

Mary McGuigan

*A Training Ground for Discernment*

My Mom was a “devout” Methodist in 1913 when she “dared” to marry a “devout” Catholic man. As a result, her family disowned her. This was later negated by loving sisters of Mom who chose to renew relationships in their golden years. Into this union were born eighteen children: eleven boys and seven girls. Three of these died in infancy. Mom and dad knelt by their bedside each evening and prayed. They attended Mass every Sunday. During the Second World War, they attended Mass almost every day and lit the red vigil lights in the front of the church, paying \$.25 each for five lights in honor of their five sons who served in the U.S. military. All of them came home alive, although two or three of them had been injured. Each received the Purple Heart. A grand celebration was held beginning with a Mass of Thanksgiving, a great meal, photographs taken, and a dance to which the neighborhood was invited.

A few months before the war broke out; my oldest sister entered the Franciscan Sisters of the Holy Family. This group of nuns came two weeks each summer to teach “vacation school” in our home parish. One of my sisters always admired them and their work, and she decided she wanted to live this life. She was seventeen when she and another sister who was sixteen also decided to join the convent to become Franciscan Sisters of the Holy Family. The sixteen-year-old stayed only six weeks and returned home due to being home sick. My third sister made the remark that no matter how long she had to wait she was also going to become a Sister. This statement came because of a mandate by our dad that before we could go away to school we had to learn to cook and keep house. After eighth grade, we all stayed home for this express purpose. For some reason, this third sister was allowed to go into the convent immediately after eighth grade. Two years later, sister number two returned to the convent to stay. I was the next girl in line. My parents had made several remarks that they were so glad that the girls were in the convent because they were “safe.” They were not getting into trouble, as were some of the other girls in our community their age. These remarks influenced me to also consider becoming a nun. I considered myself unloved by my father and I do not remember one single conversation with him. I asked my mom to ask Dad if he wanted me to join the convent. Mom would not say

whether they wanted me to become a Sister. She said that it was up to me. When I decided to go, I asked her to tell Dad. She said that he did not say much, but she said he was surprised. I believe he considered me too much of a 'wild' teenager to think of such a vocation.

I worked during the summer of 1950 at candling eggs in the local produce company. It was my first job away from home. With the money I earned, I purchased the necessary items for the convent and had \$34 left over. This money I gave to my dad while on our trip to the convent where I entered as a postulant.<sup>1</sup>

There were three years in training to become a nun. The first year as a postulant, we wore mid-calf length black dresses with a small cape over the shoulders and a white collar similar to a priest's collar. Long black stockings and black shoes completed our outfits. We studied the rule of the order (a set of guidelines formulated by the founders of the community) and Church history (according to the Catholic Church's view). After completion of this year, we were examined by some official designated by the authorities at the Motherhouse to see whether we were ready to become Sisters. We then participated in a ceremony where we dressed as brides and received our nun habits. This took place in the chapel, and we were allowed to invite our immediate families.



Mary, as she begins life in the convent

The following year was called "Canonical Year" because we studied Canon Law or "Law of the Catholic Church." It was considered a very important year and we were more restricted from contact with family and friends.

After our third year, we took temporary vows. That meant they were for one year only and would be renewed each year for the following two years before we would be allowed to take final, perpetual vows. During that three-year period, we were to pursue our duties in whatever the convent decided for us. These duties could be housekeeping, teaching, nursing, etc.; whatever the community of sisters had decided was appropriate for each member to do.

A few incidents occurred during my training years. One of them was when I mentioned to the Postulant Mistress that I could not make up my mind whether I wanted to become a housekeeper or a teacher. Her remark was "You will become a teacher." That ended the discussion. Another time, I got up the courage to approach the Novice Mistress and tell her that I was afraid to speak with her. Since I had three older sisters who were also in the convent, I had a reputation to live up to. My sisters were well respected, so I was to follow suit. Even though we had been taught that our family heritage was not to be pursued, it now seemed important that I follow their pattern and not be an individual! This affected me.

We were also told to have blind obedience, i.e., do as we were told and not to ask questions. In those three years of training, we were given specific cleaning duties, which we were to do each day. I tried to perform mine as quickly as possible and then go to study hall. One morning the Novice Mistress came into the study hall and asked me why I had not done my cleaning. I said that I had done it. She said that I had not done it. When I insisted, she became visibly angry and stormed out of the room. I could not understand why she would insist that I

had not done my work when I knew that I had. Perhaps it was part of the blind obedience training, and I was to humbly acknowledge my mistake and go do the work over.

My first assignment after convent was to a “mission” in the Chicago area. When I left the convent, one of my brothers thought that if I had not been sent to Chicago I would not have left the convent. He and another member of my family thought the “Big City” was my undoing. I was to teach third grade. At the time, I had no training in teaching. The Chicago area did not require teachers to have Bachelor of Arts degrees. I had not completed my high school, so I was sent to that area. My high school education and teacher training was completed during my first year of teaching. I sometimes think of those poor students that I had that first year of teaching. I was very strict and unyielding, and I am sure some of them suffered mental anguish from my methods. There were fifty-three students in my classroom.



Mary as a nun

After our first year on mission, the other Sisters and I would travel back to the Motherhouse during the summer months to study. That was when college courses were completed. An older Sister was assigned to counsel and/or supervise the younger Sisters who were still under temporary vows. After my first year, this Sister called me into her office and told me that one of the older Sisters who was living with me during my first year of teaching was concerned about me because I was a bit “giddy” at the convent. I was admonished to become more serious. This caused me much anxiety and I “clammed up” during the next year. I cried myself to sleep nearly every night, and there was no one in whom I could confide. As a result, I ended up in the hospital with a side ache. It definitely was imagined, as the doctors could find nothing physically wrong with me. I recall sitting in the middle of the hospital bed joking and laughing with another patient in the room. I was making no sense at all. Another Sister, who was living with me at that time, was given a leave of absence and received services as a mental patient. She later left the community. At any rate, I continued this “clamping up” for the next two or three years.

One great cause of anxiety for me was during the closing of a school year and the ensuing summer months. Each Sister had one trunk in which she could place her personal belongings. Before leaving to attend school or other summer assignments, she was to pack all her belongings into this trunk. This was so that if she were re-assigned during the summer, she would not have to travel back to her last mission but could proceed to her new assignment and then the former mission would have her trunk shipped to her at her new position. This process each summer caused a loss of sleep and other anxieties for me. Toward the end of July, after the evening meal, all the Sisters in the convent would line up according to age. Those who entered the earliest were first, and in silence, they would proceed to the chapel. As they came to the chapel door, the Mother Superior would hand each one a small slip of paper with the next year’s assignments. Numerous Sisters shed many tears at this time. This was part of our vow of obedience.

Poverty was never a problem for me, probably due to the poverty in which our family lived. However, it is difficult to see any sense of poverty within the confines of convent life now. My Sisters and their fellow companions have all the material comforts that would qualify them as

middle and upper class citizens. They travel and live where they wish, either alone in apartments or wherever they choose. They may also receive monetary gifts from their lay friends.

Superiors at the various missions were assigned for three periods and then they could serve another term of three years, but no more. My second mission was in another part of the Chicago area. The Sister who was the Superior was also the principal of the school. Her second term as Superior ended and she remained on as principal. An older Sister was assigned the Superior position. She was from a small community in Iowa and certainly was not used to the Big City. She came with a determination to bridle the wild happenings she had heard were going on at this particular mission. There was friction big time! She lasted only one year and both she and the principal were transferred the following year. The next year a new Superior/Principal was assigned to our convent. She did not want the position but, naturally, she was to take the position anyway. By mid-year, I was doing the work of the principal because she was not able physically, mentally, nor emotionally to do what was expected of her.

As stated above, in the novitiate we were encouraged to blind obedience. Do not ask questions because we were doing what God wanted us to do. During this year, when I was “acting principal,” we received directives from the authorities at the Motherhouse that if we saw things that we felt were not as they should be we could make them known to these authorities. Five or six of us who were on this mission during that year decided to write our concerns to the Motherhouse. We stated what was, and was not going on at this particular mission and what we thought should be done. As a result, all of those who wrote concerns were reassigned to other missions.

My next place of work was in a suburb of Chicago. During this time, the “community” began changing the design of our “habits.” They were modified to shorter lengths with veils that were shorter and placed back on the head so that there was hair showing. This particular mission had a principal who was also from small town USA. She began to rely on the “in group” of mothers at the school. They influenced her as to which students were from good families and which were from questionable families. I was accustomed to being drawn to those students who were considered the “outcasts.” We got along fine and I was able to help them deal with some of their problems. Principals were to begin rating their teachers that year. I received unsatisfactory ratings.

These ‘questionable’ students would drop in at the convent in the evenings to just sit and talk. They had nothing in particular to say but just wanted to get some attention and to be heard. This was suburbia and they lived in houses instead of “homes.” One day, the Superior questioned me about this turn of events. She thought that since this was the time when the Sisters were to be gathered together for their “recreation” period for the day, I should be with them instead of being with these students. She asked if I would be interested in seeing a psychiatrist. The Diocese of Chicago had recently set up a mental health program and Sisters were now allowed to see any of the assigned doctors of various professions to get the help they needed. I agreed to see this psychiatrist and began going to him once a week. I was a little hesitant because I knew that he was not a Catholic and probably would not understand my situation. After the third or fourth visit, he said to me, “Perhaps you had a vocation to be a nun at one time but that is changing, and you no longer have a vocation to be a nun.” This remark frightened me and I refused to go back

to him again. My reason for being frightened was that it was stressed upon us while we were in training that once we passed our sixth year in the convent and had taken our solemn vows, we were to stay and were not to leave the convent. This was our vocation. The Lord must have had other plans for me. I do not remember telling anyone why I would not go back, but my Superior found a priest who was considered a great counselor for Sisters. Most of his clients were women: Sisters, and laywomen.

Another practice that was suggested to us was to renew our vows each day after Holy Communion. I did this daily until the last few months that I was a nun, so I was sincere in doing what I had been taught was right. These events were “the beginning of the end” for me in the convent. During the summer of 1969, I graduated from college, having done all of my schoolwork during the summer sessions provided by the convent. A fellow sister that had been at the same mission with me during the previous year had heard that I had planned to marry a former student. She made this rumor known to the Motherhouse. I was summoned there and told that if that were my intention I should leave immediately. The only alternative was that they would reassign me to a mission in Iowa because the sister who sent in the rumor could not live with me any longer knowing what she knew about me. I said that I had planned to consult with the area representative in the fall about a leave of absence anyway. When I was told of being reassigned, I made up my mind right then that I would take a leave of absence that fall. I went back to the mission in the Chicago suburbs to pack my belongings and leave. I said that I did not wish to speak with the authorities in Iowa at the time. They did not honor my wishes. They had a lower authority phone me and then talked to the Mother Superior to try to persuade me to stay. She also reminded me that my mother might be quite upset if one of her six daughters were to leave the convent!

I chose as my date of departure September 1, 1969. This was to be a year of leave of absence. The local Superior loaned me \$400. The Motherhouse loaned me \$900, which I was to pay back with five percent interest. The priest counselor “gave” me a couple of hundred dollars. I repaid the \$900 within five to six months and the local Superior was paid within another few months. I found a studio apartment on Chicago’s North Side and a teaching position with the Chicago Board of Education. The priest helped me look for and buy my first car. I purchased furniture and other things from secondhand stores and thrift shops.

During that year, I consulted with the Diocese’s representative overseeing the nuns who were leaving at that time. There were many. He helped me to formulate my reasons for becoming a Sister. These included the influence brought on because of my older sisters and my parents’ satisfaction with them; the fact that I thought I was “safe” in a convent—it was a sure ticket to heaven. I would not have to care for my hair any longer, which had always been a source of concern for me. He also assisted me in obtaining the necessary dispensation from Rome so that I was ‘legally’ relieved of any further obligations to the convent. This he did after I had made it clear in my own mind that there was no future in my returning to the convent to live as a Sister.

Some of the reactions from my family were supposed to convince me to return to the convent. One of my sisters said that I could do much good in the convent. I also told her that I could do much good outside the convent. Another said that if I was going to leave, do it now

before I get too old! One had no comment. Another tried putting a guilt trip on me for leaving. The fifth one was a little hurt and wondered whether she had done anything to make me want to leave. I also had a brother who had been a Trappist monk<sup>2</sup> for eight or nine years and he left and married. He felt so guilty after leaving the monastery that he spent many agonizing days of whether he should return or not. He even drove part way there only to turn around and return home. He had not taken solemn vows so was free to go (according to the church). My brother who was a priest asked, "Why leave? You have three meals a day, a roof over your head." To which I replied, "I believe there is more to life than that." So, after nineteen years as a nun, I was back "in the world"—free.

A year and a half after I left the convent, I decided to attend a dance for Catholic singles. It was held at St. Peter's Church in downtown Chicago on a Saturday night. That night, I met my future husband, John. I had always dreamed of marrying a "curly black haired Irishman." His hair was not black, but it was curly and he was Irish. We married January 8, 1972. Most of my family drove from Iowa to Chicago for the wedding, which was held at the Catholic Church. I was marrying a Catholic, so I was still Catholic. At the time, that did not bother me. John used to be proud to say he had married an ex-nun. He stopped that when he thought people believed he was the reason that I had left the convent.

The fall before we married, John had an experience at a church on Chicago's West Side. It was a born-again experience. Somehow, he had trusted on Christ Jesus "alone" for his salvation, but he did not realize exactly what had happened to him. After being married a few months, he began watching TV evangelists on Sunday mornings. He would watch them and then we would go to Mass. One Sunday, one evangelist offered a free New Testament. John sent for it and began reading it with much eagerness. Sometimes he would cry and sometimes he would laugh. I started to get a bit jealous because he was spending too much time with this new book. A few Sundays later, he decided to leave the TV on and heard another preacher. This one offered viewers a free weekend at his organization's headquarters. All we had to pay was the airfare; we decided to go. As we were packing, John packed handkerchiefs. I did not know why he would be doing this because we usually used tissue, but I said nothing. When we arrived at our destination and were seated—waiting for the speaker, I began to weep. I cried and cried, not knowing why. That is when John's handkerchiefs came in handy. I had seen that I needed faith and repentance. I came to realize that I was a sinner. As a Catholic, and as a nun, I had only looked to the sacraments. However, these rituals had not changed my heart. Somehow I had seen I needed conviction of sin as I had wanted to be born again as Jesus had said, "...*Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*"<sup>3</sup> The Lord indeed convicted me, and after the speaker left, I went into a room where counselors prayed for me. That day, I trusted in Christ for my salvation, and I was born again.

Nothing spectacular happened in my life that I took notice of at that time. One Sunday morning, John watched his usual TV programs and then we went to Mass. After we came home, he said that he could not stand going to Mass any more. They were not teaching the Bible. I told him not to go if he could not stand it. He was surprised at my response. A few weeks later, I was speaking with a former nun with whom I had lived. She had believed on Jesus Christ for her salvation while still in the convent. While speaking to her on the phone one day, she mentioned

that God does not live in houses made by man.<sup>4</sup> That was a new revelation to me. It was a direct reference to the Holy Eucharist for me and was influential in my being able to break from the Catholic tradition of the Holy Eucharist being the real body and blood of Christ.

Visits with my family members have been different. We live far from any of them, so it is not too difficult to continue being Christian without going to a Catholic Church to satisfy them. There have been times when I was forbidden to take part in some of their important ceremonies because they knew I was no longer a “practicing” Catholic. I do understand Satan’s wily ways, but I will not be persuaded by him to deny my Jesus. I explained to some of my family that the laws of the Church were made by man and that, therefore, they can be changed by man. A dispensation from my vows was not breaking any of God’s laws, only man’s law.

Another evangelist that we watched on TV was a director of a retreat in southern Florida. When we decided to leave Chicago for warmer climate, we arranged to stay at this retreat for a week or two. We had glorious days of Christian teaching and fellowship. We then felt led to travel to north Florida where we purchased a small farm. We now know that the main reason for moving to that area was to be taught the Word of God. Shortly after arriving at our new home, the Lord inspired a young man from Tallahassee to “teach John.” Since our born-again experiences, we left Chicago, had some teaching at the retreat, but we were in need of Bible teaching. This young man visited our home on a weekly basis and taught us the Scriptures. In early spring of 1981, the Lord told him not to come to our home any longer. We were equipped and were to further mature without him. Within two to three months of his leaving us on our own, we moved to Hawaii for more adventures with the Lord. The young man and his wife have continued to be our friends for the past 25 years. The Lord continues to work in our lives. One favorite scripture is, *“In all thy ways acknowledge him and he shall direct thy paths.”*<sup>5</sup>

John and I are convinced that we are saved and secure in Jesus Christ. What is at stake is God’s incorruptible truth in the words, *“That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth.”*<sup>6</sup> Certainty is needed in the salvation of our immortal souls. We have the wonder and praise in the Apostle Paul’s words, *“For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:”*<sup>7</sup> The Holy Spirit was the sole and wonderful Cause of our being “born again.” In the words of Jesus, *“It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing....”*<sup>8</sup> The Lord God gloriously saved us sinners, *“...according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.”*<sup>9</sup> Here we now live in Lihue Hawaii; we continue in the grace of God. God is All Holy. This is the reason why we need to be in right standing before Him on the terms He prescribes. Turn to Him in faith alone for the salvation that He alone gives: by the conviction of the Holy Spirit, so, like John and I, you may experience the words of Scripture personally, *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Postulant – noun, a candidate seeking admission into a religious order.

<sup>2</sup> Trappist - an adjective of or referring to a branch of the Cistercian order of monks noted for an austere rule including a vow of silence. The name comes from La Trappe in Normandy, where the order was founded.

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- <sup>3</sup> John 3:5, 6
  - <sup>4</sup> Acts 17:24
  - <sup>5</sup> Proverbs 3:6
  - <sup>6</sup> Proverb 22:21
  - <sup>7</sup> Romans 8:15, 16
  - <sup>8</sup> John 6:63
  - <sup>9</sup> Titus 3:5
  - <sup>10</sup> Ephesians 2:8, 9