

BY JEANNE SCHINTO

THE BELLES OF ST. MARY'S

Coming to terms with a Catholic education



ST. MARY'S SCHOOL, GREENWICH, CONN.

They still hold a heady power over me, like ether, especially their voices. On the phone Sister Sharon speaks just above a whisper, prayerlike and little-girl sweet. How can this be the same woman I knew 20 years ago? She is saying that yes, she'd love me to come see her. She's at the Heart of Mary Provincialate now, in Stamford, Connecticut. "God bless you!" she says to end our conversation, and, not used to that sort of thing any longer, all I can manage to reply is, "Same."

One town away from Stamford, at St. Mary Girls' High School in Greenwich, when I was not quite 14, Sister Sharon in her brown Bernardine Sisters robes struck me as intellect personified, a bolt of it, pure, perfect, like the angels were supposed to have been, Lucifer included: I detested her. In the fall of 1965, I attended the first few meetings of a literary magazine she was beginning, called *Prism*. Too shy, too inexperienced to make much of an impression on her, I felt I was being ignored. Sister Sharon, tiny, precise, with a brown beauty mark on one cheek — she was handsome. Sister Sharon, verbal, witty, self-confident — in short, everything I wanted to be but wasn't — would tolerate nothing less than excellence. One day I walked into her classroom to find she had taken off her veil (though the white wimple around her head remained). She loved to shock us, to get our attention in dramatic ways. She got my attention, and more. I left St. Mary's and Catholic school education for good at the end of the 1965-66 school year.

Every Catholic, lapsed or otherwise, seems to have sister stories — bitter ones, irreverent ones, maybe more apocryphal than true. But mine have a slightly different ending from most. One recent wintry weekend I returned to Connecticut to see five of my former teachers in three different cities, to bear witness to the reality of it all. For the fact remains that my Catholic education, like it or not, shaped me, who I am and who I have become. I attended parochial schools in Greenwich for 11 years, starting 30 years ago with nursery school and ending with that last,

JEANNE SCHINTO IS A FREE-LANCE WRITER WHO LIVES IN LAWRENCE.

miserably climactic ninth grade.

My leaving parochial school wasn't only Sister Sharon's fault. Who can be completely happy anywhere at that awkward age? I was suffering from a special brand of moral confusion as well as from a badly bruised ego.

First, the ego. I have many memories of bruises, but one is particularly strong. It was the spring of eighth grade, and I was sitting up in a hospital bed, my tonsils gone. My mother gave me the bad news. I was in the "B" track for ninth grade. The B track. I took that verdict like an ax to the back of the head. (It plagues me still. It's why I am an overachiever today.) In ninth grade, for Sister Sharon and the other teachers, I set out to prove myself — something I'm still trying to do, I'm afraid. For a judgment decreed by nuns was not just on your scholastics but on your very soul, your self, and I had been decreed a B self. How to get out of it?

When my father went to speak to the nuns that summer, he was told that there weren't going to be any tracks after all. But by the way, it was my math grades that did it, that held me back. I was relieved, but the relief lasted only until the first day of class, when it was clear that there *were* tracks (do nuns lie?), though they weren't called that. In fact, they weren't called anything. They weren't even mentioned. But anyone with any sense of class standings could see for herself how students were divided. I was in the B track (albeit at the top of it) — average, mediocre, so-so, slightly soiled, imperfect. At least, that's how I interpreted it.

In ninth grade I knocked myself out academically. I ended it with a high-90s average as well as student-of-the-month and scholar-of-the-month awards. I wrote my first short story and read it to the class — breathless, blushing, animated, taking all the parts in different voices. I remember not quite understanding what had come over me, though I realized something had, something as powerful as religion had once been for me. That year I pushed myself physically, too. I went out for the swim team and water ballet. Then one *Continued on page 30*

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day before class I found myself in the lavatory crying and unable to stop.

The moral confusion is a little more difficult to define. The problem is that what the good sisters taught me wasn't necessarily what I learned. And it's these principles and habits of mind that got me into so much psychic trouble and ultimately led to my leaving St. Mary's and enrolling in a public high school. Ironically, however, it's these same principles and habits for which I am thankful today, or, at least, which I cling to most assuredly. They are also what I had on my mind when I made plans to see the sisters again after all these years.

Nuns used to be synonymous with Catholic education. No longer. Every morning this winter I have been watching my next-door neighbors go off to Catholic school in their plaid-skirted uniforms — two girls, two years apart, just as my sister and I were. There is one huge difference, though: The girls' mother leaves the house at the same time, off to work in high heels and purple quilted coat, the principal of a Catholic elementary school in Lowell.

No wonder Catholics are confused. The lay-teaching ministry has developed as the result of shrinking numbers of men and women who choose the religious life — or even who choose to stay committed to it. For the same reason, in a season of dinner parties these days a person is likely to meet any number of ex-priests, ex-nuns, even ex-monks. And many of them will be quite open

about their own doubts and crises of faith. "I really can't even say I believe in God anymore," one former nun, seven years a Sister of St. Joseph, told me at dinner last summer. That pulled me up short. Even though, with the exception of one baptism (at which, as the godmother of a niece, I obediently stood up and renounced Satan), I have not been counted among the faithful since I was married.

Thirteen years ago, a Jesuit friend officiated at that marriage ceremony, which was held in the apartment my husband and I would share. It could be considered the sacrament of matrimony, I suppose, because a priest performed it. On the other hand, my husband is Jewish, and the priest suggested that we might wish to have the knot tied again, at City Hall, because he wasn't exactly marrying us according to the laws of his church. And, as he explained, that was the legal requirement. (We didn't follow his advice.) Ten years later, when my husband and I wanted to ask the priest to our anniversary party, we heard he was at Columbia University and tried to reach him by mail. No reply. Later, we learned that he had left the priesthood. So, we thought, we kept our vows, but he didn't keep his.

It's not only the Catholic church that's suffering from the effects of rapid and widespread change, of course. At the recent 11-day synod in Vatican City, called to "relive" the "spiritual climate" of the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65, some bishops argued that the church's problems were due less to Vatican II's sweeping reforms than to the stresses and strains of massive change outside the church, in the world at large.

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In our own secular culture, the effects of profound social and technological changes seem nowhere more apparent than in our schools, and the so-called back-to-basics movement may be a reaction to it. Some would even suggest that this movement, coupled with a new and growing gen-

eration of school-age children, may signal a surge of interest in parochial school education, long-famous for its ironhanded discipline and non-nonsense teaching techniques. But is that really what my Catholic education was all about?

I wasn't so sure I would be able to find the sisters. The salty comment of that ex-nun friend was, "Oh, all the good ones have left." In any case, I knew I wouldn't be looking for them at the old schools.

The site of St. Mary Grammar School in Greenwich is a hole in the ground — an excavation waiting for an office building, retail stores, a church assembly hall, and parking spaces for 172 cars on three underground levels. The school closed in 1972. St. Mary Girls' High School is now defunct as well. In the same building is something called the Greenwich Catholic Elementary School System, and on the phone, the principal, Gerrie M. Desio, laughs when I ask her if she is a nun. The school faculty consists of 26 lay teachers and four nuns. When I was attending Catholic schools in Greenwich, there were four lay teachers to the 12 nuns. There used to be four parochial elementary schools in town: St. Mary's, St. Catherine's, St. Paul's, and St. Roch's. I'm intrigued that this new school, a modern consolidation, isn't named after a saint.

The next logical place to look for nuns is at their motherhouses. I made some inquiries — at the Sisters of Mercy headquarters in West Hartford and at the Bernardines' in Villanova, Pennsylvania. A few of the nuns I inquired about had left, I was told perfunctorily, a few had died, but many of them were scattered around Connecticut. How strange that I was thrilled by the news of this continuity, at the idea that they had kept their faith (even as I hadn't kept mine), that they'd be there for me. I chose five of the ones I most wanted to see and wrote them each a letter.

The memories of all of them then began to well up, and it made me feel anxious. But I was exhilarated, too. Isn't it a fantasy of every Catholic school child to go back as an adult and confront these mythically large and powerful figures from the past — even to befriend them — and see what comes of it? The plan also presented a challenge — to get my memories right, because I'd be pitting those memories against the real things, not just versions of the fictional Sister Mary Ignatius.

I remember very clearly one scene during first grade in the coeducational St. Mary Grammar School. It was Halloween 1957, I was six weeks short of being 6 years old, and Sister de Chantal was my teacher. The same nun I'd had in kindergarten, she was old, with wrinkled hands and a habit of affectionately pinching children's cheeks hard enough to cause pain. The father of one of my classmates had been taught by Sister de Chantal when he was a child. Sister had history — ancient — and I liked her, and I thought she liked me. There was a line of smart, oversized girls, the best students in the class, who sat in the last row, farthest from Sister's desk. Eventually I was moved to sit with them, though each was easily twice my size. This was progress.

On Halloween night, however, things weren't going well. I was sick in bed with a cold and couldn't go trick-or-treating. Not only was I sick, but it was pouring rain: These would have been reasons enough to cry, as I remember doing, but it wasn't over anything to do with Halloween. I was crying but not thinking about Halloween at all. I was thinking about my schoolwork. I hadn't been able to master the tearing out of pages from a perforated notebook, and I was beside myself with worry, probably sick from worry, not from a cold at all.

I told no one about this worry, however. Certainly not my older sister, Jan, so impressive in third grade, nor my parents, who didn't ask me what the trouble was, as I recall. Anyway, why

should they have suspected that I was crying for any reason other than that it was Halloween and I was sick in bed and unable to go collecting candy in the rain with the rest of the neighborhood children?

It was Sister de Chantal, of the Sisters of Mercy, who first told me stories of sin and punishment and eventual redemption. In kindergarten, she would gather us all together at her feet. We were close enough to touch her starchy-smelling black habit, the huge-beaded rosary that hung from her black leather belt to the floor. It was she, also, who first gave me the idea that perfection was the goal — unattainable, but a wor-

thy goal all the same.

In first, second, and third grades, the pencils we used were fat and green — with no erasers. We had to “Think first, then write!” No crossing out allowed. Then, on the first day of fourth grade, we began using cartridge ink pens — not ballpoints — and there were to be no cross-outs when using ink, either. There was a product called ink eradicator, a liquid which took a long time to dry (“Patience!”) and worked poorly, anyway. I started to put my mistakes within parentheses, which made for some pretty silly paragraphs, but at least they weren’t marred with unsightly cross-outs.

One sheet of yellow newsprint paper (or sometimes just one half-sheet torn ever so carefully) was what we were given for completion of our arithmetic homework. An error committed at home could be erased, of course, but if the eraser tore the paper — when there was only one sheet to work with — what could be done? Panic, terror — until an exact-size sheet of yellow newsprint could be found, for Sister would not tolerate a sheaf of different-sized homework papers.

Things are never pure, perfect, or unblemished on Earth, we learned. Anything earthly — silence, a blank piece of pa-

per, the state of grace — can so easily be soiled by just one wrong mark. If you sin, your soul may be wiped clean over and over again in confession, like a blackboard slate, but there is little chance of your keeping it that way for very long. Some souls — criminals’ souls — have so many black marks on them, one more hardly matters. But the soul of a child? One black mark is conspicuous and weighs heavily on the conscience.

At home, I would search through drawers, in vain, for a pencil with or without an eraser. I could find none — only a poor excuse for a ballpoint pen, which was clogged, and when it

did write, it wrote green. It must have been a dream, a child’s bad dream. What home doesn’t have plenty of pens and pencils? Still, I remember that search as vividly as I do other, real events.

Funny how I *don’t* recall a single word of the *Baltimore Catechism*, that infamous relic of the faith — pieces of dogma broken up into a question-and-answer format. In fourth grade, we had to memorize the entire booklet, several answers a night, then recite one of them when called upon at random by Sister Marita in religion class the next day. (I had a lay teacher for all

the rest of my subjects that year.)

When Sister Marita walked into our classroom after lunch — her small shoulders slightly rounded, white face wrinkled, pinched, starkly contrasted to the black of her veil — the class' collective stomach fluttered. If you missed even one word in your answer — and of course you had only one chance — you had to stand and tremble by the cloakroom for the rest of the period. I missed only one answer all year and stood in humiliation, smelling the remains of lunches in people's coat pockets, feeling nauseous in the overheated classroom.

If I were to become a nun, I thought, it would not be to emulate the likes of what my child's eyes saw as the witch-faced Marita. She had been in the convent at least 50 years when I encountered her. (She had celebrated her Golden Jubilee, we were told.) No, that wasn't the nun image I nurtured. Ingrid Bergman, Loretta Young — that would be more like it. Audrey Hepburn, Debbie Reynolds, Mary Martin, too. Or *did* I covet some of the power of Sister Marita? She had the whole class at hair-trigger at-



Fifth-grade pupils assemble in the schoolyard at St. Mary Grammar School in June 1962 for confirmation-day exercises.

tention every afternoon. Mothers, even, were made to quake. Some took their children out of St. Mary's completely if their luck pulled a whole year of Marita, instead of having her just for religion.

In spite of Marita, in spite of the nun I had next — the old, befuddled Sister Albert — in fifth grade I began to think seriously about joining a convent. I collected brochures by mail from religious orders. I

corresponded with a number of directors of vocations (who may or may not have suspected that their assiduous pen pal was 10). And each night in a ritual that strikes me now as faintly compulsive, decidedly odd — a ritual of my own devising — I arranged all my vocational pamphlets in meticulous rows on my bed, surveyed my cache proudly, "meditated" on the sincerity of my wish to be God's bride, and then packed up all my paraphernalia again to await the

next evening's perusal.

"Dear Friend" began the letter from the sister at Maryknoll, the famous first order of American missionary nuns founded in 1912 by Mary Josephine Rogers of Jamaica Plain. Over and over again I marveled at how that salutation hit just the right tone of restrained but hopeful familiarity with me. It was only after I had received a duplicate "Dear Friend" missive from the order a week or two later — in response to another eager query of mine — that I understood it was a form response, my first from any quarter. But that scarcely deterred me. I was to become such a pest to Maryknoll, the order of my choice, that they were eventually forced to hint not-so-broadly at the busyness of their staff — hence their inability to answer my letters as promptly as I urged them to.

In class, I watched poor Sister Albert being frustrated by the cocky boys. Other people's sister stories often include tales of corporal punishment, but Sister Albert is the only nun I've ever known to strike a student. This she did with a fist to the underside of Michael Burns' chin, *after* she'd told him to

stick out his tongue.

When Sister Albert would leave the room the class would explode. One day, Sister Maria Cordia, the sixth-grade teacher from across the hall, heard the noise and swung open our door. Silence. Statues. But Dicky Ferguson was out of his seat. Sister Maria Cordia — a young nun, thin and straight-shouldered, with rimless glasses, arms crossed — just stared at him. She gave me the impression she'd been around the block a time or two herself. When Dicky, snickering, asked for permission to get a drink of water, Sister shot back, "Christ didn't get a drink of water when He was dying on the cross!" Foiled, embarrassed, Dicky, prime troublemaker that he was, crawled back to his seat. I was — I think the whole class was — very impressed.

It was because I was so taken with Sister Maria Cordia that my notion of entering religious life was really galvanized. It was that and my chance finding, in our fifth-grade classroom library, of a book called *Bernie Becomes a Nun*. Written in a simple style for young adults by Sister Ma-

ria Del Rey of Maryknoll and lavishly illustrated with black-and-white photographs, the book takes you along step-by-step with Bernadette Lynch of Brooklyn, New York, through the Maryknoll postulancy and novitiate. On the last page, the professed sister is leaving on an ocean liner for 10 years in Bolivia.

On Halloween in 1961, some friends and I visited the nuns at the convent on our trick-or-treating rounds. Sister Maria Cordia was down in the kitchen that evening, making doughnuts. The grease was absorbed in a brown paper bag, and the doughnuts were shaken with sugar in another paper bag. Sister was wearing an apron and laughing, holding the bag. I reached in. It was the first warm, homemade doughnut I had ever tasted. It was also the first time I had ever been in any part of the convent other than one of the pristine upstairs parlors.

I continued to venerate the cool, confident Sister Maria Cordia through sixth grade, even though I pulled the rotten luck of getting the other sixth-grade teacher (despite my prayers). At least Sister Maria Cor-

dia led us in exercises in the schoolyard at recess; she was in charge of Handmaids, too — a club for girls in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, the equivalent of altar boys, I suppose. Our job: to clean the church.

Sister Maria Cordia spent that summer out of town, and I corresponded with her and began to make my M's and C's like hers. (I still do.) When she wrote to tell me she wouldn't be returning to St. Mary's, I cried on my bed. I never heard from her again.

I remained pious — for a time. I heard Mass several times a week — in fact, I not only heard it but often sang it in Gregorian chants with the rest of the 450 or so pupils in the school. I went to confession weekly, received Holy Communion at every Mass attendance, and, perhaps most important, prayed daily, and several times a day at that. In fifth, sixth, and seventh grades — the years of my most intense religious fervor — it was not uncommon for me to coerce my mother or father into driving me uptown for Mass on Saturday morning. Saturday was also the usual day for confession, in the late after-



Sister Mary de Chantal, the author's kindergarten and first-grade teacher, with St. Mary's pupils in the mid 1950s.

noon, and I would often take the hour's walk there. Once I confessed on a Thursday with the rest of the school and went again on my own two days later. The priest on his side of the darkened confessional assured me that it wasn't necessary to be quite so diligent.

Nor were my parents too pleased by this saintly demeanor. I remember my father informing me he was not too keen on "Holy Joes." He need not have worried. Other things would soon distract me — boys among them, of course. But there was something else, too, which was less predictable.

In seventh grade, 1963-64, I began listening to folk music; to play the guitar; to write down the words to folk ballads and study them. And I began to understand that Catholics did not have a monopoly on morality. For the musical narratives, just like the Bible stories of Sister de Chantal and the parables of Christ, made moral sense to me. Though it did seem strange in some cases, because the lyrics were quite capable of contradicting what I'd always been taught.

One day, Sister Mary Eileen asked me to bring in my guitar and play "Blowin' in the Wind" for the class. Clear-eyed, kind-voiced, middle-aged Sister (by middle-aged I mean merely that we could see gray wisps at the edges of her wimple), she too apparently was attracted by the messages of folk music. Other Bob Dylan songs she may not have found as congenial, perhaps. For example, the bitter "Masters of War," in which he suggests to the government and other warmongers, "Even

Jesus would never forgive what you do." (The Jesus I knew was all-forgiving. Wasn't he?)

It was Sister Mary Eileen from whom I first heard the word "clique." There was one in our class, and I was part of it, and her way of trying to break it up was to ask me and a couple of other girls to try to make new friends outside of it — or at least to get new people into it, particularly the ones nobody befriended, who were being systematically left out. It worked.

We had Sister Mary Eileen for English, history, religion, and music, but for math, science, geography, and art we filed into Sister Eugene Marie's classroom. Very tall, with the regulation rimless glasses, Sister Eugene Marie rocked back and forth on her heels when she spoke to us and fluttered her long white fingers to make her point. She was verbally agile but did not flaunt it; she was witty without being sarcastic, organized without being a fanatic. She had what we were too young to call "style."

Sister Eugene Marie also was the first and last math teacher I had who made any sense. I don't ever remember her having to snap us back to attention. The voice must have helped: It was radio-announcer clear and just as energetic. A gifted teacher of art, too, she was above all modest. She brought in her own masterful watercolors to show us as examples but didn't really let on that they were hers. We had to intuit it.

Nor was this my first encounter with the pleasantly brilliant Sister Eugene Marie. She

had been head of Sodality, an after-school club for third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade girls, to which I belonged. Every week she took long strides, which made her rosary beads jangle, as she headed for a seat at the back of the classroom. A 10-year-old Madam President had taken over the running of the meeting. Parliamentary procedure for 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds? We took to it like ducks to water.

Parliamentary procedure came naturally to us, because we were already so used to being orderly. Of course, we already had to be "recognized" before speaking in class; already stood by the side of our desks when called upon to answer a question. We had to speak while standing and be silent when seated ("Seal your lips!"). Silence reigned in the halls, especially while we were changing classes, filing into or out of the lunchroom, or into or out of the school building itself.

One ring of the bell in the schoolyard: silence; freeze. Second ring: form your lines. Third: march, line after line, a long, hushed snake of navy blue up the stairs.

Some would argue that this was unnatural. At any rate, ways were found to get around the restriction. Mine, it turns out, was a warm-up for things to come: I began writing — note-writing to friends. Manic, lengthy tomes of several pages. Thick wads of paper from loose-leaf notebooks folded up small and passed from one hand to the next down the aisle of obliging fellow students. Or slipped directly into the palm of the addressee as we passed each other in the crowded, silent hallway.

Of course I was caught, in eighth grade, by Sister Albina, with her piercing blue eyes. Plump-faced and creamy-complexioned, she was obviously young but trying not to appear it. From Sister Albina I first heard the word "attitude." I had a bad one.

I disliked Sister Albina, though it was in her class that I first read Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, which remains one of my favorite books. The long short story, "The Gold Bug," by Edgar Allan Poe, also intrigued me. We had read insipid Catholic readers with "morals" for so many years.

I wasn't the only one rebel-

ling. Ian Fleming's *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* was passed around in eighth grade, the "dirty" parts dogeared. Taking mug shots across the street at Woolworth's in a Photos-While-U-Wait booth, some students held up "St. Mary's Penitentiary" signs across their chests. It was a joke, but Sister Albina wasn't amused the next day in class when she confiscated the photographs. Some students were suspended. There were boy-girl parties every weekend toward spring. Sister Albina wanted to know what went on at them. Who would tell her? Finally, a homemade bomb was exploded in the alleyway between our school and the apartment building next door. Everyone ran to the windows, everyone except the boy who'd done it. He was promptly expelled.

Note-writing seems tame compared with that. On the last day of school, I saw that Sister Albina had given me an "A" in conduct — tantamount to calling me a goodie-goodie. I tore the report card in half right in front of her. I saw her shake her head no and take steps toward me but then realize that I was beyond her disciplinary reach now. She just stood a foot

or two away from me, staring at the torn card in my hands, and looking disappointed and hurt.

In time for the 1965-66 school year, the bishop's plan to separate girls and boys for high school finally took effect, and my ninth-grade class was among the first to follow this policy. That year, too, I had terrible menstrual cramps. (My punishment for past transgressions?) But the school nurse didn't even offer me an aspirin. She merely called my mother and had her take me home.

Fear of sexuality at St. Mary Girls' High School manifested itself in other absurd ways. For example, there was a rule that no male was allowed to pick you up or drop you off at school, including your own father or brother, and especially not a boyfriend, whom you weren't supposed to have until at least your junior year anyway.

Frequently, too, our principal, Sister Walter, jowly as Richard Nixon, in white wimple, black veil, and brown robes, assembled the entire school of 220 in the auditorium-gym to tell us "stories." "Teresa" was one. Teresa, the model student

and basketball star, had dropped dead one morning during basketball practice. Luckily, as Sister Walter told it, Teresa was in the state of grace and went straight to heaven. "Gloria" was another story, entirely different from "Teresa." Gloria had gotten pregnant by Jack and subsequently showed up at a basketball game with the baby in her arms. Sister Walter said she had asked the new mother, "Gloria, where is Jack?" And Gloria said Jack had left town.

St. Mary Girls' High School began that inaugural year in a brand-new building — a rather unimaginative structure built on an estate — but next to it the original mansion still stood. Darkly Victorian, enticingly Gothic, with lots of leaded glass windows and balconies and balustrades, the mansion was strictly off-limits. Then in January 1967, the mansion burned to the ground. Foul play. *Very* gothic. But I had already left St. Mary's by then.

Dear Jeanne,
Yes, dear, I do remember you. I received your letter with great pleasure. It is wonderful to learn how well you have used your potential.

... While I have left full-time teaching in a classroom, I am the Director of our Mercy Reading Center and teach remedial reading.

... And did you know that Sister Mary Aubert, your principal at St. Mary's, is here, too?

... In case something prevents our visit, may I say that I am proud of you. Continue to use your gifts for good.

Fondly,
Sister Mary Eileen

I am not the sort to look up old friends. Why, then, after 20-odd years, these visits to the nuns? In West Hartford I discover part of my answer. I go there to see Sisters Mary Eileen, Eugene Marie, and Albina.

First the egalitarian Mary Eileen. How right it seems that, judging from her letter, she is still trying to keep people from feeling left out — trying to include Sister Mary Aubert, in this case, who is living somewhere in the vast complex of collegiate-looking brick buildings in West Hartford, too. But I'll pass on Sister Mary Aubert. What have I to say to her? On the other hand, whatever will I say to Sister Mary Eileen?

Here she is: an aureole of

white, cloud-like hair; black jumper, white blouse, long-sleeved; a black bow tie at her throat. "Want to make a visit to the chapel first?" She is smiling warmly and holding my hand. "The Blessed Sacrament is exposed," she whispers.

I don't know whether to genuflect. Do people do that anymore? Going into the pew, Sister is behind me, so I can't follow her lead. I decide to err on the side of piety. The chapel is long and narrow with an immensely high ceiling. The altar looks miles away. I'm nervous — I have been all week, in anticipation — but now I feel myself start to relax. When I hear Sister get up to leave, after just a few moments, I do, too.

Downstairs in an empty office which is also a classroom, she has set up a tea party for us, with homemade bran muffins, good butter, paper plates. We talk about her remedial reading students. "All ages from first grade through high school. Whatever kiddos come in, if we don't have a program for them, we create it." What is her technique? "We work on their self-image, their self-confidence."

I tell her about my experience with low self-esteem in the "B" track at the high school, and it seems I've been waiting to say this to her, just her, for years. "Talk about cliques!" We both shake our heads.

Not nervous at all anymore, I realize I was foolishly afraid she'd ask me questions about whether I was obeying the laws of the church. Now it quickly becomes clear she's not about to ask me personal questions, though she's eager and happy to hear anything I wish to divulge to her. I understand that I am in the presence of an exceptionally good woman, an effective teacher of children for more than 45 years. I thank her for teaching me. (This is why I've come.) I give her compliments, but she graciously refuses them.

Sister Eugene Marie chooses to use her secular name now: Constance O'Meara. She also chooses to wear secular clothes. Today she's wearing a maroon plaid kilt, white sweater-vest and blouse, and a tiny cross on a chain around her neck. She has the same long figure, the same voice, and the same sure stride that she had when I was in the seventh grade. Her hair is light, with streaks of rust and gray.

The office I follow her into is huge, with many windows. She is one of four councilors, or advisers, to the major superior of the Sisters of Mercy now. "There's a president and four vice presidents," she explains by analogy. In charge of "personnel and ministry, concerned with all aspects of the sisters' community life," she's the one to deal most directly with each nun's choice of employment.

She spent six years in all at Greenwich, then went on to graduate school at Catholic University, where she studied physics, specializing in spectroscopy, the study of the spectrum. That, then, is where the art and science and math she taught us coincide. She taught high school math and physics after graduate school, then became director of formation — in charge of novices. Today, the sisters have exactly one "candidate" (they don't call them novices anymore), a nurse from Hartford.

I tell her I'm wondering what dwindling religious vocations will mean for the continued, questionable good health of the Catholic school system. She admits that parochial schools in Connecticut indeed have closed and says that of

those that remain, the average religious staff numbers three, while the rest are lay teachers. She sees the development of the lay ministry as "a positive force," however. She will *not* consider lay teachers "a necessary evil." "There's a trend toward less permanent, shorter-term commitment today," she says, "less intense, but a commitment all the same."

"Very doubtful" is her further prognosis on a parochial school renaissance, whether due to a back-to-basics movement or anything else. Instead, she says, "the situation has stabilized. We're in a holding pattern. Though, as we know," she adds, fluttering her long white

fingers in the air above her head, "the Holy Spirit works in strange ways."

We talk about the rigors of artistic versus scientific endeavors and share St. Mary's memories. It feels good to be calling Sister Marita "Attila the Hun" now, and though Sister Constance O'Meara demurs, she says, "We hear *more* stories about her." I like this personable, highly intelligent woman now even more than I did as an adolescent. It's common these days to hear about sisters doing enviable work, holding responsible positions, but you don't always connect their lives to those of your medievally garbed, former teachers from

the 1950s and '60s.

Turning to leave, I spy a snare drum and sticks.

"What's that?" I ask.

"For the odd moment," she answers.

Sister Constance O'Meara's boss — also now using her secular name — is Sister Margaret Crowley, who, it turns out, is none other than Sister Albina, who warned me about my bad attitude in my eighth-grade days. With all the name changes, I feel I'll need a scorecard before the weekend is through, but actually it's no more difficult than keeping straight some familiar actors

cast in new roles, aged a bit, perhaps, and in a different period's costumes — but still very much themselves.

The eyes are the same fierce blue. How much do those eyes remember? Not a bit about *my* mischief, it would seem — lucky for me. She's wearing earrings. Her hair is white-blond. As elected major superior presiding over 380 other sisters, she has been to Rome, Africa, and Honduras, and she just got back from Guatemala. "I was only in Greenwich that six months," she says, referring to the January through June 1965 that she taught me after another sister fell ill. From there, she went to Marquette Univer-

sity for her doctorate in philosophy. After that she taught philosophy at St. Joseph's College in West Hartford until she took the major superior post in 1979.

"I was about to leave for graduate school when I had to fill in that spot at St. Mary's," she says. "And I remember there had been a big snow in Greenwich right when I got there, and we couldn't go outside at recess, because the snow on the roof was overhanging the schoolyard dangerously. So, after three days, I was really feeling cooped up and thought you must be, too, and I asked Sister Mary Aubert if I could take the class for a walk

around town. I took both eighth grades, and half the class ran away. Some boys lived nearby, so they just ran home. Sister Mary Aubert found out, and we were made to stay in from recess for the next four school days. It was punishment for me, too."

I want to say I'm sorry (yes, that's why I'm here), even though I have no recollection of this particular event. Strangely enough, I'm glad Sister does. Then I start to understand: The extra piece of the picture she adds makes the past all seem more real. To go back and acknowledge the way my life has intersected the lives of these others is a deeply satisfying ex-

perience. It reminds me of how I feel when reading a long novel with crisscrossing plot lines, only this is much better.

The former Sister Maria Cordia, now Sister Therese Curley, tells me on the phone to look for a white Colonial with black shutters. Her late brother's money bought the house in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1979, the year he died of bone cancer. She has lived in it ever since, with four handicapped women. In an adjacent house, which she designed, two more handicapped women live.

"Hi, Jeanne! How are ya?" The voice, the eyes, un-

changed. She still wears a short black veil, because, she says, "I think it's important for some of us to be witnesses. Besides, it's fun. Little kids look at you like you've just landed. People aren't used to it anymore."

She taught for 25 years and then was asked by the city of Bridgeport to be a community developer in the Spanish community. She did that for two years, she founded a small interfaith program, and now she has founded these homes.

The women live together as a family. They range in age from the 20s to "older than myself," says the 55-year-old sister. One of them is Jewish. Some of them drive, hold jobs.

All go to parties, have parties themselves. Their handicap is mental retardation.

Sister proudly gives me a tour of each house, including the attic of the main house and the solar unit in one of the basements. The rooms are spacious, painted in colors of cheer and quiet joy. Everything is as immaculate as a convent, but Sister is the only nun who lives here. There's an empty room in the house she designed. She hopes to fill it with a low-income adult who could act in case of emergency but who wouldn't treat the women like children. "They're very honest, and they ask that you be as honest with them," she says,

"That's the challenge."

My visit is more than two hours long. We talk about her family, my family, feminism, ex-nuns, bishops, and the old days at St. Mary's. She's just as outspoken and forthright as ever. Afterward, I realize that I *still* consider her a suitable role model. I can also see more clearly what my presumed "vocation" was all about: admiration for strong-willed, clear-voiced, high-minded women, a yearning for adventure, independence, meaningful work, *and* the fantasy of freedom from my adolescent self. As I saw it, the sisterhood promised the ultimate: rebirth, including a new identity and a new name.

More, it was one logical road for a searcher after order — indeed, a searcher after truth — to take. On the alternative road I've chosen, what have I found? On my way to see the last sister I will visit, I start to get it sorted out.

In the end, I see I chose to secularize what I was taught at St. Mary's, and in a changing world, these principles and techniques have served me well. From the close study of Christ's life and the lives of the saints, I got a moral imagination, a system of ethics, and an early love of narrative. From meditation and prayer, I got into the habit of introspection and learned about the benefits of prolonged periods of pinpointed concentration. From the silence and other small discomforts and disciplines came no fear of sacrifice and the ability to wait for long-delayed results and rewards.

Finally, I am what I would call a religious person as a result of Catholic schooling, but it has nothing to do with a personified God or any other personages, infallible or otherwise. Imperfection abounds. Wasn't that what I was crying about in the lavatory that morning? In

some ways, I'm crying still, even with this report. And trying still. Now I see more clearly, more fairly, some others who are trying as well. Should it really matter so much what form each of our strivings has taken?

In Stamford, the wind is whipping me, up high on a hill. Not a soul is around. Just a grouping of low brick buildings in a campus setting, stately, but eerie for all its emptiness. I go to one door, and an old, crabby-faced nun answers. She's wearing a modified Bernardine Sisters habit. Actually, little has changed, except that the white head-wrapping is gone. Black veil, brown robes remain.

"Sister Sharon isn't here," says the nun. "She's gone to Washington."

She has? But we had an appointment.

"She was called away. A sister is ill." ("And wipe that dejected look off your face," her scowl seems to say.)

Can I leave her a message?

Not here. "She doesn't live here. Go around the brick building directly behind you. Take your car, there's a turnaround,

an archway."

Back in the car, though, I get confused, and nobody answers the next door I knock on.

"Who are you looking for?" another old nun in a habit and long apron screams into the wind. She is standing at the back door of another building.

"Sister Sharon."

"Not there! There!" She points to the circular drive and the archway.

At yet another door I ring the bell. Wait. Ring it again. Finally, I hear lock after lock being thrown.

A very young woman, blonde and blue-eyed, opens the door. She is wearing a nun's habit, apron, and jogging shoes. "Are you Jeanne?" she asks. Her sleeves are pushed up; she's wiping her hands. She explains that Sister Sharon's good friend is having emergency surgery on a lung tumor.

I am sorry, I hope things turn out . . . but I really wanted to see her.

"She's a doll-baby," the young woman says, as if to agree with something I've said. "I'm Sister Frances, by the way."

I just nod and look down the long, silent corridor behind her before I turn to leave. •