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One Lost Breath

Jean Kirlan*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

One of that profession wrote it- a terse summary of what the life is- the religious life, the Catholic Sisterhood...



One Lost Breath

by Jean Kirlan

We pay with sweat and blood and tears
For what we come to be;
And yet we shall with one lost breath
Achieve Infinity.

ONE OF that profession wrote it—a terse summary of what the life is—the religious life, the Catholic Sisterhood.

A sharp bell rings at 4:40 a.m. “In the name of the Father and of the Son. . . .” The first conscious thoughts of the day are given to God. The overhead light is bright and unfriendly and you are still so tired. You take a white towel from the metal night stand. In the corner is the black number, 479. You push open the pale curtain which separates your cell from the other two in the room and go to the corner sink. “O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary. . . .” the morning prayers continue.

You pick up the neatly folded brown Franciscan habit and slip it on, adjusting the shiny worn parts into protecting pleats. The long black wool scapular is next. The scapular is a floor length garment that slips over the head and covers the front and back of the habit. The large Rosary with the brown

shell beads is draped from the white cord around your waist. The collar and stiff white veil are put on last.

You leave the cell and walk slowly, thoughtfully, and with the dignity that is proper to one of your vocation. The terrazo corridor leads to a large chapel. The lights in the rear are off and only the part of the chapel which is used is lighted. Poverty, economy. Each Sister has her own pew. To the left are the black caped novices, the newcomers to the congregation, then the pews of the white veiled novices. After a year in the postulancy, a Sister receives the habit and spends two years in the novitiate. On the right side of the center aisle are the professed sisters, the "living rules" of the Order.

You reach your pew and slip quietly into place. Sisters move gently, obscurely and they never distract others. A good nun is like a good waiter. The morning Office—Matins—is started by the chantress. A high clear chant is exchanged by the professed Sisters on one side, and the novices and postulants on the other. The Office consists of the nine hours of the Latin day beginning with Matins and ending with Compline. Three of the hours are recited in the morning, three at noon, two in the afternoon and Compline in the evening.

The Office is followed by a half-hour meditation—a mental union with God, a time to organize your thoughts and prepare for another day—like a teacher's lesson plan. The chapel is deep and quiet. The sun is lighting the red stained glass window of the Resurrection. Meditation is almost over.

The Sacrifice of the Mass begins immediately. By 6:45 you are in the refectory, the dining hall. You take your place at the table you helped set the night before. It is long, covered with gray formica and the Sisters line each side of it. A book about the spiritual life is read and you eat homemade sausage and warm applesauce. And coffee—some mornings it is hard to navigate for two hours without coffee. The Mistress of Novices taps a little silver bell and immediately the spiritual reading stops. The soft chatters and good mornings follow the tap. The Grand Silence is ended. After Compline until breakfast the next morning, a strict silence is observed as a preparation for Mass and Communion. During the day a less rigid silence will be kept. The silence fosters an inward life and constant thinking of God—the goal of the religious life.

The Sisters leave the refectory to go about their work of the day. Witness the ultimate in organization—no words are spoken, every life has direction and purpose. As a novice, you are working in the convent laundry. Next year you will enter nurses's training.

The laundry is in a separate wing and has large high windows. It is sterile looking and very hot. But the heat of the summer and the ironers and the wool habit give you more to offer to God—more self-discipline. The objective of the life is to say like St. Paul, "I live now, not I, but Christ in me." That's why you pass up salt at the table or take the hardest chair. No one asks you to do it. No one sees you do it. It is Thursday, delivery day, and by 4:00 all the Sisters' clothes will be back on their shelves in trim bundles.

"Good morning, Sister Lucy."

You are directed to a huge table covered with towels—white towels. You've seen enough of neutrals—the clothes you wear, the shell white walls, the gray table, the black Office book. Color is a joy in life and it is a joy you are able to do without. A colorless world—to leave room for the brilliance of the life inside you.

You fold every piece of laundry in a certain way for the sake of uniformity and so the little number in the corner can be seen. The black numerals on white tape, the identifying mark of every Sister. Sounds like a prison, an abyss of conformity. Who would ever know it is a life of complete individualism—of discovering and sculpturing yourself? When you came you were like a bar of soap, rectangular and one inch thick but now you are an intricate soap carving and your person is more distinct and definite than ever before. It is the silence, the prayer, the constant discipline.

The physical work is difficult but it frees your mind. It's hard to think of God all day and your mind wanders back to last Sunday—visiting day. Mom and Dad and John and Tom had come. They still missed you and called you Betty. You'd never be Sister Agnes to them. You had a walk with them and you had driven the new car Dad was so proud of. You were still a daughter and a sister. They knew how happy you were and yet could not understand it.

The bell intrudes and you hang the blue denim work apron on the 479 hook and walk in silence to the chapel. The

Office is recited and a passage sticks in your mind: "Thy presence is a sanctuary to hide me away from the world's malice; Thy tabernacle a refuge from its noisy debate."

Dinner is served, again in silence. The reading is about St. Francis of Assisi. You know you will never reach the heights of spiritual ecstasy that cause you to float above the ground. But your life is not without consolation. There is a distinguishable happiness that carries you through your hardships—the poverty of owning not even the pencil you write with, the loneliness of giving up the love of other human beings, the offering of your own will and desires to the community. The satisfaction is always there but sometimes in such small amounts.

The meal is over. But you do not have to keep silence now. The postulants have challenged you to a softball game. You lose a little of the dignity in your walk as you grab your tennis shoes and run to the courtyard. No one expects you to catch the high fly ball and when you don't, they smile and encourage you, "Come on, Sister Agnes." Everyone else is here for the same reason you are and they too are trying to become Christ-like.

At 2:00 you are walking down the corridor to the laundry. The girls from the school are working there today, the giggly little red-head, the quiet tall girl, Phyllis. They greet you with respect. You are a nun, you are always friendly but never familiar. (And you've never heard Polonius' advice to Laertes.)

And all is routine again. Everything has a time. It's time to empty the dryer. It's time to pack the bundles. The most excitement you'll ever have is a letter from home or a trip downtown. But it is all a matter of values. You have re-oriented your life. There is as much pleasure in a letter as there used to be in a fur-trimmed coat.

Night prayer is called by a chanting voice on the P.A. system, "Ave Maris Stella." Another ritual and although your person is bound in the performance of rules, your heart is free and you form your own unique relationship with God, Whom Francis Thompson calls in "Hound of Heaven," your Tremendous Lover.

Your life is founded on an idea as old as the 6th century B.C. Buddhists—that of destroying your egoism and self-assertion, and your payments are made in sweat and blood and tears. Your purchase is a blessed state of release in this life and then with the tiny effort of one lost breath, you will achieve Infinity.

The Dying Clown

by Bill Nolan

My tragic face ventured from Mother's womb
And everybody laughed to see me cry,
So all my life I heaved a comic sigh
For them, and now shovels will dig my tomb.

I'll put my greasepaint on. They've left the room.
A clown must have his comic face to die
And can't unmask even in death's cold eye—
I'll wear it at the wake to break the gloom.

It's strange how faces hide the inner mood;
Always I felt contented underneath
While they were sad behind those frantic grins.

I was their grief a while, their heavy brood;
But now my soul garlands its funeral wreath—
What clown have I? What fool will wear my sins?