

What Makes a Woman Choose Such a Life?

A Nun Can Tell You All About Catholic Nuns

By Knights of Columbus
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Why the Knights of Columbus Advertise the Catholic Faith

The reason is simple. We Catholics want our non-Catholic friends and neighbors to know us as we really are and not as we are sometimes mistakenly represented.

We are confident that when our religious Faith is better understood by those who do not share it, mutual understanding will promote the good-will which is so necessary in a predominantly Christian country whose government is designed to serve all the people— no matter how much their religious convictions may differ.

American Catholics are convinced that as the teachings of Christ widely and firmly take hold of the hearts and conduct of our people, we shall remain free in the sense that Christ promised (John VIII, 31-38), and in the manner planned by the Founding Fathers of this republic.

Despite the plainly stated will of the Good Shepherd that there be "one fold and one shepherd," the differences in the understanding of Christ's teaching are plainly evident. It has rightfully been called "the scandal of a divided Christianity."

If there is anything which will gather together the scattered flock of Christ, it is the nation-wide understanding of the Savior, what He did and how He intended mankind to benefit by the Redemption.

To this end, we wish our fellow-Americans to become acquainted with the teachings of Christ as the Catholic Church has presented them, since the day the apostles invaded the nations of the world in willing and courageous obedience to Christ's command: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..." (Matt. XXVIII, 19).

SUPREME COUNCIL
KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS
Religious Information Bureau
4422 LINDELL BLVD.
ST. LOUIS 8, MO.

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I Can Tell You All About Catholic Nuns

Have you ever wondered about Catholic nuns? Judging from my experience, at some time or other, people who are unacquainted with Catholic nuns wonder about them.

You may see us moving quietly and efficiently in and out of hospital rooms or you may pass us on the street, as we go modestly on errands of mercy, teaching and social service. And you wonder... Perhaps you may be struck by our peaceful and contented faces, or our unusual garb. You may recall some of the revolting tales that are sometimes whispered about us. You wonder... perhaps with a sigh of pity.

I am a Catholic nun, and I know that on buses and trains, on the street and in stores, nuns are a source of unbounded and often poorly-disguised interest to many, old and young alike.

"Look, mama! What are them?" shouts Junior, pointing a stubby finger at some nuns who, until then, were quite unaware of the interest they had awakened. They smile good-naturedly as Junior's mother murmurs an embarrassed apology even while she secretly longs to hear the answer to her son's shrill question, "What are them?"

Perhaps you, like Junior's mother, would also like to know something about a nun's life. Well, to begin with, it certainly is different. Let's start with externals. Even a casual glance at nuns convinces you that they are not concerned about the "new look". They flash no costume jewelry; but their plain gold or silver ring proclaims that they are dedicated to Christ.

Utterly disregarding of modern fashions, nuns wear clothes designed to cover but not to flatter them. This is not so strange, though. Since nuns are definitely not "in the market," there is no reason in the world why they should seek to attract others. Yet even you, perhaps, have remarked to yourself how becoming and dignified are the voluminous folds of a nun's skirt and the quaint design of her headdress.

But it is not their dress alone which sets nuns apart and marks them off as "different". Regardless of what you don't know about nuns, there is one fact of which you can be certain: that they are not married. Perhaps to you a chaste unmarried life — a celibate life — seems a very great sacrifice.

This celibate life of self-denial is one which a nun freely chooses. You are just wasting your time, then, by feeling sorry for nuns, for they are the most satisfied women in the world. I recall, however, a story which reflects all too clearly the misconception entertained by many on this point. Somewhere in the deep South two nuns sat in a railroad station. For a long time two colored ladies eyed them; finally, one could restrain her curiosity no longer. "What's dem?" whispered one to her companion. "Dey's nuns," came the stage whisper in reply. "What's nuns?" persisted the other. Came the answer: "Nuns is ladies dat live in a house all by deyselves and — dey ain't no men aroun'." "We-el," drawled the other, "dey sure goes into deep mournin' about it."

If nuns often arouse interest and curiosity, they are just as often the target for suspicion and animosity. Seeing nuns only on the street or in public conveyances, many persons not only wonder about a life so obviously different from their own, but they may also continue to believe reports that are evidently the offspring of prejudice. Such stories are the stock-in-trade of persons who lack either the opportunity or the desire of learning the truth about nuns.

False Rumors

Most non-Catholics, I am sure, have heard some of the far-fetched stories about us which enjoy rather wide circulation. Every nun I know would welcome the opportunity to explain just what she is and why she is living a life apart from the world. In this booklet, I will tell you the truth about a nun's life and, in the telling, I will probably answer most of your questions.

The strange idea of nuns entertained by many persons arises from the fact that they do not know any individual nun, have never gone to the trouble of meeting one and getting firsthand information about her life. The only information some have is misinformation, an unsavory concoction of half-truths well-seasoned with ignorance or malice.

On one occasion, for example, when traveling, I was respectfully approached by a non-Catholic gentleman who sincerely wished to learn the truth about nuns — he had been brought up on the usual fables. Is it true, he asked me, that a tunnel connects the priest's house and the convent? I told him the truth, that there is no tunnel or any other connection between a convent and the priest's house. Neither is it true, as he had been informed, that when two nuns walk down the street, one is a man in disguise. We have no masqueraders in the convent!

Every nun you see is a real nun.

Life of Service

Perhaps when you were hospitalized, you saw a nun caring for her patients, hour after hour. Did she pay you a short visit and then dash out to attend a card party? On the contrary, you were her sole care; your recovery, her only concern. Has it occurred to you that this devotion to her work was possible only because the nun was free from domestic cares?

Yes, it is a sacrifice — the nun gives up the human for the sake of the divine. If you could do that, wouldn't you feel privileged? That is how nuns feel about their life. You need only look into the eyes of a nun to see there the joy that she alone knows who has given her love to God.

But don't say that a chaste single life is impossible for women, or you will be condemning countless numbers who have given up the thought of marriage for praiseworthy motives, and they haven't become nuns.

Our Common Purpose — To Strive For Holiness

When all is said and done, the 147,000 nuns in the United States are pretty much alike. There are, it is true, many Orders of women in the Catholic Church, all differing from one another in spirit, garb and work. At different periods of history, the needs of the Church have been varied. All of these needs in turn have been served by holy men and women of faith and vision, who have established organizations, "Orders", as we call them to perform a definite work.

Despite our differences, however, we nuns are fundamentally alike, in that all our lives have one common purpose — that of striving for holiness through the observance of Christian poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Not only are different Orders of women very much the same, the members of an Order, although highly individualized, are bound together and, in a sense, made one by their common striving to attain their common goal — the perfect imitation of Christ. Yet among the members of an Order, too, we may note dissimilarities of background, temperament, disposition. And it is through God's help that these very real differences are overshadowed and controlled by the larger simple dominant purpose which governs every activity of every nun — the attainment of holiness.

A member of an Order, I have been associated closely for many years with splendid religious women in my own Order and in other Orders also. Some of these nuns are called contemplatives or

cloistered nuns. By separation from the distraction of worldly concerns and pursuits, by the worship of God and prayer for others who are forgetful of prayer for themselves, cloistered nuns seek their goal of self-sanctification.

Other nuns — and I am one of them — not only strive for perfect imitation of Christ through the observance of His counsels but also work among people for the salvation of others through the practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. But all nuns, let me repeat, share the same motives, love for Christ; and the same goal — union with Christ.

Already I have told you that I am a nun who knows nuns well. It is in the belief that you are interested in learning more about our life that I set about writing a sketch which is, in part, autobiographical, but which is, I believe, typical of all nuns.

"If Thou Wilt Be Perfect...Come Follow Me"

How does it all start, you may wonder, this business of becoming a nun? While it is true that some girls, when still quite young, are strongly attracted to religious life, nevertheless I have reason to think that most girls become nuns in much the same way as I did. At the outset, I must admit that I was not the Saint-from-the-cradle type. In a perfectly ordinary childhood, faults such as vanity, sallies of temper and disobedience showed themselves, but they were met, thank God, by wise guidance and the firm — and oh, how firm! — hand of correction.

As a teen-ager, I attended Mass as regularly as I could, but no one ever spoke of me as an especially pious girl. It was the urgent need of help in the business of being good, that brought me weekly to Holy Communion. High school years were a busy round of study and fun; I always managed, though, to squeeze in those little prayers for God's guidance, however busy I was having a good time. I was normal. Plenty of dates and one or two more or less violent attacks of puppy love marked my teens. I liked a gay time but I had serious thoughts, on occasion. These were the years that count, I believe, as the years that brought the first desires of becoming a nun.

An Inner Voice

At first, the idea of a nurse's life strongly appealed to me. That self-sacrificing life would be something worth while and I did so want to do something fine for Christ. Then, after Holy Communion, the other thought started coming, "Why not be a nun — both a nun and a nurse?" Then the same idea began to recur at the oddest times; it would keep running through my mind at a dance in perfect time with my feet. Repeatedly I brushed off the thought with something of finality, "I'm just not good enough to be a nun."

Living for Christ

And so, for a long time, I hid in my heart the desire of living my life for Christ. This attraction was due to a cause more than human. What girl would want to leave a happy home? Neither did I relish particularly the prospect of a life in black and white! Gay clothes delighted me. Yet I knew that I wanted to make my life count, I wanted to do something to please Christ and to help others. So I prayed for light to know if I had a religious vocation. Since becoming a nun, I have learned that desires such as these grow up slowly with many girls; with me, they developed during less than a year. God calls each in His own time, and in His own way!

At last came the day when I determined to talk over with my family this attraction I felt for the life of a nun. It had been hard enough to make up my mind to broach the subject; I was far from ready for the incredulous smiles and jokes that greeted my news. I was far too young, the family agreed. My seventeen years that made me eligible for other responsibilities suddenly meant nothing! It was fine if I had a vocation but I must test it, I must be very sure, they urged. Besides — and this was very true — I was altogether too noisy and gay; I'd have to stop talking so much; in fact, I didn't have a disposition that was made for the convent.

When my family saw that I was in earnest, they were all very proud of me. Hadn't my mother prayed for years that God would grant a religious vocation to one of her children? But I know me! One of my sisters, who had a well-developed aversion to nuns, assured me that she'd have nothing to do with me if I should become a nun.

Thinking It Out

Rather confused by all this, I turned to the priest who was my confessor for advice and encouragement. After listening to only brief statements, he said, "Pray, child, and try to learn more about the life of a nun. Remember you in my Mass." The pamphlet rack in church supplied me with a copy of a booklet entitled "Follow Him" by Godfrey Poage, C.P. (Thomas More Book Shop, 22 Monroe St., Chicago 13, Illinois, 15c).

Here I found clearly stated the qualifications for becoming a nun. Age limit? Well, I was at least past 15 and not yet 30, so I was all right on that score, I figured. As for physical and mental equipment, I knew that I was healthy in mind and body; neither was there any insanity in my family. But my spiritual qualifications? Had I any? Of one thing I was certain — I wanted to please God, to save my own soul, and to work for the salvation of others. That was surely a right intention, but wasn't it?

The requirement easily found in the back of the pamphlet "Follow Him." I wrote to some that appealed to me. From the literature sent in answer to my request, I found out a lot about different Orders. Some of my former teachers, who are nuns, set me straight on a few points, but at no time did they even suggest that I join their Order. Very definitely, I was not "roped in."

I must mention one nun who taught me in high school. I didn't like her particularly as a woman, but as a teacher, she was "tops". She had a course that was called "Christian Origins", dealing with proofs of the divinity of Christ and of the divine institution of the Church. I'll never forget the first class and I hope that I won't ever forget the substance of the whole course. "You girls," she began, "are probably Catholics because you were born into Catholic families. You have done what your parents told you was the thing to do. That is fine. No one would quarrel with you for doing that. But now you are coming to the age when you are supposed to know the score. You are supposed to act intelligently and have good reasons for living your own lives. Well, there is a whole lot to learn in living your own lives, but this course is intended to give you the reasons why you should live your lives as Catholics."

Her course did me more permanent good than any other — and my English teacher was outstanding.

For several months I prayed and read and thought — and waited. As the months went by and I still wanted to be a nun, I decided to try to enter. All of the pamphlets I had read suggested the

advisability of consulting a priest. This I had already done — but, I wanted to go over the whole matter once more.

Must Be Sure

One fall afternoon I presented myself by appointment before the priest to whom I went to confession regularly. I chose him because I felt he knew me better than any other did and I believed he would be in a position to give me the advice that I needed. As clearly as possible I outlined my reasons for wanting to be a nun. He nodded approval when I told him that I felt the life of a nun, modeled on Christ's life, must be very pleasing to God. In reply to his questions, I told him that not only after Holy Communion, but even while on dates, I had been drawn to religious life, in order to please Christ and to save souls. His answers showed me that I could count on God's help in the matter of leaving home, foregoing marriage, and, especially, giving up my own sweet will.

Then he proceeded to answer my objections, real or imagined. He told me that I could not be sure that I had a religious vocation until I had tried the life and had been accepted by a religious superior. In reply to my objection that, although a weekly communicant, I could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be called holy, he reminded me that I did not have to be a saint in order to enter a convent, that, at this stage, God was satisfied with my desire to be good. I should get out of my head any idea that only those girls become nuns who are a "spiritual elite". Our Lord offered not a special but a general invitation to otherwise ordinary people when He said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke IX: 23).

He agreed that, on entering a convent, I'd probably be lonesome at first, but he pointed out that I'd be not less so if I were to marry and leave home. And as for the objection that I liked gay clothes, parties, boys, that was simply no objection at all. The gayest often make the best nuns. After all, I wasn't a "drip"? Men and pretty clothes — both represented something of a sacrifice, but neither is absolutely essential to one's happiness.

Proceeded Slowly

I was, he conceded, not very old; in fact, I was still in my teens. Still, if I was old enough to select my own clothes, choose my own friends, I must have at least a fair share of common sense and good judgment. And as far as sacrificing marriage is concerned, for nuns it is not sacrifice but privilege, and not renunciation but preference.

The parents who give their daughter to God, is the daughter who really keeps closest to them. The girl whom the parents give to God, is the daughter who keeps the family name. On every count, parents give greater credit to the daughter who is a nun. Who listens to the mother's worries and shows her how to bear her trials with resignation? The daughter who became a nun. In short, the girl who becomes a nun is the one who keeps the family name. On every count, parents give greater credit to the daughter who is a nun than others.

But how to know which Order to choose? I had pamphlets from several Orders and the choice of one from among many seemed quite bewildering. For instance, should I become a nursing nun and care for the sick in a hospital? Quite naturally I found myself drawn to this sort of service which had first appealed to me. Or would I be happier teaching small children? The pictures of the nuns with their tiny charges were most appealing. Then, again, the pamphlets of one Order showed the Sisters engaged in caring for the aged; the pictures of the nuns performing services for these elderly

persons tugged at my heart. Yet another pamphlet pictured nuns working with women in their needs and dispositions, but, at the same time, I found myself interested in the spirit of their Order, for I had done some reading. It was in the first ages of the Church, I discovered, that Christian virgins first professed a life distinguished from ordinary life. With the intention of imitating Christ, they observed continence; many of them gave up riches. An interesting fact, I found, is that they lived, at first, not in convents but in their own homes.

But clearly their life was far less complex than ours. These virgins did not have to rise at five in order to be ready to serve hospital patients their breakfast before the doctors should come on the hall; nor be ready at eight o'clock, after several hours of prayer, to teach several hundred students in a crowded high school.

Third Century

Women began living a religious life together in the third century after Christ, when St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, established convents for religious women. I could readily understand that such a life would necessitate obedience to a superior. But the persecutions in the third century closed the monasteries and convents and forced the nuns to retire to the safety of the desert. It was during this period, I learned, that St. Pachomius built a convent where religious women lived with his sister.

The founding of religious Orders as such brings into focus the greatest names in early Christian times — Benedict, Augustine, Basil. For their own religious Orders of men, each wrote a rule of monastic life, which was later adapted for women. These three rules form the bases for most of the rules written at a later date.

During the eighth and ninth centuries, when nuns lived together in community, their dwellings were called convents, and they wore a modest black dress. During the years that followed, many different communities of women were established, having a common goal, self-sanctification, and some special work of Christian charity as well.

Different Orders

Nuns today, I learned, are of two types. The contemplative or cloistered Orders live a secluded life of prayer, with little or no contact with the outside world; the active Orders live a mixed life of prayer and work for the neighbor. Again, some Orders confine their activities to one field exclusively; others engage in several works. All Orders, however, are distinguished by the obligation to strive for holiness; all wear a certain garb and follow some form of permanent community life.

I had often seen scores of nuns in the railroad station shortly after the middle of August. Now I learned generally that nuns get their annual assignments and leave, under orders from their General Superior for an assignment where they work under the local superior.

The more I read about different Orders, the more clearly I realized that most of them are merely the prolonged shadow of some great saint or of some other outstanding Christian man or woman. It is but natural for the Order to reflect the spirit of its founder. This spirit is an intangible thing but always recognizable.

While it is true that all Orders have in common certain means of striving for holiness, yet it is no less true that each order has some particular means that it uses, to which it subordinates all other means. It is thus that an Order develops its own distinctive spirit.

I Have Never Regretted Becoming a Nun

Several more months went by and at last I made my decision. My choice was a teaching Order, one in which the nuns also nurse. This seemed just right to me, for I wanted to be both a teacher and a nurse. I wrote to the Mother Superior of this Order and received, in reply, a most cordial letter in which she said that I might come for a visit. The prospect of that visit was both exciting and frightening.

When the time came for the visit, I was quite nervous. Still, I was delighted to be able to see the convent and to talk with the Mother Superior. I stayed a week and during this time was able to see the nuns at their daily tasks. They certainly seemed happy as they went about their work, and I noticed that they laughed a lot and appeared to enjoy one another's company.

At the end of my visit, I was quite sure this was the life for me. So when the Mother Superior told me that she would be happy to receive me as a postulant, I was overjoyed. We set a date for my entrance, which was to be three months later.

Those three months of waiting seemed the longest of my life. I spent the time getting my clothes ready and making other preparations. I also tried to learn as much as possible about religious life, for I wanted to be as ready as I could be for what lay ahead.

But Why Do They Wear Such "Funny" Clothes?

You have probably wondered about the religious habit worn by nuns. Let me tell you that, far from being funny, it is both practical and beautiful. True, it is different from ordinary clothes, but then nuns are different from ordinary women in the sense that they have dedicated their lives entirely to God.

The religious habit serves several purposes. First, it is a sign of the nun's consecration to God. Just as a wedding ring proclaims that a woman is married, so the religious habit proclaims that a nun is the bride of Christ. Second, it promotes humility and mortification. By wearing a plain, simple dress, the nun is reminded constantly that she has given up all vanity and self-seeking. Third, it promotes unity among the members of the community. When all are dressed alike, there are no distinctions of wealth or social position.

The different parts of the habit all have meaning. The veil is a symbol of modesty and recollection. The long skirt and sleeves provide complete coverage of the body, promoting the virtue of modesty. The simple design eliminates anything that might attract attention to the wearer rather than to her work.

Far from being a burden, I have found the religious habit to be a great help in living the religious life. It serves as a constant reminder of my consecration to God and helps me to maintain the proper attitude of mind and heart.

All Right—What "Goes On" Behind Convent Walls?

As a curious grade-schooler, I joined a group walking up and down in front of the nuns' convent. We spoke about this or that nun, but came back over and over to the same old question, "What does a convent look like on the inside?" You, too, may be interested, so I'll give you a personally conducted tour.

A convent, you know, is a place where we religious women live and work under the direction of a Superior. Sometimes a convent is attached to the school, the hospital, or the orphanage where we work.

Work? Yes, that's the term applied to the task to which we are assigned annually by the Superior. We are in the service and, like soldiers, we don't take orders and like them. Teaching and caring for the sick, for orphans, and for the aged, for the wayward, and for the poor, are the major works carried on by the many active Orders in the Church. Kitchens and laundries don't function by themselves. There is clerical work, too, connected with every institution staffed by nuns.

Wise Superiors place us in the work for which they deem us best suited. Just as you might expect, God helps a nun in any work that she carries on through obedience. Nuns, too, are well-qualified for the work entrusted. Occasionally, however, in an emergency, it does happen that a nun is assigned to a task for which she is not trained. The work does not suffer, though, for the nun, conscious of her insufficient training, works doubly hard to offset her deficiency.

But to get back to these buildings called convents! Those connected with hospitals and orphanages are often large. As a rule, a motherhouse or a novitiate building is large. A motherhouse, by the way, is the principal house of an Order, where the Superiors reside and, frequently, the aged and infirm nuns, also.

Other convents are small, as is the case in small country towns where three or four teaching nuns live in an unpretentious building. But, large or small, all nuns love their convent home, of which Christ is the Head.

The Nuns at Home

So much for the outside. And the inside? The chapel is, of course, the most important and best-loved spot. Clean white altar linens, flowers, and lights are the offerings of hearts in love with Christ. Nuns spend from three to four hours daily in the chapel, for they know it is only by companionship with Christ that they can come to reflect His image.

In every convent the chapel is a magnet that irresistibly draws our hearts. From my early morning visit to my last goodnight visit, I come often, during the intervening hours, to the feet of Christ. Daily I assist at Mass and meditate in the chapel. Community prayers bring me back at regular hours. Before and after meals, I have a short visit with Christ. Before and after school, before leaving the convent for a shopping trip or a visit to a dentist, I turn naturally toward the chapel. My daily rosary, way of the cross, and examination of conscience all find me before the Tabernacle. Finally, the day closes with night prayers in the chapel.

After the chapel, the focal point of a convent is the recreation room. As in every room, of course, there is a crucifix. Pictures, statues, tables and chairs are ordinary fixtures; a piano, record-player, radio, books, and magazines lend an air of informality to a room where the nuns daily gather, by rule, for periods of relaxation.

The dining room, called the refectory, is quite plain. A picture of the Last Supper usually adorns a wall, while tables, chairs, and a serving table complete the furnishings. Usually there is a service room nearby for dishwashing activities, and a kitchen which differs from any other kitchen only that it boasts few gadgets and labor-saving devices.

In most Orders, every nun has her own sleeping room. Besides a crucifix, religious picture or statue, each room contains a bed, a chair, a lamp, sometimes a small bookcase, and a closet, a chifferobe, a desk and lavatory. Certainly there is nothing elaborate about the room where a nun rests for seven or eight hours.

And that brings us to the parlor. I recall hearing, a few years ago, the apt simile, "As stiff as a convent parlor." By accident, rather than by intent, the furniture is sometimes a bit stiff and not too comfortable. When we consider, however, that the parlor is probably the least used room in a convent, and that the furniture is often a donation, we need not be surprised if appointments leave much to be desired from the artistic standpoint.

In addition to the rooms mentioned, all convents include a laundry, a trunk room, a store room, and adequate bathing facilities.

Nothing Fancy

But, we are sometimes asked, why are convents so often bleak and drab? Whether they are so or not depends, doesn't it, on the viewpoint? Often that is the way persons mistakenly regard religious life, and so they tack the epithets "bleak and drab" on our convent homes. You have never seen a convent chapel that was bleak and drab, have you? Neither have I, if I have been in hundreds of chapels.

Don't forget that ours is a life of self-denial. House furnishings are usually donated and beggars can't be choosers. But the furnishings are stuffy, you may protest. Some do protest, you know, even if the chapel is the convent. The rest of the building? Well, providing the appearance of the rest of the building doesn't mean too much to any of us. How inconsistent we should be if we let architectural symmetry or period furniture constitute our happiness.

Cleanliness Counts

Our main consideration is that our convent be clean. Every nun is responsible for the cleanliness of a certain part of the convent. Every nun? Yes, each has an assigned task; as the result of her novitiate training, a nun is as ready to don an apron and scrub a floor as she is to teach a class. Each nun takes pride in doing well her share of the housekeeping in God's house. And when Christmas, Easter, Vow, and Anniversary Days come around, our joy expresses itself in attractive decorations not only in the chapel but throughout the rest of the convent.

Our tour of the inside over, let's see about those high walls that surround some convents. Frankly, I've never lived behind a high wall or even a low one, but I have seen some walls. It may come as something of a shock to our well-meaning critics to learn that the walls are not for the purpose of keeping nuns in but for keeping intruders out.

No one can deny that nuns have a right in their convent to the privacy of their home, and may take any means they deem necessary to insure this privacy.

Has it occurred to you that the walls surrounding some convents are merely a product of the architectural style in vogue when the convents were erected? On every side, you may see large estates surrounded by walls quite as high — (I venture this statement without a yardstick in hand!) — as those around any convent.

It seems strange to us that so many make so much over "convent walls." Perhaps the rumors still afloat about "convent walls" are a hangover from the time when a considerable number of books and tracts claiming to be the life stories of "ex-nuns" were rather widely circulated. In many cases, the women who wrote these stories, or permitted them to be written, had never been nuns. They had spent some time in a Convent of the Good Shepherd, but as wayward girls, not as nuns. There are Convents of the Good Shepherd in many large cities and they are uniformly surrounded by high walls as are other reformatories and correctional institutions. They are reformatories for delinquent girls conducted by nuns, and the inmates are usually committed to them by civil authorities.

So much for the walls. Whether or not nuns get enough to eat is really their own business, but since the question has been put to me, I may as well answer it here.

Good Food

We nuns are well-fed. The gaunt, hollow-cheeked, anemic individual just doesn't exist except in some morbid imaginations. In the Order to which I belong, and I believe my experience is typical of all nuns, Superiors realize that we cannot live a strenuous life of prayer and work unless we are properly nourished. So at our convent table, although the food is not fancy, a balanced diet is provided in abundance. Special treats in the line of food are always in order on special feasts and holidays.

The question of food — and the bills — quite naturally brings us to the matter of income. Just what revenue has a nun? She has no private income, let me assure you. The vow of poverty takes care of that. The monthly salary of a teaching nun — (and I am one) — runs between thirty-five and sixty-five dollars, a sum far below that which her professional preparation warrants. This entire salary goes to the Order, not to the nun herself; but on its part, the Order has the obligation of providing for all of its members, whether they be active, aged, or infirm.

It is this very donation of our services which constitutes part of our remuneration — the joy of wearing a garb which sets us apart as special friends of Christ. On our Clothing Day, every dress was blessed at the altar; consequently, our garb is our holy habit. Our loving gratitude to God for being allowed to wear His livery prompts us to say a prayer as we don every article of dress. Each part of our religious garb is a symbol or a reminder of some phase of our life. My veil, for example, reminds me that I have given my heart to Christ, that for the sake of His love, I desire to avoid the admiration of all others.

My love for my garb, then, and the special significance of every part of it prompts me to keep it clean and mended. Finally, my religious dress, which some may term funny, was worn by my foundress and many holy members of my Order, and so it is a constant reminder to me to strive to grow in the spirit of my Order, in the love of Christ and of the neighbor.

Only a nun can know the deep joy of wearing a garb which sets us apart as special friends of Christ.

We take care of the sick, we teach, we do other work for souls for the love of God, not for the sake of a salary.

Do nuns like their clothes? That is a question that often occurred to me as a girl. Maybe you, too, are wondering if nuns, like God's own penguins, like to dress in black and white. I believe I answer for all nuns when I reply that we all love our habits — as we call them — and are perfectly happy wearing them, no matter how strange they may look to others. There are natural advantages, even, to wearing a uniform. We save time by never having to decide what to wear, and we know that we are always in style — God's style.

Come, See What Life Is Like In a Convent!

When I first entered the convent as a postulant, everything was new and different. The schedule seemed rigorous at first, but I soon learned that it was designed to help us grow in holiness and to make our work more effective.

The period of formation lasts several years. First comes the postulancy, usually lasting six months to a year. During this time, the candidate learns about religious life and begins to adapt to convent routine. If she proves suitable, she becomes a novice and receives the religious habit.

The novitiate lasts two years and is a time of intensive training in the spiritual life. The novice learns to pray, to meditate, to practice the virtues needed for religious life. She studies the history and constitutions of her Order and receives instruction in the particular work of her community.

During my novitiate, I saw several girls leave. Two of them were not able to take the religious life seriously enough. So, I soon discovered. One novice became ill with no hope of recovery, and so could not be allowed to take her vows. Religious life is not for "weak sisters"; a girl must have ordinary good health to be able to carry on the work of the Order. Then there was the elderly novice who admired the life, but had been her own boss so long that she simply could not learn to obey. To permit such a person to take a vow of obedience would, of course, be simply out of the question. Finally, there were two novices who were advised to leave, since, in the judgment of the superiors, they had no vocation to the Order. Thus was the truth brought home to me that the prime purpose of the novitiate is to provide sincere candidates a period of trial and testing.

No Order wants members who are not "sold" on religious life as practiced in that Order. It is good to know that the door swings both ways; it is far easier to get out than in.

The daily routine during the novitiate was carefully planned. Morning prayer and meditation came first, followed by Mass and Communion. After breakfast, we had classes in Scripture, Church history, the constitutions of our Order, and the spiritual life. The afternoons were usually devoted to domestic work—cleaning, cooking, sewing, and the like. Evening brought more prayers, spiritual reading, and recreation.

The religious life of joyous self-denial was clearly explained to me. But youth is courageous, is idealistic, and I was not afraid of the challenge presented by a life of labor, prayer, self-denial, for I had also tasted some of its joys. Daily I studied the rules and constitution and heard them explained. I was shown how to overcome my faults, to root out, one by one, the unlovely traits of character, the faults that would prevent me from showing forth in my life the likeness of Christ. All of this, I was told, would be a life-long task and that I should not be discouraged at my slow progress.

The example of my novitiate companions was a tremendous help to me. Of a naturally lively and cheerful disposition, I saw with relief that their cheerfulness and gaiety were no hindrance, but rather a positive help in their earnest spiritual striving.

I came to see that true happiness for a nun lies in giving all to God with no holding back or counting the cost. During these years, God was lavishly generous to me in the graces that He gave me to help me to understand and to love the religious life.

Almost before I knew it, the two years had sped by and it was again time for an interview with the Bishop's delegate. I sounded well the depths of my soul; yes, I was sure that I wanted to stay, that I wanted to pronounce my vows. Again there was an eight day retreat during which I made a general confession of all the sins of my past life. I wanted to be spotless as I made a complete offering of myself to Christ. Again the chapel was filled with relatives and friends, for it was the day when my white veil of a beginner in religious life was exchanged for the black veil I was to wear till death. I say, till death, for even on that day when I pronounced the vows which were temporary, I knew in my heart that, with God's help, I had made them forever. Of the favors with which God showered me on that great day, I cannot tell; only those who have given themselves entirely to God know, as I know, the joys that He gives on Vow Day. And that joy deepened every day of the three years that followed.

So, for the last time, I told the Bishop's delegate who examined us before final vows, that I was perfectly satisfied, that I was sure I wished to spend my life as a member of the Order I had chosen. Only on this condition does the Church allow her children to make perpetual vows. Herein does she show her wisdom, I thought, in leaving a nun perfectly free to remain or to leave at the expiration of her temporary vows.

Show Me A Happier Family — If You Can

May I present my religious family? I'm proud of them and I would like you to see them through my eyes. First let me assure you that they are real women, every one of them. You see, in changing their garb, they did not alter their sex; they are truly feminine.

With truly feminine fastidiousness, nuns keep not only their convents but themselves spotless. They are, without doubt, the cleanest people I know. To mention but a few tasks, washing, mending, and pressing are routine jobs for every nun.

Nuns are orderly people, too. Just try leaving things around and you'd be told, ever so courteously but quite plainly, to put your things where they belong. The old saw, "A place for everything and everything in its place" finds literal fulfillment in every convent.

Because nuns are real women, as I said at the start, they are kind, sympathetic, understanding. Let physical distress, worry, or any other trial afflict a nun and she will know at once the tenderness and Christ-like charity of her Sisters. The kindness my Sisters show you, they have first shown me.

My Sisters are gifted women, each of whom has been given the opportunity of cultivating her God-given talents. This one is a shark at math; that one handles science classes exceptionally well; a third is a splendid musician who can whip up a program in nothing flat. Each is a responsible person, not an automaton; consequently, each is given credit for being able to handle her assigned task satisfactorily and is allowed enough leeway to insure her having interest in her work.

We all love real people. You will love these Sisters of mine, for they are just what they appear to be; there is no masquerading, no hypocrisy. For a nun, who is so completely God's very own possession, the very idea of a double life is unthinkable.

Just because all wear the same garb, it should not be supposed for an instant that all my Sisters think alike. Quite the contrary. Each is a distinct personality, and individual, not a carbon copy of the next nun. A discussion of a book, or of a play, or even of a football game, for instance, is always interesting simply because there is a free expression of ideas and, not infrequently, a sharp clash of opinion.

Each nun has her own mannerisms, her own little faults of character, for the simple reason that she is human. Take one little nun in my family. No matter how promptly she may move toward the chapel when the bell rings for prayers, she invariably comes in at the last minute, just a little out of breath as she kneels down in her place. Then there is the one who walks too fast and chirps her responses to the prayers just an instant ahead of the others. And there is the absent-minded nun who leaves her spectacles at school and asks, yet regularly, apologetically, you to return to the school with her. But slow, fast, or absent-minded though they be, I love them all, these Sisters of mine. Don't they charitably put up with my numerous weaknesses and foibles?

Some of these nuns I know so well that I can almost predict what each will say or do in a given situation. They are characteristic in every convent.

And my Sisters, and all nuns as well, are idealists, perfectionists. Freely have they dedicated themselves to a life in which they continually strive for perfection, because of their strong love for Christ. This striving is a steady effort, not a thing of fits and starts. The vows of religion and the rules and constitutions of their Order keep nuns in there pitching all the time. With such a goal as perfection before them, the nuns I know are earnest about their life.

Their very obligations, freely contracted, make them take their life and their work seriously. Because they are interested in the "here" and in the "hereafter," they refuse to fritter their time away in useless pursuits.

But that is far from saying that they are long-faced, gloomy individuals. On the contrary, and this is most important — that they have freely made a sacrifice of certain joys and pleasures which many persons, for one reason or another, are compelled to forego.

And so it is correct to say that one source of the deep content which floods the hearts and souls of my Sisters is the total absence of emotional conflict. With charming poise and self-possession, they go about their daily work. They have all that they want from life; they are content. They do not need nor want any sympathy.

Among the happiest women I know, my Sisters top the list. A happiness born of inward satisfaction permeates their lives — expression, speech, manner. You have doubtless heard the old charge, that nuns are women who have been disappointed in love. Nothing is farther from the truth. My Sisters — and I include myself — were not left; they did the leaving. They understood what they were giving up, too, and willingly made the sacrifice. Furthermore, they do not, as so many people think, close their minds to the thought and the nobility of a generous life in the world, of marriage, of home, family. The thought of all this might be, indeed, very appealing; but the nun well knows that real love is only the love that we have denied ourselves. We draw spiritual support and strength from the good example all around us. All in a community have the same aim — the pursuit of holiness — and this common purpose serves as a sympathetic bond uniting all. Around us are gathered models of every virtue; from one, we learn humility, from another, patience, from a third, obedience.

Daily striving to become a champion for Christ brings great peace of soul — not a small advantage of our religious life. Daily examination of conscience and weekly confession empty the soul that God may fill it. By cultivating a right sense of values, we nuns come to find deep joy in spiritual things. The more a nun gives herself to God, the more does He give Himself to her, and this is pure joy.

Compare with this joy of union with God, we deem as nothing the pleasures we have freely renounced. Day in and day out we know that we are living our lives as we have elected to live them, in conformity with the Will of God. For a nun there is little disillusionment, as there so often is for many in other states of life. We nuns knew what kind of life would be ours when we joined the Order. By that, I do not mean that we foresaw every individual trial that would become to us; but I mean that we knew ours would be a life of self-denial, and we freely embraced that life. We also know that as nuns we can help our neighbor more than would have been possible had we remained outside the convent.

There is among nuns a spirit of generosity which rules out constant "griping" when, for example, extra work falls to their share. Thus it is that we nuns have a keen sense of humor. We need it to take gracefully the teasing that is part of the give and take of community life. Those who think the thoughts of Christ, speak His words and do His works, show by their calm exterior that they deem it an honor to keep a home for Christ, to be associated with Him in the noblest work possible — that of helping Him to save the souls for which He died.

On the whole, we nuns experience a definite inward calm and it is outwardly manifested by a serene, cheerful bearing.

And This Is Our Reward!

Volumes have been written on the advantages of a nun's religious life and there is still more to be said. One of the most obvious is the utter security which it brings.

In the midst of world upheavals and stock market crashes, nuns enjoy freedom from financial worry. If a new wing has to be erected, or a fire-gutted building has to be replaced, only the Superiors need be concerned about the finances.

A second natural advantage of our life, and a very real one, is the perfect old-age security that it insures. In illness and in old age, we receive the best possible care; indeed, the very knowing this is a potent factor in preserving our mental health. In illness, sorrow, worry, disappointments, misunderstandings and trials, which are inseparable from every life, we nuns can count on the powerful support of sisterly kindness and understanding.

Steady work is another advantage we nuns enjoy. A nun finds deep satisfaction in knowing that, as long as she is able, she will always have a definite job assigned to her. In every convent, there is plenty of work to be done, of one kind or another. Superiors try to assign a Sister work for which she is not only fitted but for which she has a liking. Do we not do best the things that we enjoy doing?

For all of us nuns, our community is a source of very real help and happiness. For each of us, this group takes the place of the family and consecrated themselves to Him, we two left the Order after final vows. her close and with those who stayed did so, I repeat, of our own free will. We loved and

still love Christ can offer. So don't feel sorry for nuns; you're wasting your pity on us — the happiest group of women in the world.

Certainly the prospect of a happy death may be classed as an advantage of religious life, and we nuns hope for just that. Daily meditation on the shortness of life convinces us that death is not the end, but rather the very important beginning of our real life with God. We point all our spiritual efforts to one end, that of dying well. Passing worldly events are robbed of their importance by comparison with everlasting spiritual considerations. Many persons push the thought of death into the background; we nuns encourage the thought and daily pray for the grace of dying well. Have we not seen our fellow religious full of peace and hope? And we have every reason to expect the same grace from God's liberality if we persevere in loving Him.

Our life on earth has been a daily struggle, a reaching out toward God. After oh, so short a time, which we call life, God will satisfy, as He alone can, the longings of our hearts for perfect union with Him.

Concerning the reward awaiting us, there is no doubt in our hearts. We have Christ's own words for it. "And everyone who has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall possess life everlasting." (Matt. XIX: 29).

By a special grace of God we nuns have understood that fundamental, all-important lesson of our Catholic Faith, that man is created by God to know, love, and serve Him in this life, and be happy with Him forever in the next. Thanks to God's help, we early came to realize that God alone could satisfy our hearts.

Urged on by this conviction, we cut ourselves off from human love in order to free our hearts for love divine.

Heaven! This is the payoff —

I have never regretted my choice, and I know that I never shall. Every nun I know would make the same choice again if she had to do it over. We are the happiest women in the world because we have found the secret of true happiness—complete surrender to God's will.

The life of a nun is not easy, but it is deeply satisfying. It demands sacrifice, but it offers rewards that far outweigh the sacrifices. It requires giving up much that the world considers valuable, but it offers in return something infinitely more valuable—the peace and joy of a life lived in perfect harmony with God's plan.

To you who may be wondering whether God is calling you to this life, I can only say: if you feel drawn to give your life completely to God, don't be afraid to investigate. Talk to nuns, visit convents, pray for light to know God's will. You will never regret following His call, wherever it may lead you.

List of Pamphlets Available

List of pamphlets available at the time of publication, several titles, free of charge:

1. The Bible is a Catholic Book

2. Christ's Seven Sacraments
3. The Holy Sacrifice — the Catholic Mass
4. Why the Catholic Church says "Investigate" — Masons, Inquisition, Nuns
5. Speaking of Tolerance — Controversial periods in history
6. The Bible Is Not Our Sole Guide
7. Why Catholics Believe As They Do — Existence of God, Immortality
8. A Short Story of the Popes
9. Let's Stick to Moses — Ten Commandments explained
10. But Can It Be Found in the Bible? — Bible not sole rule of faith
11. Remember the Sabbath to Keep It Holy — The "Sabbath Question"
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13. Yes... I Condemned the Catholic Church — Drinking and Gambling, Annulments, Mixed Marriages
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22. The Reformation. Was It Reform or Revolt?
23. I Was Warned About the Catholic Church — Religious Liberty
24. Why a Woman Needs the Catholic Faith!
25. The Early Years of the Catholic Church — First three centuries
26. Yes... A Priest Can Forgive Your Sins — Sacrament of Penance
27. But Why Don't You Pray to the Saints? — Communion of Saints
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30. This Was the Faith of Our Fathers
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34. But Why the Candles, Holy Water and Beads? — Sacramentals
35. Yes, the Mother of God Will Help You!
36. Yes, Miracles Happened at Fatima
37. But Why the Candles, Holy Water and Beads? — Sacramentals
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40. The Way to Everlasting Life... The Catholic Church
41. The Real Secret of Successful Marriage
42. I Am a Catholic Priest
43. Yes... A Priest Can Forgive Your Sins — Sacrament of Penance
44. But Why Don't You Pray to the Saints? — Communion of Saints
45. God's Story of Creation — Genesis

46. Is the Catholic Church Out of Place Here? — Catholicism and Loyalty
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49. Does It Pay to be a Catholic? — How to be a Catholic
50. What Makes a Woman Choose Such a Life? — Life of a Catholic Nun
51. Think About Death and Start to Live — Catholic attitude toward death
52. What Do You Find Wrong With the Catholic Church? — Loss of faith, how to return to the Church
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