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When Martha Buser joined the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville, Kentucky, at 18 years old in 1949, she entered a community of 600 women dedicated to God. But today, the community that was founded by St. Angela Merici and emphasizes education for women and girls, has only 33 members left in Kentucky, and their median age is 85.

"What seemed so secure and a forever thing, you start to realize, no, it's not," said Morgan Atkinson, a filmmaker who has documented the Ursuline order for nearly four decades and has followed Buser's life closely. "What does that say about our culture today, that, good or bad, people no longer are wanting to join in this mission, in this vocation?"

Atkinson's latest film, "In the Company of Change," is both a tribute to Buser, who died in 2023 at age 92, and an exploration of the societal and ecclesial shifts that reshaped Catholic religious life in America over the past 75 years. The one-hour documentary premiered Sept. 14 on PBS Kentucky.

The film is in many ways an extension of Atkinson's 1987 film "A Change in Order," which investigated the lives of the Ursuline sisters after the dramatic changes of the Second Vatican Council. It is also a tribute to Buser, who at one point served as a spiritual director for the filmmaker, shaping his life and Catholic faith.

"The film is about the strength of (Buser's) faith and other sisters, to look at what was not always a rosy picture, and still say, 'This is where I stand, and these are the values I embrace,'" Atkinson told RNS. "The congregation is diminishing, so the bravery and the faith of these sisters to stand up to those potential outcomes, really, I found remarkable."

Like nearly all contemporary Catholic women's religious orders in the United States, the population of Catholic sisters has significantly decreased. In 2022, ABC News reported there were fewer than 42,000 nuns in the country, representing a 76% decrease over 50 years. After teaching in Louisville for 20 years, Buser wrote two books and served as a spiritual director, working with a few Catholic sisters but mostly laypeople. Her books, "Also in Your Midst" and "Lover of Us All," reflect her interpretation of the spirituality of St. Angela Merici, while also helping women religious embrace a more open, pastoral role in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

"She had a sense of inner freedom," said Sr. Jean Anne Zappa, 76, president of the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville and a lifelong friend of Buser. "She was grounded in spirituality, and that just came through in the way she just touched people's lives."

The film shows Buser being interviewed throughout her older life. Rich Super 8 footage taken in the 1950s from the Ursuline Sisters' archive shows the sisters' very

obedient, rigid lifestyle, while also depicting beauty and playfulness in their community.

In one moment, the sisters are lined up in what appear to be wedding dresses at their initiation ceremony — when a deacon places gold rings on their left ring fingers to signify their lifelong marriage to Christ in the Order of St. Ursula. "It was exciting because it signified the beginning of being an Ursuline," said Buser, with sparkling blue eyes and a soft demeanor, in the film. "There was life there."

In the next clip, the sisters are playing tennis, dancing in a circle and drinking Coke — all the time wearing habits, or nuns' traditional clothing.

Throughout the film, Buser's voice leads viewers through how the lives of the Ursulines shifted over time. In 1962, because of the Second Vatican Council — the global meeting of bishops credited with modernizing the Catholic Church's relationship with the rest of the world — orders of nuns revised their constitutions, adopted modern dress and moved away from the regimented daily schedules that had previously defined convent life.

"In the '60s and into the '70s, the ground began to shift under her," Atkinson said. "People were leaving, and new people weren't joining."

Zappa said that after the Second Vatican Council, the focus shifted away from outward symbols such as habits and ceremonial traditions. The Ursulines no longer referred to themselves as nuns but as Catholic sisters. "What mattered more, she said, was living a consecrated life rooted in vows, the charism of the community and the Gospel itself.

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"I didn't even wear a habit," said Zappa, who joined the Ursuline Sisters in 1967. "I came during the changes when all religious communities were asked to renew, (to) go back to the spirit of their founders."

At the time, Buser was in her mid-30s, and many women religious in Louisville decided to leave the community. "Things were changing in the church and in the world," Buser said in the film. "I experienced a closeness with the other women that I had never felt before."

The Ursuline Sisters have been teachers in Louisville since their arrival in the mid-19th century, when three sisters came from Germany to teach immigrant children. Within a short time, their community expanded. They opened a boarding school, purchased land and built an all-girls high school and an elementary school, open to the community. At their peak, the Ursuline Sisters were operating 20 schools in Kentucky and extended their ministry to 30 states and a school in Peru.

In 2019, as their numbers were declining and the median age of the sisters grew, the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville transferred the lease of their 48-acre campus to Sacred Heart Schools. The community called the move "a gift of the heart to the heart," shifting daily operations at the school from the sisters to lay teachers and administrators.

"The Ursulines have always been wise women in facing their reality," Zappa said. "I think that's what we've done over the years, and that's what the film shows for me, that the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville kind of took St. Angela's words very vividly in our hearts, and that, as things change, we change with it."

The end of the film shows Buser's 90th birthday celebration during the COVID-19 pandemic. A line of a dozen cars stretched down the street as community members lined up to wish her a happy birthday at a safe distance. In Atkinson's voice-over, he addresses his late spiritual guide directly.

"Martha, much like your community, you have gone through changes and conversions," Atkinson says, as footage from Buser's funeral appears on-screen. "It's a rare day that I don't think of something I've learned from you."

His voice-over then relays to Buser what life in the community is like now, with a small group of women carrying on St. Angela's message as the founders did when they first came to Kentucky.

Zappa said that, while some communities still give vocation talks and invite women to "come and see" weekends, the Ursulines are no longer actively recruiting new members.

"When you bring someone in, they need to have a support system. They need to have people their own age," Zappa said. "We're just looking at how we can live our best lives as women religious, with our smallness."

For Atkinson, "In the Company of Change" is not just about a religious order fading, but also what their absence could mean beyond the convent.

"In a time of such division and polarization, it seems important to not lose this group that are united and unified in their mission of doing good works," he said.