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FACING THE INEVITABLE

“Do you think you might want to go to school in Coeur d’Alene?” my mother began asking, despite my obvious lack of enthusiasm. I ignored her questions.

By October of my freshman year in high school, one of the priests of the Fatima Crusade, Fr. Denis Chicoine, had convinced my dad to break with the local parish, a step that my mother had already taken. Instead of going to mass, our family began going to weekly meetings, called “Fatima Cells,” in the home of some Fatima Crusaders in Chula Vista. We studied documents from the group’s headquarters in Idaho. A room in their house had been converted into a chapel where we said the rosary and prayers from the mass.

All of the females in the group wore long dresses and covered their hair with scarves. It wasn’t long before my mother started pressuring me to change my style of dress. Though I resisted her proposal with all the strength I could muster, my objections had no effect on her. She repeatedly mentioned a friend of hers who could sew and would make me an entire new wardrobe of long skirts and long-sleeved blouses. The friend began sewing, despite my protests. The one, saving grace was that I didn’t have to start wearing these outfits until they were all finished. Luckily, she couldn’t make them overnight. It was a slow process but, finally, enough clothes were ready for me to start wearing them to school.

Everything in my life had been pretty good until those long dresses came along. My mother seemed oblivious to the fact that there was no way I could wear those outfits to school without dying of embarrassment. She left me no option but to turn into a sneak. I would wear the ugly skirts with pants underneath to get out of my

house in the morning and go straight to my friend Cindy's, where I would take the skirt off and continue to school in my normal clothes.

There was a big rock on the cliff overlooking the beach near our house where I took refuge whenever the pressure at home got too intense. I would sit there with my eyes closed, deeply inhaling the familiar, salty air and listening to the rumbling surf. I would trace the winding shore in my mind's eye, north beyond the farthest point, escaping to new places where I could live my life in the clothing of my choice. I would imagine myself happy and free, dressed in jeans and a spaghetti strap top, my long, golden hair gleaming in the sun. I pictured myself laughing and talking with boys who found me attractive.

The unchanging nature of the beach with its familiar bird songs and crashing waves comforted me during these times of stress in our family. I would mull over my torments until a peace mercifully settled over me and gave me courage to return home.

Sometimes, in this retreat, I wrote poems to express my feelings. I found one of these among my mother's things after her passing—it was written in this period when my parents, especially my mother, had begun to pressure me about the direction of my life.

BEACH PARTY

*When you're down and blue ... be patient
Sit on a rock at the beach/Think your problems through
Sit and watch the sunset
It's sure to ease your mind
Close your eyes and reach
Love your hopes in dreams, see what you can find.*

*Listen closely to the waves rumbling
Words sometimes can be heard
Listen even closer and you'll hear a faint mumbling
Perhaps a corner of your memory
If you're trapped with a dreadful thought
Take the moment and think it through
Unlock your chains with a solution
Relax, because only then will you set yourself free.*

*If you feel up to it, get up and go
Say goodbye to the ocean for now
For you know you'll be back in a day or so
Just sitting and thinking and dreaming
But now is now and not tomorrow
If your head is still in a cloud
Stay a while more...
and listen to the beautiful beach breeze swiftly blow ...*

As the sun slipped into the horizon's watery deep, the stark realities of my life would come swirling back, invading my daydreams. I knew I had to collect my ugly skirt at Cindy's and head home before dark so I wouldn't get into trouble.

The Fatima Crusade cell meetings served to reinforce my parents' excitement about finding the traditional faith they thought they had lost. On the way home from these gatherings, my mom inevitably injected a reference to Idaho. "I really think you'd learn a lot up there in Coeur d'Alene. And you might like it more than you think."

In the back seat of the car, poking Patrick's leg, I'd reply, "We're learning what we need to know at these cell meetings."

Pedro and Louisa Navarro, a nice young couple with a sense of humor, hosted the meetings, so the laughter at meetings was a little something to look forward to. Mostly, however, I hated going there because of their frequent comments about how wonderful it would be for us to get a truly Catholic education. These remarks invariably added to the tension between my parents and me. The Navarros made it clear they were trying to move to Idaho as soon as possible in order to enroll their oldest child in school there, which is what they ended up doing. These and other messages of the Fatima Crusade were definitely sinking in for my parents.

One day when my mother, Patrick and I were running errands in downtown San Diego, we ran into Fr. Juarez, a priest we liked who had left St. Charles parish several years earlier. We had heard that he was transferred for excessively promoting the rosary. Friendly as ever, he extended his hands and greeted us warmly. My mother, in her fervor to bring others into the fold, started recounting the things she had recently learned about the Catholic Church. Fr. Juarez

appeared not to want to hear about the Pope being the anti-Christ. He cut her off, made a cheerful comment, politely excused himself, and went on his way smiling. We considered Father's non-receptiveness a sign that the anti-Christ truly was at work, even among good priests like him. I eventually came to view it as dangerous to talk with "fallen away" priests.

Father Denis, who had gotten us involved with the Fatima Crusade cells, would greet us cordially whenever we saw him. I really liked Fr. Denis because of his great sense of humor. Within minutes, though, he'd be saying, "Patrick and Sherri, when am I going to see you in Coeur d'Alene?"

"Not sure," we'd say.

Periodically through the autumn and early winter, my parents would reiterate how Patrick and I really needed to be in those schools up in Idaho, but my thought was always to try to get out of it. I considered my summer "Espiritu Camp" experience to be a microcosm of what my life would become in Coeur d'Alene, and I didn't want to leave the home I knew in Southern California and all the things I loved.

Nevertheless, my world was gradually filling up with new rules about what I couldn't do anymore: I couldn't wear my own clothes, listen to my favorite music or hang out with my friends. It seemed as if everything I enjoyed was disappearing behind a bank of dark clouds.

Basically, it had come down to Patrick and I having to be perfect now. Whenever one of us did something wrong, we would be threatened with the school in Coeur d'Alene. Our parents told us that our friends were leading us down a path of destruction, and that the only solution was the boarding school. I got really sick of hearing about that school.

"Sherri, the priests and nuns really think you should not be involved with non-Catholics here in San Diego," my mom repeated for the millionth time. She never yelled about it but tried to sugarcoat the idea to make it more appealing. "So, if you go to Idaho, you can have Catholic friends and enjoy things that other Catholic young people enjoy."

"Enjoy what?" I retorted through my tears. "What can you do when you're bald and wearing a long dress? Knit? Stop talking about sending me away!"

I stormed out of the house, jumped on my bike, and rode to the rock on the beach through a blur of tears. *It's hopeless*, I thought. *Why are they doing this to me? If I were eighteen, I'd leave, but I'm stuck. No, I'm not...I can always run away, jump in the back of some pick-up truck, find someplace where I'm appreciated for who I am.*

Calm down, I told myself, trying to control my sobs. If I cried anymore, I thought my tears would flow down to the ocean. *How would I live? Nobody's going to give a fourteen year old a job. No, I've got to stay with friends for a few years. Who would take me in? Who would let me be myself?*

I thought of Rich's parents. They were my best bet. His family was not Catholic, and his parents seemed cool and hip. Rich was sixteen and they let him date and go to parties, even have girls over to the house. I ran to Rich's, three blocks away. He was out in the front yard, smoking a cigarette. He could see I was in tears and quickly approached me to help. He took me inside where he and his mom listened to my story.

"Listen," she said, "you can stay here with us. We'll help you get started in a new life. That religion your folks are involved with is way too strict. We are Christians and can help you love the Lord in a more peaceful way."

Rich's parents both worked during the day and Rich went to school. I hid in their house with the curtains drawn, peeking out the window now and then, watching for my mother's car. Sometimes I'd see her drive by with a worried look on her face. Friends sent messages through my brother telling me to come home.

Though Rich's mom tried to help me find a job, I couldn't picture myself hiding in another town for the next several years. And I felt terrible the whole time I was gone about what my parents must have been going through.

So, after three days I went home. I timed my entrance so that both of my parents would be there. I walked through the side gate, petted our dogs, Lucy and Teddy, and entered through the back door. I cut through the kitchen and saw my mom and dad sitting in the living room. I think my brother may have tipped them off that I was returning.

"I'm sorry for taking off; I just don't want to go away," I said, bursting into tears and collapsing on the couch.

My parents were calm and didn't yell, but their faces were full of anguish. "We feel terrible that you had no other choice but to run away," my mom said.

"I'll wear the long clothes and go to cell meetings...and mass whenever Father is in town, I promise."

"We're not going to force you to go to Coeur d'Alene," they assured. "We'll just do the best we can here with what's happening in the Church and what we need to do to practice our faith."

I despised the fact that the drab and depressing wardrobe was part of the deal, but I understood that, if I didn't wear it, I'd have to go away. After that, there was a tenuous lull in the storm.

At the cell meetings, my mom was very impressed that Louisa dressed her two little girls in all the long clothes and head coverings, and got them, even the two-year old, to pray along with us during the rosary.

Our meetings involved reports based on materials dictated by the leaders up in Coeur d'Alene. One evening, after Louisa had delivered her report on the Message of Our Lady of Fatima, Pedro turned to me with an encouraging gleam in his eye.

"So how is this going for you and Patrick?" He seemed genuinely interested. He probed for more. "Are you guys understanding the reports?"

"Yeah, they're interesting," I answered. I thought I understood them pretty well, although, to be honest, I would have much preferred to be home watching *Candid Camera* or the *Carol Burnett Show*, my two favorite Saturday night programs which I now missed every week.

"Would you like to pick a topic to report on?" he asked, probably figuring it would help me feel more like a valued member of the group.

"Sure," I said in the most cooperative tone I could dredge up. I knew that if I didn't participate, I risked appearing rebellious and in even greater need of being shipped away. I chose St. Therese of the Little Flower because of her sweet name.

Louisa and Pedro loaned me a big book filled with stories of the saints. I had to admit that the lives of the saints impressed me, especially their close connections to God.

During this period, a couple of smiling nuns from Idaho began dropping by our house while visiting the area. They laughed easily and seemed genuinely kind and happy. I liked them. One was Sister Pelagia who had given me the sweater to wear at St. Joseph's Chapel and whom I had seen at camp the previous summer. They spoke lovingly of the boarding house, like it was the best place on earth. My mom showed them around our house and, when they got to my room, I froze with embarrassment. The nuns gave my room the once over. As their eyes landed on my dresser cluttered with make-up, jewelry, and the perfumes I loved so much, I recalled an admonition from one of the recent cell meeting reports: "Vanity, all is vanity, except to love God."

They must think I'm terrible, I thought with a twinge of remorse.

"Are you thinking about going to the school in Idaho?" Sister Pelagia asked before they left.

"We're going to cell meetings here, and Louisa and Pedro are *really* nice," I replied, hoping to change the subject. I wondered if my parents had told them that I recently ran away because I didn't want to go to the school.

"There are quite a few boarder girls from California there, so you'd have a lot in common," Sister Pelagia persisted, always smiling, her eyes brimming with compassion. "The next time we come back we'll want to know when we'll see you in Coeur d'Alene. Okay?"

I forced a smile. "Okay," I answered. What else could I say?

My report on St. Therese went well. At its conclusion, everyone expressed kind appreciation for my contribution, and Louisa gave me a small figurine of the saint as a gift. Soon after that, I did a second report, this one on St. Anthony of Padua. I learned that this saint had a special gift for finding lost objects. A few days later I lost my school identification card, providing the perfect opportunity to test the saint's purported power. I prayed the required prayers to St. Anthony with all my heart. Later, while cleaning my room, I found the card and heartily thanked the kind saint. I took this as another sign that we were on the right track with the Fatima Crusade.

One October night, my father woke me from a sound sleep. He had a worried look on his face as he gathered us all in the living room where my mother was hunched over weeping.

"We need to pray for Kevin," he said, visibly shaken. "He's been stabbed near his heart and may not make it through the night."

Kevin had been living on the beach, and someone had thrust a knife into his chest within an inch of his heart. Now he was lying in the hospital in critical condition. The doctor had told my horrified parents that my brother might die. After hearing this terrible news, we all went back to our individual rooms.

I lit a candle and sat on the edge of my bed, worrying about Kevin and about all the other stresses in my life. I felt guilty about my slew of recent "sins," as though I had, in some way, caused my brother's misfortune. At cell, we had been instructed to pray and sacrifice for poor sinners, but I knew I wasn't really praying and sacrificing the way I should be. After all, wasn't I still here in Imperial Beach though my parents and the priests and nuns all wanted me in Coeur d'Alene? Clearly, I was not sacrificing, and, in my mind, my brother's injury seemed somehow connected. Someone needed to be praying and sacrificing for Kevin; was God telling me I was the one? I loved my kind-hearted brother so very much. I pictured the turquoise bicycle he had built for me. I recalled our Christmas caroling and earning money together, and all the late night card games in our kitchen where the two of us had laughed and chatted over silly things.

My eyes fell on the figurine of St. Therese that Louisa had given me. I thought about my report on her life. I remembered her power before Christ. I prayed. "If you let Kevin live, I won't fight this school thing anymore," I promised with full conviction. "If my parents really want me to go, I'll go."

I lingered there, thinking about what I had just done. I let my tears flow at the thought of packing up and leaving Imperial Beach. I pictured four, long years in long skirts ahead of me. I told myself that, if I had to go, the time would go by quickly and, before I knew it, I'd be back in California and to all that I loved. Exhausted, finally, I blew out the candle and fell asleep.

Thankfully, my brother pulled through. My confidence in the Fatima Crusaders swelled. I took it as another sign that we were on the right track with the cell meetings, and maybe even the weird clothes.

12

SACRAMENTAL BLACKMAIL

In January of 1976, Bishop Francis Schuckardt and Father Denis Chicoine came to Los Angeles to host a three-day retreat.

"This is a great opportunity to learn about your faith," my mother said to Patrick and me, "especially since you're not going to school up there. At the retreat, you can learn directly from the bishop."

We were not forced to go but went anyway. I thought it would show my parents that I was spiritually on the right track, and I *was* sort of curious about the bishop. I hadn't paid much attention to him at the summer camp but, at this point, probably because of hearing things at the cell meetings, I did want to know more about him.

The retreat took place at a hotel; one of the rooms had been made into a makeshift chapel for mass. While my parents and Patrick were at the registration table, I chatted with some teenage girls who were standing nearby. Bishop Schuckardt suddenly appeared and walked right over to us girls. For some reason, he looked different in his black pants and shirt and clerical collar; at camp I had seen him only in his black and purple gown. The civilian clothes made him seem more approachable.

I had learned at camp that you were supposed to kneel before a bishop and kiss his ring. After we all did this, he smiled and began talking to us. "What are the youth of the Fatima Crusade up to these days?"

We gave short answers and he continued to talk, telling us about his recent travels, until one of his aides approached and whisked him away. He had given me the impression that he really cared about us. Later, when I attended his lecture, I looked at him in a new way, perhaps with less fear.

The retreat consisted of numerous lectures expounding on ways to defend our faith, what we were allowed to do in the modern world, and what we should not be doing. The evils of public school were mentioned more than once. Each time that topic came up I shifted nervously in my seat, hoping to distract my parents.

"The Roman Catholic parishes of today are synagogues of Satan," Father Denis Chicoine declared, "and the Holy Eucharist, supposedly consecrated by Catholic priests, is nothing but bread from Satan's table!"¹¹ According to Fr. Denis, this deception was blinding not only Rome and all Catholics but all the world's leaders as well. "God has allowed all of these to believe error and lies as their punishment for not loving the truth."¹² He predicted that a one-world government, led by the anti-Christ, would appear on the earth before Christ's return. Any remaining true believers might be martyred.¹³ These difficult times ahead would require great spiritual fortitude. He explained that many California families were already moving to Idaho for mutual support and to prepare for the last days.

All of the priests reminded us over and over of the Blessed Mother's warnings about the last days and how, at Fatima, she had asked for prayer and penance. We were in dire times; a spirit of seduction and blindness was spreading over the entire earth. By accepting Vatican II, today's Roman Catholics had fallen into the great apostasy signaling the end of the world, predicted by no one less than St. Paul himself.¹⁴

I sat there thinking, "Wow, there is nothing left to do but pray!"

The Sacrament of Penance was available in a side room with a makeshift, portable confessional. Bishop Schuckardt was hearing confessions. As I waited in line for my turn to tell the bishop my sins, my father came out of the confessional, crying. He came over to me and looked directly into my eyes.

Pointing back to where the bishop was seated, he said, "He told me that unless you go to school with the nuns in Coeur d'Alene, your mother and I won't be able to receive the sacraments anymore."

My mind went blank. I felt numb from the force of that statement. It broke my heart to see my loving father so sad, especially for something that seemed to be my fault. Suddenly, I felt as if the weight of my parent's salvation had been foisted onto my shoulders, though I was only a fourteen-year old girl.

I was next in line and had to go into the little room where the bishop was waiting. I knelt down but didn't make a confession because I burst into tears and, through my sniffles, repeated what my father had told me. While I fought back my sobs, the bishop spoke softly from the other side of the screen, saying things like, "The cross is a blessing," and "God loves young people and needs them to be loyal sons and daughters of the Church." After a few minutes he dismissed me, counseling me to ask Jesus and Mary for the grace to do God's will.

Back home, we knelt before the statue of the Virgin Mary, fervently praying the rosary with the petition that we might know God's will regarding this new twist of affairs.

"Wouldn't you like to go to the school and learn about your faith?" my mom asked me gently afterwards. "You'll only be there until June and then you can come home to visit during the summer." She made it sound like I could come home for Christmas and Easter, too.

My promise to St. Therese flashed through my mind.

"Patrick, you can choose to stay or go," my dad said, "but, Sherri, if you don't go, your mother and I cannot receive the sacraments anymore, and we are not willing to go through life without them. We absolutely need the sacraments in our lives."

Apparently, my fate was a done deal. (There was never an explanation for why my presence at the school was required, while Patrick's was optional.)

I hurried to the familiar refuge of my bedroom, trying to fight off the feeling that the world I knew and loved was being pulled out from under me. Was my leaving for Coeur d'Alene really the only solution to our problems? Surely my parents could find a different church where they could worship, and receive the sacraments, couldn't they?

But, what if the Fatima people were right? What if they really *were* the only true Catholics left on earth? What would happen if I refused to go? What horrible thing would happen next if I didn't sacrifice for the ones I loved? Would someone else be stabbed, or worse? There was no escaping it any more. I would have to go to the school in Idaho. I went back to the living room and announced my decision before I had time to change my mind.

"Okay," I said. "I'll go."

My parents were loving, good people. I don't think it occurred to them that they were hurting me; they had been convinced by people they respected and trusted to relinquish their young daughter into the hands of well-intentioned, perhaps, but seriously misguided zealots. I eventually came to learn that the faith of these Fatima people was based on fear and ignorance, the kind of fear and ignorance that is characteristic of cult members and fostered by cult leaders for their own egotistical purposes.

To make the situation even more painful, my parents decided that I should not return to my high school campus to say goodbye to my friends, who might tempt me to change my mind. The last time I saw Cindy, Tina, and Brenda was when they rode over to our house. When they arrived, I was riding my bike in my long skirt; I was mortified to be seen like that.

"Sherri, what's going on? How come you haven't been at school?" Cindy asked. "Everyone's wondering where you are, man."

My mom was watching all of this like a hawk while she watered plants in the front yard. "Sherri, go inside," she called. By this point, she seemed to see evil stalking on every corner, and she wasn't going to take the chance that my friends might lure me away. I tried to ignore her; I wanted so badly to talk with my girlfriends.

"Sherri!" she yelled sternly, "You have to go in the house. Now!"

"Sorry, I gotta go in," I told them as I turned toward the house. I felt like I was being ripped in two.

"Mom, I just wanted to tell them I'm leaving," I whined.

She replied, "It will only make it harder, and they won't understand anyway."

I had to admit, she was probably right. I barely understood it myself. I was too young to comprehend how Bishop Schuckardt and friends, for their own selfish, deluded purposes, had no qualms about threatening my parents and taking control of my life.

13

A FORLORN TRANSITION

I woke up to a gray and gloomy February morning, a harbinger of the days to come as far as my spirits were concerned.

In a mental fog, I packed my bags according to the list the nuns had mailed. It was similar to the summer camp list except for winter items. When I looked at my new winter coat and boots, I felt a small quiver of anticipation. The vision of sledding and skating up north cheered me up somewhat.

My mom's friend had spent a week sewing the baggy, long clothes for school. I had the option of packing a few religious items in addition to the required prayer books and rosary. I thought about bringing the guardian angel picture hanging on my bedroom wall; I had always thought of myself as the little blonde girl with the angel. I decided not to take it with me, as I feared losing it at the boarding house. Besides, I wanted my room to look and feel the same when I returned home in June.

Patrick was in his room packing, too. Since he was almost seventeen, my dad told him he wouldn't force him to go to Idaho. But he added that, if he didn't go, he'd have to move out of the house. The Fatima people had a rule that kids either had to cooperate with the program or get out. Patrick was leaning toward the option of getting out. He called everybody he knew, hoping that someone would feel sorry for him, but nothing panned out. In the end, he gave up, realizing that he had nowhere else to go.

He had roamed around the town the night before, saying his goodbyes, hoping for a miracle. Maybe somebody would offer up a room at the last minute, or even just a couch. Alone, Patrick climbed the fence at Mar Vista High and carved his name on the wall. He had

always talked about becoming a doctor, and he really had the brains and grades for it and definitely a big kind heart to help people. But Bishop Schuckardt didn't allow kids to go to college. *That dream is at a dead end*, I thought, as I crammed the last of my heavy skirts into my suitcase.

Before going out to the living room, I took a last glance around my room to make sure I hadn't left anything in the open that would get me in trouble. I had already hidden under the carpet the poems I'd written during the past few months. I knew that if my parents read those poems it would hurt them deeply. Despite my own pain, I did not want them to suffer more than they already were.

This was the last poem I wrote before leaving:

IT'S HOPELESS

*It's hopeless I said to her
My tears flow just as a river
And the problem still remains
Words nor explanations
Are what I cannot give her
It's hopeless.*

*It's hopeless I said to him
The will is there to get rid of
But the chances are slim
They won't listen to a word
Even if it were sung in a church hymn
It's hopeless.*

*It's hopeless I have told them
I'm not legal aged
So people consider me to be stuck
Four years is too long
So I'm tempted to hop on the back of a truck
Just so's that I'm gone
It ain't hopeless.*

I must have looked hopeless as I stood there sorrowfully, waiting to leave.

"It's just until Easter," my mom said sympathetically. "The time will go by fast. You might even end up liking it, Sherri; Sister Pelagia is so nice."

I attempted to put on a happy face for my parents as I took one, last look around the familiar surroundings I loved. I saw the rosaries draped over the big abalone shells our neighbor had decorated with crosses, and the white, ceramic cherub candlesticks that had graced our family's table on so many happy Thanksgivings and other feasts. There was the painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe that we bought in Mexico—the time we all rode donkeys—and my mother's precious statue of the Virgin Mary with a framed photo of her parents leaning against its base.

My mother gave me a hug and then hurried out of the room, bawling. My dad took my suitcase and put it next to Patrick's in the Datsun and drove us to the airport.

14

FRANCIS KONRAD MARIA SCHUCKARDT

Every cult needs a charismatic leader with the ability to indoctrinate followers with a set of beliefs and practices. These followers typically come from situations of emotional stress and are psychologically disposed to accept the teachings and unconditional love offered by the leader and other group members.

Cult leaders attempt to insulate themselves from criticism or disputes by diverting attention to the evils of the world outside and reminding members of the salvation promised to those who remain faithful. Members find comfort and affirmation from like-minded people with similar values and needs. They become dependent on the security of total commitment to the group, its rules and beliefs, and, especially, their leader whom they believe has been chosen by God.

The cult community, viewing itself as the exclusive repository of a great truth, is faced with the competing goals of keeping their circle secure, while enticing new members into the group. Prospective followers are invited to meetings, lectures, and weekend retreats, where they meet others who seek the same security of knowing that theirs is the one true faith, guaranteed to get them into Heaven.

Founder of the Fatima Crusade and of the Tridentine Latin Rite Church or the TLRC,¹⁵ Francis Konrad Maria Schuckardt was the charismatic leader to whom a group of disaffected Catholics turned for guidance when they were unable to understand what had happened in the Second Vatican Council. These people had suddenly felt cut off from the Roman Catholic Church, especially its familiar rituals and liturgies. They sought the familiar security of a church they believed should never change.

Schuckardt had graduated from Jesuit Seattle University in 1958 and was a member of the Blue Army of Our Lady until he was allegedly thrown out in 1967 for publicly condemning the Second Vatican Council.¹⁶ He considered Paul VI and all succeeding popes to be illegitimate, and the Council to be heretical.

Both ordained and consecrated in 1971 by an "Old Catholic" bishop (another renegade Catholic sect),¹⁷ Schuckardt began to gather recruits for the tiny community he had founded four years earlier. He traveled around giving speeches about the evils of Vatican II and the modern, vernacular mass. Schuckardt used, to his great advantage, the idea that the world would soon be coming to an end, and that only the faithful remnant of the true Church would survive the great destructive war, that was predicted, he claimed, in the Third Secret of Fatima.¹⁸

By maintaining that he alone of all the bishops in the world was still celebrating the true mass and sacraments, and that only his priests were being legitimately ordained, Schuckardt was able to attract many families to northern Idaho as the only place where they could live as "real" Catholics and participate in authentic Catholic rites. He claimed that the leadership of TLRC had been thrust upon him, that he had been chosen by God to keep the true Church going.¹⁹

While it is apparently true that he suffered some serious illnesses during his life, (cured, he claimed, through the intercession of the Blessed Mother),²⁰ by humbly emphasizing his willingness to suffer for this great cause of truth, he elicited a type of hero-worship, from which he garnered sympathy and financial support. The "true" believers circled around him, praising God for him and pledging their unswerving fidelity.

It was into this community, and into the hands of Francis Konrad Maria Schuckardt, that my parents sent my brother, Patrick, and me while they themselves were convinced that they were saving all of our souls.

The first time I had seen Bishop Schuckardt at camp, I had been surprised by his youthful vitality. I had been expecting to see a much older man, based on the remarks of the other speakers who always referred to him with such deference and always stressed what a privilege it would be if he could make it to the hall to talk to us.

From that, I had inferred that he was elderly or, perhaps, even ill. When a priest suddenly and solemnly announced that “His Excellency” had arrived, and everyone had stood up in reverent anticipation, I had been taken aback as he walked briskly up the middle aisle of the lecture hall toward the podium, accompanied by two men in religious garb.

The bishop was of medium stature and seemed trim under his black and purple robes. He had short, mousey brown hair and a pock marked face. His cheeks dimpled when he smiled, softening the effect of his clerical collar, polished shoes, and the awe in which he was generally held.

He would lecture for quite a while and never seemed to run out of energy. I can still remember how he had looked directly at our faces with piercing eyes. New people like me were usually assigned seats in or near the front row, so I had had a good view. He had struck me as a highly confident man who strongly believed in what he was preaching. He would occasionally raise his voice to emphasize his message, keeping us all riveted on his words. He would repeat certain words and rhetorical questions like “Whose side are you on?” and “Will you be counted at the foot of the cross?” He would refer to us as “my dear young people” and would sprinkle his talk with one of his favorite words, “uncompromising,” which summed up how we all were to be regarding our faith. Everyone in the room would be spellbound.

After meals in the dining hall, Bishop Schuckardt would sometimes take the microphone, to everyone’s surprise since we hadn’t known he was in the room. We had not been permitted to take our eyes off the space in front of us; and there had been no looking around. He would make an announcement or read something to us, sometimes even joking about our schedule. His humor and gentle demeanor in these moments had made me pay more attention to him than I had in the lecture hall. I thought I had detected kindness and compassion for young people in his voice, despite the harsh content of many of his lectures that focused on the temptations and occasions of sin facing teenagers. I had noticed him looking right at me a few times at that first camp, but I had always looked away. I had been sure he could tell that I hadn’t wanted to be there.

15

A DIFFERENT KIND OF BOARDING SCHOOL

The boarding school in Coeur d'Alene, which I had imagined would be like the huge mansion in the movie, *The Trouble with Angels*, turned out to be an old, dingy, yellow, three-story house with a crumbling front porch. It was called "Villa Maria" and it housed a total of eighteen girls from all over the country in two upstairs dorms lined with army cots. Villa Maria also doubled as our high school.

Our flight from California had come in at night and, by the time we arrived at the school, the porch light was out but a few lights were on inside. We saw a curtain move behind a little window just before the door opened. We were greeted by two friendly women, who directed Patrick to the boys' residence and invited me inside. I was hit with a musty smell of what I guessed was tuna casserole; it was a fitting prelude to the many mackerel dinners I would consume over the course of my stay here. The women spoke softly and guided me around the nearly dark house and up a narrow, creaking staircase. They showed me the dorm room and pointed to the bed where I would sleep and then told me to get to bed quickly since the bell would ring very early for rising.

There was one bathroom upstairs for all the girls, containing an old fashioned bathtub and no shower. A picture of Jesus and Mary was taped to the corner of a small mirror over the sink. A note taped to the bottom of it asked, "What would Mary do?"

In addition to the two dormitories and bathroom, there were two, small rooms with desks, a podium, and a chalkboard. The next day I discovered three more tiny classrooms on the main floor, one of which was full of typewriters. The basement was a big, cold room

with cement floors and one window. It was jammed with desks and turned out to be where we all gathered for lunch and prayers. I was happy to learn that there was a bathroom with a shower on the main level, and I didn't care that the floor seemed to be sinking.

The Villa was run by these two kind-hearted, middle-aged, single laywomen, Miss Shroyer and Miss Hogenkamp, both from the Midwest. A handful of nuns assisted them. I spent the first days studying the other girls, trying to determine who was friendly, who was goody-goody, and who looked mischievous. Everyone welcomed me with smiles.

"I don't stay here all the time," said a girl who introduced herself as Marilce, "just when my grandparents can't supervise me." (There was that *supervise* thing again.) "It's always hard for new girls, but you'll get used to it," she added. I wondered what she meant by *it*.

The girls' high school, called Immaculata Convent School, offered little academically, for a number of reasons. The main field of concentration at the school was promoting religious life and preparing the girls for domestic duties in the home or in the convent. The sisters had been commissioned by Schuckardt to ensure that the youth were prepared to defend the Catholic Faith and to refute any challenges to our beliefs about the Church.

As a result of this priority, our limited academic studies were often cancelled in favor of more immediate tasks such as going to a local farm to pick fruit and vegetables or shredding and canning cabbage. Sometimes, we attended an extra religion class presented by one of the priests.

The quality of our education was also affected by outdated textbooks and the elimination of any history books containing anti-Catholic views or inconvenient facts. This resulted in the sisters having to teach their own version of history and interpret the facts for us. We were not permitted to obtain our own books, and our teachers were not certified by the state. Some of the sisters were in the classroom simply because their superior had told them to get in there and teach, as though obedience to this command would magically turn them into professionals. We did spend time on religion, apologetics, and reading to strengthen our understanding of our faith. And we concentrated on grammar and writing, since these skills would be needed to write essays in defense of our community, our beliefs, and our bishop.

The time we spent in Immaculata Convent School was of little value in preparing us for the outside world.

The boarding house and school rules were strictly enforced. There was constant supervision, nearly total silence, no contact with boys, and no access to television, newspapers, movies or books (of our own choosing). Head coverings were mandatory for all girls; no more than one inch of hair was allowed to show. We had to be able to fit at least one generous fist between the belt of our pleated uniform and our belly button—to hide our figure. At any time, one of the sisters might come by and insert her fist under our belt; if there wasn't enough slack, she would order us to fix it right away or, if necessary, she would provide an oversized belt. In my case, I wore the belt with room for two fists to hide my curves and joked about my baggy outfit.

Silence, except during recreation, was probably the most unreasonable and difficult requirement; after all, we were high school girls. We were naturally inclined to talk and share our feelings about everything. I couldn't count the times Miss Hogenkamp would call up the stairs, "Girls! Stop talking! It's supposed to be quiet up there!" She tried to sound stern but we could always hear the kindness in her voice, and we girls took full advantage of her and Miss Shroyer.

The little room at the bottom of the stairs by the front door became, in my mind, "the spanking room." I never discovered who administered the spankings because I never got one. But from upstairs, usually at night, I would hear girls crying out "No, don't hit me!" and "I hate it here!" I always wondered what those girls had done to merit the punishment, since I had not been punished in spite of my complaining, talking, and playing pranks and jokes.

I hated being there, too. At home, I was used to vigorous physical exercise—swimming and playing softball in gym class and with my family. At the Villa, the supposed recreation consisted of sitting around, taking walks, and riding in the vans with the nuns.

Once settled into the community, I received daily reminders that this was the "only Catholic group left in the midst of the darkness of the modern world," that Bishop Schuckardt was "the only true Catholic bishop left in the world," and that he loved his flock so much that he wished to "provide for us at great personal cost."

My brother, Patrick, attended the Sacred Heart High School for Boys and lived in the boys' hall. I hardly ever saw him. But, on my

fifteenth birthday, he surprised me by delivering a carrot cake he had made himself. It had a smiley face on it, made of raisins. Smiley was not how I felt on my birthday until Patrick showed up. When Miss Hogenkamp came and told me, "There is someone at the door to see you," I was really happy. But I was allowed to spend only a few minutes with him at the door, and we were joined by the seminarian who had driven him over with the cake.

Even though I longed to be back in California, I thought that the Sisters were sweet, caring women who loved God and their mission. Most of my misery stemmed from what was going on inside of me: feelings of homesickness and boredom, my resistance to the constant supervision and ridiculous corrections, the powerful cravings to do the things I loved. Despite my frustrations, I found myself returning their smiles.

Within a few months, I realized how lucky I was to be in high school rather than grade school. One of the younger boarding girls, who took a bus to the nuns' elementary school in the mountains, often came home at night in tears, complaining about three or four nuns in particular, including Sister Ludmilla. In addition to being yelled at in class and spanked with belts, she described having to wear blinders or gigantic paper ears on her head during the bus ride because she was too curious about what others were doing. My problems seemed insignificant compared to hers.

Throughout the community, there was the constant sense that everyone adulated the bishop and the religious; one would never dream of openly criticizing the way things were, because it would reflect badly on these holy people—it would be like criticizing God. The superiors took the place of our parents and had full authority over us. We were obligated to honor them by the commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother."

People who left the community were spoken of in harsh terms. There would be announcements concerning their excommunication and their likely damnation. The horrible threat of losing one's connection with the only Catholic community always hung in the air. Sometimes the bishop or a priest would, from the pulpit, lament the sad fate of someone who had "abandoned" Holy Mother Church to instead "serve Satan and his legion of angels." This abandonment consisted of complaining or rebelling against the rules.²¹

There were many times I wanted to tell my parents about the weird things that were happening, but contact with our parents,

including phone calls, was always supervised: someone sat in the room while we talked. I learned to stick to asking for supplies I needed and how things were going on their end.

During those first four months, I often thought about how I could escape. But I didn't know where to go, how I could get money for living expenses, or whom I could trust to help me.

16

MISGUIDED PIETY

The people around me did things in church I had seen at the Espiritu Camp the summer before. They held their arms out in the form of a cross for long periods of time—sometimes kneeling, sometimes bowing, and sometimes even prostrating themselves on the floor.

At first I thought someone was making them do these things, but eventually I realized that the people were doing them to express their gratitude for the gift of true faith under Schuckardt's leadership. They were also doing them as an expression of sacrifice to God for their sins and for the salvation of others.

I started bowing during prayers because, unless we had a doctor's signature on a document attesting to a knee or back condition, we all had to kneel without flinching. Bowing during prayers gave my back some relief. I submitted to this, even though I never thought of myself as a real sinner in need of punishment.

I observed other more severe practices—"penances" as they were called—such as people walking on their knees out of church. I eventually learned that all of these odd things I saw could be explained in a way that started making sense to me. They were offered "for love of God," "for poor sinners," "for our own sins," and "for our dear bishop." The idea of trading pain for spiritual gain seemed reasonable, in the same way that my pain during training for swim meets and softball games had led to successful outcomes. With hard work, I could achieve something. With penance and sacrifice to God for special intentions, I could help myself become a better person and help others, too.

Due to the school's shoestring food budget, our meals frequently included odd items and out-of-date donated foods. But we were always thankful to have something to eat.

One March evening, as we stood around the dining table, hands folded and eyes downcast while waiting for prayers to begin, I recognized a smell that I didn't believe could be true. After grace, Miss Hogenkamp took a tray of burgers out of the oven and passed them around. Wow! We were having McDonald's hamburgers! I could see the wrappers in the trash. I was so excited. Mustard and ketchup packets were passed around, and I enthusiastically dabbed them on the bun. Nora, sitting next to me, removed the pickles from her burger.

"I love pickles, I'm keeping mine," I said taking a bite of my burger and noticing something a tad rubbery inside. Compared to the chicken foot one of the girls had recently found in her bowl of stew, the burger toppings were welcomed. Nora explained that the pickles were from the trash.

"What do you mean?" I whispered, realizing that the rubbery thing was an old pickle.

"Didn't you know? The nuns get these hamburgers from the dumpster."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Yeah," she added, "tons of stuff we eat comes from dumpster dives, even the ice cream."

"Really?" I asked incredulously, thinking of the dish of ice cream I'd devoured the night before. From that day on, I examined my food carefully before eating.

Until my life in the boarding house, I had never heard of Jell-O being called a dinner salad. Misses Hogenkamp and Shroyer put apples and bananas in gelatin, to "stretch out" our supply of fruit and to camouflage the old pieces since there was rarely enough fresh fruit to go around.

I decided my best chance of escaping from this place was to keep a Menu Diary—a secret log of the bland, starchy, and sometimes questionable, food we were served. I figured that if my mother, who believed in eating lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, saw my record of our diet, she would definitely rescue me.

I kept the diary hidden in my suitcase. When I knew the nuns were coming for an inspection, I'd remove it and hide it somewhere

else. One day, I mistakenly left it out with a pile of books. Katie, another boarder, found it and confronted me.

"Sherri, I found this," she said, pointing to my stapled booklet.

I was mortified but also impressed that Katie had the guts to confront me. Up to that point, I had put up a pretty good facade and nobody knew my true feelings.

"I'm sure you miss your mother's cooking, but this isn't a very nice thing to do. Miss Shroyer and Miss Hogenkamp do the best they can, and we should appreciate whatever God provides." A feeling of shame engulfed me.

I tried to save face. "I just thought my mom would want to know what we eat," I said, blushing. I liked Katie a lot because she was always kind and often volunteered to do extra chores if someone was sick or had too much homework.

"Well, that's okay," she said. "But you complain about what is served." She pointed to the note I had written next to mackerel fish dinner: GROSS!

I had never heard someone my age speak so piously before. I was embarrassed that she seemed to see right through me.

"Can I throw this away for you?" she asked. I quickly nodded yes, anxious to end this moment. She promised not to tell anyone.

17

FRIENDS AND CO-CONSPIRATORS

A few weeks after my arrival, Nora said to me, "Hey, somebody's got to cheer up this boring place. Are you the kind who likes to play tricks and isn't afraid to get in trouble?"

I was thrilled to meet a girl who might become a good friend, but I recalled the bandana-covered heads at summer camp and wondered if I was being set up. I'd have to find out if Nora could be trusted.

"I *love* a good joke," I responded. But until she specifically included me in something fun, I was going to play it safe. The long, supervised days *were* boring, in my opinion. School days were all the same, with mass, prayers, boring classes in the *same* building, quiet study after school, dinner, and very limited recreation; most fun and lively activities were labeled "not what Mary would do."

On Ash Wednesday, we were told to keep strict silence as penance on this first day of Lent. I was drying dishes in the kitchen when Nora, with a playful look in her eyes, challenged me to go down to the basement storeroom and report back what I saw. As soon as Misses Hogenkamp and Shroyer went to their rooms, I dashed down the steep steps and turned immediately into the dark room on the left. Gasping in surprise, I stared at the larger-than-life statue of Elizabeth of Hungary, her big dark eyes sparkling in the beam of light from upstairs. I looked up and saw Nora with a huge smile on her face, holding her finger to her lips for me to be quiet. I ran upstairs and resumed drying dishes.

Nora, cracking up silently, whispered to Marilee who was washing dishes, "Sherri's initiation went well." They were in on it together. I liked these two girls; we became instant friends.

Marilee could be recognized by her loud, hearty and contagious laughter. But she had a chesty “dragon cough” that never seemed to leave her. The housemothers felt sorry for her when she’d cough and prepared a special hot drink for her containing apple cider vinegar, lemon honey and chopped fresh garlic in boiling water. Marilee dubbed it “dragon juice,” but it did seem to relieve the pressure in her chest. At the time I did not imagine that I would use that recipe later in life.

One day, as we were making lunches, Marilee and I discovered that we both liked peanut butter. The next day, when we were not allowed to laugh or talk, I saw that she had stuffed my sandwich with so much peanut butter that it oozed out of the bread and filled up the plastic bag. I glanced over at her. I saw her eyes peeking over the top of a book, which hid her face and laughter. Sister Borgia, who was supervising lunch that day, saw my baggie and laughed quietly, saying, “Sherri, it looks like someone knows you like peanut butter.” Whenever I saw a sister letting a joke go by or even enjoying it, my respect for her would grow.

During that freshman year, we girls became suspicious that something unusual was going on in the room shared by Miss Shroyer and Miss Hogenkamp. We made a game of trying to get one of them to open the door wide enough to let us get a peek inside. They always kept the door locked and only opened it part way when they entered or left the room.

Some nights, when we were all in bed, we saw out the window an orange pick-up truck parked in the alley. We could hear muffled sounds, doors opening and closing, people moving around and talking, but we could not hear what they were saying. On these occasions, we would excitedly speculate about what was going on. Miss Hogenkamp would call up the stairs, “Girls! No talking in the dorm!”

One night after dinner as I was heading downstairs to the bathroom, I passed Marilee on her way up. She stopped me with a mischievous look in her eye. “Go down the hallway now! Marie (*another boarder girl*) is getting a package from Miss Hogenkamp and the door is open!” But, by the time I got there, Miss Hogenkamp had positioned herself to block the opening in the doorway.

"Mission failed," I reported later to Marilee. "We've got to think of a way to get in there."

We never did manage to see inside the room, but I found out much later that the sisters were hiding supplies for the Cabrini Mission, a covert survival cabin in northern Canada, owned by the Crusade. Bishop Schuckardt had originally announced that he was building this mission in Canada as a rehabilitation center for alcoholics. He dispatched a group of trusted nuns to buy the 165-acre parcel and develop it. They eventually cleared the trees and arranged for construction of a log cabin, but the mission work never materialized. Later, when Schuckardt began to talk about the U.S. Government being taken over by Freemasons, he decided to turn the Canada property into a survivalist lair stocked with gear and provisions.

Meanwhile, Marilee, Nora and I had more immediate survival needs on our minds. Physically, our knees ached, and so we decided to fashion kneepads from rags in the dust box. We wrapped them around our knees under our floor-length uniforms whenever we knew we would have to kneel on the cement floors of St. Joseph's.

To make things more interesting, we made a pact to wear them only if we were brave enough to mumble during night prayers. The sister would read a reflection in a monotone voice, always ending with the admonition "Think!" followed soon after by "Pray!" The three of us agreed not to think or pray about the reflection but, rather, to laugh inwardly about how robotic it all was. We whispered the admonitions with Sister, but not loud enough for her to hear. The idea was to keep from laughing. I did it many times without cracking up, even when I heard Nora and Marilee clearing their throats to camouflage their giggles.

18

FIRST STIRRINGS OF “CONVERSION”

In late spring, the nuns said they’d gotten word from the bishop that baseball was now outlawed for girls because it was not “Mary-like.” There would be no more trips to the field near Tubbs Hill or the hiking trail along Lake Coeur d’Alene. I was devastated, having looked forward for months to participating in baseball outings. The little “spare tire” around my waist was growing from the lack of physical exercise. I had wanted to join the team, even though they had to play in their long uniforms. Now, my main focus was schoolwork. I was being tutored since I came late to freshman year and needed to catch up.

June would be arriving soon, and I was really looking forward to going home. I called my mom to make the arrangements. Whenever we made phone calls, one of the housemothers or nuns would listen in, either in the same room or on the extension phone.

“Well,” my mother said, “The sisters don’t think it’s a good idea for you to come home now,” she said.

“Why not? It’s just for the summer. You *said* I could come home,” I pleaded.

“No, we just don’t think it would be a good idea. If you come home and see your friends, it will be really hard for you to go back for your sophomore year.”

I was furious.

The week before school let out, Sister Mary Ursula told me, “I know *self* won’t like this summer, but *self* will be happy next fall when your homework is easier.” Sister was referring to any “rebellious” tendencies that must be conquered. I resented having her tell me how I felt or how I would feel in a few months. I also thought it was

ridiculous that she referred to me as “self” instead of just saying “you.”

It was bad enough that I wasn’t allowed to go back to California, but now a lot of my time would be filled with practice lessons from an ugly, old book called *Voyages in English*. I would be analyzing sentences, looking for participles and the correct use of intransitive verbs. I dreaded seeing the last boarder girl leave for the summer.

There I was, stuck at the boarding house, alone with two nuns and two housemothers. Occasionally, other girls from the community were sent to the Villa for supervision while their parents were away or just for punishment and re-educating. But I was the only one who stayed there from mid-June to mid-August.

There was a central theme in all the sermons, study meetings, visits to community homes and informal chit-chat that I heard that summer as I hung out with Miss Shroyer and Miss Hogenkamp: people were bewailing the loss of order and discipline in the Church.

The community of religious, who ran the schools for the children of Crusade members, was considered a great gift, along with the society of other traditional Catholics. Though all of these people felt unworthy to be so blessed, they were very grateful to be a part of it all, and they knew they had Bishop Schuckardt to thank for it.

Vatican II had created a sense of urgency in these people’s minds, and they were desperate to preserve what Francis Schuckardt was giving them. They looked to the bishop to tell them how to live. They talked about wanting to know “the mind” of the bishop on all matters. Would he approve of a certain job for their son or daughter? Would he approve of their family’s travel plans? Would he approve of a new dress pattern for women?

Schuckardt maintained his unhealthy control by limiting exposure to television, newspapers and radio, and by forbidding, under pain of sin, any access to them without his express permission. The threat of excommunication was attached to most directives.

Disobedience or even questioning the bishop’s orders could have serious consequences. His priests, brothers and sisters reinforced these points in their classes, sermons, and daily interactions with us. Even the mail was censored. We were never allowed to put the date on our letters in case the bishop took a long time to “approve” them

and send them out. The bishop's reputation needed to be protected at all costs.

Anyone who had contact with an "enemy" (someone known to be disloyal to the bishop) was required to respond by cautioning the person to repent or face damnation. We were told that responding in this manner was true charity, because we were showing love for the souls of these enemies as well as love for God.

We often had to write papers about how we would defend our faith against different attacks. I could sense that I was actually starting to hear and absorb what they were talking about. I was becoming aware of what I would have to do to be a "good Catholic."

Miss Hogenkamp and Miss Shroyer tried to nurture me and make me feel at home. They were pleasant enough. They let me sleep in sometimes and, on occasion, gave me treats like ice cream or fresh fruit. I met a lot of their friends that summer, who were also nice to me. I sensed that these people meant well, and their kindness affected me. I saw myself as surrounded by people who wanted the best for me. My heart began to soften.

During the summer, Nora's family moved to Coeur d'Alene, and her mom would bring Nora to the Villa to visit me. I noticed that, gradually over the summer, Nora was changing, too. She had started out as a fun friend who enjoyed playing pranks with me, but now she was, like me, embracing more and more of "the system," and going to church with her parents more often. Each time she visited me, she would confide some new spiritual insight she thought God was revealing to her about herself or the community.

She'd take me into another room or a closet so we wouldn't be seen and, then, very dramatically, tell me about her latest inspiration. I liked her well enough but felt uncomfortable with the way she'd put her face so close to mine when she told me something special or secret. Her huge, brown eyes were kind and friendly but very piercing at the same time.

"I think God is showing me how sinful I've been," she'd whisper intensely; "I think He is calling me to do penance for poor sinners." Then she'd describe one of her penances. "I'm not going to let it

show that I'm skipping seconds at meals. I want it to be just between me and Jesus and Mary and, of course, you. What do you think? Do you think I'm crazy?"

I always told her of course she wasn't crazy, just very holy.

We became what we called "Friends in Christ." When she told me she was going to stay up late every night praying her rosary on her knees with her arms stretched out, in her closed bedroom so that her mom and dad would not find out, I began to wonder how far Nora would take her penances for souls.

But I knew that I, too, was in need of forgiveness for so many sins. I had disobeyed and deceived my parents back in Imperial Beach more times than I could count, not to mention my running away from home. During the summer I had read the lives of the saints and was impressed by those who had suffered greatly in reparation for their sins.

Nora and I believed that our lives, before we joined the Fatima Crusade, needed to be atoned for. We referred to the new fervor in our lives as our "first conversion." We bought two new bishop-recommended books, *Friends of the Cross* and *True Devotion to Mary*, which provided us with additional inspiration.

I was not surprised when Nora announced that she planned to enter the convent for her senior year. She was a grade ahead of me, so that meant we'd be saying goodbye in another year. She said, "I'm being called to sacrifice everything! Are you? You don't have to answer now, just pray."

I actually had never given the convent a thought up to that point.