

Review: *Dedicated to God: An Oral History of Cloistered Nuns*

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Abbie Reese. *Dedicated to God: An Oral History of Cloistered Nuns*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014 (pbk 2016). 247 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-049059-1.

In *Dedicated to God: An Oral History of Cloistered Nuns*, Abbie Reese introduces us to the lives and stories of the Poor Clare Colettine Order of women religious that inhabits Corpus Christi Monastery in Rockford, Illinois. Beginning in 2005 and continuing until the summer of 2011, Reese has intermittent contact with the sisters and the mother superior through personal interviews, as well as observation, at the monastery, supplemented, on occasion, by letters and phone calls.

As her ethnographic fieldwork continues, the Mother Abbess and the nuns grow in their comfort with the stories Reese is inviting them to share and her presence in their midst. Over time, the nuns themselves become committed to her oral history and photography project, even as they become interested in Reese's life and her engagement with the work of understanding them. But, there is always a deep and profound separation between the monastery and the outside world. For me this separation was highlighted by my personal circumstances of reading the book while on sabbatical in sunny, southern Florida—a place where attention to personal wants, desires and comforts abound.

That a monastery offers silence, anonymity and hiddenness from mainstream culture will surprise no one. But the rich diversity of the past experiences of the women who choose to make this home no doubt will.

It is a story of a deep longing for connection and closeness to God. It is also a story of pain—the pain of being separated from those whom you love and the harshness that accompanies vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The Poor Clare sisters are poor indeed and they toil long hours in the garden and elsewhere to provide for their meagre subsistence. When they are free from their physical labours of yard work, repair work, cleaning and meal preparation, they commit themselves to prayer and the sometimes excruciating weight of interceding for the sins, misery, and injustice that face men, women and children around the world. It is hard work too, and from that burden, there is no relief. The nuns believe that through their temporal suffering of poverty, of separation, and of silence, they can bring the concerns of the world to the heart of God.

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As Brides of Christ, the sisters who live in the monastery believe that they are in a unique, and indeed, privileged position, free of worldly constraints and pressures and able to focus their minds and hearts on their bridegroom, Jesus. By understanding the pain of loneliness and loss and separation so intimately, they are able to be single-minded in their spiritual devotion, clinging, as it were, to their heavenly spouse.

I was intrigued by how much the sisters' recollections of their past family life centred around the disappointments they believed they had brought upon their family members by deciding to enter monastic life. Often fathers and mothers begged the women not to choose to enter religious orders and certainly not to choose the extreme separation of the monastery. For those women who entered a religious order in their teen years, often there was a prolonged struggle with one or both parents and, many times, with siblings too. For those women who entered a public ministry as a woman religious first, and then chose to transfer to the monastery, again, there was often a sustained attempt by family members to have the women reconsider such a decision. Perhaps family members were grieving for themselves—for the loss of contact they would experience with the daughter or sister who had chosen life in silence. But, perhaps, they were grieving too for the woman herself and all she would be expected to bear in that context.

In a highly sensitive way, Reese provides space and time for the women to let their own stories unfold. The reader is given visual cues to the separation they experience—that is, the metal grates that separate the visitor from the nun. But we are also given some clues to the emotional and physical separation that is always present for the nuns—even when the family is allowed to visit. Embracing or hugging is impossible. Privacy is nonexistent. There is no opportunity to unload any of the cares or concerns that the nun has residing deep inside herself with those who know of her prior life. During these visits, the sisters sometimes feel that they need to keep convincing their family members that their vocation and call is strong. And sometimes, the weight of sacrificed family expectations is almost unbearable.

In one very telling account of the cost of disrupted personal contact with family, a nun's mother had asked the Mother Abbess whether, upon her death, her coffin could be brought to the open area of the monastery so her daughter could have one final visit. Her request, though very unusual, was granted. When the coffin arrived, the nun tried to reach through the grates to touch it, but it had been placed too far away, beyond her reach. A priest who was present in the visitor room saw her angst and placed his hand on the casket and with his other hand touched her—in that way becoming the conduit to provide one last connection of mother to daughter.

Dedicated to God explores individual and cultural identities of the Poor Clare sisters—from the insistence of physically demanding work to a schedule that deprives the women of rest and even modest comforts. The silence that is

demanding during their daily routine, with the exception of one hour of socializing and relaxation in the evening, means that the inner life of the nuns takes precedence. Most of the women speak of the incredible challenge of attempting holiness—or perfection—in a community context where different personalities and skills further separate the women from each other. In their reflections, most of the women are rather harsh in their personal evaluation of their early days of accommodating to the rules and routines of the monastery. They speak of failure, of asking forgiveness, and of an ongoing deep recognition of the need for personal growth. I was struck by how the submission of the self must take centre stage if a woman is to live in such circumstances. To accept joyfully poverty and to forgo sexual intimacy might be difficult for sure. But to totally submit yourself to the demands and routines of the monastery forever seems foreboding. Truly it is very costly. And Reese helps the reader to see clearly what that cost looks like and feels like from the perspective of the women themselves.

In the monastic world of secrecy, silence, and submission, the oral histories of the Poor Clare nuns in the cloistered contemplative order at the Corpus Christi Monastery offer us a look at a small group of women who embrace countercultural values at great personal cost for the benefit of others. In so doing, they live day to day as brides of Christ, bringing before God, the needs of others in their own community and around the world. It is a sacrifice that few understand and even fewer appreciate.