

Documentary features defiant nuns who defied 'patriarchy of the Catholic Church'

by [Alejandra Molina](#) in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue



(Courtesy of Corita Art Center/Immaculate Heart Community)

In late June, a documentary film chronicling a group of protesting nuns who clashed with a cardinal in the 1960s became available in select theaters and on the streaming service Discovery+.

The Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a group of nuns based in Los Angeles, “stood up to the patriarchy of the Catholic Church, fighting for equality, their livelihoods, and their own freedom against an all-powerful Cardinal who sought to keep them in their place,” according to the summary for *Rebel Hearts*.

“These ladies were kickass and kind of subversive,” one woman said of the sisters, who were dubbed “The Rebellious Nuns” in contemporary headlines.

Directed by Pedro Kos, the movie is a blend of interviews with surviving members of the order, archival footage, and animation, all set to music from the 1960s, according to IndieWire. The film’s graphics were inspired by the late Corita Kent, or Sister Mary Corita, an Immaculate Heart nun whose iconic pop art covered racism, poverty, and misogyny.

Kent’s work embodied the spirit of the 1960s and was prevalent in church basements, dorm rooms, and communes of people involved in the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War campaign.

During this period, the Immaculate Heart College sisters “took to heart” the words of the Second Vatican Council that sought to modernize the Catholic Church by renewing and adapting “to the sign of the times,” according to the nonprofit Corita Art Center, which adds that “they looked to meet the citizens of Los Angeles where they were at, physically and spiritually, in their life.”

The sisters entwined “contemporary philosophies, modern psychology, and women’s liberation movement into their work,” the Los Angeles Conservancy said.

One segment of the film shows sisters getting arrested; one holds a sign declaring, “Guns and Bombs Will Not Bring Peace to Central America.”

The sisters’ plan for renewal called for those who taught in religious schools to pursue teaching credentials and graduate degrees, according to Diane Winston, a USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism professor, writing for the *Conversation*. They pushed to choose the length and time of their individual prayers and to forgo permission from their mother superior for small decisions.

The sisters’ outspokenness ran afoul of Cardinal James Francis McIntyre, archbishop of Los Angeles from 1948 to 1970. McIntyre, according to Winston, “berated their defiance and doubted their commitment to religious life.”

But he did not quiet their zeal. “The Immaculate Heart sisters taught me you must follow your conscience,” says a woman in the film’s trailer, “even if it goes against what the pope himself has to say.” —Religion News Service