

# THE NAPKIN RING: A SYMBOL OF COMMUNITY LIFE:

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The napkin ring is a practical object with historical roots in France. Around the year 1800, the bourgeoisie invented this device as a way to identify one's napkin in between washes, and it wasn't long before the idea spread quickly throughout countries in the western world. In those early years, napkin rings were made out of a variety of materials such as silver, wood, glass, bone, and, by the early twentieth century, Bakelite. Some are simple in their construction; others more intricate.

Housed in the archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden are two napkin rings: a simple one fabricated from Bakelite dating to the late 1910s and an artistic one made from bone dating to the 1940s. At some point, a Baden archivist identified these two napkin rings as archival artifacts. Baden is not alone in having napkin rings in the archival collection – other archives, such as that of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, are also home to napkin rings. Interestingly enough, there are seven napkin rings on display in the heritage room of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Los Angeles. As artifacts, the two napkin rings in the Baden archives, as well as those in other congregational archives across the country, are more than an everyday object. They are tangible expressions of community life.

By the mid-twentieth century, when a young woman entered a religious community, the congregation provided her with a list of items to procure.<sup>1</sup> In the Baden Archives, there are many examples of these lists and among the extant ones, the earliest ones date to 1942; the latest, 1964. Reminiscent of a bridal trousseau, these lists include linens, clothing, personal hygiene items, school supplies, eating utensils, and - for the Baden congregation, at least - a napkin ring. For other congregations, while the napkin ring is not on extant entrance inventories, there is an understanding that a napkin ring was “required (or at the very least strongly suggested) for entrance to the community.”<sup>2</sup>

Just as in the case of a bride pulling together her trousseau, the young woman seeking to enter religious life experienced a variety of emotions while securing all of the items. For some, it was exciting, while for others, there was some difficulties associated with costs and availability. The costs for procuring all items on a list could rack up; for example, the cost for one dozen handkerchiefs was listed on a 1943 entrant's invoice as costing \$3.15, which today would be \$46.53 for the dozen. One Baden sister who entered in 1945 indicated that the requirement for specifically bone napkin rings in those war years caused some headaches, as there



**Napkin rings from the  
Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden Archives**

Source: Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden

was a scarcity.<sup>3</sup> Those who needed napkin rings by the early 1960s ran into problems finding them, not because they were scarce but rather because they were no longer popular.

In the mid-1900s, the years of postulancy and novitiate were ones of adjusting the young woman to the rigid structure of religious life. Along with studying the spiritual aspects of the congregation, the novices learned to live and function within a community, its constitution, and the 1917 Code of Canon Law. As stated in the code: “In every community the community life shall be followed by all, also in those things pertaining to food, clothing and furniture.”<sup>4</sup> The use of a napkin ring was a practical measure, keeping order to the napkins and prolonging the use of napkins before the need to wash them. With motherhouses in those years home to so many young women - aspirants, postulants, and novices – all at the same time, there would have been many napkins that would have needed to be laundered. Those women in formation were involved in the cooking, the cleaning, and the laundry that was needed to operate the motherhouse. As designed, the napkin ring worked to the advantage of all by reducing the amount of laundry. The napkin ring was also part of the uniformity sought by those in charge; the phrase “to preserve uniformity” was used on the instructions on some of the Baden lists of items to procure for entrance.

While for some congregations like Baden, a young woman brought the napkin ring at entrance; for other congregations, the young woman did not obtain a napkin ring until the time of reception or soon after reception. In these cases, the sister would have a napkin ring engraved with either

her religious name, her initials, or her rank number were inscribed on the napkin ring. By personalizing these napkin rings in this manner, the congregation not only provided a practical way to differentiate napkins but also reinforced the connection of the young woman to the congregation. In some instances, the family gave the napkin ring; in other cases, a congregation had a set number of napkin rings, sequentially numbered. In some instances, sisters would be assigned numbered ones that had once belonged to the sisters who were deceased.

In many religious communities, as the young woman entered, bringing with her the procured items, she in reality would only personally use a portion of the supplies. As this was community life, items such as the bedding, towels, and pillows would be given to the older sisters, serving like “social security,” where the young paid into it and in their old age, they would in turn receive from this established system.<sup>5</sup> Sisters rarely informed their families of this practice; they accepted it as part of community life. For certain periods in Baden’s history, even the napkin rings were placed into the community supply and were issued one to the sister from the supply. This pooling of resources was part of a life of sharing and sacrificing for the good of the whole, evidence of community life.

Starting in the mid to late 1960s, as society, the Catholic Church, and women religious were all undergoing major

changes, the napkin ring fell into disuse among congregations. In some instances, the practical sisters in some congregations sold a few of their silver napkin rings for the income, although even then, they retained representative napkin rings in their archives. However, as congregations entered into the late twentieth century, some returned to the use of napkin rings at motherhouses or in community living settings. By using cloth napkins instead of paper, the sisters produce less waste and thus, help the environment. The current motivation of care and concern for the environment is a reflection of community life today. In the case of one convent house for the Philadelphia Sisters of St. Joseph, two of the sisters actually made the sets of the napkin rings for their use.<sup>6</sup>

Lastly, congregations of women religious consist of individuals – the *folding* together of the individuals creates the unity of community and the history of the community is often understood from the stories of individuals. In the case of the Bakelite napkin ring in the Baden archives, the reason for its retention becomes apparent with the unfolding of the sister’s story. This napkin ring from the late 1910s was identified as having belonged to Sister Clarissa Statmiller. Born in 1896, Sister Clarissa entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1917 and made her final profession in 1923. In those early years, she was known for her ministry as a schoolteacher. In 1926, she was one of the first four sisters from her congre-



**Sister Clarissa Statmiller (far right) was a missionary in China and died there in 1927. Her napkin ring is preserved in the Sisters of St. Joseph Archives.**

Source: Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden Archives

gation to be sent as missionaries to China's interior. For tragic reasons, she was only a missionary for a short time. On Easter Sunday in 1927, Sister Clarissa and her fellow sisters were driven into exile by the Communists. Their flight was an ordeal: most of their travel was overland, over high mountains; they found sleep in huts; and they scavenged for food. Towards the end of the trek, Sister Clarissa contracted malaria and suffered through several days of the journey before they finally reached a hospital. But it was too late. On July 21, 1927, at the age of 30, Sister Clarissa died and was buried in China. The congregational memory of Sister Clarissa lives on, not only through records, but also through a three-dimensional object – her napkin ring.

For the Sisters of St. Joseph in Brentwood, New York, a napkin ring is part of a story that has been slowly pieced together. In working with the records from the late 1800s, the archivist stumbled across “Viola” recorded as being received at age 18 months into the Academy of St. Joseph. This was not the norm as the Academy was a school, not an orphanage; additionally, St. Malachy's Home, the orphanage run by the sisters, did not accept infants. So, who then was Viola? Current sisters had no knowledge of the congregation ever taking in an infant. Further evidence of Viola accumulated: a sacramental record with a record of a sister as guardian; the inclusion of her name in a poetic tribute to a sister; the death of her father noted in the annals; and finally, a silver napkin ring with the name “Viola.” It is the existence of the napkin ring in the archives that indicated Viola's importance to the sisters, for, with the act of keeping the napkin ring, the sisters had demonstrated an emotional attachment to this orphaned girl; she must have been a significant part of their lives and of their community.<sup>7</sup>

When an item such as a napkin ring survives as an archival



**Viola's napkin ring is preserved in the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood Archives.**

Source:  
Sisters of St. Joseph  
of Brentwood  
Archives

artifact, the mere presence can bring a fresh view of the world of women religious. Whether the napkin ring is reminiscent of a young woman's entrance into a congregation or brings to mind the ecological concerns of sisters today, these napkin rings - not only in the Baden archives but also in other archives across the country – are evidence that the napkin ring is a part of the story of women religious.

[Editor's note: This article is adapted from a paper presented by the author on June 25, 2019, at the Triennial Conference on the History of Women Religious.]

**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Kuhns, *The Habit: A History of the Clothing of Catholic Nuns* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 25-26.
- <sup>2</sup> Casey Bowser, email message to author, May 31, 2019.
- <sup>3</sup> Sister Frances Rooney, in discussion with the author, August 2018.
- <sup>4</sup> Rev. Stanislaus Woywod, O.F.M., *The New Canon Law: A Commentary and Summary of the New Code of Canon Law* (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1918), 117.
- <sup>5</sup> Sister Clare Reese, in discussion with the author, April 2019.
- <sup>6</sup> Sister Margaret Mary Smith, email message to author, June 5, 2019.
- <sup>7</sup> Virginia Dowd, email message to author, December 10, 2018.