between power, either in relation to the patriarchal Church or to the power structures within Religious Life, and celibacy in such dysfunction. Neither is this study able to address the impact of sexual trauma, whether in childhood or adulthood, on how the Nuns in this sample experience their lives, or deal with their present vulnerabilities, as well as their sexual histories, as women living in a celibate context.

A further link has been drawn between sexual experience, in particular sexual abuse in childhood, spirituality and the image of the passive, complacent Nun. The representation of the Nun as compliant, complacent and non-assertive has been supported historically by the spiritual notion that Nuns hand their lives over to God in a spirit of humble submission to God’s will (Abbo & Hannan, 1952; CICLSAL, 2002). C. E. Smith, Reinert, Horne, Greer & Wicks (1995), in a quantitative study of 350 Nuns in the USA, explored the relationship between childhood abuse and spiritual development in Nuns. They found that abused Nuns who had a high level of passivity and acceptance, had a lower level of spiritual maturity than those who tried to take more control of their lives, though they do not define what they mean by spiritual maturity. The researchers do note that taking control of one’s life is not a stance encouraged by the traditional spiritual ideology of Religious Life. However, while they suggest that those working with sexually abused Nuns should help them to develop assertiveness, encouraging them to break out of disempowerment and take more control of their lives, they do not
examine ways in which Nuns could take up more powerful and assertive positions as Nuns, or what the consequences would be for them both individually and communally, in taking up such positions.

Throughout the ages, society as well as the Church, has recognised Nuns primarily through their dress, known as habits, as women who have chosen a life dedicated to God and to the service of God. Nuns’ habits have signalled the rejection of the notion of the decoration of the female body as a sexual object. Arguing that Nuns, who have traditionally been resisters of food, sex, ordinary pleasures and womanhood, have tried to create a new sense of womanhood and femininity, guided by perfect ideals from saints and holy women, Driscoll (1996) included a sample of 22 Catholic USA Nuns in an ethnographic study of gender resistance across a diverse set of bodily practices. The Nuns, aged mid 60’s-90’s from 7 different orders, were included in a broader sample of 72 women, including anorexic women and ‘gender blenders’ that is, women dressing in such a way as to create gender confusion, in a study of the ways in which women claim their identity through food and body practices. Driscoll compares what she calls the ‘secular asceticism’ of anorexia with the ‘religious asceticism’ of Catholic Nuns.

The Nuns in Driscoll’s study described themselves as having escaped the burdens of life in the world and thereby avoided the subordinate roles for women in society, their ‘Nunhood’, according to the researcher, having elevated them in the ‘gender hierarchy’. Driscoll concludes that the self-denial intrinsic to Nuns’ lives has been empowering for these Nuns, leading to a sense of moral superiority. Although the Nuns in this study
have now divested themselves of their habits, some Nuns in the sample saw their habit as a protection, affording them safety in an unpredictable external world. Driscoll claims that the Nuns’ cross or small identifier, which has replaced the habit, still enables them to be a ‘neutral elevated personhood’ in social contexts. Presumably this is an advantageous position from which to engage with the people in the world who can read the religious cues.

While Driscoll does acknowledge that there may have been other motivations for women choosing this lifestyle, she suggests that some Nuns, prior to the 1960’s, entered the convent primarily to escape gendered roles and the subjugation of women in society. She represents Nuns as ‘living beyond the physical realm’, as committed to perfection, sacrifice and what she describes as ‘transcendent living’, their lives shaped still by modern day saints and martyrs. But is this who Nuns are, in fact, today? The reflections on Nuns in Driscoll’s research are based on the stories of mostly elderly Nuns she has interviewed and on her interpretation of the significance of holy pictures hanging in the Nuns’ living and working areas. The researcher’s representation of the Nun is of the elevated, selfless, pure, self-sacrificing woman, faithful to menial tasks even in her old age. Nuns, she says, “follow the sanctifying practices instructed by their vows and put their own needs aside through continual activity for others” (Driscoll, 1996, p. 148). The practices of self-denial even in relation to food she sees as ‘sanctifying’, whereas the practices of the anorexic woman in relation to self-denial are death-dealing. The suggestion in this research is that the Nuns in the sample are rejecting what is ordinary and demeaning about womanhood and femininity.
Driscoll does accurately describe the Nuns’ habits of former times as signifying purity and cloaking the sexual female body, but she assumes that Nuns freely created such clothing for themselves to support their supposed rejection of gender constraints. In fact, Nuns’ habits represent one of the powerful material practices of one of the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun, a practice over which, before Vatican II, Nuns had no control. Important new practices relating to dress for Nuns could only be created by the hierarchical power structures of the Church, at a time determined by the Church, to be implemented only with the imprimatur of the Church (Abbott, 1966). This study leaves some questions unanswered. Does ‘Nunhood’ really elevate women in the gender hierarchy? Is being a ‘neutral elevated personhood’ a good thing for women who are Nuns?

Nuns are conversant with the notion and practice of fasting and food deprivation. The feasts of Easter and to a lesser extent, Christmas, are preceded by Church-nominated periods of fasting and abstinence from meat (Catholic Church, 1995, p. 549). Orders of Nuns would have observed this practice rigidly in the past and would still be bound by Church law to continue to observe fasting and abstinence rules which are now, however, much less comprehensive than they were previously. A possible connection between Nuns’ customary fasting habits and their vulnerability to eating disorders has been explored (Marcias & Vaz Leal, 2003), the researchers hypothesizing that since Nuns are used to starving the body at certain times for positive religious reasons, they could continue limited food intake practices for a different reason, namely, the cultivation and
preservation of a socially acceptable body. In a quantitative study focusing on the eating behaviour of 44 Spanish middle-aged Nuns living communally and engaged in work such as teaching, the association between emotional states and anorexic eating behaviour was confirmed, as were high rates of psychological discomfort and “eating discontrol” (Marcias & Vaz Leal, 1991, p. 113) among the Nuns in the study sample.

The study draws attention to the fact that Nuns are not disembodied spirits, that they do have bodies and that these bodies are subject to change and control. However, other factors influencing body regulation in Nuns such as concern for the changing body at midlife, ways in which food may be used as control in communities of women, communal practices involving food in religious communities of women, and obesity in Nuns are not explored in this study. While Nuns could be influenced by societal pressures to manipulate food intake to conform to images of the acceptable body, communal regulation of food and food habits in communities of Nuns need also to be examined to more fully understand the relationship between the body and food regulation for Nuns.

One issue which relates not only to body and sexuality for women, but to the way women relate to broader themes in their lives such as freedom, responsibility, and spirituality, is that of midlife (E. M. Banister, 1999; Howell, 2001b), an important life-stage transition experienced differently by different women (Lippert, 1997). While it is a normal and inevitable transition for women, the language typically used to speak of one aspect of the midlife transition, namely menopause, is negative, ageist and undesirable
The woman’s menopausal body is considered a burden and the post-menopausal body an enigma (Boughton, 2002). At midlife, women can feel betrayed by their bodies (Pearlman, 1993), leading to a re-evaluation of themselves, their bodies and their current life situations. Women may present themselves in an unreasonably favourable light to compensate for loss of bodily attractiveness (J. J. Ray, 2003), trying to keep up appearances, while attempting to maintain a sense of control over menopausal changes in their bodies (Kittell, Mansfield, & Voda, 1998). Medical discourse strongly influences women’s self-definition and experience of their bodies at midlife (E. M. Banister, 1999) while the dissonance experienced by women in comparing their lived experience of midlife with socio-medical misrepresentations of midlife can lead to the experience of confusion in women at midlife (E. M. Banister, 2000).

However, even though they may have internalised the medical narrative of menopause, women can and do work towards creating their own midlife narrative arising from their lived experience (J. Jones, 1994). The changes women experience in their bodies reflect and are reflected by the changes they experience in their broader lives at midlife. McQuaide (1998b) reports that the typical midlife woman finds pleasure in children and grandchildren, her study of midlife women leading her to conclude that the midlife woman needs a decent job, a decent income, active contact with the world and a supportive social network to experience a sense of well-being at midlife. Nuns’ lives sit outside the usual context for women in that they have not generated families, or traditionally chosen their own jobs, or received their own income
from a ‘decent’ job or had opportunities to develop long-term supportive social networks.

While there has been much research focusing on midlife issues for women, midlife issues for Nuns has attracted only limited interest from researchers. Responding to the lack of empirical data on Nuns’ experience of midlife, Flynn (1993) studied the midlife experience of four USA Nuns, using an ethnographic methodological approach. The Nuns, from two different Orders, all used the term ‘crisis’ to speak of midlife, reporting challenges and losses as themes in their lives during this time of transition. While the loss of fertility, a concern for some midlife women (E. M. Banister, 1999), was not important to these Nuns, the loss of family and friends through death, and the growing sense of their own mortality were themes for them at midlife. The Nuns in this study reported changes in their careers and educational opportunities, rather than menopause, as markers of the midlife transition. Midlife stress emanated from death of family and friends as well as from caring for aged parents, and from overwork to the point of reported exhaustion.

Flynn set out to look for new imagery and metaphors for midlife by focusing on the lives of a specific cohort of previously un-studied women, namely Nuns. Her research could have further developed an understanding of the experience of Nuns at midlife. Issues specific to Nuns’ lives like the impact of previous prohibitions on close friendship, the changes after Vatican II and the effects of different styles of community on Nuns are examined, but the study is largely a description of Nuns’ experience rather
than a critical analysis of how these influences have impacted on their present experience of being Nuns at midlife. In the face of a dearth of empirical data about Nuns, she draws heavily on the opinions of Nuns and other commentators on Religious Life, to make sense of the ethnographic data, failing to create or develop new insights arising from the data provided by Nuns in the study.

In spite of the Flynn’s hypothesis that Nuns respond to ‘the call’ to Religious Life to escape the obligations of family, which reinforces a representation of Nuns as carefree and unburdened by family worries, the participants in her study all reported that at midlife they experienced stress resulting from attending to the needs of aged family members. In addition, some of the Nuns in Flynn’s study reported experiences of relational difficulties with men. Flynn theorises that these difficulties would have been linked to the fact that the Nuns also reported the absence of their father’s influence in childhood. She does not explore the possibility that prohibitions on forming relationships with men were imposed by the vow of chastity, or that the Nuns would have had limited experience in relating with men. In presenting her data, Flynn concludes that if adult religious education groups focused on providing stress reduction workshops for Nuns, and if Nuns were provided with support groups and respite for their elderly relatives, they would be able to work more effectively. The construction of Nuns implied in her conclusions is of a woman unaware of and powerless in the face of her own needs, who requires others to set up structures to support her in identifying and dealing with her life issues.
Nuns have ‘sacrificed’ bearing children and consequently are denied the pleasures and satisfaction implicit in the role of grand parenting. There is no next biological generation for women who are Nuns, no experience of passing on the genes, no experience of observing the family being generated into the future. Von Ruhland (2004), writing about her experience as a 40 year old single, Christian woman in an article entitled “I don’t want to die a virgin” speaks of her virginal, childless life as one of sexual poverty which she likens to the tragedy of physical poverty. So too, the experience of life-long celibacy can leave a Nun with an intimacy vacuum, particularly at a time in history when Orders in the Western world, including Australia/New Zealand, are ageing and seriously diminishing in numbers. Midlife, the time when a woman’s physical fertility ends, is a time when Nuns face again, the broader intimacy and generativity issues embedded in their lifestyle.

As the research examined above indicates, Nuns as embodied women are not immune from sexual exploitation and abuse, or from sexual experience. Their bodies are no longer shrouded in the clothing which once may have provided a refuge from the pressure of society’s expectations of the desirable female body. During the midlife transition stage of their lives, they report dealing with the loss not so much of the fertile body, but of the losses embedded in the life-long sacrifice of sexual as well as relational intimacy.
2.5 Australia/New Zealand Research

The empirical research on Nuns noted above, while having relevance for the lives of Nuns worldwide, does not, however, involve participants from Australia/New Zealand. There are some empirical studies which have focused directly or indirectly on the lives of Nuns in Australia/New Zealand or in which they have been participants. Many works have been published on the history of Nuns and their work in Australia/New Zealand (J. M. Brady, 2005; Kelleher, 2000; O'Sullivan, 1995; Walsh, 2001; Zimmerman, 1999). A qualitative, inductive methodology applied to Orders’ accounts and historical documents was used by Hughes (2004) for example, to examine the contribution of four Orders of Australian Nuns to social welfare in Sydney in the late 19th Century. In attempting to locate documents for this study, Hughes found that some documents belonging to Orders were not available since they had been taken by Bishops. These documents, having been deemed to be owned by the Church and not the Order, are therefore inaccessible to the Nuns themselves as well as to the researcher. At the same time, Nuns’ own accounts of their work were of a communal rather than a personal nature, that is, accounts of undisclosed authorship rather than records of the personal experiences of the Nuns themselves. This lack of personal documentation in the archives of the Orders, Hughes attributes to what she describes as the ‘suppression’ of their individuality. She argues that Nuns’ work set the prototype for future social work in Australia because of their high level of management expertise, their focus on the poor, and their methods of work. Hughes argues furthermore, that in successfully establishing and managing caring institutions themselves, the Nuns developed and exercised
competencies outside those usually attributed to women in society, and in so doing acted as a “third gender” (Marshall, 1999) in both Church and society. However, the Nuns’ social work did not ‘evolve’ into professional social work. Hughes concludes that this was due not only to changes in Australian society, but to their profession as Nuns which may have impeded their ability to become fully professional social workers into the 20th Century.

While there are few qualitative studies which attempt to explore the meaning Nuns make of their lives, there are even fewer which involve Australian/New Zealand Nuns as participants. One Australian study (Seibold, 2001), while not focusing specifically on Nuns’ experience per se, does include 4 midlife Nuns in a sample of 20 single women at midlife. The participants in Seibold’s study were interviewed twice, a year apart, on their experience of midlife and menopause, and kept diaries during the intervening period. Seibold argues that the reflection on body experiences at midlife for the women and Nuns in her sample constituted an important part of the construction of their identity at midlife. She found that the Nuns positioned themselves as Nun differently according to the relevance of the body discourse to their experience at a given time, changing their positioning as new discourses became available to them during the midlife transition. The Nuns’ body discourse included a sense of the body as needing to be sublimated, transcended, denied or controlled. The Nuns, although situated within what Seibold refers to as a celibate life-style for women which is socially acceptable, reported denial of their bodies and strict codes of silence around sexual issues, the result of body
sublimation in their early formative processes. These Nuns reported feeling that their bodies were out of control at menopause.

Reinforcing the notion of Nuns as workhorses for the Church, these Nuns reported treating their bodies like ageless machines in a context where illness or breakdown was the only avenue for rest and body focus. Midlife represented a time of heightened body awareness for them, but also the opportunity to reposition themselves in relation to their bodies, as they questioned and rejected the notions of sublimation of the body which were central to their early training as Nuns. Loss of physical appearance and desirability was noted to be less of a problem for the Nun participants than for the other single women participants as the Nuns perceived themselves and were perceived by older Nuns in their Orders as still being ‘young’ at fifty. Seibold reports that the four Nuns participants experienced their bodies as being important in their construction of self at midlife, signalling a challenge to the traditional denial of the body which characterised life for Nuns in former times in relation to the body. In applying feminist post-structural analysis to her own writing, Smith (2004, p. 42) an Australian Nun, notes that she was able to pursue spaces where former taboos had existed for her as a Nun. These issues included “adult generative developments” and “menopausal dilemmas”, areas which she says she had previously not explored in her own life.

Another Australian study (Barnett, 2005) examines leadership qualities for facilitating the movement of Religious Orders into the Third Millennium and explores the challenges of dealing with transition and change as Orders fragment and diminish in
numbers. In this qualitative study, Superiors of Religious Orders of women and men participated in individual interviews which focused on leadership experience, qualities desirable for leaders and factors hindering change in Religious Life. One focus group consisted of a small reference group which was used for “ongoing critique” (Barnett, 2005, p. 83) while the second focus group comprised 100 members of the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes of New South Wales (CLRI). Preliminary findings of the study were presented to the Leaders at the annual CLRI meeting, and further data was elicited so as to critique the emerging insights of the researcher.

While leaders involved in this study expressed a certain disconnection from the official Church, they were confident that new forms of Religious Life would emerge in the future, and that it was imperative for Religious leadership to foster such emerging forms of Religious Life. Barnett’s study identifies leadership’s task as to “deconstruct and reconstruct” (Barnett, 2005, p. 211) Religious Life into the Third Millennium as new theological foundations are developed to support it. Her study argues that two leadership practices are essential at this time in the history of Religious Life in Australia: overseeing the ultimate demise of old forms of Religious Life while simultaneously promoting new forms which will emerge.

Implied in the findings of this research is the assumption that leadership in Orders can and do have the power to ‘deconstruct and reconstruct’ Religious Life as well as having the authority to re-invent new forms of Religious Life. Barnett argues that it is the task of leadership to create and support new forms of life for Nuns in Australia. But
this study does not address the issue of the Church’s power to construct and regulate the lives of Nuns, or how new forms of living for Nuns can be created and located outside the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of them.

2.6 Summary

There is limited empirical research on Nuns in the Catholic Church. Much of it has focused on pathology in individual Nuns, or on measuring and accounting for certain defined variables such as stress, depression, anger and behaviours which challenge the Church’s notions of the Nun as living a life in which she will “discover the special genius of [her] relationship with the Lord” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 57). While the Church expects the Nun’s life to provide “a spiritual therapy for the evils of our time” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 12), and there is evidence that material practices of Nuns’ lives, adapted since Vatican II, provide freedom from the restrictions of the past, some empirical research points to high levels of distress which still exist for Nuns.

Some of the research to date uses Nuns as a control group against which other groups in society are measured, assuming that Nuns do not, in fact, experience life in the same way that others do. Such studies neglect the complexity which exists in Nuns’ lives, particularly as they engage with and immerse themselves in the diverse, highly technological, global world of the 21st Century. There are few qualitative research studies which explore Nuns’ subjectivity in an effort to understand, from their perspective, the experience of being a Nun today. In some studies examined above,
access to Nuns’ experience was controlled by the Nuns’ Superiors who acted as gatekeepers, individually selecting Nuns to participate in research. Such controlled sampling raises the question of which voices are heard in the research to date. How and why does the silencing of dissenting voices represent a challenge to the Order or the Church? What are the consequences for Nuns of their own and other such voices being heard?

There is an assumption in the research to date as well that Nuns are a homogeneous group of women, who experience their lives in the same ways, irrespective for example, of cultural differences. The empirical literature overwhelmingly involves studies of Nuns in the northern hemisphere, particularly the USA. While there are aspects of Nuns’ lives which are universal, such as community, the vows and the relationship with the Church, such notions are nuanced differently and practised differently in different cultures, as is shown in the two of the studies examined above (Kenel, 1999; Leung & Wittberg, 2004). Just as there is a large difference in population between the USA and Australia/New Zealand, so too, the numbers of Nuns in the USA is far greater than in Australia/New Zealand (McLean, 2003). Some Orders in the USA still have many hundreds of members, while Orders in Australia/New Zealand are characteristically small and aged. As a result, the issue of diminishment of numbers and its impact on Orders and individual Nuns within them is more critical in the Australia/New Zealand context. In Australia/New Zealand, educational and health institutions first established by Nuns have now been running without the presence of Nuns for many years. Nuns have dispersed themselves into the world and have become less visible because of their changed work and dress, as well as their diminished numbers. Accompanying an article
written by an Australian Nun which was critical of the Pope John Paul II’s position on women in the Church, a leading Australian newspaper included a photograph of Nuns attending his funeral (V. Brady, 2005). The Nuns, dressed in black habits, presented to Australian society a representation of Nuns foreign to the experience of many Orders of Nuns in Australia/New Zealand today.

In Australia particularly, vast distances exist between its major cities, and between towns and rural centres. Frequent travel around the country was in the past, and to some extent still is, financially impossible for individual Nuns, especially those in remote areas. In the rural areas, Church parishes are vast and in some cases geographically isolated, with many Nuns living long distances from the head houses of their Orders and/or from their nearest colleagues. Due to the diminishment of numbers of Church personnel, including priests, Nuns in Australia/New Zealand are being called upon to work for the Church in remote places, often living and working alone in isolated areas. Those who take up such roles as the official representative of the Church in places where there is no longer a resident priest are referred to typically as ‘parish workers’ or ‘pastoral associates’, doing the work of the priest (except for saying Mass), but assigned a lesser title denoting a role of lesser status. It is the lived experience of Nuns in the Australia/New Zealand context which provides the focus for this present research.
2.7 Research question

There are questions yet to be addressed in empirical research on Nuns. As outlined in Chapter 1, this present study addresses the question: what are the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun, and how does a sample of Australian/New Zealand Nuns negotiate the Church’s constructions of Nun?

In addressing the first of these research questions, Chapter 3 will examine six Church documents, universally applicable to the lives of Nuns, so as to locate and identify what this thesis argues to be the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun.
2.8 The Insider’s Voice

This project began with my wanting to do some reflection and reading around Nuns’ issues. Having worked professionally with Nuns for years, I am aware that the lives of many are fraught with issues of depression, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness in community. Many have spoken of the struggle to re-gain the losses resulting from sexual abuse in childhood, others of the consequences of having made a huge life choice as relatively immature young women. Many have described emotional deprivations not only in their homes, but also within Religious Life, others have spoken of their sexual experiences, sometimes in abusive settings. Many have talked of a history of deprivation in Religious Life, of lack of nurturance, lack of privacy, and lack of understanding of women’s issues.

As I read the empirical studies on Nuns, it becomes clearer to me that I do not want to do descriptive research. Some of the empirical studies previously conducted by others are simply descriptive. I am a Nun and I understand the sub-culture. I don’t just want to describe Nuns’ lives before the changes of Vatican II, or now, 40 years later, at a time when Nuns have become something of an enigma in both Church and society. I want this study to be different: I want it to explore the layers below describing what it’s like to be a Nun or why Nuns are happier or unhappier than others. I want to explore how and why the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun function both for the Church and for Nuns.
CHAPTER 3: THE CHURCH’S DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF NUN

Identifying and exploring the dominant discursive constructions of Nun within the Catholic Church involves the “study of elements insofar as they are already interpreted” (Grosz, 1994, p. 145), in this case, by the Church. Through written texts which are universally applicable, the Church as an institution exercises the power to create “ways of organizing, regulating and administering” (Willig, 2003, p. 172) the lives of Nuns, structuring their lives and prescribing how their lives are “recognized, assembled and played out” (Rose, 1996, p. 187) as subjects in Church discourse. This Chapter addresses the research question: what are the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun? It identifies and contextualises the source texts examined in this study, and the method used in analysing these texts, before identifying what this thesis argues to be the dominant discursive constructions of Nun in the Church, namely, the Nun as called by God to live a life of self-sacrifice and work for the Church. The Chapter concludes with The Insider’s Voice, the reflexivity writing of the researcher.

Six written texts authored or authorised by the Pope, the supreme authority in the Catholic Church, or by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the body in Rome which oversees the lives of Nuns, are examined in this study in order to identify, explore and understand the dominant discursive constructions of Nun within the Catholic Church.
3.1 Analysis Sources


These Church documents are applicable to the lives of all Nuns, including the Nuns who took part in this research. All but one of the participants in this study joined the Convent during the time when the 1917 Code of Canon Law was still the official regulatory law of the Catholic Church. The 1917 Code of Canon Law and the documents of Vatican II, “Lumen Gentium” and “Perfectae Caritatis”, framed the context in which all the women in this study became Nuns. Translated texts of the documents of Vatican II were disseminated and studied widely by Nuns in the immediate post Vatican II period. All the participants in this research have lived as Nuns during or since the changes in Religious Life brought about by Vatican II, and before the publication of “Vita Consecrata” and “Starting Afresh from Christ”, two more recent Church documents. Both “Vita Consecrata” (1996) and “Starting Afresh from Christ” (2002), addressed to members of Religious Orders, are cited in Pope John Paul’s address to the Australian Bishops, the Statement of Conclusions (Pope John Paul II, 2004a) during their visit to Rome in 2004. The current Catechism of the Catholic Church,
(1995), the ‘sure norm for teaching the faith’ frequently cites both the documents of Vatican II and the Revised Code of Canon Law.

While containing some statements directed specifically at Nuns, these documents are written for all women and men living Religious Life. However, they are examined here for the ways in which they discursively construct the Nun, and for ways in which they are read by Nuns as documents addressed to them, women whose lives are regulated within the patriarchal framework of the Church. Reinforcing what Lerner (1993, p. 46) describes as the Church’s long-held belief in the ‘God-given’ inferiority of women, and echoing Grosz’s notion that “it is only men who can afford the belief that their perspective is an outside, disinterested, or objective position” (1994, p. 191), these documents, like all major Church documents, use language which is sexist in its use of male pronouns and nouns as normative for both women and men, except in sections referring specifically to Nuns.

The original documents are written in Latin. This study examines English versions of the documents which have been officially translated by Canon Lawyers or Church officials in Rome. The 1917 Code of Canon Law was published in English with an explanatory commentary on the Canons by Canon Lawyers (Abbo & Hannan, 1952). The Canons of the 1917 Code of Canon Law and the Revised Code of Canon Law will be referred to by number, the ecclesiastical norm for referencing Canon Law.
3.1.1 The 1917 Code of Canon Law (Abbo & Hannan, 1952)

This document, the official regulatory law in the Church until 1983 when it was revised, codified various rules, regulations, and disciplinary practices stretching as far back as the early centuries of Christianity. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) promulgated a series of disciplinary Church laws in 1564, but they were largely unknown to the Church community (Abbo & Hannan, 1952). In 1917, Pope Benedict XV promulgated the Code of Canon Law which comprehensively covered all aspects of Church life, including setting down in law, for example, details of the lives of members of Religious Orders. In the 1917 Code of Canon Law, male pronouns are used to denote both genders, though there are some separate sections pertaining to Nuns.

3.1.2 “Lumen Gentium” (Abbott, 1966)

In 1962, Pope John XIII called for a gathering of all Bishops of the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council, known as Vatican II, so as to “give the Church the possibility to contribute more efficaciously to the solution of the problems of the modern age” (Pope John XXIII quoted in Abbott, 1966, p. 704). Vatican II examined major aspects of Catholic Church life, aiming to introduce a fresh, new spirit so that the Church would “ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate” (Pope John XXIII quoted in Abbott, 1966, p. 704). This major document espoused this new spirit, focusing on the Church’s role in the world. According to
“Lumen Gentium” (“Light of the Peoples”), the Church was to be the light for the world, guiding all people in the way they should live. While this document is addressed to all members of the Church and examines all aspects of the Church’s life, it is the Chapter relating to the lives of members of Religious Orders that is examined in this study.

3.1.3 “Perfectae Caritatis” (Abbott, 1966)

This document also emerged from Vatican II and is specifically directed to the lives of members of Religious Orders. The document, known by its opening phrase “Perfectae Caritatis” (Perfect Love), a reference to the attainment of perfect love as the goal of Religious Life, lays down general principles to guide the implementation of the renewal of Religious Life called for by Vatican II. In this document, members of Religious Orders are encouraged to present the face of the Church to the world in a manner more adapted to the times in which they live. The Church itself claimed ultimate authority over the renewal and adaptation of Nuns’ lives which followed the dissemination of this document.

3.1.4 Revised Code of Canon Law (Catholic Church, 1983)

Although Pope John XXIII first announced a decision to revise the 1917 Code of Canon Law in 1959, Canon Law was not revised until 1983, and promulgated by Pope
John Paul II that same year. In doing so, Pope John Paul II (1983), stated that the Code of Canon Law:

… is to be regarded as an indispensable instrument to ensure order both in individual and social life, and also in the Church’s own activity. Therefore, besides containing the fundamental elements of the hierarchical and organic structure of the Church … the Code must also lay down certain rules and norms of behavior. (Pope John Paul II, 1983, p. xiii)

The revised Code of Canon Law reflects the mind of Vatican II, with an emphasis on service in the Church’s mission to the People of God in the contemporary world (Spiteri, 1997).

3.1.5 Vita Consecrata (Pope John Paul II, 1996)

In 1994, almost thirty years after Vatican II, a Synod Assembly of Bishops and women and men from Religious Orders in Rome examined ‘Consecrated Life’ (previously referred to as ‘Religious Life’), and its mission to the Church and the world. This document represents a summary reflection on the discussions of that Assembly and, according to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, which is responsible for Religious Orders and their members, it is a necessary and significant reference guide for those living Religious Life. This document “remains the most significant and necessary point of reference guiding the path of
fidelity and renewal” of Orders and is a document which “must continue to be studied, understood and put into practice” by Nuns today (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 9).

3.1.6 Starting Afresh from Christ (CICLSAL, 2002)

In 2001 the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, produced this document as a reflection of its deliberations “in order to help in the discernment which safeguards this particular vocation, and to support the courageous choice of evangelical witness” (CICLSAL2002, p. 8). Written four years after “Vita Consecrata” (Pope John Paul II, 1996), “Starting Afresh from Christ”, expresses gratitude and appreciation for ‘Consecrated Life’, encouraging Nuns to find new meanings and to “renew” Religious Life, in spite of the present difficulties in the face of global secularisation.

Using the analysis method outlined below, these six texts are examined to identify the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of the Nun.

3.2 Analysis Method

Initially the Church texts were read in their entirety then re-read to identify major themes embedded within them. In this early stage of analysis, a broad and close reading of small sections of text was carried out to create themes grounded in the textual data and to refine these themes (Charmaz, 2003). In the re-reading of each text, important
themes about Nuns were noted including the Nun as called by God, living communally, required to be accountable to Church or Church-delegated authority, living a vowed life, sacrificing herself, taking the Virgin Mary as the model for her life, working for the Church’s mission and so on. While a number of such themes or representations of Nun emerged in an initial reading of the Church texts, closer reading of the texts pointed to the dominance of certain representations of Nun, representations which were referred to frequently in the texts and which received prominent emphasis in them. Using the Foucauldian/feminist analysis approach outlined in Chapter 1, readings of the texts focused on the relationship between language, discursive truths created by the Church, and material practices located within these texts (Danaher et al., 2000) so as to identify what this thesis argues to be the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of the Nun.

3.3 Dominant Discursive Constructions of Nun

Emerging strongly from these readings was a positioning of the Nun as an obedient and faithful woman, called by God to live a life of self sacrifice in doing the mission of the Church. This chapter then, examines three dominant discursive constructions of Nun identified in these Church documents, namely the Nun as called by God, the Nun as self-sacrificing and the Nun as working for the Church in its mission.
3.4 The Nun as Called by God

Discursive subjects are constructed within institutions, which draw on discursive resources to exercise power over them (Marvasti, 2004). In Foucauldian terms, discourses can transform over time, such that “a whole new ‘regime’ in discourse and forms of knowledge” emerge (Gordon, 1980, p. 112). In other words, an examination of texts can reveal not only how discursive truths are reinforced in institutions, but also how new regimes of truth, when reinforced with institutional power, are created.

While the 1917 Code of Canon Law (Abbo & Hannan, 1952) describes the Nun as belonging to “the religious state, that is, a permanent mode of community life by which the faithful undertake to observe not only the precepts common to all, but also the evangelical counsels by the vows of obedience, chastity and poverty” (Canon 487), the documents of and since Vatican II, position her as having been called by God to be a Nun. New forms of knowledge emerge in these texts which speak specifically of, or refer to, the Nun as ‘called’ by God (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 574; Pope John Paul II, 1996). She is positioned as ‘called’ regarding many aspects of her life: called to sacrifice her whole life to God, called to serve the Church, called to be faithful, called to enrich the Church, and called to recognise that the difficulties she may encounter, and so on. Such emerging forms of knowledge suggest the advent of new discursive truths in the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun since the promulgation of the 1917 Code of Canon Law. Within the Church texts examined, there are different manifestations of the Nun as Called by God. This chapter will explore firstly the Nun’s being called by
God as a mark of her identity and secondly, the Nun as called by God to be faithful to that calling.

### 3.4.1 The Call Marks the Identity of Nuns

In the regulation of female bodies, institutions, such as the Church, shape the identity of women as well as restrict their experience (Rubin, 2004). In the case of Nuns, the Church creates a discursive truth about their identity by positioning them as having been called specifically by God to be a Nun. Thus God is employed as a discursive resource, increasing the power of the institution over the lives of individuals (Marvasti, 2004), and positioning the Church as legitimate in exercising power over the lives of Nuns.

From the point of view of the divine and hierarchical structure of the Church, the religious state of life is not an intermediate state between the clerical and lay states. But, rather, the faithful of Christ are called by God from both these latter states of life so that they may enjoy this particular gift in the life of the Church and thus each in his own way, can forward the saving mission of the Church ("Lumen Gentium" in Abbott, 1966, p. 74).

In later texts, the Church reiterates this discursive truth in stating that “the call to follow Christ with a special consecration is a gift of the Trinity for God’s Chosen People” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 14). In the text “Lumen Gentium” (Abbott, 1966, p. 78), the Church speaks of the vocation of the Nun as one to which “God has summoned” her,
thus deeming her to have neither acted on her own choice, nor created her own plan for her life.

The Nun is said to have heard the call of God, and she should be ready to respond to God’s invitation by giving her life to God. The Nun is represented as the passive woman, a particular mode of being female validated by the Church (Weedon, 1997), the recipient of God’s summons and of God’s will for her, responding to the call of the powerful male God, a call which she cannot question or refuse.

This ‘special consecration’, is not given by God to everyone in the Church. The Nun is positioned as different from other women, her response to the call from God marking her within the Church as a ‘consecrated person’ (Pope John Paul II, 1996), a term which, although suggestive of holiness and privilege, at the same time objectifies and disembodies the Nun. The Nun’s female body, made holy through consecration to God, is positioned within a holy, consecrated space which encloses and confines her “bodily intentionality” (Bartky, 1997, p. 134). Furthermore, the Nun is described by the Church as not needing human affirmation, since her identity as a Nun, as one called by God, is said to be its own reward:

Consecrated life does not seek praise and human appreciation, it is repaid by the joy of continuing to work untiringly for the kingdom of God, to be a seed of life which grows in secret, without expecting any reward other than that which the Lord will give in the end. It finds its identity in the call of the Lord, in following
him, in unconditional love and service, which are capable of filling a life to the brim and giving it fullness of meaning. (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 22)

While this text applies to both women and men in Religious Orders, the Nun reads this text as the Church positioning her as fecund, nurturing not the seed of a human union, but her own ‘spiritual seed’ which ‘grows in secret’ inside her, notions which bear direct reference to images of fertility in the female body. In this way the Nun, although celibate, is complying with “a compulsory obligation on women's bodies to reproduce” (Butler, 1999, p. 115). Within the Church context of vowed virginity, she performs according to the script laid down for her by the Church, a role previously rehearsed by other Nuns before her. Using language overlaid with sexual connotations, the Church prescribes the ways in which the Nun will be a fertile woman, in spite of her vowed virginity and chastity. Hers will be a spiritual fertility, since her life itself will be the spiritual seed of the Church, silently and secretly growing to produce, through the ‘unconditional love and service’. Though her body is involved in work for the Church, it is through her spirit, not through her fecund body, that the Church will be fruitful.

The Nun is described here as playing her own part in the “gendered biography produced for women” (Gullette, 1995, p. 222), that is, reproducing, nurturing, mothering and grand-mothering. Social discourse partly defines women in terms of the regimes of truth associated with motherhood, so much so, argue Malson & Swann (2003, p. 197), that childless women are “marked as different and need to explain themselves”. The Nun, however, marked by the Church as different from other women, need not explain
her childlessness. The Church constructs a regime of truth which defines a spiritual motherhood role for her, a role which is played differently from that played by other women. Furthermore, unlike other women who reap the human rewards of nurturing, labouring and delivering life, the Nun is positioned as being content to receive spiritual rewards for her spiritual mothering. Her rewards will come from the hands of God ‘in the end’, signalling that she must die before such rewards will be bestowed upon her by God in heaven.

Though taking on an identity of being chosen by God, Nuns are nevertheless human beings, positioned by the Church as needing to be transformed and redeemed from an implied lesser state of being:

The Church needs consecrated persons who, even before committing themselves to the service of this or that noble cause, allow themselves to be transformed by God's grace and conform themselves fully to the Gospel. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 192)

Although the Church speaks of all people as needing salvation, in the mind of the Church it is particularly women who need transformation, since it was through the disobedience of the first woman, Eve, that death and sin are deemed to have come into the world (Pope Paul VI, 1964). According to the Biblical story of creation in Gen: 2 (Revised Standard Version), it is because of Eve’s challenging the authority of the all-powerful God, and her encouragement of Adam to do the same, that women and men of every generation are described by the Church as sinful and in need of redemption.
Though called by God to a ‘consecrated’ life, Nuns, as women, are represented as not immune from the damning effects of the sin of the first woman. According to the Church, they too need ‘to be transformed’, a process in which they surrender and conform to the workings of God’s grace. The Nun must be reminded of her constant need for this conformity and of her inability to transform herself without the help of the powerful male God. Through her identity and her work, the Nun must allow herself to be transformed by both God and the Church. The Church creates in her consecrated person, a submissive body, a body which requires an “openness and docility to the Spirit’s action” in her life (CICLSAL 2002, p. 35). Hers, then is a docile body which “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, 1979, p. 136) by the Church. The Nun, called by God to live a ‘consecrated’ life, is a woman who must remain faithful to this call.

### 3.4.2 The Call demands Faithfulness

Once the Nun has been called, she does not turn her back on the one who calls. She must remain faithful, striving to grow and develop into the calling she has been given:

> Let all who have been called to the profession of the vows take painstaking care to preserve and excel increasingly in the vocation to which God has summoned them. Let their purpose be a more vigorous flowering of the church’s holiness and the greater glory of the one and undivided Trinity. (Abbott, 1966, p. 78)
The Church describes the Nun as needing to be reminded of her calling, which includes a calling to serve the Church, and to be assisted in her persevering:

[The task of the Superior] requires a constant presence which is able to animate and propose, to recall the raison d'être of consecrated life, and to help those entrusted to [Superiors] to live in a constantly renewed fidelity to the call of the Spirit.

(CICLSAL, 2002, p. 23)

According to the Church, the Nun’s Superior has the responsibility, on behalf of the Church, to maintain vigilance over her and to ensure that she remains faithful to her calling. This is a service of surveillance (Foucault, 1979) rendered by the Superior on behalf of the Church, especially in the need within the present times to “rediscover the meaning and quality of consecrated life” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 11). The Nun is thus positioned as not having the personal authority to animate her own life. Weak, open to temptation, and incapable of monitoring and maintaining her own faithfulness to her call, she is represented as needing the person of the Superior to inspire and motivate her response to the call of God. The disciplinary principle of surveillance (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1979) is necessary to prevent the Nun from reverting to being an ordinary woman whose fidelity to the call might lapse at any time. In spite of being described as a woman who is different from other women, in that she is called and set apart by God to live a life which “is a special following of Christ,” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 38), the Nun is deemed to be incapable of maintaining her own faithfulness. She must internalise the authoritative gaze of the Superior, a gaze which circulates through
networks of individuals within institutions (Heaton, 1999), learning ultimately to monitor her own behaviour.

In spite of the evidence of the worldwide decline in numbers of Nuns entering the Convent (Australian Catholic Bishops, 1998; McLean, 2003; A. J. Mills & Ryan, 2001), the Church expresses a confidence that ‘the consecrated life’ will always be present and available for the works of the Church:

The various difficulties stemming from the decline in personnel and apostolates must in no way lead to a loss of confidence in the evangelical vitality of the consecrated life, which will always be present and active in the Church … New situations of difficulty are therefore to be faced with the serenity of those who know that what is required of each individual is not success, but commitment to faithfulness. What must be avoided at all costs is the actual breakdown of the consecrated life, a collapse which is not measured by a decrease in numbers but by a failure to cling steadfastly to the Lord and to personal vocation and mission … Sad situations of crisis invite consecrated persons courageously to proclaim their faith in Christ's Death and Resurrection, that they may become a visible sign of the passage from death to life. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, pp. 113-114. Italics in original)

While Orders of Nuns face the ‘sad situation of crisis’ in diminishing membership, the Church describes an even more threatening ‘collapse’, namely Nuns’ failing to be faithful to ‘the Lord and to personal vocation and mission’. Unfaithful Nuns, Nuns who
abandon their ‘personal vocation and mission’, are positioned as presenting more of a threat to the Church than the diminishing numbers of Nuns in Orders. While social support provides a context for women who are not Nuns to cope with stress and “avoid the pit of despair that characterizes depression” (Ussher, 2006, p. 117), the Church expects the Nun to face the ‘crisis’ of diminishing numbers with the ‘serenity’ appropriate for a consecrated woman. The Nun’s stress is alleviated not by human support, but by ‘clinging to the Lord’. Even in the event of the death of her own Order, minimised as a ‘sad’ event, the Nun must bear the grief of that death courageously, serenely and with passive acceptance. The Church speaks of God as ultimately in control of what happens to the lives of Orders and of individual Nuns, thereby distancing itself from the responsibility of having to deal with the crises experienced by Orders or by individual Nuns within them, and positioning Nuns as powerless against Divine authority.

Although the decline in numbers was first documented in Australia thirty years ago (Leavey, 1977), the Church continues to position the Nun as bearing a responsibility to call others to become Nuns.

The consecrated person is, by nature, also a vocation animator: one who is called cannot not become a caller. (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 26)
The Church thus positions the Nun as having to accept responsibility for the decline in the number of young women joining the Convent, since such a decline in workers for the mission of the Church cannot be represented as God’s doing.

According to the Church’s discursive truths of Nuns’ lives, difficulties an individual Nun may experience, or which may exist in Religious Life in the present age, are represented as challenges in which:

… lies hidden an authentic call of the Holy Spirit to rediscover the wealth and potentialities of this form of life. (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 21)

For the Nun, challenges merely mask the call, the ‘authentic’ call of God. The Nun is expected to respond to difficulties by working to rediscover the richness of her life as a Nun. It is her task to search for and uncover the ‘wealth and potentialities’ which difficulties have masked in her life as a Nun, strengths which the Church defines as merely lying ‘hidden’ within the challenges she may experience. She is positioned as having power over such difficulties and questioning, but it is a power to be directed at the inadequacy of her own thinking, at what she has presumably lost and needs to ‘rediscover’.

The challenges or difficulties a Nun encounters in being called by God, are described by the Church as part of the life of self-sacrifice she commits herself to as a Nun. The Nun is positioned as the self-sacrificing woman who gives herself totally to God, and
whose self-sacrificing body is regulated through material practices relating to dress, the vows and communal living.

3.5 The Nun as Self-sacrificing

The life of a Nun is recognised by the Church in its first promulgation of Canon Law as a life of sacrifice, in which she offers herself as “a holocaust, through [her] prayers and penances” in her striving for perfection (Abbo & Hannan, 1952, p. 482). The notion of the self-sacrificing woman is powerful within society (O'Grady, 2005). Many successful careers of writers, entertainers and musicians in Australian culture in the early to mid 1940’s, for example, are attributable to the self-sacrifice and dedication of mothers to their talented children (Hunt, 2004). The ‘good mother’, a pervasive discursive construction of woman, positions the idealised woman (Ussher, 1997) as one who sacrifices herself for her children by devoting herself tirelessly and selflessly to their welfare, (Robson, 2005), as well as to her husband and her home. The Nun, unmarried and childless, does not, however, escape the pervasive construction of woman as self-sacrificing (Keenan, 2004). She is positioned by the Church as sacrificing herself not for husband or children, but for the sake of the Church itself.

The Church draws on the discursive resource of the authority of God to reinforce its expectation of renunciation and self-sacrifice in the life of the Nun. It positions her as having been offered a special gift by God, a gift which she must accept and repay with the sacrifice of her life:
Those who have been given the priceless gift of following the Lord Jesus more closely consider it obvious that he can and must be loved with an undivided heart, that one can devote to him one's whole life, and not merely certain actions or occasional moments or activities. The precious ointment poured out as a pure act of love, and thus transcending all ‘utilitarian’ considerations, is a sign of unbounded generosity, as expressed in a life spent in loving and serving the Lord, in order to devote oneself to his person and his Mystical Body. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 190. Italics in original)

Even though there is a cost for Nuns who have given their lives in sacrifice to God for the work of the Church, her ‘loving’ sacrifice, is to be given freely to God who has called her to this form of life. God requires no less than an ‘undivided heart’ from those who dedicate their lives to God. Being devoted to God is not sufficient; God demands ‘a life spent in loving and serving’, a consequence of her being gifted by God. In the document “Vita Consecrata” (1996, p. 62), Pope John Paul II, further reminds Nuns that once they have learnt detachment through sacrifice, their lives will be more effective in “working and suffering with [God] in the spreading of his Kingdom.”

Nuns are thus positioned by the Church as the epitome of the idealised, self-sacrificing woman. Total giving of self and the regulation of the body, are manifestations of this sacrifice of self.
3.5.1 Total Giving of Self

Since the promulgation of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, the Church has positioned the Nun as committing herself to a “permanent mode” of living her life as a Nun (Abbo & Hannan, 1952, Canon 487). This notion of permanent self-giving is reinforced in the documents of Vatican II examined in this study. “Perfectae Caritatis” reminds Nuns that:

… by their profession of the evangelical counsels they have given answer to a divine call to live for God alone not only by dying to sin (cf Rom 6:11) but also by renouncing the world. They have handed over their entire lives to God’s service in an act of special consecration … Inasmuch as their self-dedication has been accepted by the Church, they should realize that they are committed to her service as well. (Abbott, 1966, p. 470)

The sacrifice of one’s life to God is represented as constituting ‘an act of special consecration’, which privileges the Nun, inviting her into a close bond with God. The Nun makes a commitment of her whole life to God. In accepting this dedication, the Church redefines her commitment as her having ‘handed over’ her entire life. Just as the married woman, by virtue of her marriage vow, is expected to forsake all others in dedicating herself to her husband (Catholic Church, 1995, p. 448), so too the Nun is expected to enter into a kind of spiritual marriage contract with God in which she not only forsakes earthly union, but also the earthly rewards associated with it.
In language reminiscent of a sexual conquest, the Church positions the Nun as surrendering herself to God, giving herself over to a power greater than herself, a power which she should not and is not able to resist. The Nun gives over not only her earthly desires, but also her self, as is expected of women in patriarchal cultures (McCarthy, 2006), particularly in the Church which, according to O’Murchu (2005, p. 72), has “seriously undermined [women’s] legitimate sense of self-value and personal integrity”. This positioning of the Nun by the Church echoes that of the ‘good wife’ and the ‘good mother’ in social discourse (Young, 2003). But whereas the expectation of the ‘good wife’ in wider discourse includes an expectation of sexual availability to a husband (Potts et al., 2004), the expectation of the Nun is that she is asexual, giving her life in service of others through the surrender of her whole self to that service, thereby modelling ideal self-sacrificing feminine behaviour to others. The Nun is positioned as understanding and accepting that such abandonment and submission of her self, her personhood and her being to God, mediated through the institution of the Church, is inherent in the acceptance of God’s call.

While midlife for women has been described as a time of achieving satisfaction by fine-tuning the relationship between values, behaviour and circumstances (Howell, 2001a), the Nun is warned by the Church that there are threats to her complete sacrifice of self which are inherent in her own process of maturing:
The stage of maturity, while it brings personal growth, can also bring the danger of a certain individualism, accompanied either by a fear of not being in line with the times, or by forms of inflexibility, self-centredness or diminished enthusiasm. At this point continuing formation is aimed at helping not only to bring back a higher level of spiritual and apostolic life, but also at discovering the special characteristics of this stage of life. For at this time, after refining certain features of the personality, the gift of self is made to God more genuinely and with greater generosity. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 125. Italics in original)

The Church represents the Nun as needing to be guided through the maturation process of her own life, since this is seen as a time when individualism, doubts and reassessment of one’s life and life choices can erode the original commitment to the call of God. While other women report an increased independence and sense of freedom at midlife (Lippert, 1997; McQuaide, 1998b), the Church warns the Nun that she should be suspicious of her own maturation process, viewing it as possibly destructive of her commitment to a life of self-sacrifice. Individualism, thinking, questioning and acting independently, the enemies of the sacrificed self, represent a threat to the Church’s model of the ideal Nun, particularly when energy for work wanes with ageing, and the Nun begins to focus legitimately on her own needs. Committing oneself with renewed enthusiasm at this time of maturity is described as a gift, but a gift with strings attached, a gift which paradoxically, demands even greater sacrifice on the part of the giver, the self-sacrificing Nun.
The histories of Orders of Nuns in Australia/New Zealand include accounts of self-sacrifice which impacted negatively on their mental and physical health as they dealt with issues of isolation, loneliness, lack of support from the Church and conflict with Church authorities (J. M. Brady, 2005; O'Sullivan, 1995; Zimmerman, 1999). The Church, however, deems that it is fitting that some Nuns literally sacrifice their lives for the work of the Church when it states that:

Some Gospel-inspired initiatives and daring have compelled consecrated men and women into difficult positions even to the risk of and the effective sacrificing of life. (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 16)

Such risks taken in difficult or dangerous situations are described by the Church as being appropriate, since not only the Church, but also the Gospel, calls for the sacrificial offering of the Nun’s life. It is particularly Nuns, through traditionally gender-specific performative acts (Butler, 1997; Weedon, 1997) of caring for the sick and dying, often in places where personal safety is compromised, who have sacrificed their lives to the point of death. “Vita Consecrata” lauds the ultimate sacrifice of their lives:

Following a glorious tradition, a great number of consecrated persons, above all women, carry out their apostolate in the field of health care, according to the charism of their respective Institutes. Down the centuries, many consecrated persons have given their lives in service to victims of contagious diseases, confirming the truth that
dedication to the point of heroism belongs to the prophetic nature of the consecrated life. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 153. Italics in original)

In their living and their dying, the bodies of Nuns become the “representatives of corporeality, of domesticity, of the natural order that men have had to expel from their own self-representations in order to construct themselves as above-the-mundane, beyond the merely material” (Grosz, 1995, p. 122). Their deaths, resulting from selfless engagement with the ‘natural order’, are described as noble and honourable, in line with a ‘glorious tradition’ set by Nuns in the Church, of self-sacrifice to the point of death. The Church reinforces here its discursive truth that dying in the service of the Church is a heroic act, one which is intrinsic to the sacrificial, missionary nature of Religious Life, especially for women. In her death, the heroic Nun, the Church’s representation of what Ussher (1997) calls the “idealized woman”, is positioned as confirming the truths constructed for her life by the Church. In the ultimate sacrifice of her physical life to the work of the Church she brings God to the world.

Though sacrificing one’s life for the Church is an extreme act, Nuns’ lives are permeated with the notion of self-sacrifice, which is evidenced even in the ways in which Nuns in Australia and New Zealand, for example, have worked for many years in inadequate conditions and for poor remuneration (O’Brien, 2005), conducting educational and health facilities on behalf of the Church (J. M. Brady, 2005; Gardiner, 1994). The discursive ‘truth’ of the Nun’s life as one of self-sacrifice is enacted in practices designed to regulate her body and behaviour.
3.5.2 Regulation of the body

Material practices in the lives of Nuns, such as the taking of vows and living communally, are invested with meaning by the institution which they serve, the Church. According to Foucault, “religious groups and charity organizations had long played this role of ‘disciplining’ the population” (Foucault, 1979, p. 212), thereby creating a population of docile bodies to be used for the work of the institution and regulated in terms of time and space (Danaher et al., 2000). Gergen (1999, p. 207), speaks of power relations within institutions as “incorporating the biological existence of the person”. Disciplinary power, exercised through the regulation of bodies, at times invades the body itself. Female bodies have been regulated by religious institutions not only to limit their experiences, but also to shape their identity as well (Rubin, 2004).

Ontologically defined by the patriarchal Church, Nuns embody disciplinary practices defined for them by the highly patriarchal order existing within the Church. The production of docile bodies requires, according to Bartky (1997, p. 130), that “an uninterrupted coercion be directed to the very processes of bodily activity, not just their results”. She argues that even the movement of women, the positioning of their limbs, and the placing of their bodies is subjected to the discipline of producing an appearance of deference under male scrutiny. In the case of Nuns, the activities of their lives, their dress, the material practices associated with the vows and the communal mode of living, work towards the continual creation of the docile body, of the woman who is “docile to the working of the Holy Spirit” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 196). For Nuns, however,
the discipline enacted on their bodies functions to turn women who are Nuns not into compliant companions of men, but the compliant, willing workers for a male God and a patriarchal Church.

Material practices in the lives of Nuns aim to control the senses, restrict behaviour, privilege ‘feminine’ values and promote the Church’s constructions of what it is to be a good Nun. Butler (1997, p. 402), argues that gender is a constructed reality, a “performance accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief”. In the same way, it can be argued, the constructed reality of ‘Nun’, that is, what Butler (1997, p. 402) describes as the “mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self”, is also a performative act in which the Nun’s dress, movements and manner of living are constructed for her by the Church.

3.5.2.1 Dress

Within the Church, certain discursive practices, particularly the wearing of habits by Nuns, support and make visible its discursive truth of the Nun as consecrated, holy and owned by the Church. Bartky, (1997), argues that disciplinary practices function to increase the utility of the body as well. Prior to the Vatican II, Nuns wore habits, which made them visible and identifiable to both the Church and the world. The document on
Religious Life from Vatican II, “Perfectae Caritatis”, introduced a change in this material practice of being Nun:

Since they are signs of a consecrated life, religious habits should be simple and modest, at once poor and becoming. They should meet the requirements of health and be suited to the circumstances of time and place as well as to the services required by those who wear them. Habits of men and women which do not correspond to those norms are to be changed. (Abbott, 1966, p. 478)

There is an important connection between material practices within an institution and the language in which they are described or proscribed, for “language both is and refers to that which is material, and what is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified” (Salih, 2004, p. 152). Not only are Nuns’ habits to be simple and suitable to local conditions, but the Church instructs that they are to be both ‘modest’ and ‘becoming’, descriptors which are applied more frequently to the clothing of women than of men. While this instruction about dress is addressed to both women and men in Religious Orders, the descriptors ‘modest’ and ‘becoming’ have application more particularly in the Church to women’s than to men’s clothing (Kidder, 2003, p. 134). In outlining the details of this material practice for Nun’s lives, the Church exercises over them what Burns-Ardolino, (2003, p. 50), calls “social control of feminine comportment”. Though changes in this material practice of Nuns’ lives resulted in their being able to experiment with less outmoded and cumbersome forms of dress, the
Church’s use of the terms ‘simple’, ‘poor’, ‘modest’ and ‘becoming’ ensures that it still exerts its disciplinary power in relation to the regulation of dress for Nuns.

For generations in the Church, women have been reminded that “modesty and moderation should guide [them] in their dress” (Guide and Manual of Prayers for the Sodality of the Children of Mary, 1941, p. 29), and thus the link is forged between the sexual body and the manner in which it is to be clothed. In the Church, sexuality is controlled for women by means of marriage and motherhood, or Religious Life, where the image of the ‘good Nun’ encapsulates ‘feminine’ notions of behaviour and dress for Nuns (O’Brien, 2005). Representations of the female sexual body as needing to be hidden, contained, and constricted through material practices relating to dress, are common in other religious traditions as well, such as for Muslim women, whose dress protects their ‘modesty’ and thus their family’s honour, (Daly, 1999), for Hasidic women whose hair is considered an erotic site, (Carrel, 1999), and for Mennonite women, whose head covering symbolises their submission to both God and their husbands (Graybill & Arthur, 1999). Such control of women’s body through dress reinforces problematic institutional power relations between men and women (Ussher, 1997).

The Nun’s female body too is positioned by the patriarchal Church as dangerous, needing still to be restrained by clothing codes. Her simple, modest clothing portrays her to herself and to the world, as pure and virtuous. This purity and virtue, however, is enjoined on her by the Church which, at the same time, treats her female body with
suspicion. As recently as 1996, the Church still speaks of the habit as conveying signs to the world, and the Nun is still being positioned as the one to present that sign through material practices relating to her body:

Since the habit is a sign of consecration, poverty and membership in a particular Religious family, I join the Fathers of the Synod in strongly recommending to men and women religious that they wear their proper habit, suitably adapted to the conditions of time and place. Where valid reasons of their apostolate call for it, Religious, in conformity with the norms of their Institute, may also dress in a simple and modest manner, with an appropriate symbol, in such a way that their consecration is recognizable. Institutes which from their origin or by provision of their Constitutions do not have a specific habit should ensure that the dress of their members corresponds in dignity and simplicity to the nature of their vocation (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 41).

A ‘valid reason’ must exist for the Nun not to wear a habit, the proper form of dress for a Nun, and that reason arises only from the nature of her work. The individual Nun, positioned here as not being able to regulate the clothing of her own body, is not the authority on her own dress and must be guided by the Church-approved ‘norms’ of her Order. If the Nun belongs to an Order which does not have a specified habit, her clothing and style of dress must be judged by the Order to be ‘simple’ and ‘modest’. The Nun is positioned as a woman who must take guidance in how to present her own body. Even if she does not wear a traditional habit, she is required to wear a ‘symbol’, a cross
or other recognizable religious symbol, which marks her as ‘consecrated’, as set apart from other women and belonging to the Church.

The discursive truths and material practices relating to dress are not the only vehicles for the regulation of the Nun’s life. The bodies and behaviour of Nuns are further regulated by the Church in the material practices associated with the taking of vows.

### 3.5.2.2 Vows

The documents examined in this study describe the value of the Nun’s life as being enhanced through the sacrificing of autonomous control of money, sex and power in her life. In fact, in the text “Lumen Gentium”, the self-sacrifice and renunciation embedded in the vows taken by Nuns, are said to purify her heart and contribute to her personal development:

Everyone should realise that the profession of the evangelical counsels, though entailing the renunciation of certain values which undoubtedly merit high esteem, does not detract from a genuine development of the human person. Rather by its very nature it is most beneficial to that development. For the counsels, voluntarily undertaken according to each one’s personal vocation, contribute greatly to purification of heart and spiritual liberty. They continually kindle the fervor of charity … [they] are especially able to pattern the Christian man after that manner of
virginal and humble life which Christ the Lord elected for Himself, and which His
Virgin mother also chose. (Abbott, 1966, p. 77)

The Nun is described as being spiritually liberated through keeping the vows which
impact on her body, mind and spirit. Furthermore, the vows are described as having the
capacity to continually enliven the Nun and motivate her to create an even more perfect
form of ‘the Christian man’, a term which the Nun must translate to include her as
woman. There is no reference here to the renunciation implicit in living the vows, but
rather the vows are described as positive, helping the Nun achieve a life detached from
the world. In creating this discursive truth for the lives of Nuns, the Church offers what
Burr (2003) describes as a “framework” in which individuals are meant to understand
their lives and their behaviour, drawing on the authority of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, to
reinforce the manner in which it expects Nuns to live their lives.

The Vatican II document devoted entirely to Religious Life, “Perfectae Caritatis”
(Abbott, 1966) also speaks of the notion of the self-sacrifice of the Nun’s vowed life as
beneficial. Not only is her self-sacrifice beneficial to the human development of the
individual Nun, but the whole Church benefits from her giving her life to God:

The more ardently they unite themselves to Christ through a self-surrender involving
their entire lives, the more vigorous becomes the life of the church and the more
abundantly her apostolate bears fruit. (Abbott, 1966, p. 467)
This lifelong sacrifice of her life to God becomes a gift which she gives to the Church and which the Church uses to enliven its own life and work.

However, in the later text, “Vita Consecrata” (Pope John Paul II, 1996), the Church does acknowledge that the Nun’s life of self-sacrifice may not always be entirely beneficial to her. To ascribe meaning (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002) to the discursive truth of the Nun’s life as self-sacrificing and difficult at times, the Church draws on the authority of the most central symbol in the Christian tradition, the cross, the Christian symbol of suffering to the point of death.

[The consecrated life] helps the Church to remain aware that the Cross is the superabundance of God's love poured out upon this world, and that it is the great sign of Christ’s saving presence, especially in the midst of difficulties and trials. This is the testimony given constantly and with deeply admirable courage by a great number of consecrated persons, many of whom live in difficult situations, even suffering persecution and martyrdom. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 39 Italics in original)

Like Jesus who ‘suffered persecution’ and died, the Nun, in her self-sacrifice even to the point of death if necessary, becomes the face of God to the world. Her life, in its renunciation and negation of her rights through the vows, becomes the ‘great sign’ of God’s presence in the world, particularly through ‘difficulties and trial’ she may experience. In presenting these ‘truths’ about the Nun’s life of sacrifice, and drawing on the authority of God, Jesus and the Cross to support these discursive truths, the Church
establishes the mechanism by which the Nun internalises the link between her female self and the suffering she must endure. Thus service to the point of suffering becomes normalised for Nuns, through “being incorporated into the structure of the self” (Bartky, 1997). She internalises both what it is and how it is to be a Nun, including another material practice regulated by the Church, the communal lifestyle she takes on in living as a Nun.

3.5.2.3 Communal Living

The 1917 Code of Canon Law (Abbo & Hannan, 1952) speaks of “the common life” which Nuns must “assiduously observe … in food, clothing and furniture” (Canon 594). The Nun is described in this text as a woman who lives a shared, common life with other Nuns, not marked as an individual or as distinctive from the others in terms of food, clothing or furniture. Each one’s needs mirror the other’s. The Revised Code of Canon Law (1983), restates this obligation, but allows for possible cases of exception:

Observing common life, religious are to live in their own religious house and are not to be absent from it except with the permission of their superior. If it concerns a lengthy absence from the house, however, the major superior, with the consent of the council and for a just cause, can permit a member to live outside a house of the institute, but not for more than a year, except for the purpose of caring for ill health, of studies, or of exercising an apostolate in the name of the institute. (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 665)
The Nun’s life is regulated through living a ‘common life’ with other Nuns, a lifestyle wherein she is subject to what Foucault calls the “permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (1979, p. 201). The ‘common life’ implies uniformity and visibility, disciplinary techniques whereby the Nun’s life is regulated by a system of control over bodies (Bartky, 1997), operating even within her own living space. However, while the possibility for resistance, in the form of living away from the Convent, does exist for the Nun, she may only be absent from the ‘religious house’ for reasons of illness, study or work, and only with the consent of the highest authority in the Order. She may not make her own independent choice to live outside the ‘religious house’. There are implied dangers here of developing personal and financial independence and of the temptation inherent in forming other relationships in the Nun’s living away from the ‘religious house’, beyond the regulating effects of the disciplinary practice of surveillance within communal living. The Nun is positioned as needing such disciplinary regulation in the material practices of her life so as to live as a good Nun.

Discourse creates a world within which individuals operate (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). The self-sacrificing, docile Nun, the woman called by God, operating within the world created by the Church’s discursive construction of Nun, functions as the regulated subject of the Church institution. The function of the docile, Church-regulated body is to work for the Church, submissive to the Church gaze and engaging in its mission.
3.6 The Nun as Working for Church

Nuns have traditionally been involved in service roles in the Church, while the management of the institution and the guardianship of the faith have remained in the hands of men. In spite of changes developing within traditional gender functions in the managerial world outside the Church, whereby the mastery of skills usually associated with women is being recognised as important for managerial expertise (Hatcher, 2003), within the Church there remains clear demarcation around gender function: men control the lives of women. “Full, supreme and universal power over the universal Church” resides with the Pope and the Bishops of the Church (Abbott, 1966, p. 43). Since the Church believes its male authority figures to be direct successors of the Apostles, who were male (Catholic Church, 1995, p. 254), all women are excluded from authority and leadership roles in the official Church structure by virtue of their gender. However, the life of the Nun is positioned as being valued by the Church and of benefit to the world through her work (Abbo & Hannan, 1952). The Revised Code of Canon Law (1983), enunciates the Nun’s obligation to be an obedient worker in the service of the Church:

Inasmuch as institutes of consecrated life are dedicated in a special way to the service of God and of the whole Church, they are subject to the supreme authority of the Church in a special way. Individual members are also bound to obey the Supreme Pontiff as their highest superior by reason of the sacred bond of obedience. (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 590)
The Church positions itself as having a right and obligation to subject Nuns to its highest authority, expecting from them the loyalty of indentured servants, bound to the Church by obedience. The bond of obedience to the Church, as distinct from the Nun’s vow of obedience to God, is an attachment to the ultimate authority of the Church. In referring to this bond as ‘sacred’, the Church again draws on the authority of God as a discursive resource to support its ‘truth’ that Nuns are subject, in obedience, to the supreme authority of the Church and are thereby subject to its disciplinary gaze.

3.6.1 Submissive to the Church Gaze

Foucault argues that disciplines, the mechanisms by which power operates within institutions, “function increasingly as techniques for making useful individuals” (Foucault, 1979, p. 211). Discipline operates effectively within institutions by means of surveillance, whereby individuals within the discursive framework of the institution are exposed to systems which can or do monitor their behaviour (Danaher et al., 2000). Within the institution of the Church surveillance systems monitor the behaviour of Nuns, exerting an influence over them for the creation of compliant, Church-working bodies. When laws were first codified for the lives of Nuns, the Church exercised the power of surveillance over them through the person of the local Bishop. According to a section in the 1917 Code of Canon Law directed specifically at Nuns, the authority of the Bishop is evident from the very beginning of her life as a Nun, since it was he who:
… must inform himself whether she has been subjected to duress or fraud and whether she understands what she is about; if he is fully satisfied regarding her proper motives and her freedom from duress and fraud, he will permit the admission of the candidate to the novitiate or of the novice or professed to profession. (Abbo & Hannan, 1952, Canon 552)

According to this directive, the Bishop ascertains whether the Nun is acting freely, is aware of what she is doing and is a suitable candidate to be a Nun. It is the Bishop who accepts her vows on behalf of the Church. The Nun’s Superior, who would have satisfied herself of compliance in these matters, has her decision ratified and approved by the male authority figure in the local Church, the Bishop. Both the individual Nun and her Superior submit themselves to male authority, the only competent authority of the Church to interpret the evangelical counsels, to direct their practice by laws, and by canonical approbation to establish the stable forms of living deriving from them.

Furthermore, the 1917 Code of Canon Law, the binding regulatory law in the Church until its revision in 1983, there are different regulations governing the election of Superiors for men and women’s Orders. Such different gender-identified material practices support Bartky’s notion that disciplines can work to “produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine” (1997, p. 132). For example, men are positioned in this text as capable of electing the leaders without official supervision by the Church, while Nuns must submit to a different set of rules:
Before proceeding to the election of major superiors in institutes of men, every member of the chapter must promise under oath to elect only such candidates as, before God, he considers worthy of election. In congregations of women, the election of the mother general shall be held under the presidency, either in person or by delegate, of the Bishop of the place in which the election is held; and in the case of a congregation of diocesan approval, the local Bishop has the right to confirm or rescind the election as his conscience may dictate. (Abbo & Hannan, 1952, Canons 506, 507)

Nuns, represented here as needing extra guidance and greater surveillance than men, must elect their leadership under the gaze of the local Bishop or his delegate. In not being able to hold their elections without the Church surveillance, Nuns are positioned as being incapable of authenticating their own leadership, this task falling to the authoritative, powerful male. Furthermore, the Bishop/delegate has the final power of veto over Orders of Nuns which are directly subject to the local Bishop. Guided by his ‘conscience’, he has the power to negate the will of the Nuns in the election of their own leaders. The Church thus creates the discursive truth that the lives of Nuns need to be monitored, a truth reinforced in the later Revised Code of Canon Law (Catholic Church, 1983).

While the Church’s discursive constructions of Nuns offer clearly defined subject positions for them, the strength of the surveillance mechanisms set up within the
institution, imply that other subject positions can or do exist. Canon 628 of the Revised Code of Canon Law, states that:

The superiors whom the proper law of the institute designates for this function are to visit the houses and members entrusted to them at stated times according to the norms of this same proper law. It is the right and duty of a diocesan bishop to visit even with respect to religious discipline … individual houses of an institute of diocesan right located in his own territory. Members are to act with trust toward a visitator, to whose legitimate questioning they are bound to respond according to the truth in charity. Moreover, it is not permitted for anyone in any way to divert members from this obligation or otherwise to impede the scope of the visitation.

(Catholic Church, 1983)

Surveillance functions for the Nun through the home visits of their Superior, whose role it is to ensure that the ‘religious discipline’ is being observed. Not only the Nun’s Superior, but also the Bishop has a right and a duty to visit the house of Orders which are subject directly to his authority. The Nun is positioned here as needing the monitoring gaze of the institution to regulate even her everyday life and work. In addition, there is a suggestion embedded within the material practice of such surveillance mechanisms, of the possible existence of sites of resistance, what Weedon (1997) describes as ‘spaces’ in which individuals can resist dominant discursive subject positions. If such spaces exist for the Nun, spaces in which she resists the Church’s
discursive truths and material practices for her life, mechanisms of surveillance, which deal with such possible resistance, can reach even into her personal and domestic life.

Although Nuns’ lives are directed towards working for the Church, there has emerged a recognition of their need to be given participatory space within the institution. The Church affirms that:

It is … urgently necessary to take certain concrete steps, beginning by providing room for women to participate in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 98. Italics in original)

It is the male leadership of the Church which has the power and responsibility to ‘make room for women’, including Nuns, to participate in Church life. However, as Grosz (1995, p. 121) notes, “men produce a universe built upon the erasure of the bodies and contributions of women/mothers … They hollow out their own interiors and project them outward, and then require women as supporters for this hollowed space.” The space offered by the Church to women is a space not created by them, but allocated to them by men. Within the patriarchal structure of the Church, room to participate does not intrinsically exist for women (Robinson, 2007). A space has to be carved out for women and Nuns, a space which reinforces the notion that women’s concerns, along with women themselves, are tangential to the affairs of the male world of the Church. Women who are Nuns, positioned as docile workers for the Church, are thus unable to
claim their own authoritative, participatory space within the Church. Although described as important to decision making processes, particularly in issues which relate to women, they are positioned as marginal to decision making itself. Though the generosity of male leadership has created an involvement space for them, women, including Nuns, are positioned as subordinate to patriarchal authority and power in the Church.

As well as positioning Nuns as submissive to its disciplinary gaze, the Church sees itself as having a right to expect witness and service from Nuns who must be visible to both the Church and the wider world. The Nun is described as called to convey the Church’s disciplinary gaze to others within and outside of the Church, to bring others to a conversion to God:

Their lifestyle too must clearly show the ideal which they profess, and thus present itself as a living sign of God and as an eloquent, albeit often silent, proclamation of the Gospel. The Church must always seek to make her presence visible in everyday life, especially in contemporary culture, which is often very secularised and yet sensitive to the language of signs. In this regard the Church has a right to expect a significant contribution from consecrated persons, called as they are in every situation to bear clear witness that they belong to Christ. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 41 Italics in original)

Bartky (1997, p. 142), speaks of the disciplinary power inscribing women’s bodies as “everywhere and nowhere” in a society which positions woman as merely functional,
feminine body. The docile body of the Nun speaks the words the female voice has no power within the Church to utter. The Church positions the Nun, the ‘eloquent’ conveyor of its gaze, as communicating with her body while her voice remains voiceless in the style of the uncomplaining woman, described by Bordo (1997, p. 99), as “an ideal of patriarchal culture”. Lorber (2006, p. 449), in discussing the ways in which women and men are treated differently in corporations, argues that such different treatment arises not because of biological differences between women and men, but as a result of the “production and maintenance of gender differences” which privilege men over women in terms of remuneration and work. In the patriarchal culture of the Church, the production of gender differences relates to the way in which power operates within the institution. The Church defines and refers to itself as feminine, the Bride of Christ, (Catholic Church, 1995, p. 229) and thereby able to be controlled by the male power circulating within it. Male authority silences “those forms of expression linked metaphorically and symbolically to ‘female’ speech” (K. B. Jones, 1988, p. 120), at the same time, imposing “an impoverished” patriarchal view of the world (Brady, 2002, p. 19) on women and Nuns.

The Nun is never free of bearing ‘clear witness’, showing ‘in every situation’ to the world that she has accepted a call from God to belong to God alone. Since the Nun has no power in the Church to officially “proclaim the Gospel” (Catholic Church, 1983), her proclaiming of the Gospel is, paradoxically, ‘often silent’. The visibility rather than the voice of the Nun is valued, reinforcing Jantzen’s claim that the Church makes “strenuous efforts to silence women’s voices or require [them] to stammer in a male
tongue” (1998, p. 193). The Nun, positioned as speechless in the patriarchal framework of the Church, is meant to convey an eloquence, but it is an eloquence of silent submission, conveyed through the language of her docile body engaging in the Church’s mission.

### 3.6.2 Engaging in Mission of Church

While the Church respects the lives and contributions of the Nun, her working role is clearly defined for her:

In the field of theological, cultural and spiritual studies, much can be expected from the genius of women, not only in relation to specific aspects of feminine consecrated life, but also in understanding the faith in all its expressions. In this regard, the history of spirituality owes much to Saints like Teresa of Jesus and Catherine of Siena, the first two women to be given the title "Doctor of the Church", and to so many other mystics for their exploration of the mystery of God and their analysis of his action in believers. The Church depends a great deal on consecrated women for new efforts in fostering Christian doctrine and morals, family and social life, and especially in everything that affects the dignity of women and respect for human life. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 99)

Nuns are described as having their own ‘genius’, which lies in fostering and respecting social and family life and morals, roles traditionally normative for women (K.
B. Jones, 1988). Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, two Nun saints posthumously awarded titles usually afforded to males in a Church which has a long history of forbidding women to study theology (Kostroun, 2003), are presented as role models to Nuns, their ‘genius’ lying in their contemplation of the mysteries of God. Described by the Church as ‘mystics’, whose essential testimony, argues Lacan, “is that they are experiencing [that moment of sexuality which is always in excess], without knowing it” (quoted in Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 147), these Nun saints provide a spiritual framework for the docile Nun’s work in the Church, the traditional female focused work of educating, caring for others and promoting life, while contemplating the mysteries of God.

Within the Church, the Nun does not exercise or convey her own strength and power to others, but rather her work is described as analogous to that of a passive conduit, passing these qualities of God on to others. According to the Church, the way of life for Nuns takes its ultimate authority from Jesus who:

… proposed to His disciples that form of life which He, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world to do the will of the Father. In the Church this same state of life is imitated with particular accuracy and perpetually exemplified … to all men [the profession of evangelical counsels] shows wonderfully at work within the Church the surpassing greatness of the force of Christ the King and the boundless power of the Holy Spirit. (Abbott, 1966, p. 75)
The God of power and strength is a male gendered God, unsurpassed in his unchanging, unproblematic maleness (Birke, 1999), the male subject “construed … as the subject par excellence” (Grosz, 1994). The male pronoun is used by the Church to denote all those, including women, who witness this display of male/God power working through the lives of Nuns. Women generally are positioned in society as denying and being denied their real strengths, such as endurance and flexibility, by a social world which constructs them as timid, weak, submissive and vulnerable (Burns-Ardolino, 2003; Duncan, Peterson, & Ax, 2003). Similarly, Nuns are denied their strengths as women by functioning as merely the conduits of the strength and power of a male God.

According to Grosz (1995, p. 84) the body is never merely a ‘body’, but a gendered body, “which makes a great deal of difference to the kind of social subject and indeed the mode of corporeality assigned to [it]”. In a section of the text “Vita Consecrata”, devoted specifically to the role and dignity of Nuns, the Church assigns a ‘mode of corporeality’ to Nuns, allotting them gender specific roles in noting that they have a special task as women:

By virtue of their dedication lived in fullness and in joy, consecrated women are called in a very special way to be signs of God's tender love towards the human race and to be special witnesses to the mystery of the Church, Virgin, Bride and Mother. This mission of theirs was noted by the Synod, in which many consecrated women participated and made their voices heard. Those voices were listened to and
appreciated. Thanks also to their contribution, useful directions for the Church's life and her evangelizing mission have emerged. Certainly, the validity of many assertions relating to the position of women in different sectors of society and of the Church cannot be denied. It is equally important to point out that women's new self-awareness also helps men to reconsider their way of looking at things, the way they understand themselves, where they place themselves in history and how they interpret it, and the way they organise social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial life. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 97 Italics in original)

Though there is evidence of a growing emancipation of women and Nuns in the Church and their voices are being heard in the circles of Church officialdom, Nuns are positioned as still having a separate and distinct role to play, a role which arises out of the traditional patriarchal gender role distinction between men and women. In spite of claiming an awareness of the changing position and role of women in society, the Church still positions the work of Nuns as conveying ‘tender love’, a task which implies working with “graciousness, deference, and the readiness to serve” (Bartky, 1997), qualities expected of women in gender specific work. The Church, while acknowledging the threat of women’s ‘new self awareness’ to their work and status in society, positions Nuns as playing a supportive, supplementary role in the patriarchal Church structure. Nuns are to help men to understand themselves more fully as individuals, but as individuals nevertheless whose position is privileged within Church and society, in that they alone have the role of organizing social, political, religious and ecclesial life. Nuns
are positioned by the Church as supporting rather than challenging the power positions taken up by men in the Church and society.

From a Foucauldian analysis of key Church texts relating to the lives of all members of Religious Orders, but examined as applying to and ready by members of Religious Orders who are female, it is argued then, that the Church discursively constructs and regulates the life of the Nun according to three dominant regimes of truth: that she is called by God, that she must sacrifice her life and that she works for the Church in its mission. How then, do Nuns in Australia/New Zealand negotiate such dominant constructions in their lived experience of being Nuns, and what are the consequences for them of their subjective positioning? These questions are addressed in the following Chapters. Chapter 4 presents an introductory preface to the analysis of individual and group interviews with 43 Nuns in Australia and New Zealand. Chapter 5 examines Nuns’ experience of learned subjective positioning before analysing their accounts for ways in which they take up the Church’s discursive constructions of the Nun. Chapter 6 explores the position of resistance in the Nuns’ accounts of their experiences as Nuns.
3.7 The Insider’s Voice

The Church documents relating to Nuns’ lives are bulky, densely written documents, couched in the culture-specific language of the Church. They possess a characteristic de-humanising style, employing passive verbs and impersonal pronouns, usually in plural form, adding to an archaic effect in the writing. The language is sexist, privileging the male, and specific to Church/Religious Life. Rarely are the terms such as ‘charism’ or ‘community’ defined clearly for the non-Church reader. There is an assumption of in-house knowledge of the sub-culture of Religious Life.

As I read the texts examined in this study, I frequently experienced a reaction, a clenching, in my body. So much of these texts evoked the feelings of my own striving to be a good Nun, of my renunciations, of what it all cost, in fact. Feelings revisited the pain in the days before Vatican II, of cutting off from my family, of having my head shaved, of being confined and restricted, re-moulded and re-shaped, while my peers were learning to negotiate relationships, finances, education and decision-making in the world outside the convent. I shudder at the thought of what I would have become living under these constrictions of every small detail of my life, had it not been for the changes brought in after Vatican II and the possibility for renegotiation of my own discursive positioning in the years since.

I have to admit that some of the documents being examined, I had not previously even read in their entirety, which leads me to wonder how many of the Nuns I
interviewed would be in the same position. I was amazed, for example, to find that as late at 1996, Nuns were still being urged by the Pope to wear a habit. I found the impersonal Church language and the style of the writing disempowering, uninspiring and controlling.

Having now finished this chapter, I realise that I have become more strident about naming the patriarchal control of our lives by the Church. I am reflecting on the Church’s control of our lives as Nuns and on our inability to critique what is happening to us as women at the hands of the patriarchal authority in the Church. We are expected to be docile, hard working, servants of the Church. The documents still proclaim this, and yet there are Nuns who can’t find work within the Church, and Nuns being moved out of their parish-owned convents because the Church wants to use the space formerly allocated to Nuns, for other things.

The self-surveillance discipline was working on me in the early stages of this chapter. Could I really say what was emerging for me? Who would read this? What will be the consequences for my life as a Nun that other Nuns and Church people may read this? These questions I struggled with in the beginning. However the more I analysed and the more I wrote, the more I realised I had to call the situation as it so obviously seems to me. Perhaps I have become an outsider in my own life since I find now that I read these documents with the eyes of a sceptic. I no longer blandly buy what the Church is trying to sell us about our lives. It’s as though I’m both living it from the inside and critiquing it from the outside; it’s like being loyal and disloyal at the same time.
This situation partly arises from this research and partly from my knowledge that while the documents present the ideal, the real situation on the ground in my life and in the lives of peers and people I have worked with professionally (Brock, 1993), is very different from what the Church continues to present as the discursive truths and material practices for our lives.
CHAPTER 4: PREFACE TO INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

This present study adopts an approach which acknowledges Nuns as gendered discursive subjects, women whose lives are discursively constructed and regulated by and within the patriarchal institution of the Church. It applies a critical, feminist focus to the patriarchal, male-privileged Church world in which the Nun’s experience is framed. It is a Foucauldian and feminist epistemological approach which informs the methodological framework of the research and which is used to address the question of how Nuns in the sample of this study negotiate the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun. This chapter describes the qualitative methodological approach, and the procedures used for both gathering and analysing interview data, concluding with the reflexivity writing of the researcher in ‘The Insiders’ Voice’.

4.1 Interview Data

As noted in Chapter 2, many USA studies involving Nuns accessed participants directly through the Head Houses of their Orders, in some cases the Leaders themselves even selecting the Nuns for the research projects (J. T. Chibnall et al., 1998; Gallivan, 1994; Meiring, 1985). It was the intention in this present study to have the Nuns self-select for the research so as to encourage free participation and avoid the possibility of Nuns’ participation being motivated by pressure from their Order or Superior to participate in the research. Initially the study was to involve Australian Nuns, but Nuns in New Zealand became aware, through links with Orders in Australia, that a research
study of Nuns was being proposed by the researcher, and requested that an opportunity to be involved be extended to Orders in New Zealand. Some Orders in Australia have branches of their Orders in New Zealand, and indeed, in some Orders of Nuns there is exchange of personnel between Australia and New Zealand.

The researcher’s scholarship to conduct the study was part-funded by 32 Nuns’ Orders in Australia and New Zealand. These Orders were targeted first for recruitment of participants. The Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (ACLRI), now known as the Australian Conference of Religious (ACR), offered support and access to their resources for dissemination of information about the research.

4.2 Procedure for Recruitment of Participants

Notification of the study was sent to the Head Houses of those Orders in Australia and New Zealand who had offered financial support to the scholarship, and who had Nuns within the age range of 40-65. Nuns in this age range were targeted as this cohort would have lived as Nuns during or since the changed material practices brought about by Vatican II, and they are likely to be still actively engaged in work within or outside the Church.

Emails containing general information about the research, and a request to notify Nuns within the age range in their Orders, were sent to the Leaders of Orders through their administration offices (see sample in Appendix B). Several Leaders replied that
they would send the information on through their newsletters or emails to Nuns in their Orders. According to information volunteered by participants, some Leaders chose to send the information to all the Nuns in the Order, others individually contacted Nuns within the age range of the study, alerting them to the project if they wished to be involved. No other inclusion or exclusion procedures were used.

4.3 Participants

Seventy-six Nuns, aged 40-65, belonging to Apostolic Orders in Australia and New Zealand volunteered to participate. Of these, 45 were selected so as to include heterogeneity on the basis of age, Order, length of time as a Nun, living situation and geographic location. These 45 Nuns were sent information packs (see Appendix C), and 95.5% of them participated in the research. Three participants were unable to attend interviews due to unforeseen circumstances on the day of the interview. Forty-three participants from 14 different Religious Orders were interviewed, 84% of the sample were Australian and 16% New Zealand Nuns. In total, 52% of the participants (18 Australia and 4 New Zealand) were interviewed individually, while 48% (18 Australia and 3 New Zealand Nuns) participated in focus group interviews; 46.5% of the participants live alone, while the others live with another Nun or Nuns in a communal setting.

Of the total number of participants, 35% were in leadership positions in their Orders, or were working in other roles for their Orders at time of interview, while 9% were
working outside Church and 2% were unemployed. The remaining 54% were working for the Church in areas such as education, aged care and pastoral parish work. As well as those in Order Leadership at the time of the interviews, a number of participants gave accounts of having been in Leadership roles in their Orders in the past.

The Novitiate process for most Nuns in this sample began when they were young, 79% being under the then legal age of adulthood, i.e. 21, when they began the Novitiate process, while 30% of the participants were still under the now legal adult age of 18 when they entered the Novitiate. Once the training period of the Novitiate process is finished, the Nun is ‘professed’ as a Nun. The length of time the Nun participants in this research had been professed Nuns, ranged from 15 - 45 years.

The participants interviewed individually were assigned pseudonyms and are referred to throughout this thesis by pseudonyms and their age. Focus group participants are referred to by the number of the focus group. Details which may identify participants by location or by Order have been omitted from participants’ accounts.

4.4 Interviews

All interviews were conducted by the researcher and lasted approximately one hour, while all interviews except two were transcribed by the researcher. Since the interviews were conducted to “obtain qualitative descriptions of the life world of the subject with respect to interpretation of their meaning” (Kvale, 1996, p. 124) rather than for
sociolinguistic analysis, expressions such as ‘um’ and ‘you know’ have been omitted, while omission are indicated thus: … in the interview texts.

To refine the research question and the interview processes, pilot interviews were carried out with three Nuns aged 52, 53 and 65, from three different Orders in Australia. Using an open-ended interview approach, those interviews focused on prompt questions used to facilitate conversation. Following the pilot interviews, a change was made to the way interviews were conducted so as to invite a more participant-directed focus in which the researcher explored the direction set by the participant rather than by the prompt questions. That direction had already been signalled by each participant, in fact, before she engaged in the interview, as is outlined below.

On the demographics sheet sent to participants, Nuns were asked to respond in writing to the question: ‘In general terms, how would you describe your life as a Nun?’ Few of the responses were wholly positive or wholly negative. So as to facilitate a more participant-directed interview, it was decided to use the Nuns’ responses to the general question on the demographic response (see Appendix D) in conducting the remaining interviews, rather than use interview prompt questions. In this way, the interview was focused on the Nuns’ own experience as summarised by them, exploring and drawing on their own broad descriptions of their experience. These summaries generated conversation in the interview both in terms of beginning, as well as sustaining the interaction between participant and researcher in the individual interviews, and between participant and participant in the focus groups.
In the individual and focus group interviews, each Nun was given a copy of her own response at the start of the interview, and it was explained that no specific questions would be asked. Each participant was invited to read silently her statement, which was then used as a springboard for discussion. In the focus group interviews, participants were given only a copy of their own summary statement. No participant saw the summary statement of any other participant.

Interviews were conducted as a conversation between participant and researcher (Kvale, 1996; Ussher, 2003), or in the case of the focus groups, as a conversation among all present. During the interviews, the conversations revolved around the past and the present realities of the Nuns’ lives. Before the end of each interview, participants were invited to re-read their summary statement and to add anything more which had come to mind but had not yet been said.

4.4.1 Individual interviews

Management of time and distance were a key consideration in the data-gathering stage of the study. Individual interviews were conducted across a wide geographical spread in both countries, where in all but three cases, interviews were conducted in the Nuns’ location. In the other three cases, the interviews were conducted in the nearest major city, as requested by the participants. The researcher travelled to interview Nuns living in isolated regions. Living alone or with one or two other Nuns in remote, isolated settings is a reality (J. M. Brady, 2005; O'Brien, 2005) which characterises Nuns’ lives.
in Australia/New Zealand. In the case of the Nuns in remote settings, the visit included the interview as well as some social time spent with the participant. Some of the Nuns in remote areas had rarely been visited by other Nuns. The individual interviews were conducted in a variety of settings including participants’ homes, participants’ workplaces, holiday houses of Orders, the researcher’s workplace, a private lounge at an airport, and a motel room. All settings were chosen to guarantee privacy and confidentiality.

4.4.2 Focus Groups

Focus groups afford an opportunity for the participants to individually speak their stories, listen to those of others and collectively work at making sense of their experiences within a social setting (Wilkinson, 1999; Willig, 2001). Nuns are used to reflecting on their lives where sharing in groups is the norm, as for example, in the emerging practice of sharing theological reflection (Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005; Reynolds, 2005), where participants reflect on religious source material before sharing personal life experience. Some Orders of Nuns in Australia/New Zealand have adopted theological reflection groups as a religious practice, though Nuns in isolated regions would be excluded from regular group interaction with other Nuns because of time and distance constraints.

Of the total sample, 48% of the participants were interviewed in focus groups, four in Australia and one in New Zealand. One participant nominated a preference for focus
group over individual interview, and two others requested specifically not to be in a focus group. The focus groups were conducted in two major centres easily accessible to Nuns living in close proximity to each other. They were composed to be as heterogeneous as possible, based on the Nuns’ written responses to the question: In general terms, what has being a Nun been like for you? Except for one group, where location of participants precluded an Order mix, all focus groups contained Nuns from a variety of Orders. Participants interacted with each other in the focus groups, responding to and challenging each other’s experience and perceptions of being a Nun.

4.5 Pen Portraits

The Catholic Church in Australia and New Zealand is a relatively small world. There are personal stories from the Nuns’ interview accounts which will never be told because of the risk of identifying the participant. In referring to these experiences, details of the Nuns’ lives would so have to be changed as to lose the meaning conveyed in the original telling. For ethical reasons, therefore, it was decided not to include these accounts, and not to present pen portraits of the participants, although individuals’ written responses to the question ‘in general terms, how would you describe your life as a Nun?’ are presented in Appendix D.
4.6 Analysis of Interviews

The interview accounts were read and re-read as discursive texts, with particular attention given to notions of power, regimes of truth, disciplinary practices (Parker, 1994), and the ways in which the individual Nun was positioning herself, or was being positioned by others, in relation to the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun. So as to explore subjective positioning in Nuns’ accounts of their negotiation of the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun, a close analysis of a small, randomly chosen sample of interview text (see Appendix E) was carried out using the grounded theory technique of open coding that is, coding small sections of text line by line so as to “remain open to the data and see nuances in it” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 50). This initial close analysis of small sections of interview text was not integrated into the final analysis, but rather it was used to explore examples of Nuns’ subjective positioning, taking up and resisting the Church’s constructions of Nun. In the analysis of interview data, no distinction has been made between the individual and the focus group interviews. All data was coded and analysed according to themes, irrespective of whether it arose from individual or focus group interviews.

Applying open coding analysis in this way to small samples of accounts in which Nuns negotiated Church constructions of Nun, led to the identification and naming of certain subjective positioning themes emerging in Nuns’ accounts.
4.7 Overview of themes

The table below indicates the subjective positioning themes identified and named as emerging from an initial analysis of the interview data. Some of the themes, e.g. radical, feral, visible, hopeful, happy, different from others, different from the past, and invisible, were named using language given by the Nuns in their accounts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TAKING-UP POSITIONING</th>
<th>RESISTANCE POSITIONING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Different from others</td>
<td>Different from the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Nun</td>
<td>Sexual Nun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopeful Nun</td>
<td>Travelling Nun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible Nun</td>
<td>Invisible Nun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle of the gaze</td>
<td>Educated Nun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Docile Nun</td>
<td>Radical Nun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Church worker</td>
<td>Post-Church Nun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happy Nun</td>
<td>Subversive Nun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedestal Nun</td>
<td>Feral Nun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sacrificing Nun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Emerging positioning Themes

The entire interview data was then re-read and the themes refined, both in terms of Nuns taking up and resisting the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun.
Represented below is an example of the refining processes used in the analysis of the subjective positioning of resistance to the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun, from Nuns’ accounts.

**Refining Positioning Themes: Resistance**

The further refinement of themes led to an identification of different ways in which Nuns in the sample position themselves in relation to the Church’s notions of what it is...
to be a Nun, sometimes taking up the Church’s constructions of Nun and at times resisting.

4.8 Summary

In Chapter 3, the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun have been identified as the Nun as called by God to live a life of self-sacrifice and work for the Church. In the analysis of interviews of the 43 participants which follows in Chapters 5 and 6, the Nun negotiating the Church’s dominant constructions of Nun are described in the following way. The Nun taking up the Church’s constructions of Nun is described as functioning as The Institutional Self, while the Nun resisting is described as functioning as The Individuated Self. Chapter 5 explores the Institutional Self, the self created through the process of subjectification in the Novitiate training, the self as Church woman, loyal and in the service of the Church. Chapter 6 focuses on the Individuated Self, the Nun exercising personal agency, who is an autonomous, relating and sexual woman.
4.9 The Insider’s Voice

There has been some resistance to the research by some Leaders. One Religious Leader, who had initially expressed support for the research, replied in writing that after discussion with her Council, she was unwilling to send any information about the research project to the Nuns in her Order. No reason was given. There had already been a similar response earlier, from a different Religious Leader, when the research was first being proposed and support in general was being sought from Religious Leadership in Australia/New Zealand. This Leader, who did reply to the initial contact, stated that she could not allow me access to ‘their resources’ or ‘her Nuns’ unless and until she had a letter of confirmation and approval from the Leader of my own Order. Like a child being scolded.

Another Religious Leader made contact with some concerns about one of the Nuns in her Order who was within the age range of the sample and who, the Leader suspected would welcome a chance to be involved. According to the Leader, this Nun was an ‘angry’ woman, who would want to be involved, and the Leader feared she would ‘speak out’. It is not known whether, in fact, this Leader did notify the Nuns in her Order about the study but no Nuns from this Order volunteered to be participants in the research. It surprises and disappoints me that this level of control over Nun’s lives and freedom still exists in some Orders.
In the interviews the Nuns have spoken of some hardships in their lives, of some sense of not being or doing the things a Nun is ‘supposed to do’ like dress plainly, live in community with others, live on a very small budget, and not enjoy travelling the world. The Nuns are talking frequently about the stereotypes of being a Nun, focusing on community issues, living issues, vows and relationship with the Church often from a disengaged perspective. My supervisor and I discuss the effect of my being a Nun on the interviewing process and on the Nuns’ responses to the questions.

The Church documents contrast in essence with the personal accounts of Nuns interviewed for this project. Few of the Nuns have spoken of their lives wholly in terms of the pious, disembodied language of the Roman documents, though some have used terms specific to Church or their lives as Nuns. In the interviews, participants have used language colloquially, many of them lacing their accounts with words considered ‘swear words’ in the Australian and New Zealand cultures.

All the Nuns being interviewed know I’m a Nun. Without doubt, they know that I know the Nun agenda. There has been an assumption during the interviews that I know the language and lifestyle themes in Nuns’ lives. When I asked a Nun what she meant by a Religious Life term such as ‘community’ or ‘finals’, her answer was preceded by a puzzling glance which I interpreted as meaning, ‘but you must know what I mean by that’. This is both advantageous and disadvantageous in this research. On the side of advantage is the fact that there is an assumed knowledge and understanding of the material realities of the life of Nuns, the older ways of being Nun, the changes resulting
from Vatican II, the resistance on the part of some Orders / individual Nuns to adapt to the changes of forty years ago, and the themes relevant to Nuns’ lives today such as diminishment, lack of corporate focus and lack of visibility.

On the side of disadvantage, however, is the possibility that because I am a ‘fellow Nun’, I will therefore presume to understand the Nuns’ lives, and they will revert to stereotypes to describe their experience, or will couch their experience in terms of the spiritual stereotypes. If I were not a Nun, they would have to describe, explain and elucidate their lived experience in a different way. Our shared life of being Nuns also has the capacity to limit the ways in which I conduct the interviews. I let some things go in the pilot interviews because the participants are assuming that I know what they are talking of, or know what they mean. There could be an assumption on both our parts that we both ‘know’ what’s being said without it’s having to be explained. An interviewer who is not a Nun would have to elicit more specific details, would ask questions which were more ‘unknowing’, simply because of not having had the experience of sharing the common knowledge of what it is to be a Nun.

This reality has been brought home to me in some of the reactions of my supervisor to my own stories of being a Nun, or to aspects of my life as a Nun, which I take for granted. For example, one of the participants talked about attending gatherings of the Order, of not wanting to go because it was taking a day out of her weekend, of being expected to go, and of being satisfied at the end of the day only because she had been able to connect with some of her Nun friends at the gathering. My supervisor, astounded
that Nuns would be expected to ‘give up’ a Saturday to attend Nun meetings, asked me, ‘what would happen if she didn’t go?’ That’s a question I wouldn’t even think to ask the Nun participants because I know the answer from my own experience, and the answer is complex, related as it is to issues of membership, accountability, co-responsibility, power and loyalty.

I need to adopt an attitude of unknowing to invite the Nuns to tell me of their experiences of being Nun. I know the stereotypes, and I know my experience, but I don’t know of the individual participant’s experience of being Nun unless I assume a position of ‘unknowing’ in the interviews. What I’m searching for is the individual’s experience, which can only emanate from her experience of being a Nun. It is crucial that I do not shut down the interview data because the participant and I have both assumed that we know what it is to be a Nun, and that the experience of ‘being Nun’ is common to us all.
CHAPTER 5: THE INSTITUTIONAL SELF

The Catholic Church discursively constructs the Nun as having a special identity and place in the Church, recognised in and for the role she plays in the life of the Church. Indeed, the Church describes itself as having “reason to hope that a fuller acknowledgement of the mission of women will provide feminine consecrated life with a heightened awareness of its specific role and increased dedication to the cause of the Kingdom of God” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 100). In the telling of their experiences, the Nuns in this study are the narrators of their own lives, the subjects of their own experiences (Chase & Bell, 1994). In their accounts they position themselves and are positioned by others in relation to the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun.

In applying Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to the accounts of the 43 Nun participants in this study, this Chapter focuses firstly on the Nuns’ experience of learning subjective positioning, before exploring ways in which they take up the Church’s dominant discursive constructions of Nun, a position described here as that of the ‘Institutional Self’, the self which takes up and does not resist the regimes of truth and material practices of the Church’s dominant constructions of Nun. This Chapter examines three manifestations of the Institutional Self, namely the Self as docile Church Woman, who is holy and self sacrificing, the Self as Loyal Church Woman who is the vehicle of the Church’s gaze to others, and finally the Self as Servant of the Church who
is productive as woman and Church worker. The reflexivity writing of the researcher concludes the Chapter.

5.1 Learning Subjective Positioning

The process of subjectification by which an individual within an institutional discursive framework learns to position herself in relation to others, and is transformed into a docile discursive subject, is the process through which discursive meanings and values are ‘attached’ to an individual’s experience (Hollway, 1984). Rose (1996, p. 151), speaks of disciplinary practices within the discursive framework of institutions, operating on the bodies of individuals through “the design of institutional space, the arrangements of institutional time and activity … and the operations of systems of norms and judgements”, producing individuals who are seen and come to see themselves as certain kinds of discursive subjects.

In examining maternal subjectivity and describing the transition of woman from ‘woman’ to ‘mother’, Hollway (2006, p. 63) speaks of the changes which alter the woman’s perception of herself, where “bodily, psychological and social processes intersect”. She argues that women are not born mothers or carers. Rather, they take up subjective positions dominant in social discourse for women, of being ‘good mothers’. Similarly, Nuns are not born Nuns; they learn to be Nuns. Through the process of subjectification, the Church turns ‘women’ into ‘Nuns’ through the disciplinary power which pervades social and religious institutions (Foucault, 1979). In the present study,
Nuns speak of their experience of the process of subjectification, the training process whereby they learnt to become Nuns.

According to Foucault, (1979, p. 167), the highest form of disciplinary practice within an institution lies in the “tactics, the art of constructing, with located bodies, coded activities and trained aptitudes”. The Church requires the young woman becoming a Nun to engage in a process of learning the activities and ‘trained aptitudes’ deemed by the patriarchal institution of the Church as appropriate to being a Nun. The transformation of the woman to ‘Nun’, governed by Church law (Catholic Church, 1983), is the task of the Novitiate, the place where a woman become a ‘Novice’, where meanings and values of ‘Nun’ become ‘attached’ to her. A woman becoming a Nun is spoken of as ‘entering the Novitiate’. She spends at least one, but usually two years, learning what it is to be a Nun. At the end of this time, she professes vows for limited times of between five and nine years. During this time she is considered to be in ‘temporary profession’. At the end of the ‘temporary profession’ period, the Nun takes ‘final vows’, that is, professes to live a vowed life for her whole life. Some Nuns in this study refer to this stage as ‘my finals’ or just as ‘final vows’. Nuns with final vows are referred to as ‘perpetually professed’ and should they ever wish to leave the Convent, they must apply to the Church authorities in Rome to have their vows dispensed.

The Nuns in the present study give accounts of their training days in the Novitiate and of themselves as Novices during this time. The terms ‘Novitiate’ and ‘Novice’ belong to traditional Church discourse (Abbo & Hannan, 1952; Woods, 1901), denoting
the status of the young woman as new and naïve, needing to be schooled in the Church’s rules and regulations governing what it is to be a Nun. As one of the participants, Elaine, notes, “the Novitiate was, you know, how to learn how to be a good Nun”. Another participant recalls that by the time the initial training process was complete:

We were supposed to be in love with Jesus, which enabled us to get up every day and go out and basically make a compliant constituency for the Bishops, that there would be bums on seats in the church as a result of Catholic education and we were supposed to have the energy to do that because we each had this passionate relationship with Jesus the bridegroom. (Elizabeth, 53)

Elizabeth enunciates the Church’s representation of the Nun as a woman whose passion for ministry, for working for the Church, derives from her passionate love of God in Jesus, the only passionate form of loving authenticated and approved by the Church for Nuns.

In more recent times, the Church has discontinued the use of such language in its documents, though it still places great emphasis on the training of the woman to be a Nun as a process of ‘formation’, whose:

… primary objective … is to prepare people for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church’s mission. To say "yes" to the Lord's call by taking personal responsibility for maturing in one's vocation is
the inescapable duty of all who have been called … Formation should involve the whole person, in every aspect of the personality, in behaviour and intentions. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, pp. 117-118)

No part of the woman escapes the focus of the formation process. The whole woman, personality, behaviour and intentions, must be formed and transformed in a process which starts when the woman first becomes a Nun, and which is ‘inescapable’ for the whole of the Nun’s life (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 661). The formation of the Novitiate, of the process of subjectification for the Nun, is directed towards the creation of a self which has learned and internalised the regimes of truth and material practices of what it is to be a Nun.

For some Nuns interviewed in this study, the experience of the process of subjectification as a Nun was not positive. Disciplinary power within discourses assigns rank to individuals within institutions (Danaher et al., 2000). The Novice Nun is positioned as a woman of low rank and influence within a network of relations within the Church and the Order:

For people who were at the top of the hierarchy I [as a Novice] was absolutely the doormat and I felt really alone, very, very alone and chillingly alone at times in that structure. I had this feeling you could sort of slip into nothingness and nobody would even notice. So long as you turned up, so long as you kept being a cog in the wheel, so long as you were there for prayers and breakfast and you did your job, whether
you were alive as a human being was completely inconsequential and you could actually die on the inside, you really could, you could just become just a functionary and I felt like that. I felt like that in the Novitiate, I felt like that at times in my first year out of the Novitiate and nobody, practically nobody knew and nobody seemed to care. (Elizabeth, 53)

The process of subjectification, for Elizabeth, involved what she describes as one of becoming an inconsequential functionary, ‘chillingly alone’, a woman who could ‘slip into nothingness’ without anyone noticing, a ‘cog in a wheel’. The newly forming Nun performs externally while experiencing an aloneness which is foreign and disturbing, a self in danger of metaphorically withering and dying. This participant describes herself as a young Nun as having no choice but to take up the Church’s positioning of her as a functionary.

Another participant describes the process of subjectification in the Novitiate as one which infantilised her:

Well we had to ask permission for all sorts of things that an adult wouldn’t have had to ask permission for. I believe that certainly in my very early years … in the Novitiate, I was wanting to be a good Nun and to do the right thing. A good Nun didn’t make a fuss about anything and did as she was told. We just kind of worked out what the rules were and fitted in with them. (Agnes, 61)
Agnes speaks of her experience of striving to become a good Nun as a time of learning to ‘ask permission’, like a child seeking parental approval before acting. She describes herself as having learnt early on in her training, that obedience, docility and compliance characterised the ‘good Nun’. The ‘rules’ guiding her during the training process permeated her experience. Agnes recalls learning the ‘rules’ from the observation of other ‘good’ Nuns.

The process of subjectification whereby women in this study became Nuns included veiled threats designed to achieve acquiescence in the young Novice:

I think we lived under a threat that if you didn’t do what you were asked, I’m never sure whether that was an explicit threat or implicit or whether it was real or imagined, but I certainly was aware of it, both by people saying it to us, but also in other ways, that if you didn’t, I’m going to say comply, it’s probably a harsh word, then basically, for someone who hadn’t made final vows, that you did what you were asked to do. I was fairly compliant anyway for a lot of my movements, but it wouldn’t have occurred to me not to do that. (Felicity, 48)

For the young Nun who had not yet taken ‘final vows’, the final life-long commitment to being a Nun, complicity with rules and regulations was part of what was expected of her. The training required that she learn absolute obedience and loyalty, to the point where she admits that, looking back, the possibility of resistance never occurred to her. In recalling this dimension of her training in the process of becoming a
Nun, Felicity tries to silence the critical voice within, describing her positioning as one of compliance, representing herself as not being able to, or having no notion of resisting the disciplinary power over her young life at the time. Compliance with the discursive truths and material practices designed to turn women into Nuns was fostered also through the threat of failure, the threat of being sent home. Louise (59), recalls her training experience as one in which she, like others, was required to fit into the Church’s notions of what it is to be a Nun, a process she says she found difficult:

You had to not ask any questions, you had to be prepared to do as you were asked, and not think about it too much. Several times I thought I might get my train ticket home because I didn’t sort of, it was difficult to fit in. (Louise, 59)

The Novice who asks questions is positioned as questioning authority, a non-docile, a young woman having a mind of her own which may challenge prevailing ‘truths’ of what it is to be a Nun.

Another of the disciplinary techniques experienced in the initial training, and designed to create the compliant body is described by one participant as the fear of being reported to higher authority, the Superior of the Order. While one participant (Focus Group 5) tells of her fear at the time of training, of being “thrown out” because of developing a friendship with another Novice, Felicity (48), describes her fears arising from a troublesome relationship with another Novice who constantly provoked her with demeaning personal comments during their training period:
F: [Another Novice] would say things to me like, I was soft. And I can remember a time in the Novitiate where I yelled at her and said, I’m not leaving here till you tell me why you’re saying that about me, like, ‘you’re soft’ and things like that. And the Novice Mistress came and she said that she thought there were school students under the building killing each other. So it was a very serious matter for two people to fight because people weren’t supposed to fight.

I: People being?

F: People being Nuns. So the Novice Mistress did say to me that I’m going to tell Mother that you’re always fighting with (x) now. (Felicity, 48)

In this case, the threat to the Novice existed in the reporting to the Superior, the ‘Mother’, who had the power to dismiss the young Nun from the training program. The title ‘Mother’, used at the time for Superiors in Felicity’s and many other Orders, draws on the constructions of mother in social discourse, positioning the Superior in the Order as the Mother in the Religious family. Just as the mother in social discourse is positioned as the regulator of behaviour through her power to give or withhold love, so too the Religious Mother, the Superior, is positioned as exercising the same power and control over the life of the woman training to be a Nun. Like the mother in social discourse, the Superior is positioned as the agent of the institution (Danaher et al., 2000), the conveyor of the Church’s disciplinary gaze to the young Nun in training.

In the process of subjectification which is the Novitiate process, participants in this study spoke of themselves as stripped of individuality:
We were like a sausage machine going through, that was the experience I had, anyway, and I don’t think we were personally known very well at all, so in some ways you could escape some of the issues that were coming up because you weren’t really known. (Focus Group 3)

In language of the captive, this Nun describes the anonymity of the training experience as both dehumanising and protective, her anonymity, ironically, shielding her from the disciplinary gaze of the institution. Another participant recalls:

They’d just refer to you as ‘dear’ all the time, you know, they never called you (name), but it was just ‘come here, dear,’ or ‘do this dear’, you know, that one-to-one thing was not real. They had to keep us busy all the time so we polished floors and cleaned things and washed halls and all of that until, yeah, they had to keep us busy, and that was such a futile exercise half the time ’cause the walls weren’t dirty and nor were the floors. (Focus Group 3)

The process of subjectification for the Nun includes the de-personalization of the individual and the use of the individual as a functionary in the institution, always busy, never idle. Foucault speaks of the discursive disciplinary technique within institutions, particularly religious institutions, of setting timetables to control individuals. He describes the underlying principle of keeping individuals constantly busy, as the principle of “non-idleness”, whereby “it was forbidden to waste time, which was counted by God and paid for by men; the time-table was to eliminate the dangers of
wasting it – a moral offence and economic dishonesty” (Foucault, 1979, p. 154). There is a sense of something morally wrong and inherently dangerous in numbers of young women being left to their own devices, having free time, being idle. The idle Nun is positioned as being an offence in the eyes of the God and a danger to herself in her idleness, since, in idleness, she may have time and space to think, to question and possibly to rebel. Furthermore, the Church’s construction of Nun, in positioning women as bearing the burden of responsibility for domestic work, reinforces the positioning of women in broader social discourses. Doing domestic work, scrubbing walls and floors, whether dirty or not, is stereotypically represented as the natural role women (Gross, 2003). In the experience of this participant, the woman training to be Nun spends her time on domestic tasks rather than on reading, studying, socialising or relaxing, as women of her age outside the Convent would have been doing.

In the experience of Nuns in this study, one of the regimes of truth to be learnt in the process of subjectification was that two distinct worlds existed: the world of the Nun and the world outside the convent. ‘The religious family’ was the world of the Nun, a family where practices were reinforced to promote altruistic behaviour, and ‘kinship’ was to be developed where no kinship in fact existed (Qirko, 2002). Problems within the institutional world were to be dealt with inside the framework of that world:

I didn’t pick up any vibes through the Novitiate that if I had a problem, that I had a place to go and to be heard and to be counselled without having to be outside counselled, [you had] to be just assisted at home. And that to me is one of the big
things where I had felt all through my life, that the Novitiate was a training, but not a training for life. (Focus Group 2)

This Nun speaks of now realising that though the training process created her Institutional Self, her self as a Nun, it did not prepare her for life in the world beyond the institution. She describes the training experience using the domestic language of family imagery. Through the process of subjectification she learns the Church’s discursive truth that the home, the religious family, would provide any and all the assistance she would ever need. She now describes herself as keenly aware that the self constructed and formed by her training as Nun, has been inadequate to deal with life beyond the institutional framework. Her comment in the Focus Group provokes a similar response from another participant:

P 1: Novitiate wasn’t a preparation for life, it was a preparation for a kind of a spiritualising of everything, so any problems you had, you were supposed to move on to a higher plane kind of thing. That was, that was totally unreal. You weren’t supposed to need counselling. You’d fall in a heap, but if you did, you weren’t being a good Nun and you weren’t praying properly and you weren’t…. P 2: …you weren’t in the world and the world didn’t want…. P 1: …you did what the Superior said that you ought to do. (Focus Group 2)

These Nuns describe being trained in a ‘spiritualizing of everything’, a process whereby the limitations of the human condition are denied and suppressed. In the
The experience of these Nuns, the Nun in training is positioned as rising above her humanity, learning to recognise that any distress she may feel results from her own deficiency in prayer. The discourse draws on the authority of both the Superior and God, through prayer, to reinforce the process of subjectification, the process whereby the woman becomes the docile, problem-free Nun, positioned as being guided in her life by prayer and the will of the Superior. The young Nun has placed before her the representation of the ideal Nun: the one who silences her own distress, who does not seek professional help outside the Convent, and whose difficulties are addressed directly to God in prayer.

The young woman had to be moulded into a spirituality deemed by the Church’s discourse to be appropriate for a Nun. Emily (61) describes an emerging awareness during her process of becoming a Nun that practicing external forms of pious spirituality, such as praying with one’s arms extended in the form of the cross or kneeling for long periods of time in the chapel, were markers of the subjectification process:

I wasn’t pious and there was a lot of pious, there was a lot of outward piosity in those days and if you did go around with your arms out, or if you sort of knelt there looking pious for hours. I was a rabid extrovert, but extroverts really didn’t have a place in Religious Life and the spirituality of Religious Life was for introverts. (Emily, 61)
The practices of ‘outward piosity’ she describes as foreign to her before she became a Nun. Even as a young Nun in training, she did not see these practices as a necessary part of her spirituality. Describing her inability to engage in such material practices as a deficiency in herself, she positions herself as a misfit in an institution where the docile, introverted Nun is equated with sanctity. For the woman aspiring to be the ideal Nun, external displays of piosity were rewarded, while displays of extroversion were punished. Thus the extroverted Nun learns to find a place in Religious Life by denying her identity and assuming the identity of a pious introvert.

The process of subjectification, begun in the training regime of the Novitiate, not only functions to create the ideal Nun, but also to create what Foucault calls “an inspecting gaze”, a gaze which the individual will “end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (Gordon, 1980, p. 155). This internalizing of the disciplinary gaze, managed through self-policing, and which continues beyond the time of the Novitiate training is described by one participant this way:

The image or the ideal was out there. When I joined, [I wanted] something, hopefully to be part of that ideal, idealised way, but in the actual living of it, it moved from ‘out there’ into this internal me. I am, it’s part of me, it’s part of who I am, it’s not necessarily a structure or a specific dress or whatever, and it’s who I am. (Focus Group 1)
This Nun describes herself now as not needing the ‘structures’ of the material practices of being Nun to regulate her behaviour since ‘out there’ has become ‘part of [her]’. The ‘idealised way’ does not belong to the Nun who challenges, rebels, functions as an extroverted individual or claims an individual identity. Foucault describes Bentham’s Panopticon prison buildings, as imposing a “surveillance [which] is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action” (Foucault, 1979, p. 201). The surveillance of individuals within the system appears to be continuous, even if it is not in fact. So all pervasive is the perception of disciplinary surveillance that even if the physical surveillance is discontinued, the power of its effect is internalised, such that the individual “becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault, 1979, p. 203). In the same way, this participant describes herself as having internalised regulatory mechanisms of the Church’s construction of the ‘ideal’ Nun as part of her identity, the part which regulates her life without the need for external disciplinary ‘structures’. The ideal Nun dependent now on internalised process rather than external structures, is the product of the Church’s process of subjectification.

Nuns in this study give accounts of continuing to take up the position of the Institutional Self, the docile Church woman, loyal to the Church and spending her life being productive for the Church.
5.2 Self as docile Church Woman

Although reflecting critically on the process of subjectification of their training days, some Nuns in the study still position themselves as the docile Church woman, the woman whose life “is possible only on the basis of a special vocation and in virtue of a particular gift of the Spirit” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 20). As a Nun, a visible Church woman, one participant positions herself as responsible not only for her own good name, but for the reputation of the Order as well:

I want [people] to have a good impression of me as a Nun, not necessarily me, but ‘the Nun’ thing and I don’t, and it worries me that I feel that I don’t come up to expectations. I suppose I’m protective of (the Order), just that way that we’re protective of our families. (Maria, 64)

In her role as Nun Maria describes herself as representing and protecting the whole Order. Drawing on the Church’s representation of the Nun as belonging to a ‘Religious family’ (Abbott, 1966, p. 477) or what another participant, Natasha (58), calls “a big extended family kind of notion”, she describes the task of protecting the whole group from criticism by others, likening her loyalty to the Order to the loyalty expected of family members in wider social discourse. Though the Nun lives and works in ordinary situations, she presents an identity more closely tied with ‘Nun’ than with ordinary woman. Another participant, Felicity (48), working in an educational institution, also speaks of having internalised the role of being a Nun:
So where I live now is very ordinary and I think I’m very comfortable there, because I think there’s something about … people don’t need to know I’m a Nun, but yet, I always am, because of the way I greet people in the streets, or my neighbours, or at the shops, is about, yeah I suppose that little bit of kindness of God. (Felicity, 48)

In Felicity’s thinking, people ‘don’t need to know’ she is a Nun; but she speaks of her identity as Nun guiding even her smallest of actions in the most pedestrian of settings. She describes hers as the role of conveying ‘that little bit of kindness of God’ to others. She sees herself as always in the role of the Nun, while at the same time representing people she meets as unable or unlikely to access God’s kindness except through her. Functioning as God’s conduit in her dealings with others, it is not her own qualities the Nun conveys, but rather as a Church woman, she bears to them the qualities of God.

The Church creates the discursive truth of the Nun as being different from other women, her life being “transformed by the [vows]”, and an “eloquent protest against an inhuman world” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 59). The Nun’s identity is created in and for her role in the Church and her assumed close relationship with God. Taking up this truth in her life, one participant says:

So I certainly have respect for the individual and the fact that what we do as a [Nun] comes from who we are and who God is for us, I think, and if that’s not functioning properly, we’re at risk and so is everyone else we’re related to, and so I think that’s, you know, what’s happening for the individual is, in a sense, what’s happening in the
whole, in a way. I think we’ve got a sense of you know, commitment to God and a life that doesn’t make any sense without faith. (Elaine, 55)

Elaine takes up the Church’s discursive truth of her as different from others, one in a “special relationship” with God (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 20). She describes the individual Nun as having responsibility because of her identity: responsibility to the ‘whole’, the Order, to be faithful to her calling, and to maintain an active relationship with God. Without a commitment to her life in ‘faith’, not only her life, but the lives of all she is ‘related to’ are perceived by her to be ‘in danger’. Without her ‘commitment to God’, her life and that of other Nuns is vacuous and barren. She describes herself as living a life which takes its meaning from outside of herself, from the religious dimensions of its institutional context, drawing on the powerful authority of God to create the meaning in her life as a Nun. In so doing she takes up the Church’s truth of how she should be as a good Nun, that is a woman whose life is ‘transformed’ by her commitment to God and her way of life.

Another participant describes herself as a Church woman different from other women because of her ‘call’ to be a Nun. She describes discovering and celebrating her difference from other women, while on a course overseas:

I found myself as a Nun very closely, when I was overseas, I was the only Australian, the only Nun there and the only [Order Nun], but I was different from them, from those other students who were there. I had a different call and it suddenly hit me like
a bullet, you know, like more than it did when I was in community, it was a two-way thing, really, it was how they experienced me and how I found, I experienced myself, you know, but I felt the need of individual solitude, this kind of thing, which probably I couldn’t have if I’d been a married woman. I couldn’t possibly, having to run around and cook meals for the kids. But I kind of felt the call to be apart a bit, to be with people and to be relating to people as non-exclusively, I think that was probably the thing that I experienced, you know. You can have your friends but not exclusively, in other words, I’m called to be with the people I’m with, whoever I’m with, I’m called to, you know, called to love. It’s a call to love and I think I’m more experienced in that now. (Ashleigh, 60)

Ashleigh’s positioning of herself as different from other women, more obvious to her when away from her community, explains her need for isolation and solitude. She represents other women as having the burden of endless domestic tasks, while positioning herself as taking refuge in being ‘apart a bit’. In the Church’s representation of the Nun as different from other women (CICLSAL, 2002; Pope John Paul II, 2004b), which Ashleigh takes up here, the need for isolation and solitude sits alongside the Nun’s ‘call to love’. While Ashleigh fulfils her desire for isolation and solitude, she recognises that she must also negotiate the desire to love. With experience, Ashleigh says she is able to balance these contrary desires: for intimacy and for isolation. She draws on the religious language used to describe the demands of the vow of celibacy (Pope John Paul II, 1996): non-exclusive loving, loving without attachment, loving in a non-committed way, called to be apart from others. In such forms of loving, which
position her as different from ordinary women, her desires for love must be kept under control, a process which requires practice and maturation for mastery.

Taking up the Church’s discursive truth of the Nun as different from other women is described by other participants as advantageous to them, since they draw on the support of God and the authentication of the Church in privileging work over relationships. Ashleigh goes on to imagine what it would be like to be doing her Church work in the context of being an ordinary wife and mother:

If somebody said to me when I go home and every time they go to do something for the Church, ‘you doing that religious stuff again are you?’, you get thrown off at. Whereas we go out, we don’t have any of that before we go out, everyone sort of expects you to do the religious stuff, whether it’s pastoral or whatever, so we don’t have that fight from within the home that all these people do, so in that way, we’ve got the hundredfold. (Ashleigh, 60)

Ashleigh describes herself as being advantaged by her identity and role as Nun. She describes other women as having to defend religious involvement or any work which takes them away from the family, whereas for her, doing ‘religious stuff’ is integral to her identity and role as a Nun. Her home life she describes as more peaceful and privileged because she lives communally with other Nuns who position themselves as she does, defined by their work for the Church. In claiming that she and her Nun companions have ‘the hundredfold’, she is drawing on a discursive truth which the
Church traces back to the Gospel of Mark where Jesus tells St Peter that those who have left all for the sake of the Gospel will receive ‘a hundredfold’ in this life (Mark 10: 29-30. Revised Standard Version). In her identity and role as different from other women, Ashleigh takes up the Church’s defining of her as one who has left all ‘for the sake of the Gospel’, and as such, is already in possession of the ‘hundredfold’ reward. For the Nun, the hundredfold results from her identifying totally with the Church, free of the demands and responsibilities of family life. The Church does not have to compete with a family for the Nun’s time, energy and resources, while she does not have to sacrifice herself for a family. At the same time, the Nun’s work is recognised as legitimate work in the public arena, unlike the ‘invisible’, unrecognised work done in the home by women who are not Nuns.

In taking up the Church’s positioning of her as different from other women, another participant, Suzanne (63), describes herself as living a life which other women do not question and may even envy, even though her life is free of the markers regarded in society as normative for women, such as establishing a home and family (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). She recalls being on a course overseas where all participants except herself and another Nun were married women:

We took to the group like ducks to water (laughter), but the other women, it was amazing, some of them had to ring up their husbands every night and that really took time. But there was an acceptance of us as Nuns, there was an acceptance of us as women who had chosen to live differently and who had chosen to live for other
people. I’m not saying that married people don’t live for other people, they sure do, if they don’t live for their kids, they very soon do. But there was a great togetherness, but there was also, I could see in the people, the way they spoke to us sometimes, or individually. They spoke to you as someone different, as someone that they could talk to without feeling that it was going to be gossiped about. They sort of felt safe and in a couple of cases they sort of envied us because they’d come from relationships that were not terribly, terribly good, so there was a difference, you know. (Suzanne, 63)

Suzanne represents herself as free from the relational and demanding ties of married women so as to ‘live for other people’. Although she resists the Church’s positioning of her as having responded to a call from God to be a Nun, claiming that she chose to ‘live differently’, she takes up the Church’s and the other women’s positioning of her as a woman different from others. She describes the married women as seeing her as a Church woman, whom other women can trust and confide in, a woman above ‘gossip’, who can talk confidentially with them, even though her experience of life is very different from theirs. She describes herself as fortunate in not having to negotiate personal relationships with men or ‘live for’ children. Even though the Nun has not shared life experiences which are considered normative for women, like forming close, personal relationships, having children and managing family life, Suzanne happily takes up the Church’s positioning of her as a woman free of the cares of other women, aspiring to have her “identity, ability, mission and responsibility more clearly
recognised, both in the awareness of the Church and in everyday life” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 98).

The consequences of taking up the position of the Docile Church Woman include some benefit to the Nun in terms of her freedom from the responsibilities of managing the demands of intimate relationships and family life, her difference from other women thereby offering possibilities for freedom and independence. The Church constructs the Nun as different from other women, primarily on the basis of her committed relationship with God. The Nun, then, is positioned not only as Docile Church Woman, but as Holy Woman of God.

5.2.1 The Holy Woman of God

Not only is the relationship with God important for shaping the Nun’s identity, (Gallivan, 1994), but the Church represents the Nun’s relationship with God as “so deep and so powerful” that she “senses the need to respond by unconditionally dedicating … her life to God, consecrating to him all things present and future and placing them in his hands” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 27). Her life is described as having no meaning outside the Church’s discursive truth of her as a woman whose primary relationship is with God, represented by the Church as male. Her relationship with the male God normalises her as woman in relationship to a powerful male authority figure, dependent on him for her very existence. Nancy (54) also takes up this discursive construction of Nun in speaking of her relationship with God:
So who God is, and the fact that God exists, and that, what that means to me in my life, that’s my primary relationship, is my relationship with God, not a husband.

(Nancy, 54)

Nancy speaks of herself as a woman in a ‘primary relationship’ with God. For her, God supplants the earthly husband, giving meaning to her life. God is the one to whom she owes all the commitment and dedication expected of a woman in a marital relationship. Another participant, Agnes (61), speaks of “what I see as the centre of our lives and that’s the commitment to God, to Jesus or to God.

In the institutional framework of the Church, which insists on a singular discourse for women (Weedon, 1997), the Nun is expected to take up a position similar to that of the faithful wife in wider social discourse, the woman whose desires are inextricably linked to her relationship with the dominant male in her life:

[A good Nun is] a person who is, well one who is really sort of rooted in God, Jesus, however one, you know, sort of single-mindedly rooted in God, and then from that flows a desire to work, to live, to do for others, particularly those much less fortunate than yourself. And to me, that’s what being a good Nun in today’s world is.

(Suzanne, 63)

It is the strength of the Nun’s relationship with God which gives the impetus for Suzanne’s good life and good work, neither of which is achievable without the existence
of this ‘single-minded’ relationship with a powerful male figure, in her case, the male God.

The Church describes Nuns’ lives as having a “spousal dimension” which has “a particular meaning for women, who find therein their feminine identity and as it were discover the special genius of their relationship with the Lord” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 57). Nuns are urged to “make your lives a fervent expectation of Christ; go forth to meet him like the wise virgins setting out to meet the Bridegroom” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 198). Clearly the Church positions the Nun as the faithful virgin, the woman in a spousal/spiritual relationship with God, discovering her ‘feminine identity’ in this holy relationship with the male God. Taking up this positioning of the Nun as deeply in relationship with God, one participant describes how she came to be and stay a Nun, faithful to her calling by God:

I had the relationship, the relationship with my God, you know. That was why I [became a Nun] because I was in a sense compelled to, because I formed a love relationship with God, which was a sheer gift. I don’t know how it happened. Well I do know. It just happened, it was given to me and I was drawn into the life as a child, a thirteen, fourteen year old, and you deepened until it became quite clear that this was… I wanted to commit myself to God in this loving relationship. And I’m still sticking around God. And still for me, it’s right. I did need to do that, I did need to make an absolute commitment to God and to the service of people, but I had that
primary relationship. That’s what was very important and it always has been and I
have been very lucky. (Focus Group 4)

In language suggestive of a sexual encounter, this Nun personalises her relationship
with God, describing how a naïve adolescent girl felt ‘compelled’ to form a relationship
with God. Grosz (1994, p. 75) in speaking of adolescence as the time when the
individual realises that she has a sexual body whether it is wanted or not, states that
“experientially, the philosophical desire to transcend corporeality and its urges may be
dated from this period”. This Nun describes her adolescence, her time of the realisation
of herself as a sexual being, as a time of the awakening of a deep relationship with God,
a relationship which she describes as not of her doing. She positions herself as the
passive recipient of God’s love, one who could do no less than give her whole self over
to the powerful male focus of her childlike love. She describes herself as still under the
spell of this love awakened in her adolescence, a pure love, a love which never
disappoints and is constant and ever faithful: the love of the all-loving God. The Nun as
the holy woman in relationship with God is ‘lucky’, privileged to be ‘drawn in’ to a
relationship with God, basking in the loving attention lavished upon her as ‘gift’ by the
most powerful of lovers.

The ‘primary relationship of the Nun’, her relationship with God, is represented by
Nuns in this study as continuing throughout their lives, nourished and nurtured by
material practices supporting the relational journey:
The primary relationship for all of us is about, I suppose, deepening [the] God connection, however that happens. But I can be as distracted as I like, but really the life doesn’t distract me. It nurtures something in me, it provides opportunity. You have to nurture it, but it does provide opportunity. Simple things like regularly praying in community, being able to have conversations that are faith sharing conversations so [as] to be encouraged in my inner journey, those sorts of things which I don’t think my peers necessarily have at all. (Focus Group 4)

This Nun uses the language of romantic love to describe how she maintains the primary relationship in her life. She describes having to do the nurturing in a relationship with God, a relationship based on faith and promise, a relationship with one who is physically absent, a relationship which stands firm in the face of external distraction. She positions herself as the one in the relationship who has the responsibility to maintain the ‘connection’, to ‘nurture’ the seed of the relationship and to share the fruits of the relationship with others. It has been argued that in relationships between men and women, men’s “own ability to be relatively autonomous is related and sustained through women’s unacknowledged nurturance” (O’Grady, 2005, p. 72). So it is too with the Nun’s relationship with God. It is she who bears the responsibility for nurturing the primary relationship in her life, the relationship with the autonomous male God.

In spite of the demands of her primary relationship, this participant describes herself as occupying a privileged position in being in close relationship with God, one which
other women who are not Nuns, do not have. Such a positioning of self as in primary relationship with God is represented as important not only for the Nun’s sense of her own identity, but for the recognition of that identity by others. As another participant expresses it:

I need to be seen to be someone who has given my life to God. (Focus Group 2)

For this Nun, taking up the role of sacrificing herself to God, is central not only to how she thinks of her own life, but it is central to how she is perceived and positioned by others.

In taking up the Church’s representation of her as Church woman, the holy woman of God sees herself as having given her self to the powerful male God. Inherent in the discursive truth of the Nun giving her whole life over to a powerful other, is the notion of the Nun as self-sacrificing woman.

5.2.2 The Self-sacrificing woman

On the occasion of his visit to Australia in 1986, Nuns heard these words addressed to them by Pope John Paul II:

To experience deeply Christ’s love and then to return it in joyful self-giving is a daily challenge. To accept this challenge is to transcend yourselves and to leave behind any
preoccupation with self … Australia needs witnesses to sacrificial love. Australia needs you to show that the love of Christ and his Church is all-consuming, all-satisfying, all embracing. (Pope John Paul II, 1986, para 6)

The docile Church woman spends herself for the ‘love of Christ and his Church’, achieving in that immolation of self, a sense of having fulfilled her designated role in the Church. One of the Nun participants in this study, who joined her Order when she was sixteen years old, reflects on her initial training as a Nun, describing how the young recruits learned the Church’s discursive truth of the Nun as the self-sacrificing woman:

The Novice Mistress’ monthly bilious attacks would be somehow seen in the past as a holy thing that we had to do and put up with. Even in those days, when I was young, I hadn’t really begun to get a sense of myself at all, I think I was thirty seven when I got that, it just didn’t make any sense to me, but there was, it was developing this kind of spirituality of sacrifice, you know, it was almost martyrdom really, that you developed a sense of suffering these things for something that was a good thing. (Focus Group 5)

This participant describes the process of becoming a Nun as one of learning to develop a ‘spirituality of sacrifice’, a process in which the Nun learns to sacrifice herself to the point of psychological and emotional martyrdom, a martyrdom she must learn to embrace as a ‘good thing’ for her life. She describes this process as having truncated her psychological development, and denied her access to any ‘sense of’ herself for twenty
years of her life. Modelled for her in the Novitiate training process, the sacrifice of self
to the point of ‘almost martyrdom’ is represented as the means to achieving the ‘good
thing’ to which the Institutional Self must aspire.

Another participant, Louise (59), describes the painful process for her of learning to
‘fit in’ to the Church’s notion of the Nun as sacrificing her real self for the Institutional
Self. Louise tells of having to position herself as the docile, self-sacrificing Nun so as to
be allowed to take her final vows:

It was basically things like I didn’t pray when other people did and I wasn’t
organised and I didn’t fit in, so I was basically given twelve months to fit in. (Louise,
59)

The ‘called’ woman must sacrifice her pre-Nun self to ‘fit’ the Institutional Self, the
Church’s representation of the ideal Nun. Louise tells of having resisted the notion of
the Nun as submissive and conforming. Her identity as an autonomous woman conflicts
with her identity as a Nun, so the disciplinary practices of the Order must work to bring
her into conformity. Corrections not only to her behaviour, but also to her subjectivity,
are deemed to be achievable in a limited time:

I decided this was my vocation, actually. If this is what I have to do, can I fit in here?
And it was a strong sense of ‘this is my life and I’m damned if I’m going to let those
bastards take it from me’. So I found myself not saying stuff, not doing stuff, not rocking the boat. (Louise, 59)

Although Louise describes herself as having chosen the life she wanted to live and as being fiercely protective of her right to live that life, she recognises that she was powerless to resist the disciplinary power of the Order. She takes up the position of the self-sacrificing woman, conforming to the ‘truths’ of her ‘vocation’, internalising the disciplinary gaze of authority and regulating her autonomous thoughts and behaviour through self-policing (O’Grady, 2005). While reflecting on this experience from her training days with strong feeling, Louise continues to take up the Church’s positioning of the Nun’s life as intrinsically difficult and sacrificial:

I feel [the call] so strongly, and it’s stood me in good stead, because in times since, when it got difficult, I’ve done the hardest bit, and I think it would take something really major now for me to decide this wasn’t my life. (Louise, 59)

Louise’s positioning of herself as having been called by God enables her to endure the sacrifice embedded in the life of the Nun. She describes her fight for survival as a Nun in her training days as convincing her now that she can survive any difficulties, secure in the knowledge that in spite of her sacrifice, her ‘call’ is real. Not unlike women in broader society performing the script of ‘woman’, the Nun, a “constructed identity” (Butler, 1997, p. 402) in Church discourse, learns to perform the role of Nun, sacrificing herself for the Church. Hers is a performance of the self-sacrificing Church
woman, a performance directed towards living the life to which she has been called by God.

In wider discourse, women are positioned as emotional and physical nurturers, learning to “feed others, not the self, and to construe any desires for self-nurturance and self-feeding as greedy and excessive. Thus, women must develop a totally other-oriented emotional economy” (Bordo, 1997, p. 96). There is an expectation in society as well as in the Church, that women will sacrifice themselves, their needs and desires for others. The Church reinforces this positioning of women in describing Nuns as having an “extraordinary capacity for dedication” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, para 58), their lives being “a total sacrifice and perfect holocaust” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 48). Some Nuns in this study give accounts of sacrificing themselves for others, sometimes at cost to their own well-being:

I think for me for the future, I’d like to have more of a balance in terms of contemplative, reflective as well as the ministry side because that side I struggle with quite a lot in terms of time, because I’ve always been someone who’s really involved in numerous things at the same time, and called upon to do many of those things, and I still am, so I’m hoping that I’ll move into much more balance and try to do that, but it’s very hard, because that’s what keeps me going, that’s the side that nourishes me. I don’t know, I can’t ever see myself sitting around too at sixty doing nothing. (Focus Group 1)
This participant describes her life as being out of ‘balance’ through over-involvement in ‘ministry’. Although recognising the need to attend to her own life, she speaks of her life as being sustained by an over-generous level of commitment to others who call on her time and resources. Within the Church’s regimes of truth which define and proscribe what it is to be ‘Nun’, the Nun in her maturing years may not rest, but must still balance those elements of her life, sacrificing her life and resources for others. Not sacrificing self for others, even as the body ages and calls for rest, amounts to ‘doing nothing’, a failure for the self-sacrificing Church woman. The Nun, then, is positioned as a woman whose sacrifice of self is life-long and unrelenting.

Participants in this study take up the position similar to that of the ideal productive woman, the good, selfless mother (Raddon, 2002; Ussher, 1997), caring for others, being a ‘presence’ for others, helping others both within and outside of the institution:

We decided we were going to have disadvantaged women as our focus in [place]. We’re for the poor and for justice and all these kind of things, but primarily as an Order. We decided that we didn’t have to be out building centres for disadvantaged women, but if we saw a disadvantaged woman in our community or in need or in our community, we would make an effort to support them. There’s a disadvantaged woman who’s just moved into our parish, it was in the newsletter, and that she said she was on her own and she needed some support with her [sick] child so I rang her up and she is going to ring me back, I don’t know that I’d be much good with the
[sick] child, but I thought that at least she knows there’s someone who’s responding to that thing in the newsletter. (Janet, 57)

Janet positions herself as the productive, caring woman, supporting other women. Like a woman somehow knowing instinctively how to be a good mother, Janet will somehow know instinctively how to be helpful, selfless and caring, even though she has no training, experience or expertise in the area of paediatric health, and she is unknown to the single mother. She takes up the Church’s representing of her as able to be productive, working for the Church even in the smallest details of life, reaching out where the institutional Church does not reach. On behalf of the Church, she ‘responds’ to the woman’s call for help, but the help she can offer is minimal. She has neither the desire nor the resources to build a ‘centre for disadvantaged women’ to alleviate the young mother’s overwhelming need for help, describing this as not necessary for helping others. It is expected by others and by the Nun herself that her own personal resources, her instinct and her capacity to care will be enough.

In obedience to the Church’s statement directed specifically to Nuns that they are to “rightly aspire to have their identity, ability, mission and responsibility more clearly recognised, both in the awareness of the Church and in everyday life” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 98), participants in this study sacrifice themselves, applying their energies to being available to meet the needs of others in the smallest details of ‘everyday life’. Elaine (55), describing her life as not being hindered by the distractions and
responsibilities of family life, speaks of the freedom resulting from such an unattached life:

[The freedom is] in our availability to those people who come to us, you know, any hour of the day or night, or that somehow we can be with people in their distress and somehow we’re not necessarily experiencing that level of distress but we can just be with people in it, and we mightn’t have the answers, but … (Elaine, 55)

Elaine positions the Nun as being free ‘any hour of the day or night’ to be productive in the way of the good mother, being available without limit, a presence for people in need. What she describes as being ‘important’ is not an empathy arising from experiences which she doesn’t have and can’t share, but the giving of her time and her unconditional availability. Having sacrificed a family life of her own, with all its time consuming commitment, the Nun is positioned and positions herself as free and available to sacrifice her life for the families of others.

The vows taken by Nuns are represented by the Church as assisting her in the sacrifice of her life to God. They are described in positive terms as material practices which enable the Nun to respond to God’s call to sacrifice her life in the service of God and the Church:
Obedience is the source of true freedom, chastity expresses the yearning of a heart unsatisfied by any finite love, and poverty nourishes that hunger and thirst for justice which God has promised to satisfy. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, para 36)

In taking up the Church’s discursive truths embedded in living a vowed life, some participants in this sample give accounts of themselves as liberated and nourished by the sacrificial vowed life, handing over control of their lives to others. Chloe (54), for example, describes placing her life in the hands of her Superiors, who determine significant details of her life such as where she will live and work, acknowledging the importance of her trust in them:

[The Superiors] are very concerned and very serious about providing life-giving communities as much as is possible. I would trust them that they wouldn’t be asking me to go into something that was not going to be reasonable. And I’d say my bit in that too, yeah. (Chloe, 54)

While describing those with power over her life as being ‘concerned’, attentive to their Church-legitimised responsibilities, Chloe describes herself as the one readily renouncing control over her own life, responding to what others ask of her, even though she would ‘say [her] bit’ about her own life.

According to Foucault (1979, p. 28), “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body”. Within the Church institution, the body
of the Nun becomes a body able to be subjected, through the vows, to forces which will control and direct it towards the work of the institution. One participant describes how she sees the sacrifice of control of her body to institutional power as part of what being a Nun means for her:

I do what I do and I think I have an integrity that allows me to not get too worried about peripheral sort of things. And so, in ministry, if I’m asked to do something, I’ll do it. I find myself very open to go wherever I’m asked to go. My love, and I’ve been that lucky that I’ve been able to do that, is that in the area of [particular work]. At the moment I’m working [in that area]. That, I think, gives me a lot of life. I love that kind of thing. But if I was asked to, I don’t know, I mean I’d go if someone said to me, well we want you to go to Timbucktoo, I’d say, ok. I’ve got an openness in me. There’s always I think, that internal struggle, or not, yeah, it’s a struggle like working [out] what it really means to be someone who’s truly seeking God in a particular way, in a particular lifestyle. (Focus Group 1)

Prepared to sacrifice her body and the work that she describes as ‘my love’, this participant faithfully serves the needs of the Church. In sacrificing her own needs with earnestness and enthusiasm, she echoes the language of the Church which states that it is the vocation of Nuns to “seek first the Kingdom of God”, which is “first and foremost a call to complete conversion, in self-renunciation, in order to live fully for the Lord” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 59). She positions herself as having the ‘integrity’ to go wherever she is asked, to put her body at the service of the institution. Her own will and
desires are ‘peripheral’ to the main objective of her life, which is to do the work of the Church through obedience to her Order. The Institutional self, the Nun taking up the Church’s construction of her as self-sacrificing, positions herself as a useful, productive body within the Church. In spite of the ‘internal struggle’ involved in such positioning, described by another participant as “a constant letting go of myself and … letting go of my preferences” (Juanita, 59), the Nun sacrifices what she loves, needs and desires for God and the Church.

According to the Vatican II document “Perfectae Caritatis, the sacrifice inherent in living the vow of chastity “liberates the human heart in a unique way … and causes it to burn with greater love for God and for all mankind” (Abbott, 1966, p. 474). The material practices associated with living this vow, namely sacrificing intimate relationships, marriage/partnering and child-bearing, are described by the Church as freeing Nuns to be a “sign of the world to come and a source of more abundant fruitfulness in an undivided heart” (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 599). Ashleigh (60), takes up this notion of herself as a woman who listens to the call of God to make such sacrifices, sacrificing one kind of loving for another:

The call to be, to love other people, it’s tied up with chastity really because the call [is] to love, not the call to the absence of love. But you’d still be a woman, but you know where your boundaries are. Like a married woman has boundaries too, so we know where our boundaries are, that’s the way the [vows], fundamental options as I call them, to know Christ, in that way. But I just think it’s to be a witness. I still see
it’s still relevant today, to be that kind of a witness, the simplicity in religious life, yeah, it’s a call to a simple life, really. (Ashleigh, 60)

Ashleigh describes herself as a woman who, like her married peers, accepts necessary restrictions around her loving. The loving woman must be constricted, constrained by boundaries set for her by social and/or religious discourse. As a Nun, Ashleigh positions herself as a Church woman who has internalised the Church’s disciplinary gaze, now able to know instinctively where the boundaries exist for her as a celibate woman. It is in this simple, bounded, sacrificial loving that the Nun gives ‘witness’ to the ‘simple’ life of a self-sacrificing woman.

It is not for a husband and family, however, that the Nun is to be self-sacrificing. The self-sacrifice of the Nun’s life is enacted within the Church where the Institutional Self, the docile Nun, functions as a loyal Church woman.

5.3 Self as Loyal Church Woman

As discussed above, in the process of subjectification during the training process, the young woman becoming a Nun learns that “what is required of each individual is not success, but commitment to faithfulness” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 113. Italics in original), described by one participant as:
… a lifetime commitment to a personal God and really, it’s about being Jesus, if he was walking around here, trying to be what he would do, and I think it’s that commitment is unwavering and it is lived within community in its various contexts.

(Elaine, 55)

As a loyal Church woman, the Nun positions herself as faithful to God in an ‘unwavering’ dedication of her life to doing good, as Jesus did. It is not sufficient for her to do good on her own behalf, but she does good on behalf of the Church, faithful to both the Church and her Order. Faithfulness to the Church entails faithfulness to a patriarchal institution, an institution wherein women, including Nuns, could claim “status as speaking subjects” (Jantzen, 1998) by taking up subjective positions resistant to the Church’s dominant constructions of them as loyal, docile and devoted to the Church. Many Nuns in this study, however, continue to take up the position of the loyal Church woman.

One participant, Louise (59), explains that her whole Order takes up this position, publicly placing their lives in the hands of the Church’s patriarchal authority. Being loyal to the Order’s commitment required her to leave the familiarity of friends, family and locality to work for the Church in an isolated area without the supports which had previously been important in her life:

We had said that we would put ourselves at the disposal of the Bishop for where he needed us in the Diocese, so I mean, [my placement] fitted as an Order call. I thought
it was great as an Order call, but why does it have to be me, sort of thing? So finally I said, yes I’ll come. At least I stopped feeling sick once I’d made the decision. So I suppose in a sense, it felt right enough to at least say yes to it, even though I knew there was going to be stuff that was going to be pretty shitty. I couldn’t find as many reasons to say no as I could to say yes, and the reasons to say no seemed pretty selfish. I think I would have had to live with being some sort of a, if you can have one, a ministerial coward not to have said I’ll at least give it a try. (Louise, 59)

In language suggestive of sexual bartering, Louise describes the Order’s handing itself over to the needs of the Bishop. The Order as a whole and the individuals within it, take up the position of being a reliable, tradable entity, loyal to the Church, bought and sold for its needs. In describing this transaction, Louise draws on the Church’s discursive truth of the Nun as called by God, as discussed in Chapter 3. If God has called the whole Order to offer itself and its Nuns to the needs of the Church, who is she to resist the power of such a call? This Nun positions herself as supporting the loyal commitment of her Order to the Church, though she betrays misgivings about supporting such a commitment when it impacts significantly on her own life. She describes this as not being her personal choice; in fact, the idea of living and working alone in an isolated setting impacts on the well-being of her body. Although expecting that the experience would be ‘shitty’, Louise positions herself as loyal to her Order, to the Church and to God as she sacrifices her own needs for the needs of the Church and the will of her Order.
In what Bartky calls women’s “obedience to patriarchy” (1997, p. 149), Louise exercises self-surveillance over her own negative feelings about her situation. She describes her misgivings as arising from ‘selfishness’, an attribute which is contrary to the notion of the self-sacrificing Nun, inventing the term ‘ministerial coward’ to describe an unacceptable perception of herself should she resist the desires of the Church and Order. The cost of working in an isolated area she represents as a challenge worthy of her energy and effort. She sacrifices herself for the sake of the Order which sacrifices its women to the needs of the Church. The loyal Church woman, functions within the Church as a woman faithful to the God, the Church, her Order and the work of the Church.

In contrasting the disciplinary power exercised over women in past generations with the apparent freedoms of women in the present day, Bartky (1997), notes that there still exist techniques of disciplinary power over women’s bodies which she describes as “peculiarly modern”. Women, she argues, submit to newer forms of patriarchal domination whereby the body itself must conform to ideals of shape, size and presentation. In so doing, the woman becomes a ‘self-policing subject’, a “self committed to a relentless self-surveillance” which she describes as a “form of obedience to patriarchy” (p.42). While Nuns are not subjected to disciplinary practices of former times, such as wearing habits, many participants in this study still position themselves as subject to disciplinary regimes which are pervasive externally as well as internalised.
Self-policing, the discursive disciplinary mechanism whereby an individual engages in “a relentless self-surveillance” (Bartky, 1997), functions to silence resistance in the accountable Church woman. The surveillance of the training experience has become internalised in the mature Nun. In the words of one focus group participant, responding to another participant’s defence of her own living alone:

Like you start off living in community because that’s how you learn what the (Order) Nuns are all about, and when you get to a certain age, you can live that spirit without having to have people under the same roof, but still having good, strong connections. (Focus Group 1)

This participant describes Nuns as being incapable of or unsuitable to live on their own until ‘the spirit’ of being a Nun has been fully imbibed, until the surveillance mechanism operates internally, and even then, she is not safe to be alone without staying well-connected with other Nuns in her Order.

Another participant also takes up the position of continuing to need self-policing, a disciplinary technique learned in the process of subjectification in her earlier life as a Nun. She describes regulating her own behaviour as more difficult than when disciplinary practices were monitored by external surveillance mechanisms:

The external walls may have gone down but we’ve had to internalise a lot of that for our own. I believe I have for my own lifestyle. I mean you do what you do, but you
have your own construct within that tells you what to do and when to do it and when to be available and not to be available etcetera, etcetera, which is much more difficult than when the door was closed at five o’clock and the lock went on and nobody went out until 8.30 the next morning. That looked tough and it was tough in some ways, but at least it was [that] you didn’t have to make decisions about lots of things. Once you made that basic decision, that I’m going to stay here, you just had to make the decision that you wouldn’t let it get you down. But when you had to say internally, I’m overworking, I’ve got to stop, I haven’t said my prayers, am I going to say my prayers or am I going to be there, those things are quite demanding, can be quite demanding, [be]cause it can be easy to be out there all the time. That to me is one of my biggest conflicts, is to not be out there every time somebody wants you. (Focus Group 2)

Regulated by self-policing, turning the Church’s disciplinary gaze upon herself, this Nun describes herself as living a life that is more difficult now than in former times when it was easier to be accountable to external rules and customs imposed by others. In those times, she recalls, the only decision was the decision to stay; after that, one just followed all the rules. Now, she says, it is more difficult to be responsible for her own life, to place limits on her own time and energy, to focus the disciplinary techniques on herself, to exercise personal agency in her own life. The demands of prayer and an ordered lifestyle still exist for the Nun, but they compete with the demands of work and leisure, with no external authority to set the boundaries between them. Self-policing.
though demanding, is described as essential for the Nun taking up the Church’s positioning of her as loyal Church woman.

The Nun has become her own ‘self-policing subject’, her self-policing taking the form of needing to set up external mechanisms of accountability in her life:

What aids me in all of that is being able to have someone who is able to call me into account and through supervision and through direction, and I think that’s probably the thing that helps keep the spirit alive in me and keeps me honest, too, because I just think, you know, I just believe so strongly in the need for whether you could call it a spiritual companion or supervision in particular, I just think in all that we are and we do, is really a world that requires accountability. (Mary, 55)

Mary describes herself as needing to have someone to oversee her life, thus positioning herself as a woman who is incapable of keeping herself ‘honest’. The woman in the patriarchal institution of the Church is positioned as needing have someone help monitor her own self-policing, a supervisor to whom she give ‘account’ of her life. Mary represents this accountability to an authority outside of herself not only as central to her life, but intrinsic to the life of a Nun, a life that ‘requires accountability’.

Another participant, Natasha (58), speaks of having to be “personally mindful of appropriate accountability” in living her life as a Nun, citing the example of a Nun in
her Order who, according to Natasha, transgressed the “appropriate accountability”
expectation of Nuns:

She thought she could just spend her [money] gift and take off, she just thought she’d
earned some money. But she’s been a restless person for a long time so she’s not a
good example [of appropriate accountability]. (Natasha, 58)

Positioning this Nun as ‘restless’, difficult, and therefore not capable of ‘appropriate
accountability’, Natasha then goes on to describe an example of what would be
appropriate accountability in her own experience as a Nun. She speaks of having been
disenchanted and disillusioned in her Church work:

… and so I would go and talk to (the Superior) about that and say, look I’m actively
seeking for employment elsewhere, because I can’t stand this any more now. Because
I thought that would effect more people than myself in terms of bringing in an
income, or I suppose because I work for the [Church], that might put [the Church] in
a dark spot. (Natasha, 58)

Natasha describes herself as being accountable to the whole Order in terms of
needling to bring in ‘an income’, and accountable to the Church authority who holds an
expectation that she would work for the Church even in an environment where she feels
devalued and dispirited. Silencing her own distress by self-policing, the Nun prizes
financial accountability to her Order and loyalty to the Church more highly than personal satisfaction in her work.

Discussing the power of an individual either to reproduce or change social discourses, Henriques et al (2002, pp. 430-431), note that “consciousness changing” results from “contradictions in our positionings, desires and practices – and thus in our subjectivities – which result from the coexistence of the old and the new”. One participant, while describing her experience of the material practice of accountability in relation to money, interrupts her own narrative, as a consciousness of old and new positioning in relation to accountability becomes available to her during the interview:

R: But all the time you were accountable for, at least I feel accountable for how I spend the money, how I spend money and so on.
I: And what does that mean, ‘to be accountable for how I spend money’?
R: It means, what does that mean? It means that unless I fulfil in my own case, that I have to justify how I spend money. So it’s because we have to do a financial statement every month, so that goes back to (head house) every month, we have to send, you have to … (becomes agitated, angry, raising voice). Isn’t this terrible, this is terrible, this is shocking …
I: What’s shocking about it?
R: Well it’s really pathetic. Yeah, someone said that I’ve always struggled with authority and I guess that’s probably right. (Rebecca, 54)
Rebecca comes to a consciousness of the ‘pathetic’ positioning she has taken up in complying with the institutional disciplinary practice of accounting to the Order’s Superiors for the money she spends every month, even though she is highly qualified woman, occupying a professional position in which she is responsible for the work of others. As a Nun she describes being subjected to the ‘terrible’, ‘shocking’ and ‘pathetic’ material practice of having to account for minute details of her life. As she does so, she experiences a change in her own consciousness. Rebecca interrupts her own story, the pitch and volume of her voice escalating as she recognises in her own account the dissonance between her role as a professional working woman and that of the loyal, accountable Church woman. But rather than attributing blame for her discomfort to the Church’s discursive truths and material practices for her life, she engages in self-policing by blaming herself and her ‘struggle with authority’, a fault attributed to her by others to explain previous positioning of resistance in her life as a Nun. The Church’s discursive truths regulating her life as loyal, accountable woman leaves the Nun no option but to silence resistance.

Self-policing also operates in response to perceived surveillance by others who are not Nuns. Erica (53) describes the impact on her life of people who might be watching and judging what Church discourse deems appropriate behaviour for Nuns. She positions herself as always under the surveillance of the disciplinary gaze mediated by others in the Church:
Well I suppose there have been occasions when I’ve been to a film when I’ve been [interstate] and not worried at all about what the film might be about, whereas if you go here, if it was something that was a little bit not proper for Nuns to go to, you know, and there are people with eyes, sure enough someone will see you and comment to you, ‘why are you going to see that?’. I mean even going round the supermarket, and they’re looking in your basket to see what you’re buying, whereas they wouldn’t do it to other people. So they just think you’re different somehow or other, and they keep an eye on us or something. (Erica, 53)

Erica describes always being in the role of the loyal, accountable Church woman, not being able to escape the disciplinary gaze of the Church and the expectations of others, even when engaging in the most pedestrian of activities like grocery shopping. Describing herself as controlled and regulated by her identity as a Nun, she tells of going to the movies far away from where she lives, taking refuge in anonymity to be able to relax at the movies, but at the same time knowing in herself that there are some material practices which are ‘a little bit not proper’ for Nuns to enjoy. In so doing, she submits to the disciplinary power of the authoritative gaze (Danaher et al., 2000), a gaze both externalised and internalised, a power located in the ordinary details of life (K. J. Gergen, 1999). In Erica’s account lies the Church’s discursive truth that there is ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ behaviour for Nuns.

Even if the Nun goes to great lengths to avoid the critical, all-encompassing, externalised disciplinary gaze of the Church, she must still negotiate the internalised
disciplinary gaze whose power authorises what is ‘proper’ and what is ‘not proper’ behaviour for the loyal, accountable Nun. Having internalised the disciplinary gaze, the Nun, positioned as a loyal Church woman, functions as the vehicle of its disciplinary gaze to others.

5.3.1 The Vehicle of the Gaze

Foucault (1979, p. 205) describes the relationship within institutions between power and individuals, the “panoptic scheme”, as “a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchal organization, of disposition of centres and channels of power”. Furthermore, the panoptic gaze, a form of disciplinary surveillance imposed on individuals within institutional systems, not dependent on physical constraints of space and time, is a disciplinary technique aimed at producing docile, functioning, productive bodies. According to Foucault (1979), disciplining the population has long been the role played by religion in society. In the Church, ‘consecrated persons’ are entrusted with the function of conveying its disciplinary gaze to others in the Church, creating a discursive truth in describing their “vocation” as having a “prophetic dimension” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 6). According to the Church, the life and dedication of the Nun “contributes to the keeping alive in many ways the spiritual practices among the Christian people” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 15. Italics in original).
The Nun is deemed to bear a responsibility not only for her own life, but for the
‘spiritual practices’ of others in the Church. The Church, thereby, not only creates and
shapes the individual, the Nun, as discursive subject, but uses her subjectivity to
exercise disciplinary control over others (Rose, 1996), making sure that others in the
church remain faithful to its religious practices. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Church
goes further in creating the discursive truth of the Nun as the vehicle of its disciplinary
gaze to those who live communally with her and to the wider world, the Church
describing her as “a witness of communion and a prophetic sign of solidarity for a
133), urges Nuns to “present new answers to the new problems of today’s world”,
referring to them as “Gospel leaven within a culture, purifying and perfecting it” (Pope
John Paul II, p. 146). Not unlike women in other religious traditions who are positioned
as bearing responsibility for the honour of their family by covering their bodies in whole
or part (Arthur, 1999), the Nun must bear responsibility for the purification and
perfection of the culture in which she lives by giving ‘prophetic’ witness of her docile
life. The terms of this prophetic witness, based on the Biblical notion of the prophet as
one who turns the hearts and minds of the people towards God (Catholic Church, 1995),
are clearly spelled out by the Church:

Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God’s will, for self-
giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual
discernment and love of the truth. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 156)
The Nun is thus identified as a prophet, one to give herself over to the will of God, the ultimate institutional authority, prepared to sacrifice herself in remaining loyal to the Church as she searches for wisdom, and for ‘the truth’ mediated through the Church. She will convey the wisdom and the truths of God through the witness of her life.

Some of the Nuns in this study take up both the notion and the language of prophetic witness in their lived experience of being Nuns. Ashleigh (60), for example, describes her life as a call by God to be prophetic:

It’s a call to be listening and in touch with God, and with the word of God, I think that’s also important, you know and about the scriptures and I’d see it as being connected with the wider community with a certain spirit. Well I mean our spirit is to be prophetic, you know, to call people forth, you know, to challenge people out of complacency, you know, that kind of thing. (Ashleigh, 60)

In loyalty to the one who calls her, the Nun is called to listen to God’s voice above her own. Ashleigh positions herself as being responsible to relay the gaze of God to the people, calling them out of their presumed moral complacency. Aligning herself with the prophets of the Bible (Revised Standard Version), like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and so on, she describes herself as pointing people in the direction of God, stirring them out of apathy, challenging them to be good God/Church people. Being ‘in touch with God’, with what God wants not only for her, but also for the world, she takes up the Church’s
discursive truth of the Nun as loyal, faithful woman, conveying the gaze of God to the wider community.

Another participant, Natasha (58), works for the Church in a role where she is an official, professional conduit between the Church and certain people who are the focus its disciplinary practices:

N: I think it’s time that we were a little more self-directing, that we really got to the margins and worked in areas where perhaps we could be a fairly prophetic presence if possible, if we’ve still got people to do some work, then to do that.

I: What do you mean for yourself, about being prophetic, what does that mean for you?

N: Well I suppose that is a big call, but I just think I’d like to, see I haven’t got the guts when it comes to it for that [Church official], the one I think that’s corrupt, for me to kind of challenge him, which I did and I suppose I’ve been suffering ever since. I wrote to him and I pointed out where he was absolutely and obviously wrong and he wrote back and kind of exercised his ecclesiastical muscle. Meanwhile, I’ve got a flesh and blood person here, with all good faith, trying to [obey the Church’s rules] and they didn’t seem to, as long as this one could exercise his muscle over [me]. I still can’t handle it, and I actually told [a higher Church authority] about that and he just said oh, he just shrugged his shoulders. (Natasha, 58)
While looking forward to a time when Nuns are more ‘self-directing’ in their relationship with the Church, Natasha describes a situation where she is unable to be self-directing in her own working environment. At the same time as wanting to take up the Church’s construction of the Nun as prophetic, she tells of the pain of censure, rejection and isolation in the dissonant space lying between the Church’s notion of prophetic and her own. She sees herself as a prophetic Nun differently from the way the Church positions her. The Church’s disciplinary practices oppress the ‘flesh and blood’ people for whom she works, and she is oppressed herself by the ‘ecclesiastical muscle’ of the patriarchal authority in the Church. While she seriously questions why she continues to act as a vehicle of the Church’s disciplinary gaze for people who cannot meet the Church’s demands for their lives, she draws on the discursive construction of the Nun as the loyal woman in blaming herself and her lack of ‘guts’ for failing to be prophetic for the Church. Natasha is left to deal with the dissonance of being ‘prophet’ for a Church whose power oppresses others, including herself.

Erica (53) gives an account of the cost for her of being positioned by others as the vehicle of the Church’s disciplinary gaze:

E: Sometimes if you’ve got your [Nun symbol] on, in a confined space, like a bus or something, people recognise the [symbol] or something and they’ll start raving on about people that they used to know and I guess when everyone is listening in to the conversation, I don’t like that, but I think that, as I said, it’s more my personality.

I: So what makes you just wish they’d shut up or keep quiet or not comment?
E: I never know whether I’m saying the right thing to them, you know. I kind of think well, am I saying what they want to hear or am I going to get myself further into this argument or questioning or whatever. (Erica, 53)

By wearing the Nun symbol, which is a either a cross or some other religious symbol specific to an Order, Erica identifies herself publicly as a Nun. She is identified thereby as a Church woman, conveying the gaze of the Church to the world, obedient to the Church’s requirement that she should “dress in a simple and modest manner, with an appropriate symbol, in such a way that [her] consecration is recognizable” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 41). However, she describes being disadvantaged and embarrassed at times by taking up this material practice of being a Nun. She speaks of her Nun symbol as attracting unwanted interaction with others who see her as public Church property. At first she explains her distress in terms of defects in her own personality, describing herself as uncomfortable in conversations with strangers. Eventually, however, she describes herself as being uncomfortable with having to be the vehicle of the Church’s gaze to others, having to say what others ‘don’t want to hear’, having to deal with ‘argument or questioning’ about the official Church positioning she feels obliged to take. In spite of the cost to herself, the Nun, identifying herself as an official Church woman, speaks ‘the right thing’, thereby conveying the disciplinary gaze of the Church to the world.

According to Foucault, power in institutions takes on pyramidal form, whereby “the summit and the lower elements of the hierarchy stand in a relationship of mutual support
and conditioning” (Gordon, 1980, p. 159). The Nun, the loyal Church woman, conveys the gaze of the institutional ‘summit’ to the ‘lower elements’, the ordinary people with whom she works. One of the participants, Janet (57), gives an account of herself as conveying the gaze of the Church to people in a country parish:

I visited a guy who lived out in the country and I knocked on the door and I said who I was, that I was from the parish and said, I’m just visiting, I’m a Sister. And he said no one in the Church has visited me thirty years. I said, oh that’s an awful long time. And he said ‘would you like to come in?’ So I said yes, but I knew he was aggressive by the tone of his voice. I didn’t worry, I just thought, well he’s invited me in. So I sat down and then he went on and he had quite a sad story to tell really. And he felt the Church had neglected him and he was angry about it to start with, quite angry and half way through he started making me a cup of tea, which was quite nice, so I had the cup of tea and he kept talking and talking and then I just said to him that I was sorry the Church wasn’t there for a man who needed the Church, cause that’s what it appeared to be for him, regardless of what happened. You’re not the ones that are responsible, but you need to build bridges. I felt the need to build bridges and to make him feel like the Church did value him as a person and I was sorry for what had happened to him. I just felt like he was feeling so hurt by the Church, it would be nice to build some bridges of friendship and support. (Janet, 57)

In taking up the Church’s positioning of her as the one to convey its gaze to others, Janet describes visiting this man alone, without fear of danger, facing, dealing with and
accepting his anger on behalf of the Church. She speaks of herself as a ‘bridge builder’ for the Church, the one to connect the alienated man with the institution, the one to offer him the human face of the Church. There is a “gendered dichotomy” (Birke, 1999) here: it is not the male body, but the female body which builds the bridges for the Church. The face Janet offers is a gendered face, a female relational face denied him by the patriarchal institution. She assumes the task of restoring this man’s faith and trust in a Church which has abandoned him, describing herself as having some responsibility to build bridges between the institution and the individual, between the ‘summit’ and the ‘lower elements’ of the institution.

In bridging such gaps, in conveying the gaze of the Church to others both inside and outside the institution, the Institutional Self, the docile Church woman, loyal to the Church, spends her life as a servant of the Church.

5.4 The Servant of the Church

In exploring the notion of gender as constructed by social discourse, Butler (1997) speaks of the gendered individual as related to and recognised by certain performative acts located within social discourse. The Nun exists as a gendered subject within Church discourse, her life and work a “performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1997, p. 402). The Nun working in the world represents the discursive gendered subject, recognised and recognisable by the work she does on behalf of the
Church (Catholic Church, 1983; Pope John Paul II, 1996). She performs being Nun in and through the work she does for the Church, positioned by the Church as a productive woman and a productive servant who takes up responsibility for the financial support of herself and others.

5.4.1 The Productive Woman

The subjective position of productive Church servant is taken up in the case of Nuns, by female bodies, bodies which “make a great deal of difference to the kind of social subject, and indeed the mode of corporeality assigned to the subject” (Grosz, 1995, p. 85). In the same way that social discourse continues to regulate women’s size, shape, appearance and desires, in spite of less overt regulation of women’s behaviour (Bartky, 1997), Church discourse assigns a corporeality to the Nun as social subject, a corporeality which reinforces the traditional work appropriations for women, namely helping, healing and caring. Furthermore, just as in social discourse, being productive through motherhood is still considered the norm for women (Malson & Swann, 2003), so in Church discourse, being productive within the patriarchal institution is considered the norm for the Nun. In the words of one of the participants:

For ME that’s what religious life is today, it’s somehow, I have to come to grips with the fact that first and foremost, I’m called to ministry and that in a sense controls my life, and I have to somehow be able to get that and the larger community together and it’s hard, and I find myself constantly working at it. (Focus Group 2)
Reinforcing the discursive truth of social discourse that women and men have different social functions related to the positioning of men as superior to women, (Lerner, 1993), especially men who mediate between God and human beings, Elaine goes on to explain the situation of some of her companions who work at a spirituality centre:

We have a couple [of Nuns] at [place] now. They love it, I mean they’re quite happy doing that. They’re running the retreat house and in charge of the cooking staff and they’d be mending their [clothes], like there’s a community of elderly [priests] and they’d be mending their clothes and doing, and sort of looking out for ways of helping them out, but it’s more, not a subservient thing, they’re, it’s a sort of mixed community really and they’re in it together. (Elaine, 55)

As well as taking charge of the retreat house, the Nuns act as caring mothers to the priests on the site, seeing to their physical needs. Elaine describes her Nun companions not as ‘subservient’ to the priests, but as caring members of a ‘mixed community’, a religious family. Drawing on the language of Church discourse she defends the Nuns’ taking up the positioning of the productive woman, not only ‘running the retreat house’ but also performing the domestic tasks of the good mother in the Church family.

Another participant, Maria (64), tells of taking the initiative in inviting the local priest for a meal every day at the Nuns’ house because:
I think he will be our last priest and I mean I just felt that if we looked after him, you know, he might be there a bit longer for the people. (Maria, 64)

While faithful to her own work, the Nun adopts a gendered role in the Church, shouldering some responsibility as a woman to protect and nurture the lives of men holding leadership positions in the Church. The Nun not only takes up the position of the productive woman, but of the productive Church worker as well.

5.4.2 The Productive Church Worker

According to the Church, “in imitation of Jesus, those whom god calls to follow him are consecrated and invited to continue his mission in the world” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 15). The servant of the Church, the productive Nun, gives priority to her work, her ‘ministry’ (CICLSAL, 2002; Pope John Paul II, 1996). There are costs, however, for the Nun taking up the position of productive servant. Some Nuns in this study describe feelings of anxiety and frustration when their personal plans are interrupted or shelved to meet the immediate needs of the Church for a productive workforce. Barbara (62), for example, was overseas on a course when contacted by her Order:

I got this phone call then to say would I mind going to [place], they needed a new [Church worker] there or something. I just thought, ‘dear!’ And so, I think I said yes, then worried sick, then rang the [Church official], a priest that I knew, I said I wish I hadn’t said this, I’m trying to get out of it now. And then he said, well we’ve got a
place where we want a relief [Church worker], would you take it on. I kind of thought, oh well, I’m asked to do it like that, obviously they’ve got enough confidence in me, and it’s not a big commitment, it could be just twelve months. And so, because I was miles away, it was half way through the year, and this is going to wreck this course if I’ve got to keep worrying, you know, I did agree. So I ended up two years as a relief [Church worker]. (Barbara, 62)

The Church authority envisages Barbara as a woman whose life and work is available to the institution, a woman whose life is directed towards working productively for the Church wherever there is a need. Barbara takes up the Church’s positioning of her as being available to them, acceding to their request even though she lacks confidence in her own ability to do the work, and is ‘worried sick’ about her decision. Seeing herself as not able to resist, and at great cost to herself, she takes up the position of the productive servant whose life is at the disposal of the Church.

However, taking up the position of the servant of the Church, another participant denies the cost and focuses on the benefit to the Church. Having worked in a Church role without appropriate qualifications, she organises to do more study before taking up further Church work:

So I was planning to go overseas and then the Order asked me to take on another project and to go and apply for this job, which was setting up a new parish in (place), and I got the job. I had four years experience again [there]. Put the study on hold, but
it was cutting edge stuff again, setting up a new place and so it was kind of something very different. So that was just another, you know, in the deep end, you know, no Church, so it was starting from scratch, which was just wonderful. (Mary, 55)

Although desiring to upgrade her training, Mary overlooks her own needs, takes up a job at the behest of her Order and spends the next four years working to establish a new ministry for the Church. Although the cost to herself is significant in terms of her desires and options for her own life, Mary gives an account of herself as the servant of the Church, describing this experience which entails starting ‘from scratch’ with few resources, moving house and surviving life in ‘the deep end’ as a positive experience.

Although her needs are secondary to the needs of the Church, the Nun is positioned as the productive Church worker, placing her personal and professional resources at the disposal of the Church. However, being a productive Church worker, described by one participant as ‘filling gaps’ for the Church, exacts other costs in terms Nuns’ well-being. Another participant, filling a gap in the Church, tells of her frustration that the small numbers in her remote setting affect the productivity of her work for the Church:

There are times when I just find it so depressing, I look at the numbers and then I go down to (city) for these meetings, and then you say, it’s very helpful, but we haven’t got the numbers. [They say] ‘you just have to adapt’. They throw that word at you all the time and the ones who throw it haven’t a clue what it would be like here, the
numbers here are just so [small]. And so, I mean, I keep saying that wherever I go it’s all about numbers and the reality here is we haven’t got the numbers. And so, from that point of view, I feel that’s why I wonder sometimes, what am I doing here and then I think, well that’s rather arrogant because there are needs, and the elderly, and they appreciate it. (Barbara, 62)

Taking up the position of the productive servant of the Church, Barbara expresses her frustration that she is not able to be as productive as she and the Church would like, since the number of people coming to the isolated Church is so small. Outcomes are expected of her but she is unable to achieve them, not from lack of skill or dedication on her part, but because of the isolation of her setting. Though she tries to speak from her own experience in the Church, her voice is silenced and the problem of her non-productivity she describes as arising from her own inability to ‘adapt’. She describes feeling helpless and frustrated in her task as productive Church worker, questioning why she persists in the face of failure, but at the same time, continuing to take up the Church’s positioning of her as productive servant. Silencing her own dissent, she describes as ‘arrogance’ her frustration at her lack of productivity for the Church. Even with few resources or support, the Nun must and does continue to function as productive servant of the Church.

The Church describes the Nun’s life as important “precisely in its being unbounded generosity and love”, since the Church and society “need people capable of devoting themselves totally to God and to others for the love of God” (Pope John Paul II, 1996,
The productive servant of the Church, the Nun schooled in the disciplinary practices of working hard and sacrificing her personal needs for the sake of the Church, may also bear the cost of exhaustion, with serious health consequences.

Several of the Nun participants gave examples of being productive to the point of ill health. Kathy (62) describes a time when she was overburdened in a Church work, bearing great responsibility in the face of hostility from Church authority. She says that other Nuns involved in the same work suffered health problems as well:

… and basically I was the only person standing until I got cancer. So we all gradually sort of fell apart, really. (Kathy, 62)

Another participant, Janet (57), gives an account of continuing to take up the position of productive worker even after suffering a serious injury in an accident:

I remember at lunch time saying to [another Nun], I wish I could cut myself off from the waist down, but I figured I’d better do something to forget about the pain, so I went and thought I’d sit at the computer and prepare my [parish work] for the next Sunday. And I just collapsed on the bed, I couldn’t get up, I just couldn’t move for the pain. When I look back, you don’t know how you survive it, but you do, you just have to. (Janet, 57)

Janet’s strategy for dealing with her pain, that is, continuing to do productive work, fails her. Her body protests against her denial of the pain, forcing her to stop working
and rest. Ultimately, however, the Nun just has to survive even serious, debilitating injury so as to continue being productive.

Yvonne (65) gives another account of the Nun being positioned as productive servant, and the consequences for her of taking up such positioning, in spite of her serious illness:

The Order was trying to get me back on my feet and get a job for me. They were putting pressure on that way. What they didn’t realise, they didn’t realise how bad I was. (Yvonne, 65)

The Superiors, anxious that Yvonne get back to work, arrange to speak with her Doctors to confirm that she really is too ill to work. Invited by the Doctor to be present when they discuss her case, Yvonne recalls saying to the Doctor:

… no. I said, I haven’t done anything wrong, and [the Doctor] said I know that, but he said do you want to be here when we’re talking about you. And I said no… …it was really terrible, it was terrible at the time, and then I thought: no one believes me, and I kept on saying to [the Doctor]: your tests are right, aren’t they? I said, there’s not something else wrong with me, I said, I’m not imagining this am I? (Yvonne, 65)

In her own eyes, as well as in the eyes of the Superiors, Yvonne’s body has let her down. She can no longer work as she once could. Though she wants to continue to take
up the position of productive servant of the Church and the Order, she now no longer can. Her body, regulated by the Order and the Church, is under their control, controlled by the power of the institution. The individuals in positions of power exercise proprietorial rights over her body, expecting her to function long and hard as productive servant. The Doctor’s knowledge of her body is privileged over her own as she is stripped of the power to speak for her own body. The institutional authority positions itself as having the right to consult with the Doctor about how and why this body has broken down, why it is no longer able to be productive. There is an assumption that the Nun is either not capable of relaying the truth about her body to the institutional authority or that she is falsifying her body’s capacity to keep being productive. The productive body of the Nun must not give up on its task.

Yvonne recalls that in spite of the Doctor’s confirmation of her serious illness, the Order continues to pressure her to be productive:

… [the Order] kept on saying: you’ll have to earn, bring money in, you know, earn money, get a job that brings money in, and I said: but I can’t work, I said I’m not, I can’t work, I’m not very well. And see at that stage I couldn’t cope very well because I’m thinking: they’re on to me, they’re ringing me up about getting a job, you know, they said, kept on saying, there’s jobs going, because I had to bring money in, anyway I said to [Doctor] what am I going to do, and [Doctor] said, I’ll get you on a disabled pension and get them all off your back, so [Doctor] organised the pension
for me, got them off my back. They got off my back, but there was no apology from anyone, anyone at all. (Yvonne, 65)

Drawing not on her own power, but on the discursive power of medical discourse to confirm what her own body conveys to her, Yvonne is finally free of the Order’s expectation that she be productive servant of the Church.

Productive work is represented not only a means of serving the Church in its mission or of keeping the otherwise idle hands of the Nun busy, but it also provides the means by which the Church Nun supports herself financially. The productive Nun, then, is represented as a vehicle for economic survival, not only her own, but that of the Order and even the Church itself.

5.4.3 The Financial Supporter

According to the Church, the Nun is “subject to the common law of labor” wherein she secures “necessary provisions for [her] livelihood and undertakings” (Abbott, 1966, p. 475). Drawing on the authority of Jesus, the Church reinforces its discursive truth that the Nun is called to labour for God’s work, as a labourer works for a master. “We are reminded of the words of Jesus: ‘The harvest is great but the labourers are few. Pray the master of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest’ (Lk 10:2; Mt 9:37-38)” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 26). It is the Nun who labours in the harvest of the Church’s work, as MacGinley (2002, p. 341) notes in outlining the stereotype of the Nun in Australia’s
history, who “worked tirelessly for nothing beyond keep in conventional classroom, hospital ward, orphanage or other recognised institution.”

In examining the relationship between the body, discourse and power for women in neo-liberal discourse in society, where power mechanisms work on bodies to produce docile, economically productive bodies, Davies & Gannon (2006, p. 168) speak of the neo-liberal discursive subject as “primarily inscribed with economic discourses of survival/success”. Productivity in terms of work is not only important in terms of economic survival, but as a gauge of personal success and achievement. The impact of economic survival/success for the individual Nun subject within the Church affects not only herself, but her Order and the Church as well.

One participant, Chloe (54), gives an account of the Nun situating herself within one of the alternative discourses available to individuals (Burr, 2003), negotiating economic discourse of ‘survival/success’ as well as taking up the Church’s positioning of her as productive worker in the Church’s harvest. She tells of returning from gaining a degree overseas and having to find paid work:

I can remember now, [when] I came back I used to walk into town sometimes and think, this is what the unemployed feel like, a whole sense of identifying with the unemployed. [The Order] weren’t asking me to do anything; I’ve got to find something. Nobody put any pressure on me, but I mean, I was very, very grateful for that, for the gift at the time, for the [x] years and to come back with this degree. I’ve
got to do something with that, I’ve got to earn my way. That’s something to do with, at a deeper level, well you’re not much good unless you’re doing something useful, helpful. I’d say apprehension is sort of a good word, well I’ve got to DO something, sort of feeling compelled, so where’s it come from? I don’t know. (Chloe, 54)

For Chloe, being useful to the Order and the Church resides in doing something ‘useful’ as well as paying her way, not being an economic burden on the Order. As she takes up a position of productive Church worker, educating herself for the work of the Church, her life becomes a commodity (Irigaray, 1997), her capacity for work traded within the Church. In response to the Order’s financial commitment to her in having educated her overseas, she describes feeling obliged to pay her debt, feeling ‘compelled’ to do something, to work for the Church/Order. The Order invests significant money in educating her, but neither it nor the Church benefits from this investment while she aimlessly walks around the city coming to terms with what it feels like to be ‘unemployed’. Using language of neo-liberalist discourse, she describes herself as useless to the Church and her Order while she is not being productive and earning money.

Felicity (48) also tells of being financially indebted to her Order, educating herself to be competently productive for the Church, but at the same time feeling indebted to the Order for its financial investment in her. She describes having to deal with criticism that she is not as financially productive as others in the Order:
I’ve got a retort for [Nuns] who say to me, well some of us have to work for a living. They think that being a student is a glorious life. I can say well I’m bringing in as much income [through a scholarship] as you. In fact, I bring in more than her. And I suppose it is important also so that I didn’t feel obligated to the Order. I suppose in recent years, I’ve wondered whether my future is really with this group. And I think if they’d paid my way right through [the study], that I’d feel like I should stay because after all they’ve educated me and now I’m going to walk out. (Felicity, 48)

Felicity takes up the position of not only being a productive worker for the Church, but also being financially responsible within her Order, ‘bringing in’ income to support herself within the Order and to free herself from feeling ‘obligated’ to the Order. She describes herself as in an unequal economic relationship with the Order. Since the Order has invested significant money and resources in her education, Felicity becomes the productive worker (Davies et al., 2006), needing to repay her debt, and thereby indentured to the Order. In a circular irony, the Nun, the Church’s productive labourer, eventually pays for the wages of her work with a future committed to more work.

Nuns are described by the Church as belonging to “a special family in Christ” (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 602), and are positioned as having a responsibility to nourish and care for their ‘religious family’, the Order to which they belong. Participants in this research, though middle aged themselves, are among the youngest left in their Orders. Many in this sample give accounts themselves as not only working productively for the Church, but as financially responsible for elderly members of their
Orders. Unlike in a biological family where adults are financially responsible for children, in the ‘religious family’, the Nun is financially responsible to provide resources to care for the growing numbers of elderly Nuns as well as for herself and the works of the Order. As Irene (55) puts it:

This is an apostolic order and service and ministry is part of its basis. It would just be a given that you are doing something that is a ministry, that is at least, at my age, earning an income, because we need to keep that in mind as well. We say that as a small group, we need to keep in mind that there is at least so many of us now unable to work. At [one stage], I was the only one [working in paid work], therefore I was the only one bringing in a proper income, and in my age group, bringing in a full income. The rest are either on a sickness benefit or doing part time work or unemployed and doing ministry that we have got them to do, but were unemployed, as such. So supporting the Order was part of it. (Irene, 55)

Irene describes herself as responsible to provide livelihood not just for herself, but for the others in her Order who cannot or do not work. Others in her Order, working for the Church, do not bring in a ‘proper income’, an income sufficient even to support themselves. Nuns working for the Church receive a ‘stipend’ paid by the Church to the Order, a fixed amount of money negotiated by Church and Order authorities, which is less than a ‘proper income’, a professional wage. The burden of financially providing for the elderly Nuns Irene describes as her own, not that of the Church. The economic contract between the productive worker and the individual, within the Church’s
discursive construction of Nun, involves only one way obligations. Having worked productively for the Church for a lifetime, the Nun cannot rely on the Church to support her once she is physically too infirm to work. Younger, more active Nuns are positioned as having to support their Orders through their productive lives, to provide the financial support for elderly and infirm Nuns who are no longer able to be productive.

Janet (57), unemployed in a small town and looking for work beyond the Church, tells of her anxiety at not being able to secure paid work either inside or outside the Church. Unlike Irene, however, she does question why this concern is hers and not that of the Church as well:

I need to get a ministry. I’m in the age bracket that needs to be earning some money. You can’t live on fresh air, we’ve got to survive, that’s virtually it, so that’s the way. There’s no one putting any expectation on me, so that’s not what it is, but I’m just saying I’m in that age group so you can’t make, I mean I could spend all day doing voluntary parish work and then help around but [the Church] won’t, I can’t get a job through the paid pastoral work and it’s, well in my eyes there’s a justice issue there too, for the Order and for me. (Janet, 57)

Using language particular to Church discourse, Janet expresses frustration at her inability to secure paid work, a ‘ministry’. She describes herself and her Order as needing to survive on the money earned by very few who are able to secure jobs. While she positions herself as willing to work for the Church if they could pay her, she says
she cannot afford to work voluntarily for the Church when the economic security of her Order is in the hands of those in the ‘age bracket’ that need to earn money for the rest. She recognises that there is a ‘justice issue’ here for her. Although she is positioned by the Church as a productive Church worker, and is trained for Church work, the Church does not provide paid work for her. The roles of productive Church worker and financial supporter are incompatible in her present experience.

Another participant, Natasha (58), also speaks of feeling responsible not only to support herself with paid work, but to support others Nuns in her Order who are now unable to work:

Well, we have to support ourselves. I don’t think our Order’s in a situation where they can be just paying for me to work, I think while I’ve got the energy, I should be able to attract some kind of financial support to contribute to the Order … I wouldn’t like to be supported by the Order, unless I knew that we were a really wealthy [Order]. (Natasha, 58)

Natasha sees herself as a useful, productive, working member of the Order. She resists the notion of being a financial burden to the Order, measuring her worth by her ability to work, and her financial benefit to the Order. The productive Nun’s worth is measured by her invisibility on the cost side of the Order’s and the Church’s ledger.
While many Nuns in the study give accounts of working to support themselves and the whole Order, others tell of labouring for the Church without wages at all. Barbara (62), for example, describes herself as saving the Church money by working for no payment:

In this parish, they’re thousands in debt and since I came here, that’s worried the life out of me, and because the people complain that [the Church authority] doesn’t put out a [financial] statement, but you can’t put out a statement because it’s just gone up a few more thousand each month. And so I brought this up to the [Order’s] leadership and I said, look, I’m just so embarrassed that every bit [of work] I do, I’m causing expense. If I could feel I wasn’t causing any expense, it might work, and I must say, I mean, they heard what I said. [The Leader] wrote to the [Church authority] and said, we’ll pay back what you’ve paid, what they paid me this year, and our Order will cover my stipend for this year, and so I mean, that has been just such a relief because I feel that whatever I do, I don’t have to feel I’m causing more expense. (Barbara, 62)

Although appointed to her work by the Church, Barbara describes feelings of guilt for causing ‘expense’ to the Church authority who cannot afford to pay her for her work. According to Bordo, (1997, p. 96), women “learn to feed others, not the self, and to construe any desires for self-nurturance and self-feeding as greedy and excessive. Thus women must develop a totally other-oriented emotional economy.” Having learnt that ‘other-oriented emotional economy’ through the process of subjectification discussed above, Barbara attends to the needs and expectations of others ahead of her own.
She describes the financial burden of the parish as a burden she must bear personally, rather than one to be borne by the Church authority who appointed her. In turn, the leader of her Order takes up the burden as that of the Order. Both the Order and Barbara position themselves as labourers undeserving of the wages due to them, prepared to sacrifice the financial resources of the Order for the work of the Church.

The Church positions the Nun as servant worker, whose life “is to be led productively in moderation and foreign to earthly riches” (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 600). Having learnt to do so in the process of subjectification of their initial training processes, Nuns in this study continue to take up the position of the docile Church woman holy, self-sacrificing, loyal to the Church in their accountable witness, productive servants of the Church, working to support herself, her Order and even, at times, the Church itself. At the same time, however, they also give accounts of resisting these discursive truths and material practices of their lives. The following Chapter examines Nuns’ accounts of such resistance in taking up the position of what this thesis argues to be that of the Individuated Self.
5.5 The Insider’s Voice

I found this Chapter difficult to face and difficult to write. In working through the analysis there were many times when I felt personally challenged and even disturbed by the Nuns’ accounts, and by their taking up the Church’s constructions of them as docile women. I asked myself, for example, what dynamic is at work that a whole Order of women would make themselves available, at great cost, to the needs of a Bishop? That sounds like ‘lie back and think of England’! It disturbs me that some Nuns and some Orders are still allowing themselves to be so blatantly used by the Church. Have Nuns become ecclesiastical gap-fillers (apply to the crack, mould to the surroundings, let it set, walk away)? The men won’t do it, but the women still can and do, even at great cost to themselves. Why is it that leadership and/or individual Nuns are not critically evaluating the worth of their lives, their own legitimate needs, the level of their education and expertise, in relation to what is expected of them?

Many of the participants are in isolate places. A couple of them tell me they miss having Nuns of their own age to talk to, and I feel for their isolation and lack of stimulation in their settings. I ponder the sense I have from some of the participants, that they have been ‘used’ by the Church/Order, at the same time as their own personal fulfilment, and the development of skills and talents have been quite neglected. It disturbs me that what I found in some cases, was Nuns who have ended up in what seem like dead-end places doing jobs which are not personally satisfying or even time consuming.
I am overwhelmed in doing this research, at the number of times the lack of support theme emerges. Nuns are doing the work of the Church in some of the most isolated places in Australia/New Zealand, some without the human support needed to enrich their lives. It’s as if they are out there lost to the Church/their Orders, contacted for the mechanics of belonging, like sending in financial statements or receiving the mail-outs of the Order. There seems to exist in places a vacuum of real concern, and a dearth of real opportunity to engage with each others’ lives and experience. Some of the Nuns I’ve interviewed express a sense of wondering what they are really doing and questioning how really effective they are. Some are wondering if the Church really understands or cares about the details of their lives. I find myself asking: what kind of a God wants this of Nuns? What is a Nun’s life worth?

Our celibate, communal life-style does put us outside of the ‘normal’, usual ways in which women position themselves and are positioned by others as ‘normal adult’. We have not committed the course of our lives to partnership with another human being; we have not given birth to or been responsible for the early formative years of our own children; we have not bought and set up our own homes or negotiated important financial decisions for our personal lives. We have histories of residential instability, having lived in many different places, usually for fairly short periods of time. We have been programmed, as it were, for disconnection from people and from particular locations.
With our personal lives, situated as they are in an arena of emotional deficits and ‘forbidden love’, how can we as Nuns talk about or experience sharing love with others either inside or outside of our communities if we aren’t experiencing love and support ourselves? Even as Nuns continue to take up the Church’s construction of them as called to sacrifice their lives for the work of the Church, many Nuns I’ve interviewed speak of having come to an appreciation of themselves as women who can and do love, not within Religious Life, but outside of it, where real people live and love in a real world.
CHAPTER 6: THE INDIVIDUATED SELF

According to Tracy (2005), discourses “work to ‘fix’ identities in particular ways … and thus constrain alternative truths and subject positions” (p.171). However, individuals can and do take up positions of resistance within the discursive frameworks within which they live and function. The Church’s discursive constructions of Nun ‘fix’ the subjectivity of Nuns, and as discussed in Chapter 5, Nuns in this study do take up the Church constructions of the Nun as called by God to sacrifice her life and work for the Church. However, they also resist such discursive constructions, representing themselves as autonomous, normal, sexual women exercising personal agency in their lived experience of being Nuns. In so doing, rather than reporting a sense of a fragmented or non-self (Dunn, 1993), the participants give accounts of having developed what this thesis calls an Individuated Self, a self beyond the regulation of the Church’s dominant constructions of the Nun.

In this Chapter, manifestations of this ‘Individuated Self’, the self resisting the Church’s dominant constructions of Nun will be considered. It focuses on three major themes of resistance located within the Nuns’ interview data, namely self as exercising personal agency, self as autonomous, and self as woman. The self as exercising personal agency theme examines the emergence of the non-docile body, and resistance en masse, as Nuns resist the Church’s discursive truths and material practices associated with being Nuns. The self as autonomous theme examines a self experiencing alienation from and by the Church, bypassing the Church in taking up initiatives to work for the poor to
work outside of ‘Church works’. The self as woman theme explores the Nun’s identifying of self as ordinary woman, as relating woman and as sexual woman. The Chapter concludes with the reflexivity writing of the researcher.

### 6.1 Self as Exercising Personal Agency

Burr, (2003), speaks of agency as an individual’s endeavor to resist damaging discourses so as to position the self in discourses which are beneficial. In resisting the Church’s regimes of truth and material practices for their lives, individual Nuns in this study represent themselves as exercising personal initiative in taking control of their own lives. The Church, however, has made it clear to Australian Nuns that:

> It is not enough that individual members of Institutes engage in employment in the secular sphere and find living accommodations singly. It is not enough that [Nuns] engage in any work whatsoever. (Australian Catholic Bishops, 1998)

Clearly, the Church expects Nuns to conform to its discursive positioning of them, particularly in adhering to the material practices of their lives such as living communally and working in Church works. Nuns in this study, however, like other women at midlife, (Lippert, 1997), are discovering ways in which to exercise freedom in resisting the Church’s positioning of them, finding ways to rebel against ways in which discourses work to define individuals (Tracy, 2005). The Nun resisting dominant Church constructions of Nun does so by taking up the position of the non-docile body.
6.1.1 The Non-docile Body

Participants in this study describe ways in which they have resisted the notion of themselves as docile bodies (Foucault, 1979) within the institution of the Church. One Nun describes the life of Nuns as restricted by the vow of obedience which limits freedom and independence, a loss which she speaks of as damaging and unnecessary:

The thing I suppose I hate most about religious life is the way a lot of people were made to be dependent. The vow of obedience was so badly interpreted that I really have resisted and resented it all my life. I hate to see people who’ve dedicated their lives to religious life, to God, to whatever, that they’ve lost something in themselves. (Focus Group 3)

This participant describes other Nuns as allowing their bodies to be trained in docility by the institution which depends on their submissive bodies for its work. Their loss of independence she represents not as a consequence of the vow of obedience itself, but of what she describes as its faulty interpretation by the Church. Although the Church creates the discursive truth that living the vows “does not detract from a genuine development of the human person [but] rather by its very nature it is most beneficial to that development” (Abbott, 1966, p. 77), this Nun represents herself as resisting the beneficial development supposedly implicit in living a submissive life, describing this interpretation of the vow of obedience as destructive for Nuns.
Another participant, Irene (55), gives an account of taking up a position of resistance when directed by her Order to study a particular course outside her area of expertise, to help her secure Church work when the Order moved her to another location. Rather than comply with this training direction, she reports telling her Order’s leadership:

I said, I don’t care, I don’t see it as being the course for me at this point in time. And I said, I’m not saying that just off the top of my head, cause I went and discussed it with two other people who’d done the course and I cannot, I just wasn’t, it wasn’t what, well they had to [accept that] because I didn’t do it, I couldn’t do [it]. I did not do the course, and they had to accept it. That’s what the leadership just had to accept, and that’s all there was to it. And I’ve not done it. (Irene 55)

Irene gives an account of taking control of her own working life, in not submitting her life to the control of authority, confident in the knowledge that her own work interests and training lie in other areas. Another Nun describes resistance to the demands of authority as self-determination on the part of the individual Nun:

We are a lot more self-determining, I don’t think I’m like [another focus group member] that could just say, [that] somebody would tell me ‘go’ and I’d just say [yes]. When I came back from overseas, somebody said, go to [another area] and I said, well no, there’s not a job there, I couldn’t do that. (Focus Group 1)
Resistance as ‘self determination’ is possible, but the springboard for resistance in this case is the lack of work availability. This Nun, as do other women at midlife (McQuaide, 1998a), describes herself as needing to have meaningful work to stay actively involved in the world. She gives an account of now being resistant to former blind obedience directives from authority to simply go where she is sent.

Resisting the Church’s constructions of Nun can have consequences for an individual Nun’s sense of herself within the Order, and the Order’s relationship with her. Rebecca (54) describes having moved into a position of resistance because her Order’s perceived lack of support for her work. She speaks of her growing disillusionment with the Order:

I guess I had an innocence about my own [Order] I no longer have. I think that I was really trusting and believed always that the [Order] would always act in my best interest, but I’d discovered that’s not so. So always I think now, I would question people’s motives and decisions. (Rebecca, 54)

Once accepting that the Order would act for her and support her, Rebecca now describes herself as disillusioned with the authority of the Order, mistrusting not only their decisions, but also the motivation embedded in them. This experience has affected her ‘innocence’, her childlike trust that the institution of the Order would have her best interests at heart. Now she positions herself as a mature woman, critiquing what she once simply trusted and believed. Describing herself as suspicious of authority, she places herself now outside the normative docile representation of the Nun:
Sometimes I think I’ve become perhaps too difficult for them, I think I threaten them too, because I guess I’ve, everything that happened, whilst I did move on, I had no choice. (Rebecca, 54)

In her resistance to the ideal of the docile Nun Rebecca is thought of by others as the enemy, the one to be feared. The one who distrusts becomes the distrusted one, the one difficult to manage, she becomes a Nun version of the “monstrous feminine” (Ussher, 2006) in the Church’s construction of Nun. Her resistance now takes the form of speaking up and speaking out, a situation not appreciated, she believes, by the authority of the Order:

One of the difficulties I’ve had is that I haven’t always, and I don’t always see things the same way as other people in the [Order], and I think perhaps I tend to be outspoken and that hasn’t always been well received either. [I’m] not willing to just sit back and accept things as they are and yet there would be other people in the [Order] who would think that would be a good thing, because so many people are fearful of saying what they really think. Because I think a lot of us have wanted approval from authority, from those in leadership, and not wanted to rock the boat or whatever. (Rebecca, 54)

Rebecca describes herself as unafraid to speak out, claiming her status as a ‘speaking subject’, (Jantzen, 1998, p. 193), a status which the Church’s constructions of Nun do not value. Rebecca challenges what she believes needs challenging, while at the same
time describing other Nuns in her Order as docile to authority, searching for its affirmative nod of approval. She resists the notion of herself as the “vehicle as well as the target of power” (Sawicki, 1991, p. 64), refusing to ‘sit back’ and accept the status quo, adding:

I want to be a contributor … I think it’s important to contribute to [the] financial as well as the spiritual life of the [Order]. I feel it’s important to participate fully, and even though I’m living [away]. (Rebecca, 54)

Though she sees herself as still making a contribution to the Order, she has been positioned by the authority in the Order as non-compliant and troublesome, a consequence of resisting the discursive truth of the docile, self-sacrificing Nun.

The difficult consequences of exercising personal agency within an Order are also described by another participant, Elizabeth (53), who recalls that even as a young Nun, she was suspicious of the regimes of truth operating within the institution of the Church:

I remember thinking when I was twenty seven, if we really believed [Nuns live for the glory of God] we would not push people to the point of nervous breakdowns by asking them to do jobs in ministry for which they are not fit, and which are pointless anyway, which eventually I decided, I worked out, were all about the ego of the Bishop. But I found that, I couldn’t say that out loud, it was politically very dangerous to say it and so for a long time I tried not to see it actually, and I tried, I
really tried, I tried. I would say through my early twenties I really tried to fit in the
loop and I tried, tried, tried, to make myself feel what apparently you were supposed
to feel, for that to animate me, and basically it didn’t. (Elizabeth 53)

Elizabeth describes her life as a young Nun as an endless, enervating effort to
function within the discursive truths of the Church’s constructions of Nun, to be and to
feel as a woman regulated by the Church’s regimes of truth for Nuns. She describes
herself as being aware of her powerlessness as a young Nun, working against even her
own knowledge and experience of being used by the Church. Today, as the Individuated
Self, Elizabeth gives an account of still silencing her own voice in the Order, but
distancing herself from the Church’s oppressive positioning of the Nun as compliant and
submissive:

I’ve said very, very little of what I really think in the [Order] just because where I’ve
gone is somewhere completely different, is quite different. So in some ways I feel a
bit like, almost like a traitor or something in that I have, you know, used the
resources of the group to access a whole world of thinking which is not what they
think, so I feel somehow devious. (Elizabeth 53)

As a consequence of exercising personal agency, largely stimulated by opportunities
to ‘access a whole world of thinking’ outside Church discourse, Elizabeth speaks of
herself as ‘almost’, ‘somehow’, a devious traitor, trading with the resources of the Order
to establish independence and individuality. However, she speaks of her desire and need to position herself where:

… you can make some decisions about who you are; you make your decisions about the kind of person you want to be. (Elizabeth 53)

In actively choosing to position herself somewhere ‘completely different’ from where she perceives other Nuns to be, Elizabeth resists the power of the Church to position her as its docile servant. Elizabeth finds a freedom to exercise personal agency, supported by a framework of discursive truths outside of the Church institution. In the experience of Nuns in this study, the freedom to be the ‘kind of person you want to be’ lies in resisting the damaging Church discourse and positioning the self in discourse/s which are beneficial (Burr, 2003).

According to Foucault, the discipline necessary for institutions to create docile, functioning bodies, “sometimes requires enclosure, the space heterogeneous to all other and closed upon itself” (Foucault, 1979, p. 141). In the case of Nuns, while living communally in the same house is described as a material practice which supports their lives (Catholic Church, 1983; Pope John Paul II, 1996), it could also be said to function as a means of regulating the bodies of women.

Nuns living communally actively mediate the disciplinary gaze of the institution to each other, becoming vehicles of the institutional gaze (Heaton, 1999) for each other.
However, 49% of the participants in this present study are resisting the material practice of living communally. They live alone, a practice which the Church acknowledges as possible provided the Nun has the required permission to do so, but which the Australian Church particularly, has described as undesirable and harmful to Orders:

A number of religious have, with permission of their Superiors, opted to leave communities in order to live in apartments or privately. Such an option, however, fragments the life and witness of an [Order]. (Australian Catholic Bishops, 1998, para 29)

While the Church describes the material practice of living alone as rendering them invisible to the world, and responsible for what the Church assumes to be the resultant fragmentation of their Orders, individual Nuns in this study who live alone speak of the benefits to them of resisting the material practice of living communal Convent life. Living alone is described as liberating, enhancing not only the life, but also their work:

For me to live by myself, I mean we’re used to that strongly now, it’s not that it’s an oasis, it is now kind of integral, but also too, it’s like a captured space because of the work I do. There you are every day and you work with [the] city’s [poor], and to come home, and to have that space, that’s the best way for me to stay enriched, to stay energised, rather than to come home and get embroiled in all the strife. And I just know that I’m much healthier psychologically and physically since I’ve been [living] by myself. (Focus Group 1)
This participant describes her living alone as ‘kind of integral’, almost the normal way now for working Nuns to live, a way which affords the Nun the space and privacy to re-energise herself for continuing the work of the Church with the poor and marginalised. She speaks of communal living not as providing a milieu of support and enrichment, but as an unhealthy option for her. Another participant, (Focus Group 1), who lives alone, describes attracting the disapproving disciplinary gaze not only of the Church, but of the Order itself:

“I’ve been living on my own for the last couple of years and I know it’s not, I know it’s been frowned upon me living on my own, it’s not quite seen [as] the right thing, it’s not quite kosher and we struggle, we struggle to have vibrant communities. And I know there are some living situations that for me, I will try and give it my best wherever I live but I think it’d be too hard. I think there has to be some kind of human, I mean I’m not going to have, meet my primary support group in community and I’m not going to meet all my intimacy needs in community. (Focus Group 1)

This Nun describes herself as seeking a living setting where she is able to have her intimacy and support needs met, where she will not be struggling to survive psychologically in a setting which is deadening for her. In doing so, in resisting the Church’s positioning of the Nun as sacrificing her own needs to live communally with others, she leaves herself open to criticism from other Nuns who compartmentalise her as ‘not quite kosher’, not an authentic Nun, not taking up the Church’s material practices for her life. In resisting the material practice of living communally, another participant,
who has lived on her own for thirteen years, describes herself as more connected to her Order now that she was when living communally:

I think that I’ve lived better community life living on my own than when I did when I was actually physically living with other people because the groups of people that I connect to, and they fulfil my needs. And also there’s a lot more sharing that I can do with other people and Nuns as well, some of them in my own Order. I also physically live near some of the other [Nuns]. (Focus Group 2)

Living alone, for this Nun, represents freedom for her to make choices about how and with whom she relates. Paradoxically, in resisting the regulated material practice of Nuns’ living communally, she describes herself as a ‘better community’ Nun since living alone, being free to ‘connect’ with people outside the framework of her Order. Furthermore, she describes her relating to Nuns in her Order as enhanced because she does not physically live with other Nuns. In this form of resistance to the notion of the docile body, Nuns in this study normalise living alone, a material practice allowed only as an exception and only in specific circumstances and for a short, limited time by the Church (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 665).

Another participant, Nancy (54) belongs to an Order in which most of the Nuns live alone. She describes the general sense of contentment among those who live alone:
We’ve said it several times, that we are much happier, that we think we do a better job of being community and supporting each other and all that, in this situation. I mean, one of our older ones who’s 75, she says things like: ‘I’m much happier since I divorced you’ (laughter). When she first said that, we all just roared laughing but then I said, well, what do you mean? And she said, ‘well, since I can have time with you, have quality time with you, but I can also have my space and do my thing.’

(Nancy, 54)

The older Nun, quoted here by Nancy, uses the language of marriage and divorce to describe her connection with community. Like a married woman, trapped in a loveless, burdensome and suffocating relationship, the old Nun, having ‘divorced’ the community, reports a sense of freedom, personal agency and choice her life and relating with other Nuns. The laughter of Nancy and the other Nuns, hints at the recognition of her action and theirs, in living alone, as acts of resistance and even defiance of the Church’s notion of the self-sacrificing, docile Nun.

In examining material practices, such as dress and body regulation, designed by social discourse to control the bodies of women, Bartky (1997), describes ways in which women internalise the surveillance gaze of patriarchal power. Once the gaze is internalised, women become ‘self-policing subjects’, who self-regulate discursive body practices even when the disciplinary gaze is absent. In spite of the freedom to exercise personal agency in living alone, away from the gaze of both Church and other Nuns, individual Nuns living alone however, can function still as self-policing subjects. Rather
than her living alone providing the opportunity to relax away from the gaze of the institution, Nancy (54) says:

… and living alone, there aren’t the expectations of others. So I [can] get up early and work all day and come home late and fall into bed and I can sometimes do that several days without like knowing that I’m kind of in the situation. (Nancy, 54)

Nancy describes herself as being unaware of her tendency to overwork and unable to control it, needing the community to help her normalise her life in terms of balance between work and relaxation:

[The community] did at least kind of provide a bit of buffer so somebody would say, ‘goodness me, stop, you know, have a meal’, these kind of things. (Nancy, 54)

Although resisting the material practice of living communally, Nancy describes her difficulty in maintaining ‘balance’ while living alone, not only because there is no community to prompt her, but because she has internalised the Church’s construction of the Nun as working long and hard for the Church. She describes not taking the time or opportunity to relax even when living alone, ever the self-policing subject (O’Grady, 2005), the Nun working for the Church with not a minute for herself. She describes the ‘contemplation’ balance she seeks using the language which supports the notion of the Nun as holy, the one with the undivided heart who, when she is not working for the Church, is contemplating God.
Some of the Nuns in this study who live alone, however, do so not because they have ‘opted to leave’ their communities, but because they are working in isolated Church settings where there is no option to live communally. Mary (55), for example, who lives alone in a remote area far from her Nun companions, tells of needing to live alone to do the work of the Church, but describes being disadvantaged in doing so:

I just find the demands of trying to stay connected [have] been an enormous challenge for me because, like, I NEED that connection. I would like to see more mutuality in, like I don’t expect people to come to (place), but I think the occasional phone call. Like I could be dead in my bed and no one would know kind of thing. I’m on the road lots, often days and nights with my [Church] job, and so I’m forever travelling, so it costs me an effort to travel. So it’s probably a physical and an emotional thing that is with me now, and the job itself is so isolating. (Mary, 55)

Mary speaks of herself as conflicted because in doing the work of the Church, she needs to live alone, thereby resisting the material practice of living communally with other Nuns. Her work for the Church isolates her from her Nun companions, rendering her almost invisible to and forgotten by them. In sacrificing her life working for the Church, the Nun sacrifices the very connection and support described by the Church as necessary to sustain her life as a Nun. That is, living communally.
The position of resistance taken up by the Individuated Self who exercises personal agency, is taken up not only by individuals, but by groups of Nuns and sometimes by whole Orders.

6.1.2 Resistance en masse

Parker, (1992), speaks of resistance as a refusal by individuals or groups to accept dominant meanings within discourses, a refusal which is the first stage in the creation of new knowledges or of increasing the power of emerging discourses (Weedon, 1997). Some Nuns participating in this study speak of their whole Order as challenging the Church’s patriarchal authority, resisting the Church’s positioning of the Nun as submissive to Church authority. Elizabeth (53) describes what she sees as the consequences of Orders not resisting living within what she calls ‘the loop’, the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun:

I think any [Orders] which are absolutely within the loop and just following the thing of the loop for women, I think they will finish, because I think the very nature of the loop it is, in a way, it is self-consuming and I think the loop has gone on for its millennia I believe really because it has consumed people’s lives, that’s what it does, it consumes people’s lives. (Elizabeth, 53)

Elizabeth describes resistance on the part of whole Orders as being critical to the exercise of personal, human agency in the lives of Nuns since it is through resistance
that Nuns can stay in Orders and still exercise personal agency. Nancy (54) uses another image to describe the consequences of Nuns resisting the ways in which they are represented by the Church:

When [Nuns] say something or put something out there, it rocks the boat. The boat acts as if it’s been rocked (laughter), if you want to put it that way, and so that’s what I mean by ‘they don’t quite know what to make of us’. I would like to think that if we started something that our Bishop or somebody was telling us we couldn’t do it, that we’d do some really hard thinking about how we would respond to that. (Nancy, 54)

Nuns who are not compliant and docile to authority, but who do ‘hard thinking’ before blindly taking up a directive from Church authority, are perceived by the Church to be dangerous to its patriarchal authority. Nancy gives an account of her whole Order as having de-institutionalised their lives by moving out of large Convent buildings:

The whole thing of being out in the [wider] community and perhaps people that needed to, living on their own, [and] the fact that we got rid of the [large institutional Convents] changed our lives completely, and enabled so much else more to happen for us, I know. It released us, that’s what my word is, releasing us for mission in a completely different way, and living, well it enabled the living situation to change. The de-institutionalization, I think of that, it meant that we didn’t live together in huge numbers any more. (Nancy, 54)
Nancy describes the whole Order as having taken the initiative to make significant changes to the material practice of Nuns living in large institutional Convents. It is possible for individual Nuns and whole Orders to resist the Church’s positioning of them as submissive and self-sacrificing. In doing so, they find a new freedom not only in living as Nuns, but in engaging in their work with personal agency, resisting the Church’s power to regulate their lives.

There is recognition by some of the Nuns in this study, of an unwillingness to represent themselves as complacent, compliant servants of the Church. Ashleigh (60) describes being on a Church course overseas where most participants were lay people. She says that she came to an awareness that as an Australian Nun, she was different from the other Nuns on the course:

I think a lot of the Europeans, at least around me, thought of the Australian Nuns as a little bit outspoken, cause we kind of speak our minds whereas some of the other cultures, like there was another Nun there who was [Asian], and she was very quiet. But you could see [the lay people] all loved her because she didn’t, she was very meek and mild, knew her place and had a habit on and she was very, whereas I was, you know, probably, probably to some of the other cultures, seemed rather bold in a sense, you know. Australians were rather bold compared with some of the other cultures. (Ashleigh, 60)
Ashleigh describes her difference from European and Asian Nuns on the course as defined by the Australian Nuns’ propensity to speak out, to not ‘know [their] place’, to resist the representations of Nun as ‘meek and mild’, not wearing habits, speaking their minds. In coming to perceive herself as ‘bold’ compared with Nuns from other countries, Ashleigh uncovers a defiant, fearless representation of the Nun which contrasts sharply with the Church’s construction of the Nun as a woman like the Virgin Mary, the “first and most exalted model for every [Nun]”, whose “attitude of docile adherence to the divine designs was to mark her entire existence” (Pope John Paul II, 2004c, para 5).

Another Nun in the study, Elaine (55) is critical of a docile servant positioning which she observes in non-Australian Nuns living and working in Australia:

I look at some of the religious Orders coming out [to Australia] from overseas doing probably really menial work, and just how well they might be treated, whether they’re doing housekeeping jobs in presbyteries or whatever. I wonder whether anything’s changed. We need to watch out for those tiny religious Orders coming out here to do the sort of work that Australian Nuns will not do. (Elaine, 55)

Elaine represents Australian Nuns as having rejected the Church’s discursive truth of Nuns as docile handmaidens, servants of the male authority in the Church, doing meaningless, menial tasks expected of and specific to women. Not only are some
overseas Orders still trapped within this stultifying representation of the Nun, but the notion of the Nun as docile handmaiden clearly still exists in the Australian Church.

Another participant, (Focus Group 5), describes being Australian/New Zealand Nuns as a support to the resistance positioning taken up by members of her Order. The reality of being physically very distant from Rome, or of belonging to Orders not attached to European headquarters, provides an opportunity for individual Nuns and whole Orders to challenging the Church’s discursive truths and material practices for their lives:

I think we’re not bounded-in either by overseas, like attached to Rome and France and Ireland. I just think we’re so lucky that we’re localised, like we all live in the same culture and we all live the same lifestyle in a sense, and I think other groups see that we’ve been able to be more creative in the living out of Religious Life. (Focus Group 5)

This participant describes her life and that of her Order as free to be ‘more creative’ because of being physically at a great distance from the surveillance of the Church’s institutional authority. Having resisted representing herself as a self-policing subject (Bartky, 1997), a positioning which maintains the subordination of women (O’Grady, 2005), she describes her life as normalised not by her connection with the Church, but by immersion in her own culture. Another participant, Nancy (54), describes her reaction to seeing Nuns in her country wearing traditional Habits, a material practice still encouraged by the Church:
When I see a Nun in Habit, and I call it ‘full pontificals’, I laugh about it, sort of thing. I often wonder what she thinks her Religious Life is about. And the other thing is, too, I’m starting to say to myself and think, what culture does she belong to, because [in] other parts of the world, it’s important that they, it may be culturally sounder and more important that they dress that way, that they choose that kind of lifestyle, that might be more appropriate to some other cultures. But that’s definitely not how it is in the Australian culture. (Nancy, 54)

As an Australian Nun, she describes herself and Australian Nuns as more influenced and guided by their culture, which presumably is freer and less constrained than others, than by the material practices laid down for her by Church authority. While she describes all Nuns as being free to resist the authority of the Church in choosing their dress and ‘lifestyle’, she contends that Australian Nuns actively resist constrictive Church material practices for their lives as Nuns, while at the same time taking up material practices appropriate to women in social discourse within the Australian ‘culture’.

In exercising personal agency, thereby resisting the Church’s construction of her as docile, self-sacrificing Church worker, the Nun as Individuated Self, functions as an autonomous individual.
6.2 Self as Autonomous

The Nun resisting the Church’s constructions of Nun strives to function with autonomy over her own life, an autonomy which frees her from to live and work beyond the constraints of the Church. Within patriarchal institutions, men order the world for themselves and for women, controlling this world in such as way as to “make women collude in creating and generationally recreating the system which oppress[es] them” (Lerner, 1993, p. 6).

The Church has “shaped the notion of the exclusive rights of an elite body to exercise power over other organizational members” (A. J. Mills & Ryan, 2001, p. 76), thereby creating a site where Nuns must function in a culture dominated by men and masculinity. As one participant, Elizabeth (53), angrily put it, most Nuns have to negotiate their lives within:

… an entirely male run, specifically, intentionally male organised, highly hierarchalised and I believe female-fearing and therefore female-hating organisation [that] has taken basically the spiritual capital of Jesus and has organised it into a multinational corporation which operates for the benefit of the ego, basically the power ego of these hierarchalised males. (Elizabeth, 53)

Furthermore, at the same time as expecting Orders of Nuns to “integrate their pastoral activity within the overall pastoral plan of the diocese in which they are present,
and to minister in communion with the Bishop” (Australian Catholic Bishops, 1998, para 34), the Church invites Nuns to collude with a world where resources are spread unequally and Nuns are sometimes not remunerated at all for work done on behalf of the Church.

Although the expression of strong negative emotions has not been seen as acceptable in the lives of Nuns, (Malone, 1991b; Sinnot, 1997), one participant openly expresses anger, her form of resistance, at what she sees as the Church’s unwillingness to remunerate the work done by Nuns, while at the same time generously funding other areas in the Church, particularly what she calls ‘the bureaucracy’:

It just feeds into that feeling I have that we’re being used. I don’t find that heroic, I find that being used by the [Church]. I don’t think that’s prophetic at all. And I suppose on one level we preach collaboration and consultation and every [Nun] being responsible for leadership, and I wasn’t, I didn’t mission that [Nun] to work for nothing. ‘We’ve always supported the [Church]’. Well I think we’re stupid for doing that. (Natasha, 58)

Natasha sees the Order as being complicit in the oppression of Nuns by continuing to envisage Nuns as a cheap, docile labour force, expecting them to impoverish their own lives for the work of the Church. Her expectation is that the Church should now be more financially supportive of Nuns who have spent their lives working for it. The notion of the Nun as being at the disposal of the Church, her labour owned by the Church, is
challenged as the Nun recognises and exercises her rights as an autonomous individual within the Church. However, exercising her autonomy can leave the Nun alienated from the Church which exercises power over her.

Power within discourse “surveys, supervises, observes [and] measures the body’s behaviour and interactions with others in order to produce knowledges” (Grosz, 1994, p.149). The Nun is not positioned by the Church to function as an autonomous individual. The document Vita Consecrata, (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 79), reminds all Nuns, ‘consecrated persons’, that:

A distinctive aspect of ecclesial communion is allegiance of mind and heart to the Magisterium of the Bishops, an allegiance which must be lived honestly and clearly testified to before the People of God.

The gaze through which disciplinary power operates within institutions (Danaher et al., 2000), in this case the gaze of the Church, functions to regulate the Nun’s life. One way in which Nuns in this study exercise personal and collective autonomy is by removing themselves from the disciplinary gaze of the Church altogether.

Suzanne (63), who works outside the boundaries of the Church with people with other religious beliefs, while acknowledging that she is inevitably part of the Church, aligns herself with other Nuns whom she sees as ‘defecting in place’. Defectors in place find support and friendship outside the structure of the Church, while at the same time
maintaining membership with and some allegiance to the Church (Wintermyer, 1992). Suzanne resists the Church’s constructions of Nun by dismissing the Church as irrelevant to her, thereby removing herself from the influence of the power of the Church’s surveillance:

What they want to do in Rome running around in their dresses is their problem. By not conforming to the stereotype that others may have of what [Nuns] are and what [Nuns] do, I don’t take too much notice of what might be happening in Rome cause it doesn’t basically affect me, it’s a long way away, and [they] make these great pronouncements. I think well, it’s going to filter through and it does, or if it doesn’t filter through, too bad. (Suzanne, 63)

Suzanne describes herself as unaffected by the authority of the Church, speaking of male authority in derogatory terms. She describes herself as actively resisting the stereotypical representations and behaviour of Nuns. Though she says that the Church has a limited impact on her life, she is still aware of and impacted upon by the Church’s official statements:

I mean some of the pronouncements are really, really hard to take. I mean that very late Encyclical of [Pope] John Paul, Dominus Jesus something, that blows me off something shocking, partly I suppose because I’m working a lot ecumenically and I thought it was an extremely insulting document. (Suzanne, 63)
Such official ‘pronouncements’ from the Church increase not only Suzanne’s alienation from the Church, particularly since she works with people who are not Catholics, but arouses anger and distress in her. Working ‘ecumenically’, she mixes with people who see her as representing the Catholic Church and its ‘pronouncements’. However, she alienates herself from the Church and its pronouncements, unable and unwilling to defend either.

Some Nuns in the study speak of removing themselves not only from the work of the Church, but from the public practice of their religion, specifically Sunday Mass attendance. Nancy (54), for example, says:

I don’t have a problem with those of our [Nuns] who have difficulty with [Mass] and who can’t go [to Mass on Sunday] … we have those who are very strongly into the cosmology and all that area of spirituality … there is space here for everybody. (Nancy, 54)

Nancy says her Order has developed a strong ecological spirituality which meets the spiritual needs which were once met by Church attendance. Nuns in this study, like other women at midlife, who explore new insights and new sources of meaning in their lives (O’Connor, 1996; Pearlman, 1993), are representing themselves as finding those new sources of meaning and spirituality beyond the Church. The Church however, clearly states that Nuns are not just to meet the Sunday Mass obligation of all Catholics, but they are also to:
… make every effort to participate in [Mass] daily, to receive the most sacred Body of Christ, and to adore the Lord himself present in the sacrament. (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 663)

However, Nancy acknowledges that some Nuns in her Order do not attend Mass even on Sundays, that they have ‘difficulties’ with the Church, and have chosen non-Church ideological frameworks within which to express and nurture their spirituality. Another Nun participant describes her allegiance to the Church bluntly in asking and answering her own question:

Would I still be a card-carrying member of the Church if I didn’t have [the Order]? And I’m not sure if I would. (Focus Group 1)

Spirituality for women is described as characterised by connection and relationship (R. E. Ray & McFadden, 2001). Furthermore, women have reported that spirituality and spiritual experiences assist them to focus positively on themselves, to enhance their quality of life (Howell, 2001b) and to reflect on and relate to nature (E. M. Banister, 2000). Spirituality is important in the lives of Nuns and is meant to be one of the clearest supports and location of meaning for them, but some Nuns in this study report a sense of alienation from a Church which positions itself as the sole provider of opportunities for spiritual nourishment for them.
While alienation from the Church and its surveillance gaze is a position taken up by some Nuns in this study, such alienation is not without consequences for them. Another participant describes herself as a Nun without any intentional connection to the Church:

My relationship with Church is now, like there’d be Nuns who’d say ‘like a road map’, I would say it’s a swamp actually, and it’s a loss, a loss. But at the same time, this is something that I’ve got to do. Like we here in this place, we’re meeting people for some reason. A few of them, they go, oh, I’ve never seen you at Mass, and I say, oh, haven’t you (laughter)? To some people you would say, well you probably wouldn’t see me there or I’ll say, oh do you go, you must go to another Mass than I do or something and you don’t. But it seems like I’m protecting, there’s people I don’t know that well probably and you don’t really want to reveal yourself to people you don’t really know, and yet I don’t feel being a [Nun] has to be part of the Church. (Focus Group 5)

This participant recognises that her positioning in relation to the Church may be different from that of other Nuns. She resists the discursive truth that the Church is the life-guide and ‘road map’ for Nuns, inevitably regulating their lives. She feels bogged down by the Church, an institution which has become fetid in her view, and which has no life to offer her. She admits that there is pain in this reality for her, ‘it’s a loss’, but she feels she is compelled to take up the position of alienation from the Church. Her alienation and lack of participation in Church activities is noticed by others who are puzzled by her non-compliance with the Church’s material practices for her life.
According to Bartky (1997, p. 43), “as women … begin to realize an unprecedented political, economic, and sexual self-determination, they fall ever more completely under the dominating gaze of patriarchy”. She posits that it is in their resistance to dominant discursive constructions of themselves as women, that individual women attract the critical gaze of patriarchal systems. In spite of, and perhaps because of, their taking up positions of disengagement from the Church, women who are Nuns, attract the disciplinary gaze of the Church, a gaze which it is the duty the Bishop to impart (Catholic Church, 1983):

Participant 1: ‘They do their own thing’, the Bishop says; ‘they shouldn’t be living on their own, it’s not good.’

Participant 2: A lot of Nuns these days live on their own in other Orders as well, more and more, but I think some people disapprove of our detachment from the Church, I suppose. I’ve heard some funny things, really that probably people wouldn’t say out in public, that gives me a sense that maybe we’re not quite kosher in some circles, there’s a kind of a disapproval that we’re not toeing the line. It just gives me wonderful hope; I think we are doing the right thing. (Focus Group 5)

Speaking in the plural, of ‘us’, of herself and other Nuns in her Order, this Nun describes herself and other Nuns as detached from the Church. They are criticised by the Bishop, the patriarchal Church’s male, authoritative mediator between God and humans (Lerner, 1993), for acting and living autonomously, for disengaging themselves from the patriarchal gaze and control of the Church. The Church expects Nuns to ‘toe the line’, to
be supportive, to work for the Church. In spite of what the Church thinks and says, however, this Nun believes she and the others who resist are doing ‘the right thing’.

Nuns resisting the Church’s discursive truths and material practices for their lives, earn criticism from the Church and from ‘some circles’. Braidotti (1994, p. 64) theorises that woman, represented as the ‘devalued difference’ from man, has been represented in Western cultural and religious thought as “forever associated to unholy, disorderly, subhuman and unsightly phenomena”, resulting in her being represented as the enemy of humanity by virtue of her gender alone. Women who are Nuns, who do not toe the line, are deemed to be dangerous, ‘not good’, causes of trouble, and are demonised by Church authority, as is attested to by the troubled history of some Orders of Nuns in Australia and New Zealand (O’Sullivan, 1995). Mary MacKillop, for example, the co-foundress of an Order of Australian / New Zealand Nuns, was excommunicated from the Church in 1871 because the Bishop claimed “she excited the [Nuns] to rebel against my authority” (Bishop Sheil, Bishop of Adelaide, quoted in Gardiner, 1994, p. 105). Away from the controlling surveillance of the institution, Nuns are in danger of being positioned as what Ussher (2006) refers to as the ‘monstrous feminine’, monstrous because they are independent, a representation of woman with a strong historical basis in the Church (Clark, 1996; Pernoud & Hyams, 1994), as well as in society.

However, another participant believes that she and her Nun companions are living a different way of life for Nuns, one which they have carved out for themselves, and which is lived in resistance to the Church’s material practices for Nuns’ lives. Though
she enjoys being autonomous in relation to the Church, she hopes, but is not certain, that she, and they, are doing ‘all right’:

Sometimes it makes me think, well, I hope we are all right. Someone on the leadership team of another Order said to one of her members, who reported it to me, [my Order] have a lot of people with cancer. Now there have to be reasons for that, you know what are they, what is it about their lifestyle that, what are they doing that they’ve got so many people with cancer? I suppose it did concern me that other people might view us in a negative way like that. I don’t know how common that is, but still, I didn’t feel good about that. (Focus Group 5)

A sense of isolation can result from Nuns’ taking up positions of resistance, particularly when other Nuns disapprove of the resulting independence and disconnection from the Church. In tones that are reminiscent of Biblical punishments meted out by God to those who disobey God (Deut: 29 New Revised Standard Version) resistance attracts a verbal critical gaze from other Nuns who believe that the ‘lifestyle’ of Orders/Nuns resistant to the Church’s dominant constructions of Nun brings down upon them disease and death. Cancer is represented by others as God’s punishment for the Nuns’ resistance. The disciplinary gaze of the Church is mediated through other women, other Nuns, who disapprove of the way this Nun and her friends position themselves as resistant, conveying to them that there is a price to be paid for autonomy. However, while this Nun acknowledges that she and others deviate from ‘the right thing’, hoping that they are ‘all right’ in their resistant positioning, they must deal with
the way illness in their Order is interpreted by others. They speak of the enjoyment of their lives as more important to them than conformity to the disciplinary practices embedded in the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun.

Power within institutions ‘surveys, supervises, observes, measure the body’s behaviour and interactions with others’ (Grosz, 1994, p. 149), so as to exercise control over individuals. It is through their resistance to the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun, and its disciplinary surveillance of them, that Nuns in this study experience their growing independence from the domination of the institution. Like women who resist other social forms of domination, they “call into question the meaning and necessity of the current discipline” (Weitz, 2003), freeing themselves from its controlling constraints. Nuns who do not ‘toe the line’, an image used by more than one of the Nun participants, are deemed to be a threat to the Church:

I think some of us can, can appear to be threatening to clergy people, I know, and it’s very hard to have reasonable conversations with people because they, they just close up, don’t want to know. I don’t know what it is. I think it’s because we’re not going to toe the line, necessarily. (Elaine, 55)

Fearful of the Nun’s autonomy, male authority is described here by Elaine as dismissive of the independent Nun, disengaging from her while she resists male power in the Church. The independence of Nuns is seen to be frustrating and threatening to
male Church officials who will not communicate reasonably with Nuns who do not conform to the Church’s expectations of them.

The identity of the Catholic Church’s Nun is a constructed identity wherein the Nun is represented as taking up an identity and role as a woman who has sacrificed her whole life to God for the work of the Church. While some Nuns remove themselves from the gaze of the Church by physically withdrawing from Church work and activities, others in this study silence their own resistance while they still work within the framework of the Church:

I’d never stand up in the (Order) and say, look, actually I never go to Mass, but I couldn’t say that to my mother, either (laughter). I’ve moved in as a [Church worker] (laughter) in [a non-Church] institution. If [the Church authority] knew what I really believed, I’d be out of there like a shot (laughter), but if I said to [Church authority] look, I’m hypocritical here, I never go near the Church for anything. I think they might have considered that I’m out. (Focus Group 5)

This participant resists the spiritual material practices of being a Nun, namely attending Mass daily as well as on Sunday (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 663). Her resistance, though, must be secretive since her employment and the Order’s income are at risk if her resistance were to become known. Furthermore, she must deal with what she names as her own hypocrisy in working as an agent of a Church whose beliefs and practices she no longer accepts as part of her experience of being a Nun.
Other Nuns in the study describe similar difficulties in reconciling their personal positioning in relation to the Church with the public profile of their employment within the Church. One participant describes the difficulty she has reconciling her enthusiasm for working with Catholic adults with what she describes as the Church’s disrespect of them:

[The Church] seems so totally out of touch with where human beings are, and sometimes then just downright lack of any compassion and Christianity is spoken on behalf of the Church, I just feel so, sometimes I just feel ashamed, and sometimes I just feel absolutely frustrated and I don’t want to be identified with that, but because of my work within the Church, I am identified with that. There are times when I feel that I’d like to walk away from it. (Agnes 61)

While Agnes still works for the Church and sees herself as relevant and sympathetic to the concerns of people she works with, she disassociates herself from what the Church teaches. In not walking away from the Church because she believes she can have some mitigating influence in the lives of Church people, she nevertheless must cope with the resulting frustration and shame she feels in being so identified with the Church, which she describes as an institution which does not practice what it preaches.

Nuns resisting the Church’s construction of them as docile workers for the Church position themselves as not only as autonomous individuals alienated from the Church as
institution, but as individuals who, by virtue of their autonomous functioning, are alienated in turn by the Church.

6.2.1 Alienated by the Church

The autonomous Nun functions as one marginalised by the Church, a woman alienated and without official recognition or power. In working for and on behalf of the Church, Nuns are expected to:

… not fail to cooperate generously with the particular Churches as much as they can
… working in full communion with the Bishop in the areas of evangelization, catechesis and parish life. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 85. Italics in original)

In the case of many Nuns in this present study, however, while they may be willing to work for the mission of the Church, there are, in fact, decreasing opportunities for them to find paid work within the Church. One participant summarises her feelings of being let down by a Church which she describes as devaluing the life and work of Nuns:

To have worked as hard as you can and then find that your old age could be cracked and miserable and that you could find yourself in the position of somebody who hasn’t [given their life for the Church]. You could find yourself having to be grateful to people for handouts which is just so unjust and so untrue, it’s just again, see,
reality is somehow a big thing for me at the moment. It’s just simply unrealistic.

(Elizabeth 53)

Though “called to be a leaven of communion at the service of the mission of the universal Church.” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 80), and having worked hard for the Church, Elizabeth sees herself as vulnerable to enduring an old age which could be ‘cracked’ and ‘miserable’. Belonging to an Order which is small and diminishing in numbers, she is aware that “the temporal goods of [Orders] are ecclesiastical” (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 635), and that ownership of an Order’s assets reverts to the Church when an Order closes down. In this likely event for her Order, she describes her dependence on ‘handouts’ from the Church which ultimately will secure the Order’s assets as its own, as demeaning. The autonomous Nun, alienated by a Church which cannot provide employment to sustain her present life, is likely to be beholden to the Church to provide for her needs in her old age.

Another participant, Janet (57), who was engaged in paid work for the Church where she lived the year before being interviewed, speaks of her need to find paid work now in her new location, since her Order is small and dependent on the income of the few who are young enough to work. She has not been able to secure paid work for the Church in the area where she now lives, though the Church authority encouraged her to do voluntary work for the Church:
Parish, pastoral ministry is probably what I’m qualified for, I’ve got counselling qualifications and pastoral skills too, really, and experience. [The Church jobs] are just not around because it costs money. I need to get a [paid] ministry. I’m in the age bracket that needs to be earning some money. You can’t live on fresh air. (Janet 57)

Although willing and trained to work for the Church as a pastoral worker in a parish, she is unwilling to work for the Church without pay. Janet describes herself as having no option but to take up a position of resistance to the Church’s expectation that she will work for the Church. Although she is prepared to work for the Church, there is no paid Church work available for her. Her qualifications and experience are valued only if she works for no pay. Since she needs to earn money to support herself and the other Nuns, she has applied for a job, working for the poor and marginalised, outside the Church.

Yvonne (65), on the other hand, gives an account of being rejected outright in her application to work even voluntarily for the Church in a particular Diocese:

[The Bishop] said he didn’t want a lone ranger in his Diocese, [be]cause I was asking him if there was anywhere that I could help out in a parish, that I could help the women in [area], and he wrote this terrible letter back to say that he had enough Nuns, that everywhere was covered. And I know it wasn’t covered, they needed more Nuns to help out. (Yvonne, 65)
As well as failing to provide an opportunity to ‘cooperate generously’ with the Church, in describing her as a ‘lone ranger’, the Bishop draws an analogy between Yvonne and the masked, nameless central character of the radio/televisio show who sets about doing good, but on his own behalf, unattached and unaccountable to any social institution. As women, Nuns are positioned as needing to be controlled by the Church, particularly as they moved out of the restricted material practices of former times, replacing their habits with street clothing and moving out of large communal living spaces (O'Brien, 2005). This Nun, working on her own, helping other women, is seen as a danger by the Church authority, not just because of the nature of what she might be doing, but because there are no surveillance mechanisms with which the institution can control her movements, behaviour and work.

Kathy (62), who has worked in Church works all her life as a Nun, gives an account of having displeased Church authorities by organising an open discussion on sensitive Church matters. As a result, she:

… got a really big name amongst [the Church authorities] for that. Well they just wrote me off. (Kathy, 62)

Now she works outside the Church and laments the fact that she is never invited to participate even in her local parish activities:
I’m never asked, never have been asked to do anything in the local Church, I suppose, that’s here locally. I used to be asked to preach in the [another denomination] Church at workshops and in the [another denomination] Church and do a lot of stuff. I’ve never once been asked even to talk to (groups) in the Catholic Church, never once. It was all right for the other Churches. (Kathy 62)

The Church thus makes no space for Kathy, ignoring her expertise and experience, even though in order to “make her presence visible in everyday life” the Church “has a right to expect a significant contribution from [Nuns], called as they are to bear witness that they belong to Christ” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 41 Italics in original.). For challenging their power, the Church authorities have exerted a disciplinary technique over Kathy’s non-docile body (Foucault, 1979), excluding her from being present to and functioning within the Church. Ironically, although the Church’s exclusion of Kathy from participation in its mission has cut her off from networking with individuals and groups within the Church, other denominations have welcomed her skills, training and talents, in inviting her to work with them.

If the Church cannot create the space for Nuns who resist its discursive truths and material practices for their lives, Nuns in this study are bypassing the Catholic Church to take up opportunities provided by other groups and religions to do work they believe in and for which they are trained.
6.2.2 Bypassing the Church

Nuns in this study describe themselves as working for the poor and the disadvantaged, being faithful to the Church’s representation of them as having:

a devotion which [they] live out not without sacrifice … generously serving the poor and the sick, sharing the hardships of others and participating in the concerns and trials of the Church. (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 39)

However, there is resistance to ‘participating in the concerns and trials of the Church’ in that some commit themselves to work for the poor outside the structure and control of the Church. One Nun in the study, for example, describes her life-long commitment as a call to serve the poor, rather than to serve the Church, even though her own resources may dwindle through age or infirmity.

I feel a real call to continue staying with [marginalised] people. If I couldn’t stay in [location], but I can’t see any reason why I couldn’t, I’d just go into a [Housing Department] block and be in there as a resident presence, someone people could come and talk to, be around. I hope I can stay in one of those settings. (Focus Group 4)

Though taking up Church’s exhortation to Nuns to “[become] one with the poor” in their lifestyle (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 63), this Nun speaks of herself as being called to
work outside the Church. In so doing, she negotiates with civic rather than Church authorities to facilitate her work with the poor who are marginalised. Taking up the Church’s construction of Nun as a woman who sacrifices her whole life for the service of others, this Nun sees herself as continuing to respond to a call to sacrifice her life not for the Church or people in the Church, but for the marginalised beyond it.

While Nuns in this study do position themselves as being called by God, some redefine ‘the call’ as inviting them not to work for the Church, but to work directly for the poor, those people marginalised by society and even by the Church itself. Natasha (58) describes her Church work with the disadvantaged, defined for her in a particular way by the Church, as an impediment to her desire and capacity to relate to disadvantaged people as a compassionate woman:

I just would like to come across to people as accepting of all kinds of people, of being interested in those people. [I] couldn’t give a damn about how they live and what they do, I just would like to be able to be sort of someone who connects with people, can accept people for who and what they are and be able to respond to people’s needs. And I don’t want to be constrained, I don’t want to be constrained by stuff that I’m increasingly losing faith in, losing respect for, might be a better way of putting it, which is hierarchical, institutional Church. (Natasha, 58)

Natasha speaks of the Church’s defining her role in her Church work as constraining, restricting her capacity to be a compassionate woman who doesn’t ‘give a damn’ about
the details of others’ lives which are contrary to Catholic Church teaching. In her language she resists the Church’s institutional control of her life as well as of her sense of herself. According to Harre & van Langenhove (1999), even though a person may have many personae, an individual’s public performance must conform to persona they adopt. Natasha is left to resolve the dissonance arising from her taking up a public performance persona as a Nun working on behalf of a hierarchal, patriarchal Church, and her private competing persona of the compassionate, non-judgmental woman. Nuns who work for the Church but position themselves as resisting the Church’s constructions of Nun thus inherit an additional task of dealing with the resulting dissonance in their experience of being Nuns.

Midlife has been found to be a time in which women develop trusting ties with others, when women develop and share confidences with networks of women friends (McQuaide, 1998a, 1998b) and when they seek to achieve satisfaction in their life circumstances (Howell, 2001a). In dealing with the isolation resulting from resisting the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun, midlife Nuns in this study describe themselves as having created new networks of support beyond the institutional Church. Kathy (62), for example, gives an account of taking initiatives to set up support networks for herself outside the framework of the Church.

K: For the last fifteen years I’ve belonged to a women’s group.

I: Nuns?
K: No, no, and not Catholics either, a couple of [other denomination] and a couple of agnostics. We have two three day weekends a year and we meet somewhere for a long day other times a year. And so they’re very close to me, those women, and we have a lot in common, and some of us are married and some of us aren’t and some are divorced, it’s just lovely, that’s a great group.

Kathy describes herself as having more in common now with women from a variety of backgrounds who are not affiliated with any Church or denomination; women who support her life and who meet her needs for intimacy and affirmation. Kathy goes on to sum up her relationship with the Church saying:

I’m not too sure how much I believe in a lot of Church stuff, a lot of Jesus stuff or whatever, but I do believe in the sacredness of life.

While she is the only Nun in the study who alludes to being a disbeliever regarding ‘a lot of Jesus stuff’, she is not alone in describing herself as detached from the Church and its practices, committed to life beyond the constraints of its institutional power and control.

Taking up a position similar to that of some feminists who have moved outside established religions to create new forms of religion (Ecklund, 2003), another Nun in this study goes further in bypassing the Church by describing herself and her Nun peers
as creating their own ‘church’, a church of women where she feels ‘comfortable and familiar and at ease’:

I feel what we’ve got, we’ve formed our own [Church] really. I belong to this ecclesiastical group that we’re operating and [am] affirmed from that group and give to that group, and enlivened, and awakened and created and that all happens in our group. A lot of it happens for me, what happens in the group has got nothing to do with Church as such. Well I think as a group we probably feel, a lot of us, that we are the Church. (Focus Group 5)

Resisting the Church’s notion of her as docile woman, responding to a call to serve the Church, this participant describes herself and her companions as powerful in the creation of their own ‘church’, a church created by and for women. Although speaking of her comfort and familiarity with her life as a Nun, identifying with the Order and sure of her place within the Order, this Nun no longer takes up the Church’s dictates about what it is to ‘Nun’. She describes herself as faithful to the Order rather than to God or the Church, resisting the Church’s control over her life as a Nun. The ‘group’, the Order itself, has become her church. Although her life as a Nun exists within the framework of the Church and is regulated by the Church, this Nun resists the notion of submitting to the Church’s power over her life. She appears to be not alone in taking up such a position of resistance, since ‘a lot of the group’ feels that they are creating their own church, a church which exists outside of the formal framework of the institutional Church.
Whether bypassing the Church to work for the poor or to create their own supportive networks in a ‘church’ of their own, Nuns in this study give accounts of continuing to do good, aligning themselves with and caring for the marginalised. They do so, however, outside the control and material regulation of their caring by the Church. Resistance for the Nun is a gendered positioning; it is as woman that she resists the Church’s discursive truths of what it is to be ‘Nun.

6.3 Self as Woman

Against the backdrop of the positioning of all women as inferior in social discourse (Braidotti, 1994), the Church speaks of the Nun’s way of life as having an “objective superiority” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 54), a notion of virginal women as exalted above other women, which has a long history in the Church. Prominent male theologians in the 4th and 5th Centuries, such as St John Chrysostum, St Ambrose and St Augustine lauded virginity as a higher state than marriage, representing virgins as being more loved by God than married women (Kidder, 2003). Nuns in this study give accounts of resisting the notion of being on a pedestal and being different from other women, by positioning themselves as ordinary women, as relating women and as sexual women.
6.3.1 The Ordinary Woman

As discussed in Chapter 5, the young Nun learns subjective positioning as ‘Nun’ through the process of subjectification of the Novitiate training period. In writing of her experience of becoming a mother for the first time, Baraitser, (2006), reflects on maternal subjectivity as a ‘fundamentally changed state’, wherein a woman needs to radically re-think who she is as new mother, located within what Baraitser calls a ‘plurality of self-positions’. The Nun too inhabits a space of plurality of self-positions including woman, Church worker, and Nun. Nuns have traditionally adopted the title ‘Sister’ when referring to themselves and each other, and when being addressed by others. Use of the title, ‘Sister’, reminds the Nun that she has adopted, in the eyes of the Church and the world, a ‘fundamentally changed state’, a state in which she is removed from the world of ordinary women.

Some Nuns in this study openly resist referring to themselves or being referred to by others as ‘Sister’, as Nun, as different from other women. Nancy (54), for example, works alongside others in a Church social work setting. Though her colleagues know she is a Nun, all refer to her by her own name except one. Nancy objects to the categorisation of her which is implicit in this colleague’s insistence on using the title ‘Sister’ when addressing her:

Being called that, seems, sets me, I feel set apart, and I’ve actually said that to this person, because in the end he asked me why does it bother me. And I said ‘well,
because when you say that, like, I feel like you put me on a pedestal, where you’ve
made me feel different to everyone else. No one else here is called ‘Mr’ or ‘Mrs’. So
if everyone else was Mrs so and so, Mr so and so, and I was ‘Sister’, fine, but
everyone else is by first name here, and, and I’m not different’. And to me it also
says something about a set of expectations that I wasn’t sure I wanted to live up to.
(Nancy, 54)

In spite of having a different identifying title from other women, Nancy says she does
not want that difference to influence relations in her workplace. Individually she sees
herself as equal to the women she works with. She speaks of the use of the term ‘Sister’
by others as setting her on a pedestal, where colleagues may have different expectations
which she sees as burdensome and alienating. Furthermore, this male colleague’s
referring to her by her title also objectifies and depersonalises her in the same way that
men depersonalise and objectify their female partners by referring to them as ‘the wife’
or ‘me missus’. The power to resist the effect of her Church title positioning her as on a
pedestal, in a role, different from others, lies in her refusing to accept the title as part of
her working identity.

For Suzanne (63), who acknowledges that she lives a life different from that of most
people in the general community, the title ‘Sister’ constitutes a stereotype, something
which she resists because it defines, confines and restricts her:
I see us as living a life that is different from what most people in the community live. But I don’t sort of feel looked down upon or terribly, terribly different although I know it is different. I suppose I’m still concerned that many people, particularly many Catholics, still have the stereotype of what ‘Sister’ is, and they expect that I’m going to conform to that stereotype and I usually don’t, I usually don’t want to be put in a box. (Suzanne, 63)

Suzanne speaks of not considering herself as different from other women, but rather, that her lifestyle is different from that of ‘most people in the community’. It is not her female subjectivity, but the material practices of her life as a Nun that mark her as ‘different’ from other women. The difference from women she describes as a stereotype imposed by others, particularly Catholics, whom she sees as expecting Nuns not to resist, but to take up the Church’s discursive truth of them as different from other women.

Vita Consecrata, (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 14) reminds Nuns that they have received a special consecration “for the good of the Church”. As discussed in Chapter 3, they are represented as the public face of the Church, visible as such to the Church and the world. By positioning themselves as invisible, through either title or dress, Nuns are resisting the ambassadorial role placed on them by the Church:

If you are introduced as ‘Sister’, quite often the conversation turns around to religious kind of things and instead of people being warm with you, they kind of
think they’ve got to trot out to you, you know, why they don’t go to Church or something or guilty consciences or something, I don’t know, or ‘when I was in Year 4’ and you cop everything that has happened since. (Erica, 53)

Erica speaks of being identified as a Nun as severing her from the warmth and easy conversation of being an ordinary woman relating to others. She describes herself as having to be in the role of defender of the Church once she is identified as a Nun. In her experience, being visible as Nun positions her as Church representative rather than as woman, or any other subject position available to her such as friend, colleague or professional woman.

According to Harre & van Langenhove, (1999), when individuals position themselves within discursive frameworks, it always includes moral and personal positioning; that is to say, the more an individual's positioning cannot be made sense of by their role, the more they are ‘morally’ positioning themselves. Nuns in this study, who represent themselves primarily as ordinary women rather than as Church Nuns, also speak about being conflicted in relation to the lack of congruence between the positioning of ‘ordinary woman’ and that of ‘different woman’ who is ‘Nun’. Nancy (54) in acknowledging that she wants to be an ordinary woman, describes herself as:

… different in the sense I have different life experience, different in the sense I have more, actually, I have more, I have more personally. I have more resources compared to people who I work [among]. I’ve had an easy, lucky life, all those things, so I’m
different in that sense. I have a sense of personal power and a sense of identity and stuff that [the women I work among] don’t have because they are marginalised and all that, and I’d love them to have that. Most of the people I work with would be, would be parents, would be mothers, right, I’m different from them in the sense that I’ve never been a parent, and yet I know something about the nurturing and parenting, I have parenting skills that I can share with someone because I’ve been a teacher and I know what it means to nurture someone, and yet, I’ve not been a parent, so I’m different in that sense, but it’s about role and lifestyle, and about experience. But as a person, I’m not different in the sense that I know what it means to be angry, I know what it means to hurt, I know what it means to feel betrayed, powerless, hopeless, and I want them not to feel that I’m different on that level, I think that’s where I want to be. I’m no more special than a committed mother, or wife. (Nancy, 54)

Nancy portrays herself as having personal power and an identity as a woman. She speaks of striving to identify with ordinary women who have nurtured and parented children, by making reference to her caring for children as a teacher. Caring and nurturing are part of her experience, she says, not as a consequence of biological motherhood, but by virtue of her being woman. In claiming that she is ‘no more special than a committed mother, or wife’, Nancy resists the Church’s discursive truth of the Nun as special, different from other women, rejecting the hierarchy of lifestyles created by the Church.
Natasha (58) gives an account of resisting not only the Church’s discursive truth that the life of Nuns has an ‘objective superiority’, but she also resists the cultural representation of woman as defined by their relationship to men:

Well I wouldn’t like people to think just because I’m a Nun and that I’m not married that I’m not a woman, I do have, through my generations, I do have the capacity to be generous and to be loving, to be warm and affectionate, I’m not just a sterile kind of rigid robot. (Natasha, 58)

Natasha resists the notion of womanhood as synonymous with marriage. She describes herself as possessing qualities of generosity, warmth and loving affection not because she is a Nun, but because she is a woman who has inherited those qualities from her own family. It is her humanity, her being an ordinary woman, not her elevated status as a Nun, which she describes as saving her from becoming a ‘sterile kind of rigid robot’, a representation of Nun which, she suggests, could be a possibility.

Appearance and clothing are a part of the perception of an individual as a ‘normal’, ordinary person or not. It is forty years since Nuns in Australia and New Zealand began to modify and change their dress after Vatican II, a time described by one participant as:

… difficult years when the gap was pushed. Those first faltering steps of going into (ordinary clothes) and not having them and because we had no money and we couldn’t buy them and your family couldn’t give them to you and you felt like you
were wearing these old fashioned clothes that came from somewhere. And then coming out of the habit and having all of the physical signs too, you know, of having worn the habit and hair styles. I mean I think they were very fraught years for us as a group. (Focus Group 5)

At the time of the changes in their dress immediately after Vatican II, representing themselves as normal women was discomforting and distressing for some Nuns, even though they embraced the changes with energy (Michelman, 1999). Paradoxically, although encouraged by the Church to update their clothing, this Nun describes having no access to resources to dress herself as an ordinary woman, but having to dress in ‘old-fashioned’, cast-off clothes which set her apart as different from other women. Although the Church still expects Nuns to wear a habit or a defining symbol of their commitment (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 41), Nuns in this study speak of the liberating consequences of resisting this material practice of their lives, one stating that she ‘couldn’t wait to get back into ordinary clothes again’ (Focus Group 1) after Vatican II allowed Nuns to experiment with new forms of clothing (Abbott, 1966, p. 478). One participant, Elaine (55), recalls a particular occasion when the wearing the habit made her the target of derision:

I mean, my experience of when I wore habits in [city] at weekend schools, that I was called a prostitute, or some guy singing behind me, you know, ‘some girls do, some girls don’t’. It was just a, it was just a, I was just an item for abuse. (Elaine, 55)
While the Church describes the Nun’s habit as ‘a sign of consecration, poverty and membership in a particular Religious family’ (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 41), Elaine, whose habit signalled her as different from other women, tells of being subjected to insult, embarrassment and abuse because of it. The habit objectifies the Nun, visibly signifying her as different from ordinary women.

In examining the relationship between fashion and the identity of Nuns, Michelman, (1999, p. 173), comments that dress “has been critical in not only reflecting, but also in helping [Nuns] to construct social change”. Dressing in ways that are more like those of ordinary women liberates Nuns from constantly operating within a public role prescribed for them by the Church. One Nun in this study describes her present life as more free than it was in the past, partly because of the changed material practices around dress:

We’ve had trappings, we had trappings of clothes before, we had trappings of certain ways of being, but for me it’s been, you know, much lighter, a lot less trappings of how you should be or what I’m wearing or what I should be doing or how I should be in community, I’ve let that go, before I used to get very worked up about it, but I’m just enjoying the whole thing and going, well, just to be very more myself, I’m enjoying that. (Focus Group 1)

This participant describes herself as having been imprisoned in the past by the ‘trappings’ of clothing, behaviour and styles of living associated with being a Nun. Like
ordinary women who report experiencing an increased independence and sense of freedom in the midlife years (McQuaide, 1998b), this midlife Nun reports now ‘enjoying’ the freedom and independence that results from her resistance to the constrictive material practices of the Nun’s life. Although still a Nun, she describes herself as having resisted the Church’s regulation of the material practices of her life and its social control over her.

Another Nun in this study describes the difficulty she still experiences in confidently presenting herself as a normal woman:

There’s that too, that huge gap of being normal. I sometimes think every now and again that it affects me again. Like I never feel real confident of how I dress, like whereas I think if you go out with, this, do you know what I mean, I always think that conditioning of being anonymous, amorphous or that sort of thing, no sex, you know. (Focus Group 5)

Thinking of herself as a normal woman is still difficult for this Nun, who has spent many of her adolescent and adult years dressed as “a sign of consecration, poverty and membership in a particular Religious family” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 41). While other ordinary women may not feel confident about their dress either, they have been trained in the social practices of femininity, learning how to perform gender as woman (Butler, 1997). This Nun, however, describes being ‘conditioned’ to be anonymous as woman, unknown even to herself, nondescript, shapeless, formless; a sign, not a woman.
The internalizing of the Church’s discursive positioning of her as a ‘sign of consecration’ convinces her that in spite of wearing ordinary clothing now, she still lacks confidence in being an ordinary, ‘normal’ woman.

Nuns in this study represent themselves as ordinary women not only by dressing as ordinary women, but by choosing to live among ordinary people. Natasha (58), who lives with two companions in an ordinary house in the suburbs of a large city, describes her experience this way:

Well for the first time in my life, I felt that I was living in a home, and I loved every bit of it, I loved the housework, together we just had a whole lot of second hand stuff that had come from our convent in (place), and we loved arranging it, we loved setting out the garden, and we just felt, this is what other women do, they establish a home, and I just think it made me feel much more mainstream as a woman. I think that in our culture, in our society, people think we’re aberrations. (Natasha, 58)

Natasha describes herself as having been denied, as a Nun, access to what ‘normal’ women do, namely establish a home. She resists the discursive ‘truth’ of the Nun as a woman living in an institutional setting, communally with other women, sublimating her own desires. In resisting the Church’s construction of Nun as different from other women, she takes up the positioning of ‘normal’ woman in social discourse (Ussher, 1997), that is, the woman who belongs somewhere, who has a home which she has
helped establish, and who gains a sense of contentment from living in the home as a ‘mainstream’ woman.

Individuals not only position themselves within discursive frameworks, but they are also positioned by others (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999), resulting, in the case of some Nuns in this study, in their having to deal with conflicting emotional responses resulting from their not being seen by others as an ‘ordinary’ woman. Barbara (62), for example, describes belonging ‘anonymously’ to a yoga class where she interacts normally with the other women until her identity as a Nun becomes known and talked about in her absence. The other women express great interest in her life, which she describes as being mysterious to them:

Well the interest, I mean, it was really good, really, but they were intrigued, so from then on if there was ever a break or a bit of a rest time, somebody would always ask a religious question and then one of them especially, she got interested in why you entered and what you do in your work and I suppose because it was like a bit of a mystery, that there’s somebody around now, you know, going into a life like that. So in one sense it was good, I suppose, in another way, I was sad. I thought, a few years ago, people wouldn’t have had to kind of ask all those questions, they knew what you were representing. We’re seen as so removed, you know, yes, and I suppose I almost felt I was getting special attention once they realised who I was, that you couldn’t be just an ordinary woman like they were. (Barbara, 62)
Barbara notes with sadness the women’s ignorance of her life, noting with some nostalgia, the passing of the time when people knew what Nuns’ lives were about and what they represented. At the same time, she regrets being seen by other women as ‘removed’, resigning herself to the fact that once they knew she was a Nun, the other women would treat her differently, as if she were not an ‘ordinary’ woman as they were. ‘All those questions’ the women ask indicate her difference from them and their life experiences. Although they envisage her as different from them, she strives to be an ordinary woman as they are, resisting the focus they want to give her now that they know she is a Nun.

Some Nuns in this study, in positioning themselves as ordinary women, resist being perceived by others as the conveyers of the disciplinary gaze of the Church, vehicles of the disciplinary principle (Danaher et al., 2000; Heaton, 1999) operating throughout the Church. A work colleague of Natasha (58) tries to hide a stubby of beer from her view as work in the Catholic setting is drawing to a close on Friday afternoon:

He was trying to hide it from me and I sort of thought, I can’t stand that. As if because I’m a Nun, I disapprove of what they do on a Friday night. I couldn’t care if he was rolling drunk, it’s none of my business. You know, I hate that, I hate people putting Nuns in categories as if we don’t approve of anything.

(Natasha, 58)
Natasha resents this young man’s representation of her as conveying the disapproving, disciplinary gaze of the Church. He relates to her as a woman in role, a Church woman who must disapprove of others who overstep boundaries or fail to keep the rules. She reports this as particularly disappointing to her as she:

talk[s] to him often, like we talk about his life and his footy and his cricket and all that kind of stuff. (Natasha, 58)

Natasha describes herself as having established a friendly working relationship with him, although they have talked about his life and interests rather than hers. In being positioned by others as conveyors of the Church’s gaze, Nuns are denied the opportunity to be related to as ordinary women or even ordinary people who might like to relax with a drink themselves on a Friday night.

As they strive to represent themselves as ordinary women, Nuns have to deal with the inner conflict resulting not only from resisting the Church’s discursive truth of the Nun as needing to live a ‘superior life’, but also from being positioned by other ‘ordinary’ women as being different from them. Nuns, as ordinary women, however, are women who negotiate relationships with others outside the Church, their Orders and their communities.
6.3.2 The relating woman

The Church creates the discursive truth of the Nun as working for God and the Church with an ‘undivided heart’, demanding faithfulness to the ‘obligation of perfect continence in celibacy’ (Catholic Church, 1983, canon 599). Many Nuns in the study speak of their early training as Nuns in the 50’s and 60’s, as encompassing strong prohibitions on developing ‘particular friendships’ with anyone, even other Nuns, although none were told why particular friendships were supposed to be inherently dangerous for them. As mature women now, Nuns in this study assume that the prohibition arose either from fear of lesbianism, which, ironically, most said they had no knowledge of when they entered the Convent, or fear of sexual exploitation within the Convent, perhaps a legitimate fear given the repressed approach to sexuality and sexual identity issues in Nuns’ training (J. T. Chibnall et al., 1998). While the prohibition of ‘particular friendships’ which were said to “destroy religious life and ruin charity” (Explanation of the Rule and Constitution of the Sisters of St Joseph, in the Diocese of Maitland, 1901) was a common experience among the Nun participants, One Nun (Focus Group 5) says she “fully expect[ed] at the time to be thrown out” because of a friendship she developed with another Nun. Another participant recounts:

You got terrified if you got friends, if you got close to somebody, if you were seen being with somebody in the rare events when we did have recreation.

(Focus Group 3)
Louise (59), describes her early days as a Nun this way:

Right up until I was 18, I had been the sort of person who was encouraged to be relational, if you like, and suddenly this was chopped off. (Louise, 59)

In the process of subjectification of their training days, Nuns in this study learned to take up the positioning of the Nun as having an ‘undivided heart’ for God, another participant reflecting:

I suppose we’d been starved of any sort of relationships. (Focus Group 5)

This relational deficit has left Nuns in the past with intimacy struggles, relational inadequacies and a sense of disconnection from others (Dunn, 1993). Even today, Nuns in this study speak of the consequences of the relational deprivation of their early training days. Nel (60), for example, describes relationships as very important for her now:

[Relationship] is a priority for me as well, because I can get pulled in so many different ways but unless I have this time, and unless I am relating with people, I think that’s what’s key for me because like to me, relationships are so important because in that time of being with another person, something happens to me, but if I’m so busy at my job, which I have to constantly watch, I think I miss something. (Nel, 60)
Nel describes recognising the danger of prioritising work over relationship, but does not articulate what it is that ‘happens to [her]’, and can speak only in vague terms of what she would miss, if she were not to relate with others in friendship.

On the other hand, Agnes (61), who describes herself as having come from a very close family with lots of friends, plots her own changed positioning over time regarding friendship:

We had this no-no about having particular friendships. I didn’t articulate this to myself when I was a very young Nun but knowing myself now more that I did then, I can realise that it was all too painful to establish friendships that I was just going to have to get up and go [away from]. (Agnes, 61)

She speaks of her early years of ‘[living] for God alone’ (Abbott, 1966, p. 470) as an isolating time, not just because establishing close friendships was forbidden, but because she, like all the Nun participants, was always being moved from one posting to another. She was therefore unwilling to even try to establish friendships. In spite of the pain of having to leave friendship behind, Agnes did eventually develop some close friendships:

A: There were occasions when I did experience it too, experience the pain of having to move on.

I: What was it like?
A: Like having my teeth pulled out (pause, tearful). And so I guess I felt pretty lonely in my youth but obviously things happened for me later, and I realised that relationship was the most important thing. I came to experience it.

In their present lived experience of being Nuns, many participants tell of ways in which they are now resisting the Church’s positioning of them as having ‘undivided hearts’. As with other women who report increasing demands of dependent caring relationships, but increased valuing of supportive relationships as they mature (Howell, 2001a), Nuns in this study describe themselves as now valuing supportive relationships, relying on those relationships to sustain their lives. Emily (61), who lives with elderly, sick Nuns, describes herself as surviving in a difficult situation because of the support of her friends:

It’s going back to what really keeps me going and I think it’s friendship and love and that sort of stuff and those relationships are in that and I’ve got good friends who are prepared to walk the road and I mean that’s pretty fantastic (Emily, 61).

Nuns are giving accounts of themselves as humanised through forming friendships and developing relationships not only with other Nuns, but with those beyond the Orders and the Church. One Nun considers herself as to have developed more holistically through actively developing friendship with others:
I went overseas in my mid thirties and was away for [time period] and I was not near any other [Nuns] and it was then that I suddenly grew up and recognised what it was like to get close to people, how in some ways I had to test the waters, but in other ways it was incredibly enriching and very wholesome. So to me, that’s one of the HUGE changes. If we’d gone through in the way we were being trained, it would have been crazy. From my point of view I don’t think I would have stayed. (Focus Group 3)

This participant describes herself as ‘test[ing] the waters’ of relationship as an adult, something she recognises as part of a maturation process denied to her when she was young Nun. She describes herself as growing up by addressing her intimacy needs away from her Order, moving beyond the boundaries of the gaze of the Order and the Church. Rather than sacrificing close friendship, Kathy (62) describes the impact of relationships, both inside and outside the convent, on her life:

I sort of need relationships with people, I need to feel I belong. I get quite loyal about the groups that I am with, and I think also the fact that that’s probably why relationships are important too. I think relationships make my life feel very rich.

(Kathy, 62)

Kathy speaks of herself as a relating woman, needing friendship, needing relationships, needing to feel she belongs somewhere. She describes herself as faithful to friends; human friendship placating the loneliness inherent in the lifestyle. In
establishing and maintaining close, personal relationships, Nuns in this study have resisted the Church’s positioning of them as living with ‘undivided hearts’, and in so doing, they position themselves as healthy, normal, and even sexual women.

6.3.3 The sexual woman

Ordinary, normal women have bodies, sexual bodies. The Church presents the non-sexual, pure woman, the Virgin Mary to Nuns as the ideal model of womanhood (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 45). It positions the Nun as having sacrificed not only non-sexual relationships which could divide her heart, but her sexual desire and fulfilment as well (Abbo & Hannan, 1952; Catholic Church, 1983). Just as women resist representations of ‘ideal femininity’ in society (Burns-Ardolino, 2003), rejecting social control of their bodies through clothing (Carrel, 1999) physical appearance (Davis, 1990), and commodifying female bodies as ‘physical capital’ (Varga, 2005), so too some Nuns in this study resist the Church’s discursive truth of the non-sexual Nun.

Emily (61), for example, describes herself as attuned to her body as female and as sexual, making a connection for herself between attending to her female body and a healthy sense of herself:

I pride myself on my legs. I always wear make-up. It took me a while to be able to do that without wondering what they were thinking then I thought, no, no, this is about being feminine; it’s about your own femininity. This is me, this is how I feel. It’s a
bit like eating meat on Friday isn’t it. I’m not going to become pregnant because I’ve
got lipstick on or anything like this. I don’t want to look sort of neuter gender or
masculine, so I wear jewellery and I wear make-up and it makes me feel good and I
think it’s important to feel good. (Emily, 61)

She represents herself as resisting not only the Church’s discursive truth of the Nun
as having sacrificed bodily desires, but as resisting the critical gaze of those who
disapprove of her adorning her body as she pleases. In rebelling by decorating her body
with make-up and jewellery, Emily aligns herself with the notion of femininity as a
“spectacle, … something in which virtually every woman is required to participate”
(Bartky, 1997, p. 140). She rejects the notion of the Nun as asexual, aligning herself
with ‘normal’ women, taking up social discourse’s positioning of the adorned female
body as the standard of ideal beauty (Gillespie, 2003).

A number of Nuns in this study give accounts of involvement in sexual relationships,
a major form of resistance to the Church’s and society’s positioning of the Nun as self-
sacrificing, virginal and pure, as part of their experience of being a Nun. Living a chaste
life is described by the Church as “a way for the full realization of persons opposed to
dehumanization”, and a “powerful antidote to the pollution of spirit, life and culture”
whereby Nuns “proclaim the liberty of the children of God and the joy of living
according to the evangelical beatitudes” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 21). Far from experiencing
it as a freedom in her life, one participant, Elaine (55), enunciates the losses implicit in
living a chaste life:
I suppose the negative things would be that you don’t own anybody or anyone or anything, not that even in marriage you would own somebody. There’s not that anyone special there for you, and I guess, the loss of sort of an intimate relationship is, has been part of the deal all the way along, so it’s not, it’s just the reality of life, if you’re going to be a Nun, that’s what you, that’s what you take on. But I don’t see it as a huge sort of loss, it’s because, in another sense, you know, there are plenty of people I would count as sort of friends, or a network or support, so I don’t feel alone in that. But there’s some sense that really I don’t have a claim on anyone or anything. (Elaine 55)

Elaine describes not having a relationship with someone special or a claim on persons or things, in contractual terms, as items she has relinquished to God/Church. She speaks of the sacrificing of relationships in a perfunctory way, matter-of-factly, not seeing it as a ‘huge loss’. However, Elaine also describes having had a sexualized relationship with a man, a relationship she describes as a ‘gift’:

There’s some freedom to be myself, but I learnt that because someone loved me for who I was and when I, you know, someone fell in love with me, and I had to, sort of responded to that, and there was indiscretion and there was, you know, things that I shouldn’t have done. In fact, when I look at that bigger picture, I think of it as a gift to me, because I would never have known what it was like to be loved, or to love in a way that I know now that is free, and you know, I’m better for it, I’m much more natural and much more productive’s not a good word, but you know, in relationships
I’m much more real, and sincere and relating to men is a natural sort of experience for me. (Elaine 55)

Although she still takes up the Church’s construction of Nun as a woman with an undivided heart, Elaine describes sexual experience in her own life as a Nun:

I wasn’t prepared for it, no, it was like…it was a bit like denial stuff, or shock. I wasn’t horrified, but I was thinking, oh, you know, this is quite lovely, I’m sure I’m not supposed to be in this (laughter) but I am, and I was certainly, oh, I was wrought with anguish. (Elaine 55)

In experiencing a sexual relationship with a man, Elaine describes herself as a woman newly exploring her sexuality, and enjoying the discovery. However, she must also deal with conflicted emotions. On the one hand, she enjoys the sexual experience, the physical and psychological attention and affection denied to Nuns, but at the same time she is ‘wrought with anguish’, guilty in the knowledge of that what she is experiencing and freely choosing is in conflict with the Church’s positioning of her as pure and virginal. She goes on further to say:

But I think there was a sense of, of guilt, I suppose and also the sense of well, if I had the opportunity, I’d probably do it again. (laughter) and the sense that this had been better for me and I’ll be better for it, but it was also drew me into a decision, that
probably three years it took, to saying my place is here, not with someone who thinks I’m, you know, I’m very vulnerable. (Elaine, 55)

Unrepentant about her experience, she now represents herself as more knowledgeable, a better person for the relational experience, but now aware of her vulnerability in the Church’s positioning of her as virginal and innocent. She describes having experienced a new sense of herself as loveable and ‘sincere’ and a new freedom in relating to other people, insights into her relating self which she says had been previously unavailable in her experience of being a Nun.

Chloe (54) also describes an experience of falling in love with a man while she was studying overseas, developing a ‘wonderful relationship’ with him. She describes having been freed by this experience of discovering another self in her experience of loving a man:

I think it was like freeing, really, I think that was my part of it, because I was away for so long, like nobody knew me, so old expectations of having to perform and all that was gone. (Chloe 54)

Away from the disciplinary gaze of the Order and the Church, Chloe finds a freedom in resisting the notion of the Nun as performing the role of the asexual woman, but the consequences of resisting this notion were also painful for her:
I used to fantasize, imagine if I left (the Order) and we got married and we’d go. I’d have to go and live [overseas], and I’d start doing all. There’s no way that’s me, it’s not. Like it hurts, I can still feel that loss but it’s just not me. (Chloe 54)

Though having sacrificed her life for God and the Church, Chloe tells of not being prepared or able to sacrificing her life as a Nun for a man she loves. This is not Chloe’s first experience of relating as a sexual woman:

I’ve had myself embroiled in emotional relationships which kind of lost the appropriate boundaries and all of that, you know, a few times, and as I kind of worked through that, which I have done, always at the bottom of that I knew that this is where I wanted to be, you know, the kind of growth and all of that.

(Chloe, 54)

Chloe speaks of other relationships and experiences of herself as a sexual woman in a disembodied way, as if she were two selves, one the docile Nun, the Institutional Self of Chapter 5, and the other the sexual woman self who cannot escape being ‘embroiled’ in relationships which take her outside the boundaries of the Church’s constructions of the good Nun. Chloe does not see her relationship experiences, which she hints are numerous, as testing her will to remain a Nun, but rather as situations to be ‘work[ed] through’, normalising sexual experiences as part of her positioning as Nun as an Individuated Self.
Resisting the Church’s construction of the pure, virginal Nun, different from other women, can have consequences which leave Nuns feeling shamed, diminished and burdened with an overwhelming sense of moral bankruptcy. Examining classical representations of virginity Foskett, (2002), notes that “the virgin stands continually poised on the brink of moral excellence and moral decay”, since loss of virginity represents impurity and decay. Even more so is the virginal woman positioned as impure and degraded by both the Church (Catholic Church, 1995; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986, para 3) and society (Ussher, 1997) if she engages in a relationship with another woman. One of a small number of participants who gave accounts of experiencing sexual relationships with women, Elizabeth (53), in speaking of her relationship with another Nun, describes her experience of resisting the Church’s discursive truth of the Nun as one who has sacrificed intimate relationships:

I had a love affair and it was a really problematic love affair because it was with a [Nun in another Order]. It was full of trauma and distress in all kinds of ways. I found myself on a huge, a huge guilt roller-coaster because the language of the [Church] said I was very, very bad, very, very bad, and in fact the language of the [Church] told me that God hated me and I believed that for a long time and I tried to live through it and it was very destructive. (Elizabeth, 53)

Elizabeth describes herself as having been traumatised and ridden with guilt not only because of having had sexual experience as a Nun, but because hers was a lesbian sexual experience. Within the Church’s discursive regime of truth, sexual love between women
is described as an abomination. The Church states unequivocally, “although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986, para 3). Elizabeth describes feeling despised by God primarily because of her lesbian sexual experience, but at the same time, reflects on this lesbian sexual experience as an intrinsic element in her sexual maturation:

Any experience that people have had that has enabled them to come to their own sexual maturity and ease around their own sexuality has of necessity has been outside, outside the parameters and therefore it’s deviant. And the problem is therefore, how do you have a conversation around this without people revealing their deviance to one another? (Elizabeth, 53)

Elizabeth speaks of herself as silenced in the space between normality and what the Church describes as deviance. She describes herself as unable or unwilling to speak openly about sexuality and sexual experience, since sexual experience for Nuns is ‘outside the parameters’, outside of the Church’s positioning of the Nun as a woman who must sacrifice strong and sexual relationships. Although she speaks of her experience as significant in developing her own sexual identity, Elizabeth is unable to talk about her experience with other Nuns, which leaves her feeling isolated from them. However, Elizabeth eventually comes to understand that she is not alone in her lesbian sexual experience:
And of course one of the other things that came to me was to realise that the experience that I’ve been through, a lot of people have been through. I thought I was the only person on the planet in this particular relationship experience, which again made me feel massively isolated. I just, I just couldn’t, I just thought, I am the only person who is as bad as this. (Elizabeth, 53)

The Church describes any difficulties a Nun may encounter in her life as challenges which authenticate her call to be a Nun (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 21) One of the ‘difficulties’ encountered by Elizabeth involves her having to negotiate an illicit sexual relationship with another Nun. Rather than authenticating her call to be a Nun, she gives an account of this difficulty as leaving her feeling ‘massively isolated’, and with a sense of herself as morally bad, unworthy of God’s love. In comparing herself negatively with other Nuns in relation to her ‘deviant’ behaviour, Elizabeth’s account demonstrates “the starkest aspect of panoptical power as it involves a belief that: I alone have failed at this particular thing; that there is something wrong with me; that the shame of knowing this puts a barrier between me and others” (O'Grady, 2005, p. 35). The road to sexual maturity for Nuns is a silent, dangerous path, one they will negotiate alone, since they are not supposed to negotiate it at all.

Another Nun describes the process of both losing and finding herself in a long, close relationship with a woman who was not a Nun. Juanita (59) says of her relationship:
I was in a relationship that wasn’t very wholesome, and I felt as if I lost myself because this other person was very dominant. [The relationship] would have been strong for about fifteen [years], except for about four. It wasn’t difficult because of living close by, like for that time I was living in [the same area], so it was possible, that’s how it was. It was possible to relate intimately with her. (Juanita 59)

Though involved in a strong relationship with her woman friend for many years, Juanita describes herself as being in an unwholesome relationship, not because of its being outside of the Church’s positioning of the Nun as non-sexual, but because her friend began to control her life. As the relationship became long-term, Juanita describes coming to a realisation of the impact of this relationship on her sense of herself:

Towards the end, it was not how I, yeah, we started to fight more and I could kind of see what I was struggling about. But it certainly took a lot of confidence out of me and I felt as if I could not relate well with anybody again. (Juanita 59)

In spite of this negative experience of a long-term, intimate relationship on her confidence, Juanita says she was able to learn from this experience in initiating close relationships with others.

Then, after about eighteen months, I moved around a bit and I went [to place] for a sabbatical, and that was really good for me because then I found that I could relate well and I could love someone again, or I can be friend to someone, I can be a good
friend and they can be my good friend, so that restored some confidence, and then I suppose it was that, a stepping stone. (Juanita 59)

In the freedom of being away from the disciplinary gaze of the Church/Order, Juanita experiments anew with loving and relating closely with others. She gives an account of having learnt something valuable and empowering about herself in this new experience, her confidence in herself as loving and loveable restored in a world outside the framework of the Church.

Through resistance, individuals rebel against ways in which they are defined within discourse (Tracy, 2005). Within wider social discourse, where female desire is suppressed by patriarchal institutions, feminism continues to focus on sexual agency as a means of resisting dominant ‘truths’ of female identity (McCarthy, 2006). Ordinary women have to negotiate a cultural context which “denies female sexual desire or acknowledges it only to denigrate it, suppressing women's voices” (Tolman, 2003, p. 101). Even motherhood, “must be separated from [woman’s] sexuality, her desire … because this is a need, a want, and she cannot be perfectly giving if she is wanting or selfish” (Young, 2003, p. 159). Within the patriarchal context of the Church, the Nun negotiating her sexual needs and desires is doubly damned, damned as Nun and damned as woman.

In resisting the Church’s discursive truth of the Nun as different from ordinary, ‘normal’ women in having ‘undivided hearts’ which are to be focused on God alone,
Many Nuns in this study give accounts of negotiating strong, long-term and/or sexual relationships with both men and women. While negotiating the enriching but isolating consequences for them of such positioning, the Nun functioning as the Individuated Self positions herself as exercising personal agency, acting autonomously and functioning as an ordinary, relating and sexual woman.
6.4 The Insider’s Voice

I enjoyed gathering data, analysing and writing this Chapter. The resisting, individuated Nun is energised, deeply motivated still by one of the core elements of our lives, working for the poor and disadvantaged. Some of the writing on Religious Life of recent years has criticised a perceived ‘individualism’ creeping into Nuns’ lives. Indeed, I’ve heard a commentator refer to ‘rampant individualism’ in Nuns as destroying Religious Life, in her view.

I sense that some of the Nuns I’ve interviewed are living and working in isolated places because it’s the only way to legitimate a living situation that is conducive to good mental health. It’s like a commitment to getting one’s legitimate needs met. This form of resistance to communal living which is supposed to be about supporting each other, living happily in peace, comes at a personal price. Loneliness, lack of support, and lack of meaning in life are bartered for some space for oneself, privacy and at least some control over one’s life, one’s relationships, one’s finances and one’s independence.

Is this the ultimate resistance to the constraints of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience? Living with other Nuns has an surveillance. Others know, in general terms, whether one is in or out, who one’s friends and acquaintances are, and how money is spent. Many of the Nuns interviewed have mentioned control over personal finance and money as one of the benefits of living alone. Living alone is considered normal in some Orders, and in some Orders many or most Nuns do live alone. But in other Orders still,
there is a stigma attached to living alone, the stigma of being difficult to live with or even having a personality disorder. The most common way in which living alone is legitimised is for reasons of ‘ministry’. This covers a multitude of situations, and is more easily acceptable if the ministry is located in isolated places, or if the Order does not have the personnel to send other Nuns to live in the place of ministry and create a community.

Why is there resistance in some Orders to the notion of living alone? Although the high financial cost to the order of Nuns living alone is often cited as the reason not to support it, it’s possible that living alone raises other issues which have not been traditionally embraced within women’s Religious Orders, such as Nuns’ personal and human rights, their capacity to organise their own lives, their being trusted with managing their own lives outside the community. Living alone legitimates one’s taking control one’s life and commitment. Are Nuns taking up the living alone option to rid themselves of surveillance? Is it possible to be free of surveillance or is it so internalised that Nuns can never be free of it? Some of the Nuns talk about having to report all their financial transactions, even the most minute, to the Head House still. Is money the last disciplinary technique of the surveillance for all Nuns, particularly those living alone?
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Using a Foucauldian and feminist approach this thesis has identified and analysed the Catholic Church’s dominant discursive constructions of ‘Nun’ and explored the subjective negotiation of such constructions in a sample of Nuns in Australia/New Zealand. In the first part of the study, six key Church documents relating to the lives of Nuns were analysed to identify dominant Church constructions of Nun, while in the second part of this study, data from individual and focus group interviews of 43 Nuns was analysed to examine ways in which Nuns in this sample take up and resist such discursive constructions in their experience of being Nuns.

7.1 Summary of findings

According to Foucault, institutions create truths (Foucault, 1979) which function to define and regulate the lives of individuals within them (Danaher et al., 2000). Rose (1996) argues that individuals exist as an effect of the process of subjectification, and that such processes operating within religion compel individuals “to become ethical beings, to define and regulate themselves according to a moral code, to establish precepts for conducting or judging their lives, to reject or accept moral goals” (Rose, 1996, p. 157). In Foucauldian terms, the Nun exists in Church discourse as a product of the process of subjectification of the Novitiate or training period, the time when she is shaped as a particular kind of woman who is a Nun. An analysis of six key Church texts, written or authorised by the Pope, the highest authority in the Catholic Church, and relating to the lives of Religious women and men, identified three dominant discursive
truths produced by the Church in relation to the lives of Nuns, namely, the Nun as called by God, to sacrifice her life, and work for the Church. It is the call by God which marks the woman’s identity as Nun and which demands of her a faithfulness to that call for the whole of her life. In sacrificing her life she gives her total self over to God and to the Church which regulates her life through material practices related to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, as well as those related to communal living and dress. In working for the Church, she is submissive to its authoritative gaze and engaged in its mission.

Interview data from 21 individual interviews and 5 focus groups was analysed so as to identify ways in which Nuns in this sample take up and resist the Church’s discursive constructions of Nun. Participants taking up the Church’s constructions of the Nun are identified in this thesis as functioning as the Institutional Self, the Nun who is holy and self-sacrificing, the “docile” body “that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, 1979, p. 136) by the Church. The Nun taking up such positioning is loyal to the Church and a vehicle of the Church’s authoritative and disciplining gaze to others both within and beyond the Church. Working for the Church, she herself is submissive to its regulating gaze as she engages in its mission. Many participants in this study spoke of their lives and work as a response to a call by God, a call which they say is still active in their lives. They not only gave accounts which positioned their minds and hearts as faithful to respond to a call to sacrifice their lives and work for the Church, but also their bodies as well. Of the total number of participants, 19% were working in situations where they were officially representing the Church, and in some of those
cases, the participant was the only official Church person in a geographically isolated area. Although taking up the position of the faithful Church worker, sacrificing herself in following her continuing call from God, many of these Nuns spoke of loneliness, frustration and lack of support as consequences of representing the public face of the Church. In so doing, they “[confirm] the truth that dedication to the point of heroism belongs to the prophetic nature of the consecrated life” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 153).

Analysis of interview data also revealed that Nuns in this study are resisting the Church’s discursive truths for their lives, taking up a position which is described in this thesis as that of the Individuated Self. They gave accounts of themselves as exercising personal agency, sometimes identifying their own as well as their Order’s resistance to the Church’s notions of what it is to be ‘Nun’. The Church speaks of the Nun’s life as “a special path to holiness … the way or state of perfection” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 60), and requires her to either “wear [her] proper habit” or “dress in a simple and modest manner, with an appropriate symbol, in such a way that [her] consecration is recognizable” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 41), thus representing her as different from other women. Participants in this study spoke of themselves as not wanting to be different, but of wanting to be normal, relating and at times sexual women living and working among people in broader society. However, rather than functioning exclusively as either the Institutional Self or the Individuated Self, Nuns in this sample give accounts of using “strategies of compliance and resistance to participate in a complex web of power relationships in which they are imbricated” (English, 2006, p. 99),
constantly negotiating their positioning within Church discourse, being neither wholly docile nor wholly resistant in their lived experience of being Nuns.

In such constant negotiation of subjective positioning, and in particular through taking up the position of resistance (Weedon, 1997), lies the possibility of new ‘truths’ emerging about what it is to be ‘Nun’, signalling a change in “consciousness … which is accomplished as a result of the contradictions in our positioning, desires and practices – and thus in our subjectivities – which result from the coexistence of the old and the new” (Henriques et al., 2002, pp. 430-431). New truths about being ‘Nun’ emerged in this study. While the Church has created the truth that the Nun is called and set apart by God to live a life which “is a special following of Christ,” (CICLSAL, 2002, p. 38), many Nuns in this study spoke of their desire to be normal women, to live among ordinary people, and to be seen as women living a different lifestyle, but not intrinsically different from other women.

In requiring that Nuns “are to live in their own religious house” (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 665), the Church creates the truth that they live communally in a convent. Of the participants in this study, 49% of participants lived singly, and many spoke of others in their Orders who do also, while one reported that most Nuns in her Order live alone. The participants who lived singly, outside the convent and beyond the disciplinary gaze of the Church and their Orders, gave accounts of experiencing increasing autonomy in their lives, relationships and finances, even though they also reported dealing with isolation and loneliness at times. Of the 51% of the participants
who lived communally with others, 7% were living with people who were not Nuns, and in two of these cases, with women and men who were not necessarily Catholic. While the notion of “observing common life” (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 665), whereby the Nun lives communally with other Nuns, remains one of the Church’s important material practices for her life, a new truth is emerging in relation to this practice as Nuns create communal living with others who, in some cases, are not even members of the Church.

While still describing themselves as dedicated to working for the poor and marginalised, Nuns in the study spoke of increasingly doing so beyond the institution of a Church which expects them to “realize that they are committed to her service” (Abbott, 1966, p. 470). Most participants, when referring to the Church, differentiated between what they called the ‘official’ Church and the community of believers operating at the grass roots, with whom they identified. Some participants who still work within the Church, described their distress in working for an institution whose practices, values and beliefs they no longer held as their own, in spite of the Church’s expectation that Nuns are to serve the Church and are “bound to obey the [Pope] as their highest superior by reason of the sacred bond of obedience” (Catholic Church, 1983, Canon 590). These participants spoke of alienation and disconnection from the Church. Many participants also gave accounts of resisting the Church’s notion of the Nun as loving God and serving the Church with an “undivided heart” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 190.) They spoke of being involved in close relationships, of experiencing sexual relationships with
women and men and of being enriched by these relationships, learning more about themselves as embodied women in so doing.

The Nun is still defined and regulated by and within the Catholic Church, but many Nuns in this Australia/New Zealand sample have positioned themselves as detached from the Church, alienated by the Church, and resistant to its regulation of their lives. In such resistance, new ‘truths’ of what it is to be ‘Nun’ emerge. There are implications in the findings of this study for Orders, for Nuns themselves and for young Catholic women.

7.2 Implications of findings

In this study, Nuns gave accounts of taking up social discourse’s material practices for women, such as establishing their own homes, seeking and expressing relational intimacy, and making choices about work and religious practice, thereby resisting the construction of the Nun as totally self-sacrificing. There are challenges here for leadership in Orders, some of whom participated in this study, particularly the issue of how leadership in Orders can support and encourage individual Nuns resisting the Church’s discursive truths and material practices for their lives. If new truths are to emerge, new paradigms of Religious Life to be explored (O'Murchu, 2005), new forms of Religious Life created (Casey, 2001), resistance must be embraced, not merely tolerated or outlawed in Orders or the Church. In spite of the fact that “the approval of new forms of consecrated life is reserved only to [the Church]” (Catholic Church, 1983,
Canon 605), Orders themselves and individual Nuns within them can affect the revitalisation of their own lives and continue to believe that their lives as Nuns are meaningful. However, revitalisation of Orders and the creation of new truths about Nuns may not, in themselves, address other issues facing Orders of Nuns in the Western world today.

It is evident from demographic research (Leavey & O’Neill, 1996; McLean, 2003; A. J. Mills & Ryan, 2001) that membership of Religious Orders in the Western world is falling due to the ageing of members and the inability of Orders to attract or recruit new members (Zajac, 1999), leading one Australian Nun researcher to pose the question, "has the long historical evolution of familiar religious-life forms reached a final shore" (MacGinley, 2002, p. 341). As discussed in this thesis, the Church discursively constructs the Nun as a woman called by God to sacrifice her whole life and work for the Church. In today’s secular culture, where belief in organised religion and the external practice of religious belief appear to be in decline, it is less likely that young women will believe in or attend to a call to dedicate her life to God if being ‘Nun’ continues to be constructed and regulated by the Church in such a manner. There are substantial costs and limited gains for a woman in sacrificing independence, financial independence and sexual intimacy to become a Nun today (Ebaugh, 1993; Stark & Finke, 2000), particularly when Orders in the affluent Western world, are ageing and diminishing. For any young women who do apply to become Nuns today, training programs should pay attention to helping them deal with the dissonance existing between the Church’s discursive truths and material practices for Nuns’ lives, and the
creation of new truths by Nuns who take up positions of resistance to the Church’s notions of what it is to be ‘Nun’.

In previous generations, as in countries like China today (Leung & Wittberg, 2004), the Nun’s life offered a possibility of education, a ‘career’, travel and religious status when the ‘norm’ laid down for women by social discourse (M. M. Gergen & Gergen, 1993) as well as Church discourse (O’Brien, 2005), was marriage and family. Today, while such possibilities still exist for Nuns, and were reported by most of the Nuns in this study as part of their experience, opportunities to work for the Church in education, health and social welfare, are readily available to women in Western society. The emergence of what Lerner calls “feminist consciousness” has empowered women to “provide an alternate vision of societal organization in which [they] as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self-determination” (Lerner, 1993, p. 14). Women no longer need to sacrifice independence, financial autonomy and sexual fulfillment as Nuns to take up opportunities for education, travel and status in society. Furthermore, Nuns’ lives are regulated by a patriarchal institution which denies them institutional authority and privileges men over women, leading to the view that there exists among Nuns a “profound crisis of meaning as [they] attempt to find their way in a Church dominated by men and a culture of masculinity” (A. J. Mills & Ryan, 2001, p. 75). In this present study, participants gave accounts of believing in the intrinsic meaning of their own lives as Nuns, particularly in working for the poor and experiencing female solidarity within their Orders, however many struggled to identify how their lives have meaning and recognition in the context of the male-dominated institution of the Church.
It has been suggested that in order to redress the problem of the decline in admissions to Orders, Nuns should “cast off the stereotype of the humble, obedient woman whose loyalty is too easily identified with passive fidelity” (O'Murchu, 2005, p. 116). In this thesis it is argued that Nuns are not merely functioning with ‘passive fidelity’. They gave accounts of active fidelity to being a Nun, not abandoning stereotypes, but actively creating new truths of what it is to be ‘Nun’ by exercising personal autonomy, working beyond the institution of the Church and functioning as normal women. Others commentators on Religious Life speak of the need for Nuns to engage in personal conversion processes to reinvigorate their lives (A. Carey, 1997), to rebuild their communal life (Schneiders, 2001), or to create new paradigms for their lives (O'Murchu, 2005). However, the Church’s dominant constructions of Nun identified in this thesis run counter to the representations and experiences of women in the 21st Century. A life of self-sacrifice, directed towards working for a patriarchal institution is unlikely to be attractive or acceptable to young women immersed in a social culture where exercising personal freedom, amassing and enjoying material possessions, and expressing sexuality through experiencing personal relationships, antithetical to the Church’s constructions of what it is to be a Nun, are valued and considered normal.

As noted in Chapter 2, previous studies have identified significant mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, depression and loss of meaning as experienced by Nuns (Chibnall, 1998; Meiring, 1985; Kenel, 1998). This present study uncovers similar themes of distress in Nuns in this sample, as it explores accounts of their experiences as
Nuns which are at times stark, disturbing and confronting. Here too are accounts of isolation, lack of support, loneliness and a search for meaning and relevance both personally and within the Church. In spite of the beneficial impact of the feminist movement for women in society in general, women who are Nuns are still locked within the Church’s representations of them as docile servants of the male institution. Their accounts represent them as women struggling for emancipation, but denied by virtue of their gender alone, their right to participate equally and fully with men in the authority structures and worship functions of the Church.

7.3 Limitations and future research

This study aimed to identify the dominant discursive constructions of Nun in the Catholic Church and the ways in which a sample of Nuns in Australia/New Zealand negotiate such constructions in their experience of being Nuns, questions previously unaddressed in research on Nuns. In the presentation of its findings, however, it does not generalise for all Nuns or even for all Nuns in Australia/New Zealand.

The target sample was limited to Nuns in Apostolic Orders in Australia/New Zealand whose members engage actively with broader society through their living and their work. There are other Orders of Nuns both in Australia/New Zealand and world-wide, such as the Benedictines, the Poor Clares, and the Carmelites, known as ‘enclosed’ or ‘contemplative’ Orders, who are remote from society, who interact in limited ways with the world, and whose members rarely leave their convents to engage with the world.
outside their enclosure. Further research on Nuns could target this particular cohort to examine how Nuns negotiate subjectivity in a context where they have less freedom to interact with and be influenced by social discourse. Such future research could examine ways in which contemplative Nuns negotiate subjectivity, exploring the consequences of taking up notions of what it is to be a contemplative Nun, as well as whether resistance exists in such a closed and controlled environment and if it does, what form it takes.

The study employed qualitative methodology in which Nuns were able to tell their own stories and give their own accounts of their experience in situations designed to facilitate this process. The sample was large for a qualitative study, including focus groups as well as individual interviews. Future studies on Nuns could employ different methodological tools, such as case studies, to explore the negotiation of subjectivity in greater depth with individual Nuns, or some of the themes which have emerged in this study. Nuns are not a homogenous group of women. Some Nuns in this sample live in urban areas where they have access to a broad range of social, cultural, health and educational opportunities. Others live and work in urban areas, some very remote from big cities, where such opportunities are limited or non-existent. Another interesting avenue for study would be to explore particular ways in which Nuns in such contrasting living and working settings negotiate the regulation of their lives by the Church.

In some previous research, Nun participants were selected directly by the Superiors of their Orders (Gallivan, 1994; Meiring, 1985; Stuber, 2000) who nominated individuals to participate. The present study adopted selection procedures whereby Nuns
were notified of the study through the administration offices of the 29 Orders who had contributed funds or in-kind support to the researcher’s scholarship. Nuns were invited to self-select for the research. The self-selection procedure was adopted so as to eliminate the possibility of the Superiors exercising a controlling function over possible participants. Even so, two Superiors contacted the researcher, one refusing to disseminate the information about the research, and the other raising fears that a dissenting voice among her Order’s Nuns would self-select. Future research on Nuns would also need to address sample selection procedures for a group of women whose freedom to respond can be limited by Superiors adopting the role of gate-keeper. So as to attract a diverse sample both in terms of Orders and geography, snowballing techniques were not used in this study, though future studies could do so.

Possibly the ultimate form of resistance for the Nun is to leave the convent. Future research could examine more closely the negotiation of the resistant positioning in women who left the convent but stayed in the Church, and how these ex-Nuns negotiated the consequences of such significant resistance to the Church’s notion that the Nun must be “committed to faithfulness” (Pope John Paul II, 1996, p. 113) for the whole of her life. There is room also for a companion study which explores ways in which religious men, known as ‘Brothers’ in the Catholic Church, position themselves in relation to the Church’s discursive constructions and material practices for their lives. Religious Brothers, unlike priests, live the Religious Life, take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and usually live communally. The documents referred to in this study are directed for the most part at Nuns and Brothers. Like Nuns, Brothers are not part of the
structure of the Church’s hierarchy, and in Australia at least, Brothers have traditionally lived in large cities or major regional centres. Unlike Orders of Nuns in Australia/New Zealand, there are no Orders of Brothers which were founded locally, and hence religious Brothers typically belong to large international Orders which have substantial international and local resources to provide their members with access to education and travel. Whereas this present study examined the Church documents as read and taken up by Nuns, a study of the Church texts as taken up and read by men could examine issues such as how Brothers take up the Church’s notions of what it is to be ‘Brother’, what the consequences are for men who take up the subjective position of the ‘good Brother’, and what shape resistance takes in men whose lives are regulated by the patriarchal institution of the Church. In an institution where male is privileged over female, research on men’s Orders could examine what material practices are taken up or resisted by individuals Brothers in men’s Orders, and what new ‘truths’ for their lives are emerging from the particular forms of resistance taken up by men.

This study was conducted by a researcher who is herself a Nun, and is therefore “temporarily and precariously positioned within a continuum” (Eppley, 2006, para 4), in this case, on the one hand embedded in the research as an “invested participant” (Bolam et al., 2003, para 20), and on the other external to it as the researcher. The advantages of being an ‘invested participant’ in this study include that the researcher had a knowledge of the sub-culture of Religious Life, that she understood the language, material practices and the concerns which relate to the lives of Nuns. The researcher had relatively easy access to the participants and their Orders. Some of the Nuns in this study were known
to the researcher; three were from her own Order. However being centrally positioned within the research (Chamberlain, 2004) had disadvantages as well in that the researcher could have superimposed generalised knowledges of the Nun’s life onto particular lived experiences of individual Nuns, and may have lost sight of how her own "thoughts, feelings, culture, environment and social and personal history inform [her]" (Etherington, 2004, p. 32) in relation to the research. Values, ideas, and assumptions about the world of Nuns, shaped by this researcher’s own involvement in that world, as well as by what she brought to and took away from the research, have been explored and described in the thesis through a process of personal and epistemological reflexivity at the end of each Chapter. Research on Nuns by non-Nun researchers or by co-researchers, one of whom is a non-Nun may well elicit different data in interviews and bring a different perspective to the analysis of that data.

Gendered subjectivity and ways in which women who are Nuns negotiate the construction and regulation of their lives within the patriarchal institution of the Catholic Church was examined in this study. Future research could focus on Nuns in other religious traditions both Christian such as Anglican Nuns, and non-Christian such as Buddhist Nuns, examining discursive truths and material practices of their lives and how these Nuns negotiate subjectivity within different, though highly regulated patriarchal frameworks. In the light of the discussion above concerning the diminishment in the number of young women becoming Nuns in the Western world today, it would also be interesting to explore Catholic parents’ hopes and aspirations for their daughters, to
examine whether in the world of the 21st Century, they regard becoming a Nun as a worthwhile option for their daughters.

7.4 Summary

In conclusion then, this study identifies three dominant discursive constructions of Nun located within key Church texts relating to their lives, that is, the Nun is a woman called by God, to sacrifice her life and work for the Church. In the negotiation of these discursive constructions of their lives, Nuns in the study’s sample, adopt a fluid positioning as Nun. While it is clear that for Nuns, subjectivity is shaped by the Church’s constructions of them, Nuns in this sample continue to shape and negotiate subjectivity in their lived experience of being Nuns. They give accounts of functioning both as Institutional Self and as Individuated Self, not exclusively functioning as one or the other. It is in the fluid positioning, in the taking up as well as the resistance to the Church’s representation of them as called by God to sacrifice their lives and work for the Church, and the tensions inherent in the negotiation of such positioning, that the subjectivity of Nuns in this sample continues to be shaped.

The Church’s discursive truths of what it is to be Nun, learnt by Nuns during the process of subjectification of the Novitiate or training process, continue to be taken up by Nuns in this sample. Functioning as the Institutional Self, they continue to position themselves as docile Church women, loyal to the Church and its mission. However, Nuns in this study also resist the Church’s truths and material practices for their lives. In
so doing they function as the Individuated Self, a self refusing to be regulated by the Church’s discursive truths and material practices for her life, thereby contributing to the creation of new discursive truths of the Nun as autonomous woman who exercises personal agency in her life as she continues to work for the poor and the marginalised in the world.
APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Apostolic Order**: An apostolic Order is a collective group which is ‘active’ in the world, that is, which lives and works in the world, as opposed to the Contemplative Orders, such as the Carmelites, who lives their lives withdrawn from the world.

**Chapter**: The gathering of elected representatives of the Order every 4-6 years to discuss important issues and to elect leadership for the period until the next Chapter.

**Charism**: A particular spirit or guiding values of a Religious Order, evident in the intentions and purpose of the founder, such as hospitality, poverty, humility or care for the poor.

**Community**: Refers to either the whole Order or to a local group of Nuns living together. Even two Nuns living together are referred to as a ‘community’.

**Consecrated Life**: The Church term, first used in the Revised Code of Canon Law (Catholic Church, 1983), for Religious Life, the life lived by Nuns in the Church.

**Evangelical Counsels**: A term from Canon Law referring to the vows taken by Nuns. The vows are said to be based on the example set by Jesus in the Gospels, and hence are ‘evangelical’.
**Final vows:** Immediately after the training process, the Nun takes vows for a limited period of time up to nine years. These vows are known colloquially as ‘temporary vows’ or ‘first vows’. At the end of the period of ‘temporary profession’, the Nun publicly takes the vows for her whole life. This final profession is referred to colloquially by some Nuns as their ‘finals’.

**Habit:** The official, uniform, distinctive dress of Nuns

**Liturgy:** Rituals for prayer, such as Mass, and official celebrations in the Church.

**Ministry:** Officially the Church uses the term to apply only to priests, but ‘ministry is commonly used by Nuns to refer to their work for or beyond the Church.

**Nun:** Although there is a technical difference in Canon Law between ‘Nun’ and ‘Religious Sister’, this thesis uses the term ‘Nun’ to denote Religious Women who belong to Apostolic Orders.

**Order:** This term refers to a collective group or ‘brand’ of Nuns, eg Sisters of St Joseph, Sisters of Mercy, etc. The term covers groups known in Canon Law as Orders, Congregations and Provinces.
**Parish:** The wider community of Catholics in a particular geographical region.

The parish consists of priest/s and people. Catholics usually worship in their parish church.

**Religious Life:** The way of life or vocation to which a Nun is said to be called by God

**Retreat:** A short period of time (7 – 10 days) spent each year in prayer and reflection.

The Church requires Nuns to ‘make a retreat’ every year.

‘**Sister**’: The title by which Nuns are referred to in the Church; in some Orders, Nuns still address each other as ‘Sister’.

**Superior:** A term from Canon Law which denotes the Nun who is elected or appointed to be in charge of an Order, a region, or a local community of Nuns. Most Orders now refer to the Order’s Superior as the Congregational or Province Leader.

**Virgin Mary:** The mother of Jesus, whom Catholics believe to be the mother of God

**Vocation:** A call by God to a particular way of life, such as marriage, Religious Life or single life. Before Vatican II this term was used exclusively for Religious Life
Vows: The vow is a solemn, public promise made to God. Most Nuns take three vows, namely chastity (celibacy), poverty and obedience. In some Orders, the Nun takes a fourth vow such as stability or working for the poor. In other Orders, Nuns take just one vow, obedience, which is interpreted as including poverty and obedience.
Dear

I’m contacting you about my doctoral research project on Australia/New Zealand Nuns. Last year I received support for the project from you and your Order. I’m now at the stage of looking for participants for the project and to that end, am attaching formal letter to you and an information sheet which I’m asking if you would disseminate to the Sisters.
Dear

Thank you for your interest in the research study: Discursive constructions of nuns in Australasia.

Enclosed you will find an Information Sheet explaining what the study is about, who is involved, and who you can contact for more information.

Also, there is a form for you to sign to say you understand about the study and are willing to be involved. This is called the Consent Form and it is necessary for you to sign this and return it with the enclosed questionnaires. I have also included a Contact Details form for you to complete so that I can contact you to arrange a time for a personal or group interview.

Please fill in the demographic questionnaire and then return it with the signed Consent Form in the Reply Paid Envelope. If you can be interviewed personally or you would like to be involved in a group interview, please remember to indicate this on the Contact Details form and include it in the reply paid envelope.

If you have any queries at all or are uncertain about the questionnaires, please do not hesitate to telephone me on 0402 889 791 or (02) 97478984 or by email on mpbrock@tpg.com.au

Thanking you,

Yours sincerely,

Megan Brock rsj
Gender, Culture & Health Research Unit: PsyHealth
School of Psychology
University of Western Sydney
Locked Bag 1797
Penrith South DC NSW 1797
Australia
tel: +612 9772 6730
INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

This study is being conducted by Megan Brock who is a PhD student in the School of Psychology, University of Western Sydney. The doctoral project is being supervised by Professor Jane Ussher (Ph: (02) 9772 6720; j.ussher@uws.edu.au and Dr Janette Perz (Ph: (02) 9772 6593; j.perz@uws.edu.au).

This is a study exploring the relationship between constructions of Nun in the Church and individual Nuns’ negotiation of such constructions in their lived experience of being a nun. For the purposes of the study, the term ‘Nun’ is being used to refer to vowed Apostolic Religious Sisters.

Volunteers from Australia and New Zealand are being sought to participate in the study. Nuns who are between the ages of 40-65 years will be interviewed individually or will be asked to volunteer to participate in a group conversation about their experience of being a nun. Individual interviews will be conducted by Megan Brock rsj and will take approximately 60 minutes.

Interviews and group conversations will be conducted at a venue and a time convenient to participants either in Australia or New Zealand. This study is entirely voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any point without giving a reason. Any information collected is confidential; participants will not be identified by name in the files or in any future publication of the results.

If you would like to participate in or know more about this study please contact Megan Brock on [61 2] 9747 8984 or 0402 889 791 or by email: mbrock@tpg.com.au.

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Ethics Review Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Co-ordinator (tel: 02 4570 1136). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

CONSENT FORM

I, _________________________________ (name), have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet on the above-named research study. I am aware that this study involves discussing my experiences as a nun in individual or group interviews. I am aware that interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed, but that I will not be identified in any way on the transcript. I am also aware that all information collected will be held in a secure location at the University of Western Sydney, Bankstown Campus.

I freely choose to participate in this study and understand that I can withdraw at any time. I also understand that the research is strictly confidential.

I hereby agree to participate in this research study.

NAME: _______________________________

SIGNATURE: __________________________

DATE: _______________________________

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officers (02 4570 1136). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
CONTACT INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS

Please indicate your willingness to be contacted for an interview:

Individual interview: Yes No

Group interview: Yes No

Please indicate your willingness to be re-contacted for a follow-up interview if necessary:

Follow-up interview: Yes No

In order to contact you regarding interviews, some basic details are needed.

This information will remain confidential. Your name will not be linked to your future interview and all transcripts will be de-identified and participants’ personal identifiers removed. You will not be identified by name in the files of the study, or in any future publication of the results.

Name: ……………………………………………………………………………..

Address: ……………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………….

Phone:
Work: …………………….. Home: …………………… Mobile: ………………..

Email address: ……………………………………………………………

What are your preferred days/times for contact by phone: …………………

………………………………………………………………………………

If you would prefer to contact by phone to arrange an interview, you can contact Megan Brock on [61 2 ] 9747 8984 or 0402 889 791, or by email: mpbrock@tpg.com.au

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Would you please complete this brief questionnaire prior to the interview.

Your age: .................................

Age at which you entered the Novitiate: ........................

Number of years you have been professed: ........................

How many Sisters you are currently living with: ............... 

If you are living alone, how long you have been living alone: ..............

What work/ministry are you engaged in?

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In general terms, how would you describe your life as a Nun?

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Thank you.
APPENDIX D: NUNS’ RESPONSES

Individual Nuns’ responses to the question on the demographic data sheet:

In general terms, how would you describe your life as a Nun?

- I have found the experience most fulfilling, and believe I have reached a level of satisfaction at this time. This period is marked by a degree of uncertainty and insecurity unknown in other periods of Religious Life.

- Rewarding, fulfilling, challenging – the best decision I’ve ever made.

- Happy, challenging, rather protected and in the early years, restrictive and impersonal to some degree.

- Very happy to be involved in a great ministry with other like-minded women for over 40 years includes times of difficulty, lack of confidence, very occasional disillusionment, but no regrets.

- Happy, challenging, exciting, fruitful, flexible, rewarding, reflective; full of opportunities, ministry, study.

- My life as a Nun is full. I experience life in community, am involved in the life of the Province by being on a number of committees and am called to minister with and for the people of God and for me this is a life-giving experience.
- Generally very happy and fulfilling. I have enjoyed many challenging experiences and navigated the more difficult times with the help of good friends and wise counselors.

- Committed to the Gospels and to the values of the Foundress of my [Order]. Value the importance of being present with poor and marginalised people more than being present for hours and hours in a Church or Chapel – actually feel that the latter can be an escape from the hard realities confronting people who don’t have the comfort of a religious life that is ‘semi-cloistered’.

- My years as a [Nun] have been varied and enriching. I have a deep sense of being called by God to this way of life. I believe I have made a contribution and have also received much. There have been ups and downs in the journey, however. I have no hesitation in stating that I have chosen and continue to choose the correct vocational path for me.

- I am very happy. I feel honored to be part of such a dynamic group of women. Over the years, I have lived with some wonderful women – who really change lives.

- Being a Nun has been very fulfilling as I am finding, at long last, some balance in my life. Perhaps, I’m reaping the fruits of the continuous struggle of the ups and downs of my journey, the daily facing of myself and others through
communal living, of coming to know myself – to the degree that I do – and acceptance of and good use of my gifts. Throughout all the learnings life is giving me, I see and know the constant power and presence of God who is central to my life. Living my baptismal commitment as a Nun has deepened my understanding of human nature and affirmed me as a woman. It is these qualities that I always bring, generously and abundantly, to the various ministries I have had and to all my relationships. My life surrounds me with blessing and countless opportunities for growth.

- I am confident and secure in my chosen lifestyle and despite the usual ups and downs of life I have always been so. I’ve struggled too with ministry commitment, but not to the extent that I’ve seriously considered alternative vocation. Currently I am feeling somewhat depleted but am looking forward to the next phase of my life. Transition time!

- Over the years I have been challenged, rewarded and confounded. I have had times of joy, depression, inspiration and ordinariness. Overall I have been and am very happy. I feel passionate about who we are and our way of life. I enjoy being me.

- The last 40+ years have been a combination of blessings, struggles, heartaches and mysteries. The one constant during this time is the knowledge that these are balanced by the belief that I strive to respond to a daily call to ‘follow me’.
I find that I am in a privileged position to be doing and living as I want. To be at the cutting edge of life and Church is challenging and exciting. Personally I live a satisfying, if sometimes lonely life, but than that is part of life generally.

The 40+ years have been times of great change, learnings, development and opportunities. On the ‘flip side’, there has been pain, struggle, confusion and lots of questioning. I have grown to love my ‘sisterhood’ – my sisters [Nuns], and the privilege of sharing in the lives of so many people who have been, and are, an inspiration to me.

I think after all these years I have found my niche with 2 [my work]. Have always felt fulfilled and happy as a [Nun] except when it comes to ‘group work’ – inclined to ‘freeze’. Through all the ups and downs, the [Order] have always been there behind me and part of who I am.

I have found my life experiences as times of growth, sadness, challenge, loneliness, joyful, peaceful, exciting. Helped me be the person I am today and certainly the right choice as a way of living my life.

It’s where I’m meant to be. In my heart and ‘bones’ I know that Religious Life is right for me. It’s gift, in its lived experience of relating to a personal God, knowing the limits and freedom of vows, belonging to and making community,
being connected to local Church is where I can live my Christian life most fully and happily. Religious Life has had its ups and downs, but overall, I’ve been very happy and enjoyed my life as a Nun.

- I chose to become a Nun and, over the years, I have become increasingly committed to this particular way of life. I give much in the service of God and mission but I also receive much. In my current role within the [Order], the present and future ways of living Religious Life are my focus.

- Smorgasbord of opportunity and disappointment. I have had opportunities for education and travel, many joys in ministry and the inspiration of some great women – all beyond my youthful dreams. BUT I have known often the frustration and disappointment of institutionalism, of misjudgment, of jealousy and ineptitude, of feeling alienated from the common life and practice, and after nearly 30 years still being referred to as ‘the young one’. Somehow through it all, God has prevailed and from this place I seem to speak authentically of God, and of the human quest to know God.

- Woman, baptised, called to live Gospel life, seeking solidarity, prayer, community, God, spirit-guided: the Reign of God as guide. I have an energy for mission, deep love and commitment to Church of inclusivity (loyal opposition), standing with disempowered, daring to risk, challenge and confront the abuse of power within institution. Trying to make a difference – doing and being, calling
people to live potential, compassion / learning compassion in the process.
Stability, obedience, conversion of life.

- Currently my life is one which is supported by my [Order] but lived typically not physically linked to the lifestyle I was used to due to my isolation from the rest of my [Nuns]. This is missioned by my [Order] and I am definitely supported by them.

- Life-giving, challenging, at times frustrating and limiting. I have been blessed with the love, friendship and support of most of our [Nuns]. I have grown in my relationship with God and others and enjoyed the ministries I have been involved in.

- This commitment enables me to be supported by a community which continues to stimulate me to focus upon issues of finding the sacred in the ordinary and the struggle for justice. It ensures that reflection and development of relationships are kept in the forefront of my life. It helps me to work towards and to value fullness of life for earth and all peoples.

- My life is full and happy. Sometimes I allow my ministry to take priority over my personal/community life and so I become a bit ‘out of balance’. At times I buck at being too closely identified with the institutional church.
- Rich, full, diverse, stretching. Contradictory: I’m committed to be at the heart of the Church but often feel on the edge. I’m at home with sub-culture of Nuns and the wider culture. Not sure if wider culture is at home with me – can still feel the culture stereotypes.

- Ever since I joined Religious Life, there have been major changes accompanied by chaos, confusion and uncertainty. My commitment to ministry has been a strong focus throughout. I have undergone major shifts in my theology and spirituality. I love living by myself. I do not relate to the institutional Church. I have a good support network and have appreciated the opportunities to study that have opened doors for me allowing me to use my gifts.

- I have always felt I lived on the margins and so feel much at home living [among marginalised people]. In lots of ways I feel more part of an ecumenical world and dealing with grass-roots justice issues than simply being a member of an [Order].

- A blessing! On the periphery of the institutional church, but at the heart of the Christian community – a day to day living of Gospel values with what ever that demands of me. A bearer of the Christian story.
• Fulfilling, life-giving, support to my life of faith, challenging to grow each day as a person; a life of hard work, but wonderful opportunities nurturing me for service to others, living frugally for the sake of service to all, with many opportunities for relationship with God and others. I am grateful. To be prophetic means to me to often stand alone or with a minority for the sake of justice and the values of Jesus.

• I have had a very fulfilling life with many wonderful experiences and opportunities. A life that has been lived in a very different social reality than envisaged in my time of training.

• It is a lifestyle I chose quite naively many years ago, but as I developed and understood the commitment, I was prepared to continue the journey trying to live out the Gospel values. My family and friends have played a vital role in supporting me through the more challenging times. I have been given many opportunities I otherwise may not have experienced. My life has been challenging, fulfilling and rewarding, and continues to be.

• Happy, supportive, exciting, challenging, restrictive (prior to Vat II). Has provided a good education, has provided opportunities I would not otherwise have had, enabled me to work for and with others to mutual benefit.
- Very different to when I entered and how I thought my life would be. Experienced: variety of career experiences, changes; much independence; constant challenge to balance apostolic and contemplative life. Many opportunities to meet and be the healing face of Christ to others. Amazing personal / spiritual journeys to come to know my Beloved.

- Happy and contented – always challenged! An interesting way to make meaning and give expression to the Gospel call. I generally feel quite privileged in terms of the opportunities, relationships and learnings that have come my way as a [Nun]. Like most, I struggle with aspects of the institutional Church, particularly the patriarchal hegemony and embedded gender blindness. However I tend to live around that.

- In general, it has been and is a way of life that has given me a great deal of satisfaction and opportunity, personally and professionally. It has not, however, been without times of profound questioning.

- It has been a time of growth, shedding the old and acclaiming my own inner authority. It has been lonely in working situations in dealing with how others see us.
- Satisfying and challenging. I feel very fulfilled with a good balance of support and autonomy. I continue to be afforded many opportunities for growth and as I grow older I feel less lonely and more ‘at home’ with being alone.

- Life as a [Nun] at this time can be confronting and, at times, isolating. Consecrated religious life is difficult for people in our culture to comprehend and I often feel marginalised and very ‘different’. We have high ideals and I find myself examining the ever increasing gap between the real and the ideal. I am confronted by the thought of having so much more security and more material possessions than many of the people with whom I work in my ministry and among whom I live in my current neighborhood.
APPENDIX E: PRELIMINARY OPEN CODING

A sample of preliminary open-coding analysis of a section of the account of Elizabeth (53) is reproduced below:

| It’s also about blowing a lot of perceptions which I felt I had… I was in a position to make my own decisions about what matters in life and about what the core issues are and about what you believe of people and what you believe about life and particularly in Religious Life. It’s got an international structure all of its own; it is within the Church which has got a two thousand year history, a highly articulated social structure and authority structure, a whole theology that attempts actually to explain the entire world. There’s a sort of a loop and you go into the loop and it’s almost impossible to break out of the loop, it’s a mental thing, there’s a whole world which is envisaged from within the religious life world. You went into the loop and within the loop that language was talked and it joined up. (Elizabeth, 53) |
| What are the perceptions about what is it to be Nun? Who was making these decisions prior to this time and where did their power come from? The naïve, young mind is malleable; powerlessness of the young. Who controls the loop? How easy is it to get into the loop? How easy to break out of it? The loop is wider than Religious Life and constructs a world of its own. To whom does the language of the loop make sense? What would happen if it didn’t all join up? Loop manipulates lives lived in ignorance of the power of loop. |

A Preliminary Analysis of Interview Text
The following is an example of how open coding was used to explore subjective positioning in a sample of interview text in which the participant gives an account of taking up a position of resistance:

| Two years ago I considered and found a new profession in (profession) and … it was incredible for two reasons, one, I found myself immediately part of the community that was so supportive, so wonderful, but so respectful, so willing to help, all those things that we’d spent years and years talking about how we’d sort of fix up Religious Life and make communities mean something. Suddenly I’m just sort of finding it, and it was there without all the words and the Constitutions. But the other thing that happened was I was only there like two weeks and one of the young (workers), she was an older student, but her father died suddenly. She was an atheist, the father was an atheist, it was his thing, and she came and asked me would I do the funeral service.. wanted something that wouldn’t be too holy …and they felt I might be not sort of Churchy | Taking ownership of own life, work Learning richness of outside church world; Existence of community outside Religious Life Relating without control Helplessness, inability to affect change over long period Relating must be purposeful Meaningful relating elusive Meaning found outside boundaries Meaning without control Learnings from world outside A novice in this new professional, communal world Challenged beyond church Accepts diversity, no one truth Recognition as minister in different context Perception as outside Church formalities, structures; Nun as free to respond. |

A Preliminary Analysis of Subjective Positioning
APPENDIX F: ETHICS APPROVAL

14 October 2004

Megan Brock
PO Box 144
Croydon NSW 2132

Dear Megan

Re: HREC 04/143 An examination of mental health and gendered subjectivity from midlife onwards of Australasian Catholic nuns

The Committee has reviewed your responses and has agreed to grant an ethics approval for the above research project.

You are advised that the Committee should be notified of any further change/s to the research methodology should there be any in the future. You will be required to provide a report on the ethical aspects of your project at the completion of this project. The form is located on the Research Services Web Page.

The Protocol Number HREC 04/143 should be quoted in all future correspondence about this project. Your approval will expire 30 July 2007. Please contact the Human Ethics Officer, Kay Buckley on tel: 02 4570 1136 if you require any further information.

The Committee wishes you well with your research.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Associate Professor Louise O’Brien
Acting Chairperson
UWS Human Research Ethics Committee
Cc Professor Jane Ussher
REFERENCES


Dunn, S. R. (1993). The phenomenon of psychological emptiness in the lives of women religious between the ages of forty through sixty-five: UMI.


