

31

THE FALLOUT CONTINUES

Following Schuckardt's exposure and departure, the community had tried hard to recover, first by talking with followers of Marcel Lefebvre and Ngo Dinh Thuc, and then by accepting George Musey as our new bishop. But, in the end, as with all the others after him, we drove this bishop away. The constant comings and goings of numerous priests and bishops caused great consternation among the people in the community, including me. There were more than five bishops and ten priests with whom we associated at one time or another.

I spent lots of time meditating in our chapel and reviewing my thick notebooks from various classes conducted by the priests. I struggled to reassure myself that we were on the right track. Even so, I was bothered by the fact that we had no bishop or any good prospects for one.

When I discussed this concern with the sisters, one of them said with conviction, "God is going to take care of the situation." And sure enough, a few months later, one of our own priests, Mark Pivarunas, rose to the exalted rank of bishop when he was consecrated by a first generation Thuc bishop, Moises Carmona Rivera. Nevertheless, the fact that only some of the religious initially knew of this disturbed me and reminded me of the secretive "papal coronation" of Schuckardt.

However, when I heard the news about Pivarunas, formerly known as Father Tarcisius, I was happy. I believed one of our own men would best know how to deal with our unique problems. I had gotten over my grudge against him for not allowing me to know about or attend my brother's wedding in 1985, a circumstance that

was really due to the residual effects of Schuckardt. I had grown to respect this priest when he became one of the major players in helping to expose Schuckardt. He also opposed the departure of the Sister Counselors who had been rendered powerless during so-called meetings with Ludmilla. And he had cast a "no confidence" vote that had helped to take away the power of Fr. Denis Chicoine who had eventually become too heavily influenced by Reverend Mother Ludmilla. When Pivarunas moved to Omaha to start a new mission there, I admired his zeal. When he became a bishop, he created a new order of sisters there; that convent became a refuge for at least one of the nuns who had left us.

While I believed he was a good choice for us, it was confusing to me that he as our highest superior chose to live in Omaha, quite a distance away. I wondered how he could know what was going on here. I did look forward to his visits, which were always happy and positive. His updates about the spread of our faith throughout the country motivated me to keep working in my own way for the good of the Church.

Schuckardt, meanwhile, was trying to rebuild his ministry in California, when he ended up in the media again.

In May of 1987, a Plumas County, California, Sheriff's Department SWAT team and the California Highway Patrol raided his home and the residence of the sisters and brothers, looking for automatic weapons. Though no illegal weapons were found, Schuckardt was arrested on other charges. These were eventually dismissed without prejudice, and Schuckardt obtained a Factual Declaration of Innocence.⁶³ He then moved his ministry back to the Pacific Northwest and changed the name of his order to Oblates of Mary Immaculate.⁶⁴

From time to time, our community was blessed by visits from outside clergy who gave talks and retreats to assist with our healing. Their visits gave us encouragement as well as information. We sorely needed the encouragement, especially in view of the numbers of nuns who were leaving each year. Some had health issues. Some had lost their sense of belonging or had never really had a calling to religious

life. Others had lost faith in the principles of the community or thought that the community had lost its way. And some nuns had left under pressure to conform or get expelled. Each one of them was a deep, personal loss for me and the other sisters.

I tried to meet with these visiting priests whenever possible for their views on matters of conscience, including my relationships with superiors. While I longed for unbiased spiritual guidance, I didn't want to appear disloyal by conferring with outside clergy and tried not to be seen during these meetings.

At about this time, an unapproved book began circulating secretly among the nuns. It was known that Reverend Mother did not approve of the book, *Sins of the Just*, by Father John McGoe. The author, she had told one of the sisters, had issues with authority. Because of all the buzz about the book, I felt I had to read it. One of the visiting priests gave me "the okay" in confession, so I borrowed a copy and wrapped the cover in white paper to make it blend in with other convent library books.

Father McGoe's book was filled with common sense insights into typical problems of religious life, and I discovered that we weren't alone in our concerns. Other nuns in other convents had experienced many of the same struggles we were grappling with, and there were actual solutions that had worked for others in real life. Fr. McGoe was so inspiring; he became my spiritual director on paper. I wished I could talk to him but did not know if he was even still alive.

When I went to the ever-gentle Sister La Salette to talk about it, she invited me to sit down in her rocking chair.

"I got permission from my confessor to read this book," I admitted, holding the unwrapped version so she could see the title.

Amazingly, she nodded in approval and even offered that she knew many of the sisters had found it useful. She even admitted to reading parts of it herself but said she personally didn't care for his style.

Somewhat surprisingly, she gave me permission to try to locate Father McGoe. In the library, my research led me to see that he was alive and well in Canada. I then got approval to call him and enjoyed a series of private phone conversations with this priest over the next several years. I really appreciated the privacy of these calls, unlike the mail that was always reviewed before it got to me.

Fr. McGoe was fascinated by the history of the TLRC, now CMRI. More than once, he mentioned that we would need a full

reformation in order to rid ourselves of the influence of Francis Schuckardt, and I had the feeling he was willing to help us through the process. Once, when I was talking to him and expressing appreciation for his experience and understanding of women's religious communities, he surprised me by reiterating his opposition to our rejection of the Pope.

"Your group is schismatic whether you want to believe it or not. But, of course, I will continue to talk with you." And then, getting back to what I had said, he suggested, "Why don't you call the local archdiocese and ask for an older priest to come and talk to you ladies or hear confessions?"

I sighed and then explained, once again, our *sedevacantist* position and how that translated into very few suitable priests available to us.

"Oh, you need some outside people to talk to; that's the mind of Holy Mother Church," he said in a very kind voice, adding, "Otherwise you face the danger of spiritual incest in your community. I believe your leaders mean well but they have obviously been grossly misled themselves, and they are misleading everyone involved here... I will pray for you, Sister, that you find your way back into the Church."

I didn't know exactly what had touched me more deeply—his kindness, his reference to Holy Mother Church, or his promise of prayers, but I found myself crying and thanking him for taking time to talk with me. Fr. McGoey was a great man of God who had served the Church with great devotion for more than fifty years, giving lectures, working with hundreds of nuns, and writing documents that had the Pope's blessings. He had even experienced a horrifying bicycle escape from Communist China, which had cost him his health from then on.

Though still conflicted myself, I could only respect him and his life experience. I believe it was Father's prayers that gave me the strength to eventually walk away when I realized that certain aspects of the community's beliefs and behavior just couldn't be aligned with my conscience.

In the early 1990s, a skeleton was found on our property by the bishop's dog. The man had been missing for six months but no one knew he had even been walking at Mount St. Michael's. Soon after this discovery, a news article compared our community to Waco,

Texas, which I thought was very unfair. I felt that, if people would come up to the Mount, they would see a lot of improvements since Schuckardt's departure.

From my point of view, the healing that was occurring was obvious. The sisters were starting to open up and take responsibility for things they had done to each other during Schuckardt's regime. During our dinner conversations, past cruelties would occasionally surface, as well as some of the jokes we had shared. These memories mingled with the reflections and regrets we held in common. I heard Sister Pelagia apologize to the sisters for her harsh treatment of them. Sister Hilda asked forgiveness from Sister Lillian for withholding her epilepsy medicine and for the many public humiliations and confinements that had been visited upon this sweet woman. Hilda apologized to me, as well, for the things she did to me which, compared to Sr. Lillian's suffering, were minor grievances.

To help facilitate the healing, Ludmilla eventually invited a Traditional Catholic psychiatrist to talk to us.

We had heard that this doctor was very educated and experienced, and I was eager to hear what he had to say. I was also hoping he would weave in some details of the time he had spent working with Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and I wondered how their theologies aligned with each other. But the doctor focused on our pressing need, which was to learn how to navigate through post-traumatic stress.

It was a very simple thing that impressed me most that day. He said that many, if not most, people end up with mental problems when they live in the past or worry about the future instead of living in the present. He acknowledged that this last was more difficult than it appeared. He cautioned us about letting the trauma from the Schuckardt days control our present thoughts and lives.

In my own case, I felt that it wasn't so much that I was dwelling on the past, as it was that I worried about the future of our congregation. I was discouraged by the constant flow of exiting sisters, the endless tweaking of our rules, prayers and schedules, and the skeletons periodically falling out of the closet that led to negative stories leaking to the public. I was most concerned about our inability to maintain long-term associations with other clergy and groups, an instability that affected us all. I wondered what kind of shape we would be in down the road if these conditions persisted.

I took to heart the psychiatrist's suggestion to focus on the present, and it became another valuable tool on my journey through CMRI. It became part of my nightly examination of conscience. I placed my trust in God and tried not to worry.

That the sisters needed help, though, was clear.

One Saturday evening, after correcting my students' papers, I headed down the hill to the convent for night prayers. On the way, I remembered that it was my turn to clean the girls' bathroom. When I entered the long supply closet, there was something behind the door, keeping it from swinging wide open. When I looked in, I was shocked to find a nun crouching and crying there in the dark.

"Sister, what are you doing here?" I asked gently, trying to hide my surprise.

She looked pitiful and confused. "I don't know if I can stay here any longer," she whimpered, a fresh stream of tears pouring down her cheeks. "I don't understand what's going on around here."

"What do you mean?" I asked, thinking that I really wasn't sure either.

"Some of the lay people said there is a group that is accusing us of being a cult," she said, her voice ragged with desperation.

She looked up at me, her eyes opened wide and pleading for a response. I crouched down next to her and wiped the tears from her cheeks with my sleeve. By that time, I would have welcomed a conversation about our being a cult, but I didn't think it wise to discuss anything with this nun who seemed so unstable at the moment.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked.

"I don't know. I just need some time to think."

To my relief, she stood up and said, "I need to figure things out." Then she shared her plan to contact one of our former priests.

"I think getting help is a good idea, Sister," I agreed.

I skipped cleaning and headed down the hill with her. I still wasn't quite sure she was okay. She asked me to pray for her and I promised I would.

My night prayers were filled with thoughts about my own uncertainties and disappointments. I felt I had been blessed in my own life and considered my sorrows as my personal connection to Christ and his suffering. Then my thoughts turned back to the nun in the closet and I wondered if I should do anything more for her. Since

she did not ask for help but for prayers, I prayed for her. During the following months it seemed as though she was getting help.

Over time, there were numerous examples of our community members, particularly the religious, exhibiting symptoms of severe anxiety. The visiting doctor's analysis was confirmed again and again: our members were indeed suffering from post-traumatic stress.

As if to confirm the truth of my observation, a different kind of skeleton fell out of the convent closet, causing some sisters to question my allegiance.

In the end, I would question it myself.

32

A CONVENT TORN IN TWO

One of the sisters living in our convent, Sister Solange, was a good friend of mine.

One day, as we were taking a walk around the Mount property, she shocked me by confiding, "I was sexually abused by one of the nuns when I was a boarding girl." (In fact, she had been the girl who had spent so much time with our teacher behind closed doors in my senior year of high school.) I expressed surprise since I had never seen signs of sexual molestation, even during our years under Schuckardt.

To make matters worse, the nun who had molested her—our former teacher—was presently teaching alongside her in the school and living alongside her in the convent.

Then she added, "Don't worry. I understand how this could make people feel uncomfortable. I don't expect you to do anything."

I was relieved to hear her say this and felt even better when she added that Reverend Mother Ludmilla already knew about it. But I grew uneasy when she confided that Reverend Mother was no longer answering her calls regarding the matter. "It might be because I've asked her to move Sister to our other convent," she added. "Right now it's just hard for me to look at her."

Over the next few weeks I watched my friend grow more and more overwhelmed by having to live and work in proximity with her abuser, all the while being virtually ignored by the one person who could resolve the problem—Reverend Mother Ludmilla. I fought my anger at the apparent lack of concern for this woman in obvious need of help. I was amazed at how maturely my friend had spoken of her high school experience; she was forgiving and understanding of

the weird days we had lived through under Schuckardt's rule. I sensed that what was bothering her most was not the past abuse, but Ludmilla's seeming disregard for her very compromised situation. My friend began to leak her secret to other nuns as a means of developing some kind of support.

Understandably, the sister who had done the molesting began doing the same thing. Factions began forming as the nuns rallied around one or the other—or both, as was often the case—to offer support through what was an intensely painful ordeal for both of the nuns. Pandemonium ensued. Secret meetings between sisters began to be called as those most involved brainstormed about how to resolve an issue that their superiors seemed to be all but ignoring. The tension began to be felt throughout the entire house, even by those who were being kept ignorant of the situation.

Since I was friends with both of them, I often found myself in the middle. Perhaps there was nothing more that Reverend Mother could do, but it just didn't make sense to me that she had allowed the situation to escalate to these proportions. God bless the nuns, who, while holding the secret, continued working hard and devoting their love and energy to the salvation of souls. I imagine that, like me, they worried constantly about how this might play out.

One day, two of the sisters, who were deeply concerned about the tumult being raised within in the community and probable leakage to the lay people, came to me privately and declared, "Sister Redempta, we know you are on Sister Solange's side, and that she trusts and listens to you. But you must understand that the whole congregation is at risk if her story gets out. Please tell her to be quiet or leave."

Throwing up my hands, I responded with a quaking voice, "This is not my problem! Those in authority need to lead!" I pictured Christ behind them, fighting my anger at them for coming after me.

They basically admitted that they did not believe those in authority would do anything. "We can't just stand by and wait for this to explode."

I could understand their fears and frustrations, but I could *not* understand what I heard next.

"Reverend Mother said we could come and talk to you about this."

I repeated what I had just said, "It's not my problem!" and headed for the door. They pleaded with me to ask Sister Solange to be quiet for the sake of the community.

I went to my superior, Sister La Salette, on behalf of my friend, hoping she could help.

"Why is Reverend Mother shifting her responsibility for solving this to me? I do not have the authority to act on this. Can't you talk to her?"

It's up to Reverend Mother," Sister La Salette replied.

I went to see Reverend Mother myself, trying mightily to hide my exasperation.

"Why can't you get over to our convent and deal with this?"

She answered that she *was* dealing with it and told me to stay out of it.

I persisted, "But Sister Solange wants to talk to *you*, and the other sisters are concerned about possible damage to the community."

I pleaded and practically begged her to come to the convent to straighten things out. I then got the response that had always confused me. "There's nothing more I can do." It was followed by the familiar blame theme in which she essentially implied that Sister Solange had greatly exaggerated the story, possibly confused by other personal problems. She dismissed me, stating that the matter had been referred to Sister Francesca, the convent nurse and school counselor.

I was tired of hearing the same excuses every time a sister left or had problems.

When I talked with Sister Francesca, I found that she was just as perplexed as I was. "I don't know why Reverend Mother won't come over here and take care of this," she said. Sister Francesca was making herself available to Sister Solange if she wanted to talk. She seemed relieved when I told her I was going to talk to higher authorities.

I did go to one of our priests and then to the bishop, laying out the whole story and Reverend Mother's refusal to act. I was astonished and alarmed when they, too, declared that there was nothing they could do to get Reverend Mother to take a more assertive role in resolving this crisis in the convent. They claimed that interfering with convent affairs was beyond their realm of influence. One of them even told me, "Besides, if we did move the nuns into separate residences, it would be like admitting guilt, and that would put our whole congregation at risk."

This answer together with the stress of the virtual civil war ensuing within our convent caused me countless restless nights. Who

else could help with this, I wondered. I did confide my outrage to visiting clergy but there was nothing they could do to help. Our bishop was the highest authority, and he had abstained from even attempting to resolve the problem.

I felt our clergy's intervention would have really helped ease Sister's distress. She had made it clear that the events were of the past and that she just needed some temporary distance. No one was insinuating anything abusive was still going on. The good sisters would never have rallied around the offending sister if they thought she was still a threat to the students currently under her care. I just wanted our superiors to offer sincere support to both of the sisters.

But I could see the handwriting on the wall. For Sr. Solange, as it had been for the sisters before her, there were two alternatives: either she must live without a solution as best as she knew how, or she would have to leave.

Finally, after months of struggle, Sister Solange gave up. "I can't be a nun here then," she said, as she left the community and became Helen once again.

I was heartbroken. She had been such a good sister.

I couldn't get out of my mind how things had gone down for my friend and it kept me awake at night. The tapes playing in my head rekindled the fires of confusion and anger I was still battling from the recent departure of three other sister friends. While their complaints regarding Reverend Mother were different, the overall theme was very clear: it was impossible to get a problem resolved around here! We were without legitimate authority: our highest superior, Bishop Pivarunas, openly admitted that he had none and felt he could not interfere in convent matters; yet Reverend Mother was continually showing how inept she was at resolving problems. And then there was the problem of our cultish tendencies that continued to linger. The place was a "trap," as it were, with problems being hidden for purposes of self-preservation.

Cut off as we were from all legitimate authority, and even all other Traditionalists, we had recourse to none but ourselves when crises arose. Yet crises would continue to arise and that was precisely because of the extremely problematic nature of our origins. It was becoming a vicious cycle.

The stress was getting to me, and I thought a change of scenery would help me see things more clearly. But, where could I go? I knew my parents were having their own doubts about Mount St. Michael. My mother showed me some of the responses she had received from East Coast priests to her inquiries about the community. I was conflicted about my reasons for wanting to leave Mount St. Michael's but, after mass one Sunday, my mother must have noticed my emotional fatigue and said, "Why don't you just come home for a while? You don't have to make any decisions right away."

I approached Sister La Salette for a leave of absence.

"I can't get any sleep around here," I told her. "I'm exhausted from trying to stay neutral in this abuse case. I need some time with my parents to rest and recuperate."

She nodded understandingly.

I asked about taking off my habit to be able to blend in while I took some college classes. She made a call to Reverend Mother Ludmilla who agreed to the arrangements.

"Just be careful," Sister La Salette said after hanging up the phone. I sensed that she meant I should avoid giving scandal by being seen in my lay clothes.

33

TRYING TO STAY AFLOAT

I spent the summer at home with my parents in Spokane.

One night, after a glass of wine, I ended up giving in to their curiosity about my reasons for wanting to come home.

"That's terrible," my mother said, when I had finished unloading the whole scenario. And, since we were on the subject, I told them the real reason for the ulcer I had developed in my senior year.

"If you had told us what was happening to you in those years," my mother said, "we would have pulled you out."

My mother agreed that I should take some time off. My father, on the other hand, was more direct: "You should get the hell out of there!" He said it was a shame that Schuckardt had hidden his own problems behind the cover of religion, to the detriment of the whole community.

I told him I was encouraged by the connections our congregation had been trying to make with other groups. I explained the hope given to the sisters by having chapter meetings for discussion of problems and assigning duties. I told my parents what I had been telling myself, "Problems are a part of life and the Church is no exception." Promoting our congregation in this discussion with my parents made me feel better about it.

"Well," my dad said, "No one would blame you if you decided to leave."

The summer was good for me. At a second hand store I found enough loose-fitting clothes to keep me *incognito* and comfortable. My hair was long enough to style and, though it wasn't my goal to appear attractive, it was nice to get compliments for a change.

I went to enroll in a psychology course at the community college, but I was told I'd have to begin by getting a few high school credits that I could earn by writing a few essays or one long essay about my life. I chose the latter and found it was good therapy for me. After reading my essay about my role in spreading the true faith, the man at the Adult Learning Center told me about Father Bill Wassmuth's Cult Awareness Network. Despite the fact that it had been so active throughout the years we had been with Schuckardt, it was the first I'd heard of it, though I didn't think it was anything I needed to look into.

When I later enrolled in Psychology 101, I was presented with research results of Stanley Milgrim's 1963 and 1974 studies, the latter conducted at Yale University.⁶⁵ I learned about his experiment to test how far people would obey instructions from someone they considered an authority figure. The results showed that people will obey an authority even if it means inflicting pain on others. I marveled at this simple explanation of practices I had experienced in my community. This was the beginning of the education that would play a crucial role in regaining my freedom.

The educational experience influenced my decision to return to the convent that fall. I felt refreshed from the rest at my parents' home and inspired by my foray into the college atmosphere. My parents made me promise to come home if I couldn't handle it.

"After all," my mother said, "nothing is worth losing your health over," to which my dad added, "or your mind."

I slipped back into my religious habit with my usual morning prayer, "All for Thee," and jumped back into my duties with renewed energy. I understood that I had an important vocation, and I was so happy to be back with the sisters I loved and whom I knew loved me. I rationalized that those sisters who had pressured me a few months earlier had done it out of zeal and loyalty and had had no evil motives.

I renewed my resolution to live one day at a time, to trust in God, and to focus on the hope that I believed our religious chapters held out for us. I was also able to continue college courses via television, which enabled me to continue teaching and keep up with my convent duties.

I was also very happy to be back in the classroom with my students and thanked God for how they constantly blessed me. I loved the children, enjoyed their little pranks, and I was grateful for the grace and skill to win their hearts.

My love for education must have been obvious when later that year I met a counselor who offered to help some of us teaching sisters get college degrees, at no cost. I was beside myself with gratitude for this gift of God.

When I met with Reverend Mother to break the exciting news, she popped my bubble with, "Sister, we can't afford to have any more sisters off the convent schedule. Besides, three are already going to college."

I knew better than to question why Sister Claudia was one of the chosen few, but I did point out that the other two chosen sisters were also high school teachers, and that it was equally critical to have educated grade school sisters. I asked why the other sisters were being allowed to take classes.

"Sister!" Reverend Mother's tone told me I had pushed a bit too far.

I apologized and she went on to explain that one of the sisters had received family money with the stipulation that it be used for college; the other had threatened to quit if she could not take classes. The reasons shocked me, but what she said next boggled my mind.

"I didn't have any say on this, Sister. If I could let you go to college, I would."

I was almost beginning to feel sorry for her when I remembered that she was supposed to be in charge.

Next, I heard the dreaded words I feared were coming, because I had been warned by my superior. "Sister, this also means you will have to discontinue your telecourse program," she stated in a matter of fact tone.

I was clutching the cross around my neck as she spoke, which gave me strength at that moment. Yet I marveled at the glaring inconsistency of the situation: how could she have the authority to allow some sisters to accrue private funding for college and yet have none when it came to others' requests to go? Or perhaps it was the other way around: she hadn't the authority to deny certain sisters their requests—illegitimate as they seemed to be due to their demanding nature; after all, weren't we *all* supposed to be subject to

our superiors? Yet suddenly, she had found the authority to deny others.

I could, however, see her point about having all hands on deck. The increasing exodus of nuns to evening classes or other extracurricular events (quite a few of the sisters were now having professional counseling sessions, usually in the evening) was putting a strain on the sisters who stayed within the convent. The rest of us had to shoulder the duties that were now unassigned. But, eventually, even those who volunteered more than their fair share were down to a skeleton crew, and it was clear that we just could not afford to have more people skipping off to college classes.

During the summer of 1994, we sisters traded residences with the priests and brothers because there were more of us women to work on the property. The priests would now live in the convent recently added on the property, and the nuns would reside in the massive seminary building. As with every move, there were plusses and minuses.

The room assigned to me was next to the elevator, which frequently disrupted my sleep. But other, more serious, things were keeping me awake.

For one thing, Sister Claudia, now that she was in the process of earning her master's in teaching with Reverend Mother's apparent blessing, had established her unquestioned and ultimate authority over all the K-12 teachers. I initially accepted the new arrangements and resolved to be as cooperative as possible despite the fact that we had our own grade school principal who was perfectly capable of running the show. Slowly, however, directives for all the teachers began to float down from the third floor where sister had her office and most of her teaching responsibilities. Sister Claudia was beginning to assign minute tasks and to micromanage our work, requiring that we obtain her approval of our classroom prayers and the other resources we used. It was becoming quite apparent that none of us, in her estimation, was competent enough to make even small decisions.

Her unnecessary and supercilious interference made me angry. I was surrounded by very intelligent people, and it did not seem right that we were being second-guessed at every step. When I approached Reverend Mother about this problem I got the response that was

34

INTERLUDE

It turned out that Father McGoeys wasn't the only one going to Europe that year.

My grandmother had given her twenty-six grandchildren a big chunk of money, and I had received permission to use mine for a trip to Europe with a group from our parish. I was teaching a combined third and fourth grade and, luckily, Sister Mary Francesca offered to substitute for me.

"Go have the break you deserve!" she told me.

I looked at her and mentally ran through her own long list of duties, performed with a smile, and thought, "*Who* needs a break??"

The highlights of this five-country, three-week trip were Vatican City, Fatima, and Lourdes. "Just look at the deep faith of all these people!" I recall thinking as I joined the huge crowds singing and praying the Rosary in a candlelight procession and dipped into the healing waters, praying to be relieved of my nagging doubts. I figured that most of the faithful here had never heard of *sedevacantism*, and I envied them for their untroubled faith.

Father McGoeys's upcoming trip was on my mind a lot as we traveled, especially in Rome. As we passed through Vatican Square and the huge columns designed by Bernini, I recalled that the artist had intended them to be reminders of the great arms of Holy Mother Church embracing us. In the throngs of the Catholics all around me, I thought of Father's prayers that I would return to that Church. As I compared the massive crowds and the ubiquitous signs of Catholic heritage here with the shrinking of my Traditional Catholic community at home, I felt some uneasiness and thought, "What if he's right?"

As it happened, Father McGoey did go on the November trip, did have a private audience with the Pope and, then, on the flight back to Ontario, he suffered a heart attack and died a short while later in the hospital.

I attended his funeral in Canada and was astounded to hear in his eulogy about the many great things he had done for the Church. He was considered a great priest of our era and of Vatican II. A sense of great peace filled me as the choir sang “Be Not Afraid” and I thought about how Father was never afraid to speak the truth. His fellow priests and friends joked about the very real possibility that “Father Jack” might sit up in his coffin to say a few more words if he thought it was necessary.

I was kind of hoping he would sit up—and tell me about his visit with the Pope. I prayed for the gift of courage like his.

35

CHANGES AND MORE OF THE SAME

Father Denis Chicoine died of cancer in August of 1995.

His funeral was a huge event and somewhat surreal for me. He was a hero to some, a traitor to others, and an enigma to almost everyone. His example of hard work and self-sacrifice made it hard for us to understand why he had waited so long to expose Schuckardt's problems. I tried to let go of those thoughts at his funeral, realizing that God was his judge.

The event was strange for me for a more private reason. I had been asked to help another sister dress Father at the funeral home. As we layered his remains with the various garments worn for mass, we took turns reciting prayers out loud. I tried to keep the task as solemn as possible but I was constantly distracted thinking, "I can't believe I'm doing this!" A humorous skit about convent duties was forming in my head as we worked. I recalled Father's great sense of humor and his howls of laughter when, during the Schuckardt era, Sister Gertrude's funeral had gotten postponed numerous times as we had waited for the bishop. Father Denis had wondered aloud "how in the heck and who in the heck managed to roll her in and out of the chapel for days and what in the heck the funeral home people thought about it all."

The upside of Father's passing was that a sister was released from caring for him and returned to convent duties. On top of our regular workload, the number of our Singing Nun engagements was increasing due to our ever-pressing financial needs. Since we were considered renegade by the diocese, we had to depend solely on our own resources to keep our work going. The inevitable result was that we simply had no time, or very little, to devote to prayer and

reflection. We began to be buried under a pile of endless and urgent tasks.

Once again, I found myself questioning our congregation's true purpose. Were we missionary nuns, teaching nuns, singing nuns, visiting the sick nuns, or what? By Rule, we were to be a blend of these and more, but that did not help in the practical realm. I found myself constantly torn between options: singing practice or class preparation, spending time in prayer or doing a work of charity, doing volunteer work or our internal practical tasks. When I sought clarification from a superior, I was told, "Do the best you can." The other sisters were in the same boat and we all began missing physical recreation because we had work to do during that time. I loved, and felt we all needed, physical activity, so it got me down when our playtime became a hassle.

One day, a directive came down from Mother Superior that we sisters were no longer required to pray the rosary together in the chapel, except on Sundays. We were told to fit the rosary in during the day whenever we could. At first, I was relieved to hear this due to the time crunch, but when I ended up praying the rosary as I ran errands or waited on hold on the telephone, it occurred to me that I missed the community aspect of praying in the chapel with the others; after all, community time was a key aspect of life in religion.

The evidence all around us pointed to the fact that the already tenuous unity of the Order was collapsing, not just because of our reduced prayer time but because we were each doing our own tasks on our own schedule. And there were too many of them. Now, we were no longer required to play and pray together.

The exodus of sisters continued, as did the negative comments upon their departure. I was uncomfortable with the lack of compassion for these women, despite their years of dedicated service. Eventually, I saw the unkind insinuations as part of a larger tendency by the leaders of our community to distort the truth in order to protect their reputations. I wanted to confront those who had denigrated my friends, but I feared the ramifications of speaking out. It became clear that the excuses for the departure of more and more sisters amounted to a desperate attempt to ensure the survival of the congregation, even at the cost of destroying its members.

In addition to these negative currents, it was increasingly evident that our convent had no effective means of taking care of our own. As a result, we had lost many sisters due to their health problems. I

was fortunate that my parents were paying for my health insurance, but not everyone was so lucky. Our convent nurse spent most of her time out in the wider community begging for medicines and volunteer doctors and dentists. Even with insurance, I felt uneasy about the possibility that I could end up incapacitated and have to return to life as a lay person.

“Do you think we could actually get a new Mother General?” I asked two sisters one evening during our “free time.”

One sister looked up from the envelopes she was stuffing. “If we do, I hope she sends Sister Claudia to China!”

Sister was referring to the now chronic mayhem and resentment that Sr. Claudia’s unbridled and imperious demands were causing even among the non-teaching sisters and those assigned to teach in our other parishes. It was always comforting to hear my own feelings articulated and affirmed by other sisters. It seemed that many of the sisters agreed that new blood would be good for us. I resolved to bring up the Reverend Mother question at the next chapter meeting.

These meetings seemed to be somewhat helpful in effecting the many needed changes in the post-Schuckardt era. I hoped that a change of superior was all that was needed to resolve the serious problems that had begun to take their toll on the entire congregation. Unfortunately, it would soon become clear to me that our religious organization suffered from a chronic and perhaps incurable identity crisis. We were utterly incapable of agreeing, once and for all, on a way of life that met the ideals of our spiritual community.

Despite these deep concerns about our community, one constant source of joy and satisfaction for me was teaching. Even though I lacked professional certification, I had availed myself of every opportunity to study professional materials and attend training sessions and seminars. I felt a great deal of satisfaction from teaching, and this was reinforced by a positive professional evaluation by a principal from Tacoma, Washington. In her report she wrote, “When the students were not doing a good job, Sister Mary Redempta encouraged and demonstrated rather than condemned and berated. Great!” And, after observing my math class, she wrote, “You made

the kids think rather than giving them the answers. This is good teaching!" In yet another report she wrote, "Sister Redempta is the in-house expert on the elementary level here at Mount St. Michael's."

While normally these evaluations would not have been a big deal for me, in *that* environment in which all of us were kept under Claudia's critical eye, the extra compliments would make it harder for her to find fault with me.

Later that year, I lost two great friends and personal supports. One was Fr. James Wilson, an elderly priest from Nevada. The other was Sister Marielle, who died from lupus at the age of thirty-seven.

She had bravely suffered from our days in the novitiate for years, and her health had finally deteriorated to the point where she was bed-ridden and required a feeding tube. As the time of her passing grew near, she gave me directions about what to do after she died. She allowed me to see her pain and weeping, and I pondered the source of her strength, which seemed to be a great faith in God's plan for her. The day before she died, when I thought her mind was in a different dimension, she surprised me with a jovial glance and asked, "Hey, Sister Redempta, if I kick the bucket this time, promise me you'll take care of those things we talked about."

During the next few years I got used to being more and more alone. It was increasingly difficult to find a sister with whom to run errands in town or with whom to travel anywhere. This meant that we often found ourselves alone beyond the convent walls. And then there were Sister Claudia and Fr. Louis, who continued to spend huge amounts of time together, and who could be seen driving together, even after our 9:00 p.m. curfew. I worried about potential scandals and, even more, about how these freedoms were symptomatic of the larger issues that were already threatening our communal life.

In addition to devoting myself to teaching, I concentrated on preparation for the upcoming chapters, reviewing notes from a critical thinking course and even inviting the professor from that course up to the Mount, to help me develop good questions. Out of loyalty, I explained the challenges I faced in a kind of theoretical way without naming names. This man knew which group I was talking about but never asked for details, and I felt confident about the inquiry methods he practiced with me.

Eventually, my sleep began to suffer. Though I tried to concentrate on a positive future, innumerable sad memories and negative thoughts kept intruding. I really did not want to discuss my sleepless nights with my superiors. Though I did believe in professional help, I never went to the group therapy that other sisters were participating in or to the doctor recommended by Ludmilla who seemed to be her personal friend. But, as I continued to struggle with getting a good night's sleep, it was clear that I needed to do something.

"Reverend Mother, I need to get away from Mount St. Michael's to see if I can sleep better somewhere else. I would like to teach at one of our parishes in another part of the country."

The "missionary sisters" who taught at these parishes always seemed happy to me, and I attributed this to the fact that they did not live at Mount St. Michael's where all our problems seemed to be concentrated. She probed for more reasons but I was determined not to say anything that would be used against me if I left one day.

"I'll think about it, Sister Redempta."

A few days later, she told me that none of the missionary sisters had wanted to trade places with me. "They don't want to live here either."

I looked at her in disbelief. "So, decisions are based on who wants to do what, except that not all of the sisters have choices?" My impatience was visible.

"Sister," she began, "There are things, such as the other parishes, that I have no control over; my hands are tied."

I argued back, "So some assignments come from you and others from..."

I got no satisfactory answers. After a moment, she said, "Besides, we need you here at the Mount."

I said nothing more but stored away her words to examine later. Nothing sounded right to me. *Why are any of us even bothering to obey this woman who claims so many things are out of her hands?*

Later I learned from a visiting missionary sister that they had not wanted me because they feared my contacts with priests outside our congregation. She told me, "We want our parish to be focused only on teaching children."

My heart sank. I wouldn't be getting out of here. My feelings were hurt, too. I thought my efforts to meet and maintain friendships with outside clergy were spiritually healthy and beneficial to our

congregation. I didn't blame this sister or the others for not rescuing me from Mount St. Michael; I just chalked it up as another sign that we were isolated, that we had no resources, and that there was simply no solution to our problems. This decidedly unhealthy *modus operandi* was woven into the very fabric of our existence. I had to figure out if I could continue to be a part of the Congregation of Mary Immaculate Queen. I had a real sense of not completely fitting in anymore, and that worried me.

A pall of loneliness was drifting into my life like the dark clouds of an impending storm, obscuring what pleasures remained of community life. Over the next few years, I trusted God to see me through this fog. At the same time, I listened to self-help tapes from the library. The tapes energized me and the earplugs helped to block the noise from the elevator.

36

THE LAST STRAW

I was assigned to be the K-6 school principal, replacing a very gifted sister whose talents were apparently needed elsewhere. Running the grade school and all of its affairs was now to be my job. But, in actual practice, this assignment would mean I would be constantly running up to the third floor to Sr. Claudia's office for permissions and approvals for all of my decisions. I didn't think I could be as patient and tolerant as the sister before me had been, and I couldn't see myself laughing about it anymore, either, as the two of us had done many times in the past while walking around the property to relieve our stress.

Drawing from my inner strength as well as my strong desire to avoid certain conflict, I approached Reverend Mother.

"You know I didn't do so well several years ago when Sister Claudia tried to control every move I made in the classroom. I don't see myself lasting long in this situation if, while having more responsibilities, I'll have to waste my time constantly running things by her."

Surprisingly, Reverend Mother was not upset by my references to the past. She even mentioned that the visiting principal from Tacoma had considered me an expert teacher, an opinion that Reverend Mother said she had taken into account when assigning me to this position. She seemed sincere when she said, "Sister, I will try to steer her away from interfering in other people's business."

I thought What?? Try to steer? She's the Reverend Mother. If she sees a problem, what's stopping her from dealing with it quickly and directly?

But I didn't challenge her because I was just plain relieved when I heard her offer me some help. In my heart, I knew this assignment would make me or break me, and I wanted things to work out.

With Reverend Mother's promise ringing in my ears, I jumped into my new duties with renewed energy and enthusiasm. The many connections I had made in the Spokane community, including public school personnel, could now be put to good use. I had access to professional development libraries and was excited to bring new materials to our school. The teachers over whom I directed accepted me in my new role and brought a wonderful spirit of teamwork to our weekly meetings. I truly enjoyed these hardworking, inspiring, cheerful and generous women. We had fun doing our work and they even laughed at my corny jokes. Outside of school hours, we all had the same convent issues and extra work to deal with but we gave our best to the students. The other teachers offered me support and practical help in my roles as third and fourth grade teacher and principal.

The school year was going well, with only occasional run-ins with Sister Claudia. Surprisingly, she was not criticizing my teaching methods as she had in the past. This was a huge improvement. But I had counted my blessings too soon.

The schedule I had made for the grade school teachers seemed to be working out okay. We were a skeleton crew so, besides teaching all day, we had to take turns supervising recess and lunch and keep everything clean besides, then go home to the convent for the evening and do more duties. Reverend Mother did assign a few sisters as teachers' aides. But if one of them didn't show up, there was no replacement, meaning that some important tasks were left undone.

When one of these aides began failing to show for her assignment, I needed to know why. When I saw her in the hall one day, I gave her the benefit of the doubt and tried to sound casual as I approached her.

"Sister, I think our wires might be crossed or there is some misunderstanding about your schedule. What time do you have listed for taking recess and helping in classrooms?"

I liked this cheerful sister and I wanted her to know I trusted her. Her tearful reaction surprised me, but it wasn't anything I had said that caused it.

Apparently, Sister Claudia had given her a special “confidential” schedule to follow. She pulled a copy of it out of her habit pocket and explained, “She wants me to get into as many classrooms and areas of the school as possible. But I am confused because I thought I was supposed to be following the schedule you gave me.”

I glanced at the paper and it made no sense to me at all. I tried to hide the fact that I was furious about being kept in the dark.

Seeing my confusion, she clarified further, “I’m not supposed to tell anyone what I know, but Sister Claudia said Reverend Mother wants her to prepare a few of us for teaching at a new parish school we are opening next year.”

I looked at the poor, upset sister, and I wanted to clear up her confusion but I bit my tongue and thanked her for filling me in. When I mentioned that I would be speaking to Sister Claudia, the look on the poor girl’s face suddenly changed. There was panic and the tears began flowing again from her innocent blue eyes. She looked down the hallway in both directions and then took me into the closest little room where we would be alone and out of sight. My mind flashed back to my white veil novitiate days when I was sneaking food and messages to the poor sister locked in the basement. I detested this *deja vu* feeling of fear.

“Sister, to tell you the truth, I am afraid of Sister Claudia. She watched me teach last week and later told me I had done a very poor job. She is requiring that we go to her once a month for counseling and teaching advice, but I really don’t like to go to her; she scares me.”

She shed more tears as I tried to console and encourage her.

“You are a natural teacher,” I told her. “I’ve seen you work your magic with the kids. You’re still new to this, and mistakes are to be expected.”

With a strong hug, she thanked me for the encouragement. We both went to the lunchroom after that, but I could hardly get my food down.

Sister Claudia’s secrecy and her intimidation of this young sister—an obvious remnant of our days under Schuckardt—was yet another symptom of the overall problem—a problem that seemed to elude any of our attempts to resolve it. It seemed that our chapter meetings every four years were not effecting changes fast enough, despite the reforms we instituted and the new rules we voted on. The words, “We’ll make sure to discuss this problem at our next chapter” were

always on our lips, but it was becoming clear, at least to me, that we couldn't wait years anymore.

This particular incident, because it involved me personally and could easily be misinterpreted, was a delicate one. But I felt that, given my authority, I now had the power to do something about it.

It took a lot of my energy to get myself to knock on Mother Superior's door.

Trembling, I explained what had happened and asked, "Why does the training have to be covert? It's ridiculous."

Her reply brought back many painful memories, "That's just Sister's way; you know that."

I did know it. I had already spent several years challenging the Mother Superior to address this and the multiple other issues I had brought to her attention. And, out of a sense of charity for the sister in tears and for the good of the congregation, I felt impelled to try again. I needed a better answer.

"How in the world is a new teacher going to learn anything from someone she is afraid of?"

Her response was less than satisfying, "Sister Claudia has learned about leadership in her college internships; I'm hoping she will apply that knowledge to her work here."

So, though I could see that she understood my concerns, she made it clear that she was not going to do anything to change the situation.

"But what about the new school that will be opening?" I persisted. "I thought we had agreed at our last chapter that this wasn't going to happen until we had more sisters. You know how the convent is already struggling with the workload! It would be nice if we could do at least one thing well."

"Sister, it's the priests who want the new school, so it's really out of my hands," she confided.

I was shocked that she seemed to accept decisions made by others when she should have been making them. Once again, I wondered who was really calling the shots for the community.

Evidently, no one seemed to be able to figure out who that might be. When problems continued to surface regarding our opposing versions of religious life, the conflicts among our priests regarding our rules and constitutions, and the confusion about authority—an issue that, given our situation, didn't seem to have a resolution—Reverend Mother would just reiterate that her hands were tied.

Always I would hear the familiar refrain “There’s nothing I can do, Sister.”

I put everything in God’s hands as I kept extra busy that winter. It seemed, though, that I just couldn’t get away from that refrain.

I had tried to convince Claudia and Father Louis that it would make more sense to simplify our annual Christmas program that year from a full-blown play to only a choral program. We had less help in the school and our Singing Nun practices and performances were increasing, as these were an important financial component of our budget. I could see exhaustion all around me and I was tired as well. When I resorted to going to Ludmilla after Claudia’s and Father’s insistence that the usual big production take place, she replied with her usual hands-were-tied mantra.

In the middle of all of this, Reverend Mother seemed to be able to accomplish what she really wanted to do. She scheduled a professional speaker to conduct a workshop with the sisters on personality and stress management assessment.

I took advantage of the confidential questionnaire made available to us that day and then forgot all about it until the results were mailed to me a few weeks later in a sealed envelope. I took the envelope to chapel and carefully read the report. My results reflected my need to be in harmony with others and with my environment. The alarming part was the evidence of chronic anxiety caused, most likely, by living and working in a dysfunctional environment of constant where I faced constant crisis and trauma. None of this surprised me. But the timing for this news was perfect for me because it strengthened my resolve to figure out if I could stay in CMRI or not.

During the Christmas holidays, Reverend Mother announced after dinner one night that the new parish school would open the following year. The announcement didn’t go over too well in the convent, since we had all agreed at the last chapter that opening another parish school before we had an increase in “recruits” would be unwise. Still, I was glad that the secret teacher training was over, even if Sister Claudia kept those aides in training and out of our classrooms.

But my sense that things were getting back to normal was soon disrupted. It seemed that Sister Claudia and Father Louis could not

handle the freedom I exercised as principal. I was summoned to the third floor and told it was beyond my realm to show the progressive professional development videos I was sharing with the other teachers. They needed a detailed outline of all my principal activities up to this point and in the future I was supposed to consult Claudia for all permissions.

Reverend Mother said once again that her "hands were tied" when I complained to her about this later.

In addition to the stress caused by the leadership vacuum, I felt sad that I wasn't getting much support from my sisters who could see what was going on. Some of them seemed to be abandoning efforts to improve our situation. I couldn't blame them, knowing that each sister was doing her best in very harsh and stressful conditions. Many of them were simply worn out by their efforts. One day one of them even told me, "Sister, I'm so tired of all this. I just don't want to talk about it anymore. I'd rather just pray over it." I agreed and then never again spoke to her about anything controversial. I didn't want to cause the morale to drop any lower than it already had.

As I walked along the halls of Mount St. Michael's, I often prayed the sixth decade of the rosary, picturing Christ alone in the Garden of Olives. I prayed with him, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done." The thought of living outside the convent, of losing the company of my sisters weighed on me terribly and made it hard sometimes to hide my pain.

When I went for my annual physical, my physician asked, "How are you?"

It was just a routine question but it struck a nerve and I found myself choking up. "Not very good," I admitted, fighting back tears.

I ended up confiding my struggle to her, and she encouraged me to continue trying to figure out my options, warning "If you don't, you're going to get sick from too much stress."