

Sister Describes Campus 'Convent'

Chapter In Sister Mary Gilbert's Book Relates Experiences As Oregon Student

"The Convent on the Campus"

By MADELINE DEFREES
Sister Mary Gilbert, S.N.J.M.

However pleasant it might have been to linger always amid the repose of prayer or within the quiet walls of the cloister, that was not to be my life. As a member of an active community, one dedicated to teaching, I had work to do in the Master's vineyard.

So it was that I found myself quite unexpectedly, and with only the barest of formalities by way of introduction, enrolled in a state university where I was to study journalism.

My name had been missing from the regular summer appointment list and, a day or so later, I had received a neat little white envelope inscribed "Provincial Administration." Inside was a brief message saying that I had been granted permission from the archbishop to study journalism at the University of Oregon. The permission had been requested by the provincial superior, and this note was the first word I had heard of the whole matter.

"I suppose that I felt a certain trepidation about embarking on this new venture, for I have, tucked away somewhere in a notebook of verse, a poem titled "Sojourn on Alien Soil," which I wrote shortly after receiving my appointment.

Professorial Misgivings

Nor was I alone in my fear. After I became well adjusted to campus life, some of my professors confided to me the misgivings they had felt on learning that there was to be a nun in their classes. Fortunately for them and for me, the experience proved less painful than we had expected.

I found it a little hard to get used to beginning classes without a preliminary prayer, until I discovered that I could steal a quick minute for a silent offering, which in truly democratic fashion would embrace the whole class: "Here we are, dear God, ready to begin another battle against deadlines. Take the tensions and the trials and make them contribute to your glory."

I soon learned that our life was an enigma to many otherwise well-educated individuals, and I reasoned that since my attendance at the university had not been a matter of personal choice, there must be some work for me to accomplish there. That's why I decided to join the faculty.

My name was never on the faculty payroll, of course, but I taught there all the same. As a member of a teaching community, I could hardly be expected to relinquish one of the primary works of the congregation.

Mine was a non-credit course, for the most part strictly elective, and it was never listed in the catalog. It was a queer blend of public relations, philosophy, religion, and poetry—with now and then a bit of logic added. Open to professors and students, to office personnel and maintenance men, it met by request wherever and whenever anyone asked to be taught.

'Born a Sister?'

"Were you born a Sister or did you become one?" a Chinese graduate assistant would ask, and all my professorial prowess would rise to meet the challenge. Or an English professor would startle me with "Have you ever heard of spiritual dryness?" and we'd promptly have a "class" on prayer.

Before many months had passed, I felt quite at home with my fellow students, and they with me. The radio newscaster realized that I couldn't hear his seven o'clock show on the days we had community prayer at that hour. A journalism professor discovered that I wore scissors suspended on a card at my side, and delegated me to open all the examination copies of textbooks he received. Now and then the process would be reversed, and an alert instructor would teach me a bit of convent strategy. For example, the young man in charge of our typography laboratory confided that a nun in one of his previous classes had used vell pins with great skill to remove incorrect characters when she was setting type by hand.

The common bond that arises from mutual endurance soon drew my classmates and me together. They discovered that I could spell and punctuate, though I was a novice at newswriting. I learned to rely on them for data about the town and campus. Gradually I formed friendships which were to become a permanent part of my life.



SISTER MARY GILBERT
"... our life was an enigma ..."

The "I'll say a prayer for you" that falls so naturally from the lips of the nun soon found a place in the pattern of university life; and even a few of the more sophisticated individuals who insisted that they'd long since given up prayer, grudgingly conceded: "But from you, it might count." Around examination time it was surprising to see how much interest could be generated in the subject of prayer, and I soon learned that the Emersonian doctrine of self-reliance has its limitations even among the intellectual elite.

On certain subjects I was automatically supposed to be an expert. When we studied Newman in literature or needed an article on the Holy Year for the campus daily, I was expected to have the answers.

Discussion Nets 'A'

Once when a young man, who, I thought, was a Catholic, asked me something about Pope Pius XI's encyclical on Christian marriage, I discussed it with him at such length that he came back gleefully to me the next day with a test paper and a note from the professor. "You must be a good Roman," the philosophy teacher had written just below a large, respectable "A".

Perhaps the strongest single conviction with which the year at the University left me was the belief that prejudice stems chiefly from ignorance; and that given half a chance to find out that we're human, the majority of persons will evaluate us as individuals. I realized, too, that the faith which was an essential part of my life was completely missing from the lives of many of those around me. They were instinctively attracted by it, even while they professed a certain indifference.

Whenever I found a seemingly hostile person, I made a special effort to break down his opposition. I remember a sour-faced English professor whom I used to pass every morning on my way to class. I greeted him every time and he nodded his head curtly, without ever returning the broad smile I saved especially for him. This went on for weeks, and he seemed not to thaw in the least. Then one day I wrote a sports column for the campus newspaper. It was a whimsical bit of nonsense, representing the obtuse feminine approach to certain popular sports.

The Ice Cracked

On my way to class the next day I heard hasty steps behind me and turned to see the uncommunicative English professor. "Say," he accosted me with an enthusiasm I could never reconcile with his previously frosty greetings, "I want to tell you how much I enjoyed your sports column in the Emerald." As I smiled back, I could almost hear the ice crack in the warm October sunshine.

There was a Catholic hospital near the campus, and I took my lunch in the nurses' cafeteria. Then I'd slip away to the still little chapel to make my daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament and my noon examination of conscience. The solitude and silence

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madeline DeFrees attended the University of Oregon in 1949-50 as a graduate student in journalism, obtaining her master of arts degree. She wasn't just an ordinary graduate student, however; she was Sister Mary Gilbert of the religious order of The Holy Names of Jesus and Mary.

Sister Mary Gilbert's new book, "The Springs of Silence," contains one chapter on her experiences while attending Oregon. The chapter, "The Convent on the Campus," is here reprinted, by special permission from the Prentice-Hall publishing company, publishers of the autobiography.

The author, who will speak at the Matrix table banquet of Theta Sigma Phi, women's professional journalism honorary, Tuesday night, has been a Sister for seventeen years, is a native of Oregon and has taught in elementary schools here and in Washington. She graduated from Maryhurst college, got her M.A. at Oregon, and is now a member of the journalism faculty at Holy Names College in Spokane.

"The Springs of Silence" was written to dispel the many misconceptions held about nuns and answer questions that puzzle Catholics and non-Catholics alike. In it Sister Mary Gilbert gives a picture of convent life. She relates that she had hoped to evolve into the "convent type" sort of person, but soon discovered that there was no such thing.

were even more precious after a morning of crowds and clamor, and I'd try to pack into my fifteen minutes there enough quiet and tranquility to last through the long afternoon. That done, I'd return to my studies, physically nourished and spiritually refreshed. "If the university officials only knew my secret," I used to think, "they'd take out the coke and cigarette machines, build a chapel, and raise the campus grade point average a good two points.

Covered the Campus

Before the year was out, I had done a fairly complete job of covering the campus. I spent long afternoons in the law school library doing research for a seminar paper. I visited the schools of education, music, and physical education on various reporting assignments. I attended classes in several other buildings, and I pried into dusty and forgotten corners of the university library. Everywhere I found the same friendliness and willingness to help.

When my class work was completed and my thesis well on its way, I took a part-time job in the university news bureau to get some practical experience in handling school publicity. The manager of the news bureau was a trim, sharp-witted little lady who took a roguish delight in sending me on unusual errands—all strictly within the lines of duty.

One morning, she decided to assign me an ROTC story on candidates for military honors. "I'll bet it will be the first time they've seen a nun over there," she had said to me by way of farewell. I began to agree with her when I reached the building and caught the startled glances that greeted the intrusion of this new "uniform." But by that time I had long since learned to face strange situations almost blithely. I no longer stood in the veterans' line in the co-op when it was time to buy books. And I had learned to wait patiently every registration day in long lines, while harassed student helpers searched successively for my material under "D" as in "DeFrees," "M" as in "Mary," "G" as in "Gilbert," and "S" as in "Sister."

In the Colonel's Office

A blonde, boyish-looking sergeant showed me into the colonel's office and disappeared in search of a typewritten list.

The colonel's steel blue eyes gleamed with more than usual kindness. He leaned forward, resting his folded arms on the dark polished surface of the desk.

"Tell me," he said with a faintly amused smile, "how did you happen to choose this university?"

"How did I choose Oregon?" I countered. "Why, I suppose the same way you chose to head the ROTC unit here. I was sent."

He smiled almost imperceptibly. "What will you do when you finish?"

"I'll be teaching in one of our two colleges in this province," I explained.

A few more well-directed questions, and the colonel was on familiar territory. "I see," he interposed with a knowing glance, "your life must be a lot like the Army."

In some ways he was right. The organization and the administration of religious communities have certain features in common with the methods employed by the military. One of these is the annual "obedience" more often referred to as "appointments" or "nominations." The provincial superior and her council assign the Sisters to the various local houses. A nun may be re-appointed to the same house for several years in succession, or she may be transferred as needed.

I couldn't help thinking how simple my own life was, as I compared it with that of many of my fellow students. Some of them had heavy family responsibilities to worry about and the problem of getting a job after graduation loomed large. I opened my own little "placement bureau" and did a thriving business interceding for my friends.

It's true that there were many other persons on the campus who had more direct contacts with the working press. But few others had such effective ones. I always went directly to the Top Management, and God seemed to have an extremely gracious way of repaying my trust in Him.

'Sister Mary'

Everyone called me "Sister Mary," and I answered to anything faintly reminiscent of my name, although I could foresee difficulties when summer classes would bring to the campus Sister Mary Noreen Clare, Sister Mary Celeste, Sister Mary Louise Ann, and a succession of others. Perhaps it was because "Gilbert" seemed like a surname that I became "Sister Mary," but I could never quite figure out why both Sister Noreen Clare and Sister Regina Claire should be "Sister Claire;" and Sister Edwin Maria, be "Sister Edwin." Perhaps it was too much to look for logic in the matter of nuns' nomenclature.

Besides, I had to admit that I'd met nothing to equal the blessed ignorance of the father of a second-grade boy in one of our schools. He had taken Sister Superior and a companion for a ride one afternoon, with his young son acting as go-between. The little lad had done manfully with the introductions and kept the conversation at a gay pitch. But the two nuns had to exercise heroic self-control each time the father, following Billy's lead, addressed the principal as "Sister Perlor."

Just as "Sister" is an adequate form of address when speaking to any nun, so the title "Sister Superior" will serve for any nun who happens to hold that office. That's why it's always amusing to hear someone comment: "You know, there was a Sister Superior in Minnesota where I came from." The observation has about as much point as noting that there is a Mr. Speaker in every house of representatives.

Once when I smiled at an outsider's misconceptions about nuns, I was startled to hear him say: "Don't laugh at me. After all, how would I know anything about nuns? You're the only nun I've ever known."

A Marked Woman

The thought paralyzed me. It took little reflection to convince me that I was a marked woman. There must be dozens of others here at the university whose notions of religious life would be determined by their notions about me. They would generalize. It was inevitable. Whether I liked it or not, I was on parade. My personal mannerisms; my likes and dislikes; my talents and weaknesses were no longer merely mine. It made me think of the little girl who went over to play with her Catholic neighbors when Sister Terence was visiting.

Sister had given the children some religious pictures to color, and the little girl was bent on writing a caption beneath hers.

"How do you spell 'once'?" Sandra asked Sister.

"Just like 'one' with 'c-e' on the end," Sister said absently.

A few minutes later, when she was surveying the children's work, Sister realized that she had misinformed the little girl.

"Pardon me, Sandra," Sister said. "I made a mistake. That should be 'o-n-c-e'."

Politely the little girl looked up at the nun. "It looked funny at first," she said amiably, "but I thought maybe that was the Catholic way of spelling it."

I wondered how many observers would, in the spirit of this child, fasten on my foibles and conclude that "It seems a little strange, I'll admit, but I suppose that's the convent way."