

FOR GOD'S SAKE: an exploration of the life and work of women religious in Ireland in the twentieth century from a psychoanalytic and systemic perspective.

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Abstract

This is a study of religious life in women's congregations, in Ireland, in the twentieth century. It aims, through interviewing ten women, to explore this hidden life. In this respect the study is unique. It follows the course of convent life from 1930 until the present.

It is a psychosocial study taking conscious, as well as unconscious dynamics, into consideration (Clarke and Hoggett, 2006). It uses a Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) approach, combining aspects of BNIM (Rosenthal, 1993) FANI (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) and Cartwright's (2004) Psychoanalytic Research Interview to collect the data. The analysis is done through the iterative process of Grounded Theory and deepened by the application of psychoanalytic concepts.

Until Vatican II (1962-65), active Orders were subject to papal cloister with intensive commitment mechanisms which had many elements in common with Goffman's (1961) "total" institution, Coser's (1974) "greedy" institution and Wittberg's (1991) "intentional communities".

Besides obeying the rules and constitutions, the nuns owed "blind obedience" to the superior, who was seen as God's substitute on earth. Group conformity was of the utmost importance. The Sister's individual ego became fused with the collective ego of the group and the break with the world meant that the convent became a "psychic retreat" (Steiner, 1993) for many. A "social defence system" (Menzies, 1960, 1970) enabled an avoidance of unwanted emotional experience and the turning of a "blind eye" (Steiner, 1993) replaced insight. Personality development was stunted, maturity inhibited and spontaneity and creativity restricted. The changes effected by Vatican II (1962-65) were embraced according to the individual's ability to accept responsibility and accountability. Unfairness, injustice and punishment, especially towards the lay Sisters were part of convent life and the nuns felt powerless in the system. Identification with the aggressor (Stapley, 2006), projective identification (Klein, 1946) between society, the nuns and the vulnerable are identified as possible causes of abuse in institutions run by religious. At present, the conflict between individual freedom and the institutional mission, and the loss of a unified vision are causing a fragmentation of the system.

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Dedication

I dedicate the thesis to Marina

Le grá agus buíochas

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Introduction

This is a psychosocial study about twentieth century religious life in Ireland. The life led by Sisters in active (apostolic) congregations is a, hitherto, virtually unexplored area. Before the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962-65) permitted the opening up of convents, to allow nuns out and the public in, the perception in society was that nuns were holy people who spent their time praying and working. Convents, at this time, existed apart from the world; they were hidden, as was the life within their walls. In this study ten women tell the story of their lives in their respective congregations. The nuns, in their limited contact with family and friends, did not usually speak about their experiences, which makes this study unique in this respect.

The approach to this study is psychosocial. It is a qualitative study of insider accounts of religious life and it uses the concepts of psychoanalysis to enable a deeper understanding of the topic. The psychosocial approach considers the importance of the unconscious, as well as the conscious, in the construction of reality. It extends to the analysis of group and organisational dynamics and the co-construction of the research environment by the researcher, as well as the researched (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009). It integrates social, cultural and historical factors at a conscious level to discover information about unconscious motivations and defences (ibid: 6).

The idea for the study began in the late 1990s, as the population in Ireland continued to reel under the shock of revelations of abuse by priests and nuns¹ that daily streamed through the television, radio and print media. As a long-standing and dedicated member of a congregation of religious Sisters, I found it difficult to maintain a balanced perspective on what was being portrayed. In 1995 I became aware of alleged sexual abuse of children in residential care, by a Sister who had been a novitiate companion. This was never discussed in the convent, at any time. This made me angry, as others outside the convent, including those who worked in the residential care homes, run by my congregation, were aware of the allegations. Years later I learned, through my work as a consultant, the shocking truth about this abuse.

While I was studying at the Tavistock, in London, I began to wonder about the paradoxical nature of religious life. Firstly, there was the perception of nuns as holy, perfect and beyond reproach and secondly, the reality of wounded and often cruel

¹ In this study the word 'nun' and 'Sister' are used interchangeably as is the custom in Ireland. Sister is capitalized to distinguish between religious sister and sibling.

human beings. I wondered how one can reconcile a life of dedication to the love of God and one's neighbour, with acts of cruelty and abuse on that same neighbour. I wondered why no one noticed the abuse, and, if they noticed, why it had to be denied. John Steiner's (1993) observations on the story of Oedipus, where the evidence of Oedipus' history was there, for all to see, but was seen by nobody, left me with even more questions. Investigations into institutional abuse began in the late 1990s and it is alleged that a lawyer, engaged in this work, made a link between the oppressive conditions under which the nuns lived and the abuse of those in their care. I began to reflect on this.

My experience of religious life began when the life was already changing and I wondered what it had been like in the past. Most of the nuns with whom I lived and worked were, in spite of their human foibles, decent human beings who were committed to prayer and hard work and looking after those in their care. Some, though diligent in their pursuit of "perfection", in obeying the rule to the letter of the law, and working hard, were narrow-minded, stuck in an outmoded view of society and often disparaging towards those in the world who had made good. I asked myself why they felt so superior. In everyday life in the convent, praise was always in short supply, while punishment for misdemeanours was unstinting. Many aspects of the life did not make sense but there was no questioning. Conformity was the order of the day and companionship and humour kept people sane.

I was invited by the Tavistock to embark on a PhD research project. I decided to explore religious life. Initially my perspective was rather broad; I was going to explore religious life, by interviewing fifteen people who had lived it. I later curtailed the number of respondents to ten because I felt I had sufficient information and I did not wish the data to become unwieldy and unmanageable. My main interest was in the earlier hidden period, before Vatican II, and eight of the ten respondents spent many years in the convent during this period. My intention was, with my knowledge of psychoanalytic concepts, to look behind the scenes and beneath the surface of the lifestyle. When my proposal was accepted, I sent it to my Mother General who, in turn, sent it to the central leadership team. The response was supportive and there was a possibility of financial support for the project. Later, when I had already left the congregation, a new provincial team took over; they found the topic interesting but did not feel it was within their remit to offer financial support. I was disappointed, as life was a struggle at the time, but I resolved to continue.

This exploration of religious life cannot be totally separated from my own journey in religious life. One could say that it was an exploration of my journey from a “third position” (Britton,1989), using the experience of others to give me a new perspective, which, of course, is not entirely objective but the best one can expect from an outsider who was once an insider. I was cognizant of the fact that the interviews were co-constructions between two defended people (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). During and following the interviews, I noted my own feeling responses and reflected on them in supervision and at my personal therapy, so that I could become more fully aware of my personal prejudices.

The study uses a Grounded Theory approach, which allows for a variety of ways of collecting data (Charmaz, 2006). The analysis of the data employs both a Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and an applied psychoanalytic approach. The method used for collecting the data is a combination of three methods, the BNIM (Rosenthal, 1993) where the individual is told the subject of the study and asked to tell their story, the FANI (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) and Cartwright’s Psychoanalytic Research Interview, (2004). I was aware that the nuns were unused to speaking freely about their lives, that they would be psychologically defended and compliant and would wish to respond as expected. Following Cartwright (2004), I decided to do a total of three interviews with each respondent. Before the first interview I told the respondents the theme of the thesis, that we would meet three times in all and I invited them to take part. They were free, at this point, not to continue but all ten continued. I explained that, in the first two meetings, I would like them to tell me their stories and that, in the third meeting, I would ask some questions and we would talk together about the issues that arose. The initial meetings gave sufficient time for them to experience a new form of listening and to build enough trust to discuss the issues, without fear or suspicion. The first respondent told me at the end of the first interview that, if I wished to get the negative side of religious life, I would have to get it from someone else. She was aware that her story was one sided but looking beneath the surface allowed me to find some of the negative in her story which she had couched in metaphor.

In accordance with the principles of Grounded Theory, I did not set out with any a priori hypotheses. The analysis of the data highlighted core categories or themes across the cases, which I then considered and organised around temporal periods that coincided with changes in Irish society, in the Church and in State - Church relations. This lent itself to a division into three parts, the first part 1930- 1969 was from the time the first

respondent entered the convent, in 1930, until the approximate time when changes from Vatican II began to take effect. The second part was from 1970 – 1999, a period of transition in religious life, and the third part 2000- 2008 during which the interviews took place.

The initial core categories that emerged were vocation, life in the convent when the respondents entered and up until Vatican II (1962- 1965). This raised questions about vocation, the system that operated in the convent, how the nuns coped with it and the possible psychological effects of it on their maturation process and their personalities. Further core categories included the changes mandated by Vatican II, managing and implementing change and the experiences of new, post Vatican II recruits as well as the question of abuse in the institutions run by religious. Was there a connection between the monastic lifestyle led by the nuns in the past and the abuse, as inferred by the lawyer who was investigating this abuse? The final core category was life at present, following about forty years of change. How were the nuns coping at the beginning of the twenty first century?

Through engaging in the study, the nuns were reflecting on their lives, perhaps, for the first time. This was an opportunity for retrospection and evaluation in a holding environment. Up until now, they had lived their adult lives, firstly as a collective where individual life was discouraged, if not forbidden, and then as individuals trying to redefine and assume their individuality. The study mirrors this by looking at the institutional regime through the eyes of the individuals; exploring convent life while trying to give each Sister the opportunity to show her personality. I will now summarise each chapter in the study.

Chapter one: The Literature review

In this chapter I provide a clarification of some terms necessary for the understanding of religious life and I give a very brief overview of the history of religious life.

The literature review revealed the paucity of published psychoanalytic research on religious life. In the past the research was historical or theological. In more recent times there has been more historical, sociological and psychological research. The psychological has concentrated mainly on helping the Sisters deal with the human problems that they face in dealing with their more “normal” lives since Vatican II (1962-65). This review draws on the historical and sociological and on the limited

Jungian and psychoanalytic literature as well as documentary literature on religious life available at the present time.

Historical research (Cullen, 1987; Luddy, 1995; MacCurtain, 1997) reveals that religious Orders played an indispensable part in the functioning of the Irish Church and society since the mid-nineteenth century. The male dominated, hierarchical Church, while using the Sisters for its own purposes, had little real respect for them. These women, on the other hand, benefitted from the prestige and respect of society and thousands flocked to be part of it, all gaining professional status, with some attaining important positions as managers of hospitals or headmistresses in schools; positions that would otherwise have been beyond their reach. Following Vatican II and the allegations of abuse, the State began to take control of social welfare institutions and education and this has continued until the present.

The work of sociologists compares the impositions and demands of religious life in the pre-Vatican era to those in other forms of institutional life (Wittberg, 1991, 1994, 2007; Goffman, 1961; Coser, 1974) and throws some light on possible reasons for the present decline in recruits (Mulcahy, 2004).

A limited Jungian analysis points to many damaging effects of consistent demands on the individual to abandon common sense, in favour of blind obedience, and provides a metaphor for the current disarray in which religious life finds itself (Arraj, 2005). The issue of the abuse of women and children, in institutions run by religious (Raftery and O'Sullivan, 1999; Smith, 2007), is discussed and is broadened into a consideration of child abuse in the Catholic Church worldwide and the part played by the Vatican in its concealment (D'Arcy, 2010).

Chapter two: Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework for the study. The study is psychosocial, based on the notion that the unconscious plays a role in the construction of reality (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009). The main method used is Grounded Theory which lends itself to "*multiple methods of data collection*" (Charmaz, 2006: 178). The data is collected using adaptations of three interview methods, namely BNIM (Rosenthal, 1993; Rosenthal and Bar-On, 1992; Schutze, 1992) FANI (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) and Cartwright's (2004) Psychoanalytic Research Interview. There is a brief overview of each method.

There is a consideration of the ethical issues, including the responsibilities of the researcher as co-constructor of the interviews (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Analysis does not take place during the process of the interview, as is the case in the psychoanalytic session, but is done retrospectively, using a transcript of the interview. The data is analysed using a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which is a detailed, iterative, process leading to the identification of core categories and themes across cases. An example of the analytic process is presented, as well as an account of the unconscious processes, namely, the defences that are deemed to be part of the culture in the convent institution.

Chapter three: A Total Break with the World

In order to situate religious life in its societal context the chapter begins with an overview of Irish society from the 1930s to the late 1960s, the pre-Vatican II period when eight of the ten respondents entered religious life. It was a sexually repressed, patriarchal society dominated by the moral authority of the Catholic Church. Ireland was a land with limited prospects for most young women and it was in this environment that the respondents found their vocation to religious life.

Each story of “vocation” reveals conscious but mostly unreflected reasons for entering the convent, in addition to many possible unconscious reasons, discovered through the application of Grounded Theory and psychoanalytic concepts. While all of the respondents speak about their vocations, only two tell of the day they left home. Perhaps for those who had spent five years in boarding school, this period acted as a transition from home to convent, and the final departure to join the, already familiar, nuns was but another step.

The break with the world was accomplished with the imposition of restrictions on leaving the grounds, receiving visits from outsiders, hearing news from the world, communicating by letter and having normal social intercourse at work. Almost all of the respondents have joyless memories of these times, when the convent boundaries were almost impermeable.

Chapter four: Convent Culture 1930 - 1969

This chapter focuses on life inside the convent and the effect of the convent culture on the research respondents. They belong to active (apostolic) congregations but, at this time, they were also subject to the commitment - fostering mechanisms (Wittberg, 1991) of monastic life, from which the founders of these congregations were refused

exemption. These mechanisms included enclosure, the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the Rule and Constitutions in addition to the acceptance of the almost godly status of the superior who “knew” God’s will. All of these are discussed in detail. The individual Sister was forced to remain subservient and childlike. Retrospectively all of the respondents comment negatively on the restrictive nature of these mechanisms, although they may have thought differently at the time.

The convent operated a social class system with the wealthy in exalted positions and the lay Sisters at the bottom of the pile. The lay Sisters were not educated by the congregations and worked in lowly positions in the convent. For most, this was accepted as the status quo.

In the convent the possible psychological effect of conformity to the system was regression to an earlier stage of development (Freud, 1921) and the abandonment of one’s individual ego and identity, in favour of the collective group identity. This involved, at times, a splitting of the ego, states of denial and the turning of a blind eye (Steiner, 1993). In the convent there was no space for third position thinking (Britton, 1989; Hoggett, 1992; Steiner, 1993). There were few attempts at resisting the restrictions imposed by the life but many became ill and sought solace in visits to the doctor and periods in hospital.

Chapter five: Change and Transition

In the late 1960s Irish society was becoming liberalised and freeing itself from the moral constraints of the Catholic Church. Opportunities for women had greatly improved. The convening of Vatican II (1962-65) was a watershed in the history of the Catholic Church, calling for renewal and updating. However it showed scant regard for women, all but excluding them from its deliberations. As a result of Vatican II religious life lost its specialness and its prerogative of assured sanctification by virtue of membership. On the positive side, active religious were relieved of the burden of monasticism and they embarked on an unprecedented path that had a blueprint for change, but not a method that facilitated the internal change and internal adaptation to the new life.

Psychologically, the Sisters would have had to reverse the socialisation training that they had internalised in the Novitiate, if they were now to become mature adults in a world of which they had little experience, before entering the convent. Two research respondents entered the convent at this time and their experiences serve as a foil to

highlight the difficulties of some elderly Sisters who were resisting change. These younger members came with a different outlook and different expectations; they were focused on ministry and wished to lead a simple lifestyle. They found the situation in the convent intolerable and, like thousands of others, returned to the world at this time.

Chapter six: Forty Years on

At the turn of the century Irish society was in the grip of the “Celtic Tiger” and the people were enjoying the ephemeral economic boom. The Catholic Church was losing its grip on its members, as the growth in individualism led to an à la carte menu of religious observance.

In the convent there is confusion. Some of the elderly respondents feel let down and abandoned by those in authority, others are happy with their lot. According to the respondents, the leadership is finding it hard to cope with the demands of the role. The system is fragmenting and there is a struggle to survive. There is a move towards living singly, rather than in groups and a search for individual fulfilment.

The confusion is compounded by the continuing stream of allegations of abuse against the Church and its institutions. Abuse in religious institutions is explored from the perspective of the respondents and is recognised as having been endemic in the system for both the nuns and those in their care. The future of religious life is bleak. The Sisters do not think religious life will survive in its present form.

Literature Review

Introduction

Before embarking on an exposition of the literature on religious life it is helpful to clarify some of the terms used to define it, its legal system and Rule, and to situate the present study in the overall context of religious life as it evolved over the centuries.

In the Roman Catholic Church the term “religious life” (also called consecrated life) involves a commitment to a vowed life, observing, as binding, the Gospel counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience in a Religious Institute, (also known as an Order or Congregation). Religious life is approved and regulated by Canon Law.

The Code of Canon Law is the legal system for the smooth running of the society of the Catholic Church. It is the oldest, still functioning, legal system in the Western world. Since the fourth century the Roman Catholic Church has been developing regulations that influence the life of its members. These regulations are called canons and are codified by canon lawyers. They have their origins in ancient Church writing, decisions of General Councils of Bishops and rulings issued by Popes.

The Pope is the supreme head of the Roman Catholic Church. He “*obtains full and supreme power in the Church by his acceptance of legitimate election*” (Canon 332: 1983). The Roman Curia, made up of various ministries such as the congregational courts, led by the Cardinals, assists the Pope in the administration of the affairs the Church. The congregations deal with all matters of canonical discipline and the individual interests of the faithful (Canon 360: 1983). Religious of the world come under the jurisdiction of the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* which has had several name changes since its institution in 1586.

The Code was revised in 1983 and religious or consecrated life is now governed by Canons 573-746 (Book II, Part III). Religious are men and women who become members of religious institutes which means that, in addition to following the precepts that are laid down for all the faithful, they take public vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and are required by Canon Law to live in community and have a degree of separation from the world (Canon 607. 2 and 3: 1983). They follow a common rule under the leadership of a superior.

The term “rule” was used to denote one of the four ancient rules, that of St. Benedict, St. Basil, St. Augustine and St. Francis. The Fourth Council of the Lateran (1215) refused to recognize any religious institute which did not observe a rule approved by the Holy See. No Order should be constituted under a new rule: an old rule had to be adopted for the institutes they approved. The prescriptions, required by the special object of the new institute, were called constitutions. The rules and constitutions of the religious institute are ecclesiastical laws and are therefore obligatory.

Throughout its history organized consecrated life has seen a recurring cyclical pattern of foundation, expansion, stabilisation and breakdown at intervals of between two hundred and fifty and three hundred and fifty years (Wittberg, 1991: 24). Each new cycle had difficulty being perceived as being truly “religious life”. In spite of initial reservations each new form of religious life attracted large numbers of recruits within decades and enjoyed tremendous success. Each new form was better equipped to answer the needs of the times than the one it replaced because it had discarded obsolete and irrelevant practices (Hostie, 1972). The first form of organized religious life was the Age of the Desert followed by Monastic life, the Mendicant Orders, and lastly the Apostolic Orders that are now in crisis.

The Age of the Desert began when holy men and women in the early Christian Church, seeking transcendence, left society to pray and practice asceticism in the deserts of North Africa and Asia Minor. There they undertook heroic acts of self denial and penance as a means of winning the devil’s realm for Christ (Waddell, 1936). At this time the wilderness was seen as the last refuge of the devil (Wittberg, 1991).

The Monastic life developed in Christianity in the 4th – 5th century in the east under St. Basil and in the west under St. Benedict who wrote the great Rule from which most of western Christian monasticism derives. Once Monastic life developed, it became the predominant, but not exclusive, form of religious life in the west.

Pope Boniface VII declared in 1298 that all women religious had to observe cloister under pain of excommunication, “*in other words, monasticism was the only recognised legitimate form of religious life for women*” (Schneiders, 2009). From the 6th century until Vatican II (1962-65) and sometimes beyond, some religious congregations, including women’s congregations, continued to embrace monastic life and its commitment mechanisms, in spite of efforts, by both male and female founders of religious Orders, to discontinue them. The men, however, were not always constricted by monasticism.

The Mendicant Orders introduced the element of itinerancy in the 13th century, in order to engage in ministry (the expression of the love of God through the service of one's neighbour, outside the monastic enclosure). But the most striking departure was the founding of the Jesuits and the Redemptorists who decided not to pray the Divine Office, thereby abandoning the monastic custom of meeting several times a day to pray in common (ibid.).

Apostolic women's Orders, founded in the mid nineteenth century, engaged in ministry but were also bound by enclosure and the rules of monasticism both of which were lifted following the Second Vatican Council, which was convened in 1962 to reform the entire Church. The current study engages with the life of apostolic religious in the pre and post - Vatican II periods.

The literature review covers recent research into religious life. The historical research includes the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, providing a background, that is important, to the present study. Sociological and psychological research adds another dimension. Most sociological research has taken place in recent years and, as yet, there is little psychological research to deepen the understanding of the life. The Irish situation, in particular, is examined from a sociological perspective and reveals the paradoxical situation in which the nuns were seen as second class citizens by the Church (as indeed all women have been and continue to be) while, at the same time, being held up as paragons of virtue and holiness from the local pulpit (Mulcahy, 2004). In spite of their separation from the world the norms of society were replicated in the convents in their social structure. Each new set of recruits, having internalized the social mores of the time, is likely to have unconsciously influenced the convent culture. The revelation of institutional abuse of women and children, by religious, is of particular interest in this study, and the literature on these events will be considered.

The historical background: mid to late nineteenth century

The historical background to religious life is of great significance in the understanding of the situation, in which some congregations of religious women find themselves in the present day. Mary Cullen (1987), Marie Luddy (1995) and Margaret MacCurtain (1997) provide an overview of the history of religious life in Ireland that explains the reasons for the exponential growth of religious Orders in Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and their almost exclusive control of education and social welfare and the freedom from scrutiny in these institutions. The question is often asked how the Mercy Sisters, in particular, found themselves the custodians of the Magdalen women and the children in industrial schools. This was because of their Episcopal status and their subjection to the local Bishop in the ministries they undertook. They were the most criticised of all the congregations in the *Ryan Report* on child abuse in 2009. Historical research also shows that, while Rome and the hierarchical Church had little time for the Sisters, they used them to reorganise the Church, at local level, in Ireland, in the nineteenth century (Magray, 1998; Luddy, 1995; Clear, 1987).

Many indigenous Orders were founded in the nineteenth century and became an indispensable part of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

The growth of religious Orders

There were some Orders already in existence in Ireland before the foundation of the indigenous Orders. They include the Poor Clares (1629), Dominicans (1644), Carmelites (1690) and the Ursulines (1771). In 1800 there were eleven convents in the country (Cullen, 1987). This increased to three hundred and sixty eight in 1900. This was due, in part, to the founding of the new indigenous Orders.

The new indigenous foundations often began as groups of lay philanthropists and charitable societies and were later transformed into religious congregations (ibid.). The new Orders included the Presentation and Mercy Sisters that grew at an unprecedented rate:

... more than half of the high-walled stone buildings that became a feature of 20th century town and cities were Mercy and Presentation foundations that had stemmed from the modest beginning of Catherine McAuley's vision and Nano Nagle's aspirations to teach poor children even before the Catholic Emancipation had been won in 1829.

(MacCurtain, 1997: 147)

Other growing foundations were the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul and the Holy Faith Sisters.

Cullen (1987) observes that, from the middle of the 19th century, there was an influx of French teaching congregations that also recruited Irish women. These included the Sacred Heart Sisters (1842), the Faithful Companions of Jesus (1843), the Order of St Louis (1859), the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny (1860) and the Marists (1873).

The new foundations were active Orders, whose members took simple vows, and were called “Sisters”. The more established Carmelites and one group of the Poor Clares are contemplative Orders who take solemn vows and observe cloister or enclosure and are “nuns” according to Canon Law. However the titles of “Sisters” and “nuns” are interchangeable (MacCurtain, 1997). The active congregations broke with the traditional monastic enclosure, in order to fulfil their social welfare role, but in all other aspects they were monastic. The Bishops played a significant role in the foundation of these congregations and actively encouraged their expansion, by inviting superiors to establish convents in their dioceses, and to offer educational facilities to girls of all ages (ibid.). Convent expansion provided a very large number of single women with the opportunity of engaging in socially useful work, at a time when women generally were denied such opportunity (Luddy, 1995). Mary Peckham Magray has suggested that religious life was “*the most culturally privileged position women could hold in the nineteenth century*” (1998: 45).

All religious communities followed the rules and regulations of their particular Order. Such rules and regulations governed all aspects of life within and outside the community (Luddy, 1995). Vocations to all Orders steadily increased over the years and the number of sisters increased from twelve hundred in 1800, to approximately fifteen hundred in 1851, to nine thousand in 1926 (Cullen, 1987).

The role of the Bishops

At this time the Catholic Church was expanding at a momentous rate and the bishops welcomed the help of the religious Orders, in facing the challenge of expansion in towns and cities. This gave the opportunity for this new form of religious life in which the Sisters moved outside the convent enclosure to engage in active ministry, especially with the poor (Cullen, 1987).

The centralisation of the Catholic Church was actualized with the Dogma of Papal infallibility in 1870² at the first Vatican Council (MacCurtain, 1997). As well as increasing Church bureaucracy, it strengthened the control of the bishop and the parish priest. Although the Church was reliant on the sisterhood, the nuns had little standing in the eyes of the Church. Pope Pius X wrote that *“the Church is an unequal society comprising of two categories of persons, the Pastor and the flock.”* (ibid: 246). This was the climate in which the Sisters worked in the 1900s, desperately needed by the Church but having an ill-defined status and burdened by enclosure (ibid.).

James Smith (2007) alludes to the ongoing debate surrounding the levels of cultural authority assumed by female religious in this period. Caitriona Clear (1987) depicts religious as powerless instruments of the male hierarchy and therefore not playing a deciding role in the revitalisation of the Church or in the emergence of the new Catholic middle class. Magray argues that the development of religious life helped to transform the Irish Church and Irish society and, yet she concludes, that by the end of the century, the bishops had gained increased control over convent communities operating in their dioceses (1998: 11). Luddy (1995) disagrees with this and claims that superiors remained formidable opponents in protecting their sphere of influence.

The problem of jurisdiction, that is, whether the indigenous Orders were governed directly from the Vatican or by the local bishop had been resolved by the beginning of the 20th century in favour of the local bishop (MacCurtain, 1997). Enclosure within the convent precincts and supervision of the convent horarium, as well as visitation, were potential areas of tension between bishops and the sisterhoods prior to Vatican II (ibid.).

The work of the Sisters

Religious communities built the infrastructure of social welfare that bound the people to the church and the church to the people in 19th Ireland (Luddy, 1995). The nuns took on an enormous range and variety of works and the work was innovative in many respects. There was no aspect of charitable endeavour in which nuns did not establish themselves as workers (ibid.). They ran schools, orphanages, refuges, asylums and hospitals. According to Cullen (1987), they improved the nursing skill in hospitals and raised standards, across the board, by their commitment to orderliness and cleanliness. They

² It was seen as a useful tool in the Church's rejection of the liberal, secular agenda that was sweeping Europe. Having been dethroned as ruler of the Papal States by the movement for Italian Reunification that finally triumphed in 1870, Pope Pius IX called the First Vatican Council where he was determined to buttress his own spiritual authority (Stanford, 2009).

did much to make nursing an acceptable career for middle-class women, and their work was regarded with respect and admiration by English feminists (ibid.).

The new indigenous Irish foundations were preoccupied with the education and catechesis of the poor, while the French congregations supplemented the work of the Dominicans and the Ursulines, who have a long record of catering for the education of the daughters of better off Catholics. The first university degrees were awarded to women in the 1890s and, ironically, Ireland had little acceptable work for these graduates; quite a number of them entered religious life. In the 1940s the rule of enclosure was relaxed to allow Sisters to attend university classes and take examinations (MacCurtain, 1997).

The Code of Canon Law in 1917 forbade Sisters to take studies in midwifery, obstetrics and all branches of medicine, including surgery and gynaecology and this prohibition continued until 1936 when Pope Pius XI issued Canon 489: “*Maternity Training for Missionary Sisters*” (MacCurtain, 1997). This prohibition throws some light on the fact that the Sisters, in one particular congregation in the study, were forbidden to visit a home where there was a new baby.

Institutions of power

Convents were seen as institutions of power where some had the opportunity of rising to positions of power and authority, unmatched by lay women in secular society (Luddy, 1995). The founding women were of formidable character and vision, as well as being wealthy, and of a high social standing. Even as single women or widows they had control over the use of their property and could decide to use their money and position to establish the new congregations (Cullen, 1987).

Luddy (1995) finds it hardly surprising that women were attracted to religious life which allowed a freedom far beyond that which was available to their lay counterparts. Convents provided an esteemed alternative to marriage and motherhood and the extent of convent networks allowed women to choose the type of convent and the type of work which best suited their needs and abilities (ibid.). However, this study will show that this was not the case for all. The appeal was so great that Luddy questions the supernatural nature of vocation. This is an interesting point because the supernatural is considered to be an integral part of vocation. Everyone who thinks they have a vocation to enter religious life believes they are being called by God. This is the theological

perspective and the current study will show the possibility of unconscious or hidden motivation playing a part.

But the convent, although separate from society, was not immune to society's influence and mores, and this is reflected in the class based system in operation there, in particular the distinction between choir and lay Sisters (Luddy, 1995). Choir sisters came from privileged backgrounds and engaged in the public work of the community. Lay Sisters were generally less well educated and from much poorer backgrounds than choir Sisters; they did not bring a dowry and they carried out the domestic tasks of the community. They had little say in the managerial structures of the community (ibid.). This is corroborated by MacCurtain (1997) who adds that they were responsible for tasks such as cooking, laundering, working on the farm, cleaning the school and dormitories. They led a hidden life. They possessed no vote in community affairs and they did not elect to the leadership of the community, nor were they eligible for election as superior (ibid.). All of the Sisters in the present study are choir Sisters.

The system of having lay Sisters originated in the Middle Ages when it was customary for wealthy women, who entered the cloister, to bring their serving women with them, while those who were young were often accompanied by their nurses (ibid.). There is no evidence that such a division existed in the small groups of Irish nuns who came together in dwelling houses, during the eighteenth century, when convents and Catholic schools were forbidden to function by state law. With the resurgence of religious life for women, in nineteenth century Ireland, the lay Sister became a visible structure within the convent (ibid.). The practice of having lay Sisters has existed in apostolic congregations until Vatican II (1962-65) called for an end to discrimination in convents. By the end of the nineteenth century the religious Orders had established an immense network of institutions, which had become indispensable to the functioning of the Irish church and society (Cullen, 1987).

The historical background: early twentieth century

In the early twentieth century vocations to religious life continued apace and by 1941 one out of every 400 women in Ireland was entering a convent (MacCurtain, 1997: 248). The political activist Horgan (2001) writes that nuns made up one of the largest groups of women workers in Ireland up to the 1970s. The convent system continued to flourish, as did the role of the Bishops, in the indigenous congregations. There was little supervision of the work carried out by religious Orders. Many Sisters had the possibility of filling important roles at work, while living a restrictive life in the convent.

Episcopal rule

Raftery and O' Sullivan (1999), when writing about abuse in industrial schools, point out that, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Church had almost complete domination of provision of social services, which were funded by the State. Religious Orders, they say, continued to flourish especially the Sisters of Mercy who, as has already been noted, unlike most other Orders, were directly under Episcopal rule:

The main reason for the dominance of the Sisters of Mercy in the fields of education, health and industrial schools in Ireland was the fact that their rules allowed them to come under the direct control of the local Catholic bishop. It was the bishops who had the ultimate say over who was to provide services within their dioceses, and they preferred to be able to maintain the maximum control over these.

(Raftery and O'Sullivan, 1999: 282)

The legacy for the current members of this Order is that they have to cope with the allegations of abuse that took place, in the past, in their institutions and which remained hidden until recent years. This congregation took in more children than it could adequately cater for, and continued without supervision, probably because of its close connection to the local Bishop, under whose jurisdiction it operated and whose standing in the eyes of the State was irreproachable.

The involvement of the religious suited the State because religious labour was cheap or free “*and the capital costs were met by fundraising from the flock and through ‘dowries’ brought in by the middle class religious*” (MacCurtain, 1997: 248). Costs to the State were kept low because the religious were not paid full wages and the schools provided the sort of product desired by the State, “*young people schooled in orderliness, discipline, obedience and self control*” (ibid: 249).

The nuns continued to work and to expand and they were respected by the public. In recent times it came to light that there was little supervision by the State of the institutions that they ran because *“belief in the altruism of the religious running them and the fear of challenging the church together with ignorance of conditions and the inmates’ lack of powerful connections isolated them from public scrutiny”* (Nic Ghiolla Phadraig, 1995: 601). The power of the Church/State union was pitted against the powerlessness of those without advocacy. At the same time, inside the convent walls, power and powerlessness were juxtaposed.

Power and powerlessness

Many nuns were given access to positions of power and responsibility in Irish society, at this time. They did this in higher education, and in the management positions in the fields of education, social welfare and health. The large numbers of women entering religious life facilitated the rapid growth and involvement in institutions, such as homes for unmarried mothers, hospitals, elite boarding schools and residential homes for young people. The denominational single sex schools, run by the religious, were fertile ground for the recruitment of young women to the ranks of the religious (MacCurtain, 1997). The religious were owners and matrons of the main hospital systems in the country. They were entrusted, by the State, with the State’s industrial schools and orphanages and with the responsibility of implementing the State’s fragile and largely underdeveloped welfare policy (ibid.).

In contrast to the image of the powerful Sister, in a powerful role in institutions, is the image of the nun in the street, *“a docile and submissive figure clad in black or white or blue sweep of garment with a medieval headdress who rarely raised her voice or eyes* (MacCurtain, 1997: 252). As early as the seventeenth century John Milton describes the nun as, *“devout and pure, sober steadfast and demure”* (1663). MacCurtain continues, *“Yet these same women were major players in church-state relations below the official level of the Catholic hierarchy”* (1997: 252). Those who were put in these positions, by their congregations, enjoyed a freedom that was the prerogative of all who worked outside the enclosure, and as this study will show, it was an escape from the oppressive life inside the convent. What is not publicly known, but is here symbolized by this paradoxical representation, is the hidden, powerless life of the individual Sister, as opposed to the public power of the institution.

The pre-Vatican II era: a sociological perspective

The work of sociologists McKenna (2006), Wittberg (1991, 1994, 2007), Goffman (1961) and Coser (1974) have much to add to the historical view of, as well as furthering the understanding of, religious life before Vatican II. Yvonne McKenna's study of thirty women is limited to those who left Ireland to work abroad and later returned. She includes an exploration of the society in which these women were raised, their experiences outside Ireland and their impressions of the changed Ireland they found on their return. The sociologist Sister Patricia Wittberg belongs to the more conservative branch of American Sisters. She explores "*intentional communities*" showing how they correspond with Erving Goffman's (1961) "*total*" institution and Leo Coser's (1974) "*greedy*" institution. She examines what she calls the commitment-fostering mechanisms which are, in some respects, common to all three and she concludes that these mechanisms have important psychological implications for those on whom they are enforced.

Irish Sisters abroad

McKenna states that, by the late 1960s, the number of women religious in Ireland was almost 15,500 and that there were a further 15,000 living outside Ireland (2006: 1). The journalist Patsy McGarry comments that the early twentieth century was a time when "*Ireland was producing so many priests and nuns that between one third and a half of them went on the missions*" (2006: 32).

McKenna's study looks at Sisters who spent most of their lives in English convents or on the missions in Africa, Asia and Latin America, before returning to Ireland to retire. These women were born between 1911 and 1950 and were aged between 49 and 86 when interviewed (oral history method) and so were contemporaries of some of the women in the current study. McKenna's interest lies in the women's subjective experiences as women, as nuns and as Irish. Her aim is to "*uncover the lives of a small number of a much larger group of women integral to but overlooked in studies of Irish history, Irish womanhood and Irish diaspora studies*" (2006: 10). She explores the societal context in which the women lived their early lives, a society that viewed becoming a religious as being without contention. She considers the pre-Vatican II life in convents, how Vatican II (1962-65) impacted on the women's sense of self as religious, and the collective response to it and more specifically its impact in English

convents and on the missions. Her final emphasis is on the experience of those who returned to live out their retirement in a much changed Ireland.

McKenna makes an important and little known point about the status of women in religious life that is relevant to any study of the life. The census in Ireland considers religious life to be an occupation in itself, and accords it professional status. For much of the twentieth century women religious formed the largest and most powerful group of professional women in Ireland. Since the late 1960s this number has been in decline and at the end of the twentieth century their number was about 10,000 (ibid: 1). Professional status usually implies extensive education or specialised training which the religious received in their religious life, but not all religious, in the past, were trained for their work as teachers, social workers or care workers. This put these individuals in a vulnerable position when the State took over their institutions and when the freedoms, accorded by Vatican II, opened the doors of once hidden convents and exposed those individuals who were not qualified for the work they were doing.

Intentional communities

Wittberg (1991) uses the concept of the commitment-fostering mechanisms of intentional communities, as distinct from their spirituality, charisma and mission, to engage with cycles of initiation, growth and survival in religious Orders. Her definition corresponds, in many aspects, to those of Goffman's (1961) total institution and Coser's (1974) greedy institution, which she acknowledges. It was not Goffman's intention to study religious institutions but he refers to some of the practices in convents that correspond to those used in asylums and other custodial institutions. Coser, on the other hand, studied the Jesuits as well as the Bolsheviks and makes interesting comparisons. The works of Goffman and Coser make noteworthy contributions to the analysis of religious life in the current study.

Similar to Goffman's and Coser's total and greedy institutions respectively, Wittberg defines an intentional community as a group of people living together, on a more or less permanent basis, voluntarily surrendering control over some private choices in order to form a new way of life (1991: 2). In this way, individual members' needs are surrendered to the group's transcendent mission or goal. The members give power to the leader of the community to decide the type of work they will undertake, whether or not they will marry and whom they will marry, where they will live and how they will spend their free time (ibid.). They hand over their income to a common fund and usually

have little discretionary money of their own. In return the community takes care of the individual's emotional and financial needs and allows him/her to participate in a common endeavour, which is believed to be of the utmost importance (ibid.) Wittberg says that, in its most typical form, the intentional community is also a total institution (Goffman, 1961) which means that the members live, work and recreate together, having little contact with persons or ideas from the outside world, *"This deliberate isolation is necessary to the extent that the community way of life is based on values or beliefs which are different from the main stream of society in which they are located"* (Wittberg, 1991: 2).

The years between 1965 and 1980, saw the establishment, and usually demise, of over a thousand intentional communities in the United States. Wittberg mentions, in particular, the Bruderhof, the Amana and the Oneida and adds that the latter two famous American intentional communities evolved into fully fledged corporate businesses in which there were no traces of their communitarian origins. Most scholars of intentional communities include Catholic monasteries and convents which they consider the most long-lived form of intentional community in the Western world (Christian, 2003). Intentional communities or religious Orders come into being when a sufficient number of like-minded individuals come together, to form a group, under the leadership of a charismatic person, who has a specific and unique vision, in answer to large scale defects and individual hungers, that appear to require religious solutions (Wittberg, 2007). Each new group seeks to provide an answer to the needs of the particular time in which it is set up (ibid.).

Commitment-fostering mechanisms

Wittberg (1991) enumerates the various commitment-fostering mechanisms used by intentional communities to foster and increase ideological and catechetical commitment. They are, group rituals and traditions, boundaries, renunciation of possessions and mortification.

Attachment bonds to family are broken and group members are addressed as brother or sister. Members live, work and recreate together. There is a prohibition on particular friendships, pairings, cliques and small groups and members have to make a choice between celibacy and promiscuity, rather than marriage. The group is involved in common work and common recreation, with little time alone, and days are structured, with everyone following a timetable. There is an insistence on a strong division between

outside and inside and movement across the boundary is restricted, as is the presence of outsiders inside the boundary. The isolation from contaminating outside influence protects the ideology from competition and increases the feeling of a group identity (ibid.). Communal renunciation strengthens group solidarity. Wittberg gives examples of surrendering property or renouncing marriage which, she says, decrease the chances of questioning and leaving. However, if questioning starts, it becomes intense and the member is likely to leave.

Mortification demands that the individual “dies” to her defective and individual self to be reborn into a new, better identity conferred by the group (ibid.). Feelings of guilt and worthlessness are encouraged so that one is more likely to accept the community’s point of view. Eventually the individual blames herself for her suffering and not the injustice of the system.³ Mortification reduces self esteem until the individual no longer lives for herself but for the group (ibid.).

The imposition of these mechanisms often results in illness and resistance to change and the outcome, for the institution, is that it becomes irrelevant and out of sync with the environment. Wittberg holds that these mechanisms are destructive psychologically. Veysey states that, “*All monastic communities, no matter how enduring, pay a severe price in psychological terms for their success.*” (1973: 273). Wittberg (1991) believes that at its worst the strain of subordinating one’s identity to the group can become pathological and gives the Manson family and Jonestown as examples. Even comparatively humane groups, such as the Hutterites, have a high rate of colitis and many members regularly use tranquilizers (ibid.).

The mechanisms foster organisational rigidity and resistance to change (ibid.). There is so much emphasis on the unvaried performance of ritual or on the wearing of a particular style of clothes that even the most trivial of changes may be resisted. If the community is isolated the members will be less aware of changes in the environment and will, as a consequence, eventually become irrelevant and the major recruitment sources may dry up (ibid.).

A further danger of these mechanisms of commitment is that they may, in time, overshadow or usurp the ideological commitment to the founder’s original vision and thus decrease the fervour that the vision had inspired in the first generation of members. In the first instance, the mechanisms may have been introduced to protect the vision but

³ This is similar to the position taken by Schwartz (1990) which he sees as the result of one taking the organisation as one’s ego ideal.

the rigidity and enforced homogeneity that accompany successful commitment mechanisms may lead to the group becoming out of sync with the environment and unable to adapt fast enough to the new conditions (ibid.). This has been the case for the congregations, in the current study, who found themselves trying desperately to catch up after Vatican II but unable to adapt successfully.

Wittberg (1991) believes that these mechanisms are necessary for the survival of the institution and if it does not adopt them or if they are discarded the institution may no longer be able to require from its members the commitment needed for survival and will most likely dissolve within a single generation (ibid.). The current study demonstrates the result of discarding these mechanisms. This occurred in the wake of the changes advocated by Vatican II. But Wittberg holds that the original drive to belong to a group committed to a transcendent ideal may remain alive and a new community may spring up to replace the old (ibid.). This view is also held by the sociologist Mulcahy (2004).

The hybrid life

As already noted, active or apostolic Sisters, besides carrying out their full time ministry also lived a monastic life, which means that they were subjected to the commitment-fostering mechanisms, as explicated by Wittberg above. This has led Sandra Schneiders (2009), the American feminist theologian and member of the Benedictine Order, to refer to their life as the hybrid life. She explains that throughout the world active religious lived the monastic life at home in the convent, and carried out full time ministerial work outside the convent. They dressed in the restrictive “*fluting and pleats of floor length gowns, starched wimples and veiled headdresses of 17th and 18th century peasants*” (ibid: 2) and struggled to fit in their daily schedule of “*Mass, meditation, devotional vocal prayers, examen*” (ibid.) and some hours of the Divine Office as well as “*adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the rosary, stations of the cross, spiritual reading from assigned pious books as well as daily manual work assignments in the convent*” (ibid.). They participated, in silence, in three meals in common and “*an hour in recreation which usually included handwork or mending*” and also carried out a full day’s professional schedule in school, hospital or other Catholic institution (ibid.).

Ann Carey (1997), an American journalist, who writes for the Catholic press in the US, takes up this point and describes an overworked, overstressed pre-Vatican II sisterhood, out of touch with personal needs, pursuing practices and customs, no longer relevant to a modern apostolate. There was little consultation and little time for reflection. The

overly authoritarian convent structure, she says, was not conducive to an emotionally healthy lifestyle and many were caught up in routine rote prayer exercises and had no opportunity to develop spirituality and prayerfulness. Some were unsuited to the work they were assigned and they were “*too often treated like children by superiors and clerics*” (ibid: 11).

Regarding the hybrid life both Schneiders and Carey speak for active religious Orders worldwide. However the mid-twentieth century brought a call from Rome mandating the religious to update their lifestyle.

The pre-Vatican II era: a psychological perspective

James Arraj (2005), a Roman Catholic layman and Jungian analyst, speaks with some authority on religious life. He spent some time in a Jesuit monastery before leaving and getting married. He writes extensively on religious matters and is interested in finding common ground between Catholicism and Jungian psychology (ibid.). He comments on the psychological effects of some of the practices demanded of young women in convent Novitiates. His observations are based on the memoirs of former members of religious communities, namely Karen Armstrong, (1981, 1983) Barbara Ferraro et al (1990) and Mary Wong (1983). The disadvantage of analyzing written accounts, as opposed to live interviews, is that they are less spontaneous and contain less of the “noise” of real life that can reveal a fuller picture of unconscious processes.

Obedience

For the novice the way to perfection and sanctity lay in obedience, in doing the will of God at all times. God’s will was made manifest through the Church and more concretely through the rules and customs of the religious Order and more especially through the will of the superior. Strict observance involved emptying oneself of one’s own will, in order to allow God to fill one with his love (Arraj, 2005). The young women were trained in, and internalised an Ignatian style of obedience. The obedience of St. Ignatius was that of the professional soldier, who when his commanding officer gave a direction, obeyed without question, even to the death. This literal interpretation of obedience was implemented in a literal way. The young religious were being told to act in a certain way and not to reflect on this behaviour (ibid.). This is substantiated by Coser in his exposition of Jesuit obedience when he states that “*after a most rigorous training in blind obedience, the true Jesuit became a model soldier in the spiritual army of the Church Militant*” (1974: 125). The Jesuit was prepared even to disregard the evidence of his senses when the occasion required. The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius demanded of the Jesuits that, “*To arrive at the truth in all things, [they] must always be ready to believe that what seems to [them] white is black, if the hierarchical Church so defines it*” (Longridge, 1919: 199). The task of the obedient Jesuit was to save souls, in the service of the Church Militant (Coser, 1974).

The young person, in formation in the Novitiate, was filled with the desire to please God and was eager to be taught how to do God’s will and allowed herself to be put in a

position where she opposed the development of the human personality with its feelings, thoughts, hopes and aspirations in what Arraj calls a “*war against the human*” (2005: 28).

Armstrong (1981) describes sewing on a machine without a needle and scrubbing the stairs with a nail brush with worn out bristles. A similar example, from the current study, is the admonition to novices by the Christian writer, Rodriquez (1609), to plant cabbages upside down if directed to do so by the Superior. Arraj (2005) believes that having to put common sense aside had a deep effect on the psyche, putting the novice at odds with herself, under the guise and motivating force of trying to draw closer to God. This effectively said that the human had to be eradicated, so that that the divine could take its place but the human spirit cannot easily be put aside (ibid.).

The rule of obedience and the requirement to keep the letter of the law, at all times, put huge unconscious pressure on the individual and gave rise to a sense that true perfection meant the destruction of human affections, for example, the prohibition on particular friendships often led to having no friendships at all and resulted in a shutting down of feelings (ibid.). What is of interest, to this study, is that if nuns became cut off from their feelings then it became virtually impossible for them to empathise with others and this had implications for all of the work they did, that necessitated contact with other human beings, in particular, their work with the vulnerable and the neglected.

The potential for harm was great when blind obedience was taken as a practical program of behaviour. The individual tore herself apart in trying to reconcile the aspiration to perfection with a blunting of common sense and this often had the effect of leading to physical and psychological illness (Arraj, 2005; Wittberg, 1991) This line of argument, was not always readily acknowledged, in the past, and becoming ill was seen as the will of God. However, it also became an acceptable reason for leaving the convent; the nun was not strong enough to live the life and God was making His will known through the illness.

Arraj (2005) does not comment on the rage that inevitably results from the enforcement of the strict regime nor the guilt that might ensue from being unable to conform. He believes the effects of the pre-Vatican II over-institutionalised religious life became evident when members wanted to leave and return to the world. They had not been accustomed to using their minds and making decisions, so it was difficult for them to leave. They were torn between remaining in their oppressive religious community which, despite its problems, still retained some sense of being a sure path to God, and

facing what appeared to be the loss of vocation and a life in the world (as a spoiled nun). They felt regret that they had not tried harder to make it work and they felt guilt that they were betraying their initial commitment (ibid.).

Armstrong describes the psychological stress she suffered in the convent and how it led to her decision to leave:

At Oxford I was taught once again to criticize and to think. The critical faculty I had learned to quell came to life again while I was studying in college, but when I returned each evening to my convent, I found I could not switch off again to become the obedient, self effacing nun. For a year I struggled with this new, emergent self, for I desperately wanted to stay in my Order. It still seemed to me the best life anyone could have to be professionally intent on seeking and loving God. Finally the two selves snapped apart. I suffered a breakdown and eventually had to admit I could not continue.

(1983: 2)

Arraj sums up this era in religious life with the words, “*at the heart of the matter are the structural problems ... that took the form of a deficient spirituality in which faith in God was confused with conformity to a human organization*” (2005: 31). The institution was of more importance than the individual.

Vatican II

The call to update

As early as 1950 Pope Pius XII urged religious superiors to begin modernisation in their congregations, including the abolition of outmoded customs, humanisation of the lifestyle, increased attention to professional and cultural education of their sisters “*and the modification of practices which were unhealthy for the Sisters or which alienated them from their contemporaries*” (Carey, 1997: 11) but the call was largely ignored. The mandates of the Second Vatican Council left the Sisters with no option but to update.

Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965, a series of sessions in Rome, led first by Pope John XXIII, and after his death by Pope Paul VI, was attended by bishops from all over the world. Changes were made in Catholic theology, philosophy and liturgy. Most importantly, the Church began, timidly, to move away from the hierarchical model of governance to a concept of the Church as the people of God. Before he died John XXIII reiterated:

Today more than ever, we are called to serve mankind as such, and not merely Catholics; to defend above all and everywhere, the rights of the human person and not merely those of the Catholic Church.... It is not that the Gospel has changed: it is that we have begun to understand it better ... the moment has come to discern the signs of the times, to seize the opportunity and to look far ahead.

(Vatican Archive, 1965)

From an organisational perspective, it seems that the Pope realised that the Church, as institution, was out of line with the rest of the world and if it were to survive it would need to modernise. The vision of the institutional, hierarchical Church was being challenged in favour of a broader, more universal perspective, with an emphasis on the role of the laity. It called for a redefinition of Catholic practice and of the Church’s role in contemporary society. The Council mandated that all religious Orders renew and adapt themselves to modern times (ibid.). After Vatican II, most Orders of women were enthusiastic about the new directives and they set about renewal “*with more dedication than any other group in the Church*” (Carey, 1997: 11). Renewal Chapters (the official congregational meetings for major decision making) of the various Orders set about

revising their constitutions which have since been approved by the Vatican (Schneiders, 2009).

Carey (1997) states that in the years following Vatican II religious Sisters took one of three paths, which has led to three groups, within the Orders. She is speaking of the American sisterhood but what she says is also applicable to Sisters in other countries. The first group is made up of those who did not renew significantly and continued in a pre-Vatican mindset, while the second group managed a moderate course and renewed in accordance with the mandates of the Vatican Fathers. But the majority of Orders discarded most of their significant traditions and fashioned a new definition of religious life. Carey takes issue with this third group stating that religious who have adopted it are not in conformity with Canon Law and are not fulfilling the elements necessary for members to achieve the purpose of their vocations. The reasons that the Sisters took this path, she believes, were firstly, they were misinformed about the directives of the Council, and secondly, that they were unduly influenced by charismatic feminist leaders (such as Sandra Schneiders) who took an overly broad interpretation of the documents in reaction to the authoritarian lifestyle to which they had been subjected for many years. She claims that the documents were so broadly interpreted, that they were falsely rationalised as mandates of the Council and that no document of Vatican II even remotely proposed the kind of renewal led by what she terms the “*change oriented*” Sisters. Her assessment is that the very essentials of religious life such as common prayer, religious garb, community life and the corporate apostolate exercised in the name of the Church, were abandoned (ibid.).

On the one hand, there were those who, because of their nineteenth century pattern of functioning, were vulnerable and easily influenced by articulate leaders and on the other hand, the leaders, the well educated, self-confident and politically astute who had a socio-political agenda and the know-how to effect that agenda. Carey claims that this has led to chaos in many institutes of women religious. It has resulted in no new recruits, a cessation of traditional services to the Church, little witness to the transcendent, a polarisation of the Sisters within Orders and a loss of corporate identity. Carey is writing of religious in the USA. The most radical of American writers on religious life, namely, Sandra Schneiders, Joan Chittister and Barbara Fiand were avidly read by Irish Sisters in the post-Vatican II era⁴. However, although the call of the

⁴ Personal experience

Council to update was taken up in Ireland, a more moderate path was pursued and generally speaking, the Irish Sisters were less vocal about the Catholic Church and, also, less radical in their actions than their American counterparts.

Post-Vatican II: a psychological perspective

Once again, taking a psychological perspective, Arraj (2005) believes that Vatican II opened the door to reflection and common sense, to thinking about things rather than accepting them passively and he refers to Ferraro's (1990) comment that apparently the old ways had not been an immutable demonstration of the will of God, after all. The Sisters struggled to rediscover the humanity they had previously tried to negate. The confusion that followed Vatican II called everything in question. Once the Sisters were allowed to think for themselves, the thinking extended to all aspects of religious life, the larger life of the Church and even the binding power of the rule itself when it harms rather than helps. The influence of progressive theologians such as Cardinal Suenens of Belgium led to a re-thinking of the meaning of the vows and experimentation with new forms of ministry (ibid.).

Arraj uses the metaphor of deep sea diving to describe the Church and religious life as it proceeded through the experience of Vatican II. Pre-Vatican II religious were sent deep under the water where they were subjected to great pressure and were told that learning to live in these great depths, was a privileged road to perfection. But since such deep internal pressures are injurious to physical and psychological health the body and mind naturally seek the daylight of the surface, where they can enjoy their proper activities (ibid.).

The freedoms taken by the Council fathers allowed them to surface from the top heavy centralised Church and this freedom spread throughout the Church. Once it was felt by the religious they too, wished to surface. The religious were at such a depth that this was a dangerous and difficult process. Go too slowly and they would run out of air and be immobilized and imprisoned in their unnatural way of living; ascend too quickly and in an uncontrolled manner and they risked getting the bends.

In the immediate aftermath of Vatican II the systems of an uncontrollable decompression were evident. The pendulum swung from seclusion from the world to a desire to be in the world, from the cloister to the inner city, from secluded summer camp to co-ed summer school, from strict segregation of men and women to flirtation and romantic relationships and from the old structures of religious life to a range of experimental community living (ibid.). The current study will show the variety of effects of Vatican II on individuals, as well as on the religious institution in Ireland.

The Irish situation

There is no doubt that religious life is in crisis worldwide, “*Religious life as many of us have known it is rapidly declining.... Talk of new members seems more like wishful thinking than concrete reality*” (Fiand, 2001: 18). Sociologists and theologians are agreed that the option is, to be radically changed, in terms of size and structure, or to become extinct (Wittberg, 1991, 2007; Chittister, 1995; Ebaugh, 1993). A difference in opinion arises as to whether internal change is enough for religious life to survive. Fiand (2001) and Mulcahy (2004) are convinced of the impact of external forces on religious life. Fiand thinks that the call to leave the world and not allow oneself to be contaminated by it, is sociologically fallacious, “*Religious, like most other humans are culturally affected much more than [they] are counter cultural*” (2001: 19). Since Vatican II the religious in Ireland have cherished the notion of being counter cultural.

The Irish situation

Mulcahy (2004) takes up the theme of the influence of external forces and looks to the relationship between the religious and the larger society in Ireland to illuminate the present situation in religious life and the decline in vocations. He builds his case on the theories of the sociologists Weber (1965), Turner (1991), Silber (1995) and Elias (1970). Weber (1965) distinguishes between virtuosi and followers in world religions but does not consider the relationship between them. Turner (1991) recognises the relationship in terms of exchange theory. The mass followers supply economic support and the virtuosi make their charisma available, that is, they exercise their religious responsibilities on behalf of, or instead of, the followers. Silber (1995) considers the relationship between the monastery and its institutional context, how it interacts with its social, political and cultural environment. Both Turner and Silber fail to include the supply of recruits to the ranks of the virtuosi, as part of the relationship between them and the mass follower (Mulcahy, 2004).

Mulcahy forwards his analysis by including a theoretical framework centred on relationships. For this he turns to Elias and figurational sociology (1970) that develops the theory of interdependence, namely, that from the moment of birth one needs other human beings. In other words, throughout life we need and are dependent on other human beings and they need and are dependent on us. This includes the power and control differential which is usually unequal, where one group can withhold what the

other group needs. This balance of power is always changing. Power grows and diminishes and the balance moves from one to the other. It is a dynamic and continuing process.

Mulcahy proposes an interdependent relationship between the religious and the laity in Irish society. The religious, as virtuosi, “*hold and express the spiritual resources and values embraced by the Catholic Church*” (2004: 356) while the laity, as mass followers, who are not able to hold these values continuously in everyday life, desire the presence of the religious and through contact with them, “*are able to keep in touch with these spiritual resources*” (ibid.). In addition, the virtuosi carry out a social function such as education or care of the sick. The laity, in return, offers financial support and a sufficient number of recruits to keep the religious institution operational. In every interdependent relationship there is always a struggle to maintain the power differential and one way of dealing with this is to set up an established insider versus an outsider group. The insiders are rewarded with in-group gratification while the outsiders are stigmatised as second class (ibid.).

The religious as the insider group

In the first half of the twentieth century in Ireland, because of the high status of religious values in society and the belief in an afterlife, the religious, as the established insider group, held the balance of power while the lay people were the second class outsiders. Maintaining this balance of power required the preservation of a more or less stable belief system.

Following Mulcahy the belief system at this time could be expressed as follows:

Table 1

Religious	Laity
First class citizens in the Kingdom of God	Second class citizens in the Kingdom of God
Religious called to be perfect and dedicate their lives to the pursuit of perfection	Laity cannot dedicate themselves to perfection because of their preoccupation with worldly matters
Think of themselves as superior	Accept their position of inferiority
Assured of place in heaven	Will get to heaven with help of religious
Example to the laity	Acknowledge example of religious
Lead good life <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ keep the rules of the convent ➤ follow the example of the saints ➤ live common life ➤ remain separate from laity, in cloister 	Sins put before them from the pulpit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ fail to attend Sunday Mass ➤ fail to fast and abstain from meat ➤ indulge in extra marital sex ➤ over indulge in alcohol ➤ other moral issues

These positions were reinforced from the pulpit and in religious magazines. The laity came to believe that they were the second class citizens and of lesser rank than the religious. Their redemption lay in the recognition of their state and their dependence on the religious to intercede with God on their behalf, to ensure their salvation.

Projections

In psychoanalytic terms each side was splitting off and projecting aspects of itself into the other and a situation was set up that was mutually supportive and interdependent (Bion, 1967; Symington, 1994). The religious projected their sinfulness and spiritual impotence into the laity and the laity projected its goodness and spiritual power into the religious. Then there was a mutual introjection of the projected aspects and an identification with them. Theoretically, that which is projected is no longer available to consciousness but is unconsciously acted upon and this acting out is of interest in this study.

In this dynamic there was some flexibility for the laity while the religious, as a group, could not acknowledge anything other than goodness and perfection. The convent was obliged to continuously present this face to the public. One is reminded of MacCurtain's (1997) description of the nun who walked through the streets as a mysterious figure with downcast eyes and wearing strange clothes.

A change in the relationship

In the second half of the twentieth century there were several changes that influenced the balance of power between the religious and the laity and, as a consequence, their interdependent relationship began to change. Critical to the change was the lowering of the priority given by the mass followers to the religious values of Catholicism. This was due, in part, to economic growth, more young people having access to education and the greater openness to influences outside the country.

The separation between the religious and the laity had already begun to break down when more religious moved into the secular world, to avail themselves of further education and training, on the advice of Pope Pius XII, in 1952. More contact with the laity led to a lessening of the divide between the two groups. Before Vatican II the religious had seen themselves as being on a path to perfection, and superior in status to the laity, but this special position of superiority was lost, following the universal call to holiness of Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium*). Since everyone was called to perfection

leaving the convent was no longer seen as a failure and many left religious life. The level of control over members by the established group was very much weakened.

Religious became redundant

In the 1990s the State began to take over and run health, educational and social services which had hitherto been the domain of the religious Orders. If the laity did not feel the same level of need for the religious, then there was less reason to provide new recruits, and the intake of members began to drop dramatically. There was a notable re-adjustment in the power balance between the established religious and the outsider mass followers.

At this time, stories of widespread sexual, emotional and physical abuse by religious Orders, and the abuse of power in covering up, began to emerge in the media. Slowly but surely, the established were becoming the outsider and had no way of fighting back. *“They had no control over the mass media, their religious magazines went into decline and there were fewer in the pews to hear what was coming from the pulpit”* (Mulcahy, 2004: 362).

By the turn of the twenty first century the power balance had changed, to the extent that the laity is now the established and the religious are the outsiders. The established, in any interdependency, look down on the outsiders and consider them always in the wrong, so it would not make sense for the established to give recruits to the outsider. Now, that the outsider, the laity, has become the new established the numbers in religious Orders drop to a minimum (ibid.).

Shared values

Mulcahy concludes his argument with the notion of the *“prophetic”* function that the religious have for the laity when they serve as a reminder of values and spiritualities that are shared. When the religious and the laity have a shared spirituality then this *“prophetic”* aspect is evident. As the balance of power shifts from the religious to the laity, the laity drifts from these shared values and the religious remind them of what they once believed. But once the laity becomes the established, with a new agenda and a new spiritual search then the religious no longer have a prophetic function for them. The values and spiritualities that the religious express are now of low priority, or even meaningless to the laity, and the religious become redundant as *“prophet”* (ibid.).

A resurgence of religious life does not lie just within the Orders and congregations but in the wider community of religious and laity. What is required is an emergence of a

new shared spirituality between laity and religious. Mulcahy holds a hope for a shared spirituality between religious and laity and the creation of a new religious form which will express the shared values in a strengthened interdependent relationship and with renewed support and the provision of recruits from the laity (ibid.). In this he agrees with Wittberg (1991).

In psychoanalytic terms both society and the religious Orders have to recognize the aspects of their reality that have been split off and projected into the other so that each group can acknowledge its own good and bad aspects, its own light and darkness.

Since Mulcahy's wrote of his hopes for the future, revelations from the *Ryan Report* (2009) on childhood abuse in religious institutions have further alienated the Irish public.

Revelations of abuse

The revelations of child abuse in Ireland have had a profound effect on religious life and cannot be ignored. Institutional abuse by religious and sexual abuse by clerics had, until recent times, been concealed by the Church, putting the preservation of the institution before the safety of children.

There was little public attention to the subject of abuse in residential institutions in Ireland until the television documentary *Dear Daughter* in 1996. It includes accounts of appalling brutality by nuns in one industrial school, run by the Sisters of Mercy. It produced an enormous response; most of it horrified at the deeply shocking nature of the abuse outlined. Some aspects of the programme were discredited but the cause was taken up by the journalist, Mary Raftery, who produced a three part documentary, in 1999, called *States of Fear* which provoked hundreds of responses. It resulted in an apology by the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, to victims of institutional abuse, and the setting up of the Ryan Commission to inquire into childhood abuse. When Justice Ryan took over from Justice Mary Laffoy (who had resigned because of disagreements with the Department of Education) he decided to hear a sample of 1,090 of those wishing to be heard. (Quinn, 2009: 712). Heads of religious Orders were heard in public and the former residents in private, because the latter were naming individuals, none of whom had ever been charged, much less convicted (ibid.). The Commission reported ten years later, in May 2009.

In 1999 Raftery with Eoin O'Sullivan published the book, *Suffer the Little Children: The Inside Story of Ireland's Industrial Schools*, that expands on many of the areas dealt with in the previous television documentary. It uses testimonies of former residents and includes startling research, showing a level of awareness of child sexual abuse going back over sixty years and it gives insights into several of the religious Orders involved in the system.

The industrial school system originated in the nineteenth century in Sweden, Switzerland and Germany and came to Ireland via Britain (Quinn, 2009). It aimed to solve the problem of children who found themselves on the street and offered an alternative to adult prisons for those involved in crime. The intent was to feed, house and train them for work (ibid.)

Raftery and O’ Sullivan make an important link between the industrial school (usually known, in the local area, as the “orphanage”) and the Magdalen laundry; two institutions often found on the same convent complex. Many of the children of unmarried mothers were placed in the industrial schools and, in many cases, the mothers themselves ended up in the Magdalen laundries. This interlocking system, built up over a number of decades, resulted in huge numbers of children and, to a lesser degree, their mothers being incarcerated for transgressing the narrow moral code of the time (ibid: 19). This is corroborated in an interview with the Sister in charge in the Magdalen Laundry, in Galway, in 1955 who explained the connection between the industrial schools and the Magdalen asylums. She said that the pregnant women went to the mother and baby home in Tuam (run by the Bon Secours Sisters), to have their babies, after which some of them were sent to the Magdalen in Galway. The illegitimate children were relocated to the industrial schools. Some of the children were sent to the Magdalen when they left the industrial school. She said those who were “*backward*” (*socially immature*) rather than “*mental defectives*” received special care (Sutherland, 1958: 82). The interlinking of Magdalen asylum and industrial school is what Raftery and O’Sullivan (1999) refer to as “*the system*”.

A total of over 105,000 children were committed to industrial schools, by the courts, between 1868 and 1969 (ibid: 20). There was little or no contact between the women in the Magdalen and their children in the industrial school, and the only point of contact between the local community and the Magdalen laundries was when people arrived to hand in their laundry to be cleaned by the Magdalen women (ibid.).

Raftery and O’Sullivan (1999) refer to the argument that the reason for the abuse was the frustration of the nuns in charge who had been sent into the convent by their families. This they reject on the grounds that the nuns enjoyed a high social standing in society and had considerable outlets for their professional skills and a degree of power denied to other groups of women, at the time (ibid.). While this was true for some, this study will show that it was not true for the lay Sisters who were victims of the class system in operation in convents throughout the country. These Sisters were deprived of education and training which left them open to projections, both from the vulnerable and deprived they looked after, and from those higher up the social ladder in the convent. These women were the most likely to have been working in the industrial schools and the Magdalen laundries, which were not the most coveted ministries in the convent.

Magdalen asylums

Magdalen asylums grew out of the “rescue movement” in Britain and Ireland, in the nineteenth century, with the goal of the rehabilitation of women who worked as prostitutes. At this time, sex outside marriage was seen as sinful and sinners had to atone. The movement in Ireland was taken over by the Church and the homes, that were initially intended to be short term refuges, turned into long term institutions (Finnegan, 2001). There was no state funding for Magdalen asylums; they were funded through the commercial laundries in which the Magdalens worked without remuneration. Women were still being admitted to these homes in the 1970s and the last home closed in 1996 (Culliton, 1996). There are a number of these women still living in four convent communities in Ireland.

The Magdalens were women who were sexually active and did not fit the model of the Irish family and so were excluded, silenced or punished (Conrad, 2004). This was at a time when Irish women were expected to be morally pure; they were unmarried mothers of illegitimate children when the constitution rendered motherhood and marriage inseparable. They were victims of physical and sexual abuse by men, under a legal double standard that evaded culpability and condemned female victims as criminals (Smith, 2007). They were removed from society and consigned to Magdalen asylums, often by female relatives (Finnegan, 2001). Educated women supported the asylums either by direct personal involvement, or by employing former penitents as cheap domestic servants; by financial contributions or on a much larger scale, by sending their laundry to be washed (ibid.). The asylum imposed celibacy and confinement with hard labour. These were punishments normally reserved for criminals, sentenced by the State, to a fixed, rather than an indeterminate, term of imprisonment (ibid: 243). Finnegan claims that the Magdalens were, “*Kept ignorant of changing attitudes, demoralised and controlled, they were excluded from the sexual revolution which, far from freeing them made mockery of their wasted lives*” (ibid: 5). Of course, one could say the same for many nuns.

Patricia Burke-Brogan was a novice in the convent in Galway and she did some holiday relief work in the laundry. When she left the convent she began to look for an explanation for the cruelty of the past. In an *Irish Times* interview with Anne Dempsey (1993) she claims that “*the nuns were also imprisoned, and did not see clearly either*” She depicts the nuns and Magdalens as part of a mechanism of social control and contends that the nuns were as dehumanised in this culture, as the penitents abandoned

to their care. She does not condone systematic institutional abuse but she presents it as part of a wider social, political and religious context. This notion is contested by Finnegan who finds it unconvincing. She claims that the nuns' fanatical commitment, their distasteful relish in carrying out their dual role as carer and jailor, their determination to inflict their rule on others and their refusal to change until forced to do so, counteracts the view that they were powerless instruments in a patriarchal rule (2001: 243).

There is agreement between Burke-Brogan and Smith (2007) when the former challenges the view that religious Orders were solely responsible for the operation of the Magdalen asylums. Burke-Brogan suggests that post-Celtic Tiger Ireland found an easy and convenient scapegoat in the newly tarnished Catholic Church, in this way excusing state collusion and evading familiar and communal complicity in this situation (Smith, 2007: 106). Smith argues against the condemnation of "*those bad nuns*" something that has happened, he believes, in the popular Irish media since the 1990s. It allows the State and society to scapegoat the Church for all the sins of the past. The nation-state, as a result, evades culpability, not just for complicity and collusion in past institutional abuses, but also for the unresolved challenge of that history in the present (ibid: XIX).

Raftery and O'Sullivan (1999) also consider Burke-Brogan's opinion when she claims that the vow of obedience and the hierarchical structure in the convent are the reasons why abuse remained unchecked. She describes the structure in the convent:

There was a God of fear at the top, and then you had a Reverend Mother, a figure of fear, and the top always sends the messages down. And that it was sort of a reign of terror instead of a reign of love.

(Raftery and O'Sullivan, 1999: 285)

Burke-Brogan contends that obedience was total and any questioning meant that the novice was transferred to another area of work. Reporting everything to superiors was part of the rule. The greatest sin was the flouting of obedience, a failure in maintaining the vow of obedience. She says:

This wasn't the real Church – it was just an institution. Total unquestioning obedience like that is a very dangerous concept. If you close your mind and you don't allow questions to be asked, the danger is very great that abuse of that power can happen.

(ibid: 287)

When, as a novice, Burke-Brogan asked why the women were locked away in the laundry she was told, that if they were let out they would be pregnant again in a few months, and *“then [she] asked about the fathers, were they locked up too, but [she] didn’t get an answer to that”* (ibid: 286).

The Ryan Report

The *Ryan Report* was published in May 2009. The Commission heard evidence from almost 2,000 people who spent their childhood in 216 institutions in the Republic of Ireland, mainly in the decades between 1940 and the mid 1980s but it also included some evidence going back as far as 1914 and up to 2000 (McGarry, 2009: 7).

The report, in five volumes, and running to thousands of pages is a devastating indictment of Church and State authorities where sexual abuse, by some staff members and some older boys, was “endemic” for boys, and where children lived *“in daily terror”* of being beaten. Although *“not systematic in girls’ schools”* girls were subjected to sexual abuse by male employees or visitors or in outside placements. The Commission also found that *“children were frequently hungry, food was inadequate, inedible and badly prepared in many schools”* (ibid.). In these institutions academic education *“was not seen as a priority for industrial school children”* and *“in reality the industrial training afforded by all schools was of a nature that served the needs of the institution rather than the need of the child”* (ibid.). Children were beaten and were forced to witness the beatings of other children and were often separated from siblings, and family contacts were restricted, with the result that *“some children lost their sense of identity and kinship, which was never recovered”* (ibid.). The commission also found that *“schools were run in a severe, regimented manner and imposed unreasonable and oppressive discipline on children and even on staff”* (ibid.).

The Archbishop’s response

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin (2009) responded to the report. He said that the first thing the Church had to do was to move out of any mode of denial, a position that had been held for too long. He accused the Church, that presented itself as different to others and as better than others and as more moral than others, of placing people in institutions in the care of people who showed themselves to have practically no morals. He admonished religious Orders, who had been identified as being responsible for the abuse, to ask what happened; to ask how they had drifted so far from their charism, and to answer that question thoroughly, honestly and transparently, for the sake of their

good members. He believes that the Christian message of love has been lost and the religious Orders have to take notice and to make some new gesture of recognition (ibid.). It is believed that he was let down by the decisions of the Vatican (D’Arcy, 2010: 54) and since his return from a visit there, in 2010, he has been noticeably less vocal.

Reparation

In response to the Archbishop, the Sisters of Mercy paid €127 million, in addition to the €33 million they have already paid as compensation, by way of “reparation” for the abuse of children. The Order said it was “*deeply saddened at the findings of the Ryan Report and again wholeheartedly regrets the suffering experienced by the children*” in their care (Mac Cartaigh, 2009). Other religious Orders also apologised. As yet, there is little understanding in the public domain of the situation inside religious institutions.

The crisis in the Church

Following the publication of the *Murphy Report*, in 2010, on clerical child sexual abuse, Brian D’Arcy writes about the systemic failure of the Church to protect the innocent and the vulnerable. Besides bad management and institutional hypocrisy, he believes the root of the problem lies in bad theology, the dysfunctional abuse of power and a warped view of sexuality (2010: 55). The might of the Vatican, he states, “*continues to quash the individual without any radical change in its own structures*” because “*institutions protect themselves at all costs*” (ibid: 54).

D’Arcy is a radical thinker (for which he finds himself isolated). He is a member of a religious community and referring to the findings of the *Ryan Report* he says it is “*an unequivocal condemnation of religious life over a 60-year period*” and “*as a member of a religious Order myself I am disgusted and angry*” (ibid: 60-61). He comments on the systematic brutalization of children in the “*sadistic world*” created and sustained by the Catholic Church, a world where helpless children were taken from their homes and placed, by the courts, in houses considered to be safe. This, however, was not the case. In these homes, “*these children were trapped. And they were raped, beaten, molested, starved and bullied by men and women who took vows to serve the poorest of the poor in the name of Christ’s love.*” The children were not criminals and only a small proportion of them were there for petty offences, “*It is estimated that 70% came from two-parent families who were unable to look after their children because of poverty or alcohol abuse*” (ibid: 60).

D'Arcy refers to the historical role of the Catholic Church in every part of society in Ireland and its control of education, healthcare and the welfare systems; this, he says, is because it was the cheapest way for the State and it was being done in this way before the foundation of the State (ibid: 62). The most involved, "*the worst culprits*" were the indigenous congregations of brothers and nuns who were "*directly under the control of the bishop much more than congregations of priests were*" (ibid.). In this he agrees with Raftery and O'Sullivan (1999: 282). D'Arcy signs the death warrant for religious life, as it is at present, and he believes it will be replaced by a new, believable kind of religious life based on love, self sacrifice and spirituality. He is unrelenting in his criticism, as he puts the Irish situation in a worldwide context. Reports worldwide, he states, unlock the secret doors of sexual and physical abuse that was endemic in the clerical Church. "*Vicious, systemic and not accidental*" it was known, he claims, by Church authorities including Pope John Paul II, all of whom "*turned a blind eye*". He notes the "*predictable*" response to the abuse worldwide. It was denied, there was an attempt at minimization, blame was shifted, there was a qualified apology and there were promises it would not happen again (ibid: 62). He writes of the cover-up by the Church and cites the example of Cardinal Law who, when he was found to have allowed clerics, guilty of sexual abuse of children, to continue in their ministry, was turned upon by his priests and people and was then given a comfortable job in Rome (ibid: 58)⁵.

D'Arcy lays the blame for the condition of the Church flatly at the door of the Vatican (2010: 59). He makes the distinction between the legal advice that guided the Church and moral advice that it ignored. The pastoral obligations of the Church were not taken into account and this has left the Church in a "*complete mess*" (ibid: 58). He feels that too many in the Church are afraid to stand against the imposition of centralized Roman policies (ibid: 56). He sets out a radical agenda for change that includes an end to celibacy, the acceptance of women priests, an end to the treatment of women as second class citizens, blessings for those who live in good conscience who are in second relationships, compassion for gay people who want to live a spiritual life and a voice for people in their choice of bishops and priests and a limited term of office for both of these.

⁵ Despite his resignation in Boston, Cardinal Law has remained a powerful American figure in the Vatican. He has posts in as many as nine Vatican congregations, or departments, including the one that determines church leadership worldwide by nominating candidates for bishop. He is a member of the Congregation for Clergy, which has a role in handling sexual abuse cases that are sent to Rome (Baker, 2004).

Conclusion

The historical overview accounts for the exponential growth in religious life and points to vocation, the call to join the religious congregation, which in the culture of the time, had prestige, respectability and allowed for career possibilities. However within this scheme of things there was a hierarchical system which, on the one hand, offered positions such as managers of institutions, matrons of hospitals and university lecturers to some, while others were relegated to the lowly position of lay Sisters who carried out the menial tasks in the convent. At some level, the awarding of professional status by the State to all Sisters, allowed everyone to feel superior and be respected by family and society because the discrepancy in the social status was hidden behind the walls of the convent.

There was a hierarchy within the religious congregations themselves; some Orders worked with the wealthy while others worked predominantly with the poor. One might conclude that this had some influence on the aspirants to the religious Orders, in that the wealthy were more likely to be attracted to the wealthy congregations and in this way the hierarchical system was perpetuated. Although all provided much needed social services, the less wealthy indigenous Orders were controlled by the Bishops and therefore, had less autonomy in their choice of apostolates than those controlled directly from Rome.

The mutual arrangement between the Church and the religious Orders, the provision of service in return for an opportunity to live a life that was superior to one's counterparts in the world, at least for some Sisters, has since Vatican II and the changes in society in Ireland, outlived its usefulness.

Sociologists give insights into the institutions and the mechanisms used to control the individual members and to keep them faithful. Since Vatican II these mechanisms no longer exist and the institutions are fighting for survival. Some sociologists attribute the fall in vocations to conditions inside the convents while other attribute it to societal factors and the change in attitude of society to the Catholic Church. Mulcahy's exposé of insider/outsider dynamics and the effects of the changing picture of Irish society, over the years, offer a comprehensive explanation for the decline in vocations in Ireland. He tenders some hope for a change in the future but further revelations of abuse make this less likely.

There is a dearth of published psychoanalytic literature on religious life, most likely on account of its being hidden from the world. The insights of Arraj go some way to explaining the psychological effects of blind obedience and his metaphor of deep sea diving for religious life, in the post-Vatican II era, is most pertinent.

It is clear that there was some collusion between the State, the Church and the religious institutions, that facilitated institutional abuse. The concealment of that abuse has led to a crisis in the Church worldwide and has to be faced by clerics and religious alike.

The current study bears out much of what has come to light in the literature review. What it adds is the personal experiences of ten women who have lived convent life for many years and an exploration of the institution in which they lived and its impact on the psychological well-being of its members and the defences needed to survive psychologically.

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter aims to present a methodological framework for the study of the lives and work of religious women in the twentieth century. I began to think about the study in 2004 because I was interested in looking at religious life in the early twentieth century, which seemed to be the period when institutional abuse was most prevalent in convents. I wondered why things had gone so wrong and why no one ever spoke about or noticed anything untoward. I was still a member of a religious congregation when I began the study in 2005.

The research is a qualitative study of insider accounts of religious life, using the application of psychoanalytic concepts to deepen the study. Ten women were interviewed, eight of whom entered before the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962-65) and two in the post-Vatican II era; all, except the latter, were still members of their communities at the time of the interviews. From the interviews I hoped to gain an insight into the organisational dynamics of the institution and the psychological effects of these dynamics on the lives of the individual respondents and to trace the path of the institution from the early twentieth century until the present.

The methodological framework is based on Grounded Theory that lends itself to multiple methods of data collection (Charmaz, 2006). To that end I have used adaptations of three qualitative research methodologies. They were the biographical narrative-interpretative method (BNIM, 1993), the free associative-narrative interview method (FANI, 2000) and the Psychoanalytic Research Interview introduced by Duncan Cartwright (2004). The analysis of the data was conducted using a Grounded Theory approach, as well as applied psychoanalysis.

This chapter will cover the selection of the sample, the consideration of ethical issues, the data collection and analysis, the analytic process and the layout of the thesis, in addition to an exposition of unconscious processes.

The selection of the sample

Finding a number of nuns prepared to share their stories with another was not an easy task, even for someone who was an insider. Life inside the convent has not often been shared with outsiders and I am aware that my colleagues were often too ashamed to speak to their families about some of the demands of the life, for fear of being thought ridiculous. In order to begin the research I contacted three or four people who, I hoped, would participate but they refused. Maria, for example, is an elderly Sister who had worked all of her life in a convent laundry and I was interested in hearing from someone like her, but when I asked her she seemed very frightened. I did not put her under any pressure and I asked her to think about it; she phoned me the next day, to say that she did not wish to take part. I then asked a friend for her help. She has a wide circle of acquaintances and she agreed to search out nuns who would be willing to take part. I started and, over the next three years, I interviewed ten women in all. They belonged to three different congregations and one, Jenny was English and entered in England but was second generation Irish and had spent some time in an Irish branch of her Order. Table 2 is a chart of the participants giving their names (all have been given pseudonyms), year of birth (or approximation if they did not mention it), place of birth, the type of second level school they attended, year of entry into the convent, the location of the convent, if, and where they went abroad and their place of residence at the time of the interviews. Apart from Barbara and Birdie, all of the others were total strangers to me and I to them. They were all willing to oblige me, by telling me their stories and although they may have been acting altruistically by agreeing, I think they found it a positive experience. All, except Rose and Jenny, were older than me and of a different generation and background to mine and they had lived through a regime, which was beginning to change when I entered the convent.

The sample is accidental, in that it consists of people who were confident enough to share their stories. Eight of them worked in schools, as did most of the religious in Ireland in the mid twentieth century. Jenny was a social worker who did not fit into her teaching community and Rose worked in an industrial school and had spent a short time working in the Magdalen Laundries. There are no representatives of those who did the domestic work (e.g. kitchen, farm, dairy) in the convent and in the boarding school.

Table 2

Name	Born	Location	Type of school	Year of entry	Location	Ministry	Work abroad	Residence at time of interviews
Patsy	1912	Rural town	Day/nuns	1930	Large Town	Teacher	No	Large convent
Lauren	1920?	Rural	Boarding/nuns	1938	Large Town	Teacher	No	Large convent
Annie	1920?	Rural town	Boarding/nuns	1939	Large town	Teacher	USA 36 years	Large convent
Birdie	1922	Large town	Boarding/nuns	1940	Small town	Teacher	No	Small house
Mary	1928?	Small town	Day/nuns	1946	Small town	Teacher/Mother General	No	Large convent
Margaret	1931	Small town	Boarding/nuns	1950	Large town	Teacher	UK 8 years	Large convent
Clare	1937	Small town	Day/nuns	1955	Large town	Teacher/Local superior	USA 1 year	Small house
Barbara	1937	Small town	Boarding/nuns	1955	Small town	Teacher	USA 2 years	Large convent
Rose	1952?	UK city	Day/nuns	1972	City Ireland	Childcare/Social worker	No	Own house
Jenny	1962?	UK city	Day/comp	1983	UK city	Social worker	No	Own house

Table 2 This chart gives details of the Sisters

The age difference between the respondents covers a span of fifty years. They were born, one in 1912, four in the 1920s, three in the 1930s, one in the 1952 and one in 1962. The eight older members came from rural Ireland (albeit in towns of varying sizes) and attended schools run by nuns; five of those were in boarding schools. One can hypothesize that that their rural background and their familiarity with nuns had some influence on their decision to enter the convent. All have stayed until the present. The two youngest were born in English cities of Irish parents and only one attended a school run by nuns and both left the convent after some years. Rose is now deceased. Jenny lives, with her husband, in a city in England.

Sisters refer to their work as ministry. The eight older members were teachers, one was untrained. Going away for training and meeting the public in schools, gave these women some opportunity for contact with the world that was not available to their untrained companions and to those who worked full time in the convent, for example,

the lay Sisters. It is probable that they were more likely to respond to a request to take part in the research than their less well educated companions. It is also likely that they were seen as women who could give an account of themselves, in other words, they would show the convent in a good light. Two of them had held positions of authority; Mary was a Mother General for six years and in authority, in some form, for a total of eighteen years. The two younger members, Rose and Jenny, are social workers. Following Vatican II many nuns moved out of teaching and into social work.

Five of the eight older members had the opportunity to spend time working outside Ireland and only one, Birdie, never moved from the town where she went to boarding school and later entered the convent. She did, however, move from her large convent, first to one small house, and then to her present house. Everyone, except Birdie, had many moves and experienced living in several places. Although moving from place to place may have caused some emotional pain, many lay contemporaries of the older nuns spent their lives in one or two places and did not get the opportunity for training or travel. At the time of the interviews six of the eight were, once again, living in retirement, in some of the few remaining, large convents.

Ethical issues

Hollway (2006) argues that the primary ethical challenge in psychosocial research is care of the subject and Clarke and Hogget (2009: 21) summarise the key ethical points in the practice of psychosocial research. I will use these points to demonstrate the care taken in my research study. They are informed consent, awareness of unconscious processes, an ethical approach to the analysis of the data and its presentation and the implications of the use of self as a research tool.

Informed consent

“being sure that the participants are aware of what they are participating in” (ibid.)

At our first meeting I gave the rationale for the research and explained the format of the interviews. I gave the participants an opportunity to ask questions and confirmed that they wished to take part and I gave them an opportunity to opt out. I requested permission to record and said that they could stop the interviews at any time. I guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality and mentioned the possibility of publication at a later date. When speaking of confidentiality I told the participants that they were free to speak to others about their participation in the research but that I would be treating their participation as confidential.

Awareness of unconscious processes

“Being aware of the ethical demands of the actual research encounter, recognising countertransference, identifications, and projective identifications” (ibid.) My training as a therapist and my experience of working psychoanalytically gives me an awareness of these mechanisms and I have used my personal therapy and my individual supervision, as well as our doctoral research seminars, to separate, as far as possible, my identifications with the research respondents and the projective mechanisms at play, to come to know what belonged to me and what belonged to them.

An ethical approach to data analysis

“what gets left in and what gets left out in talk, transcription and presentation” (ibid.)

I was honest in my encounters with the research respondents, while remaining aware of the boundaries within which I was working. All of the interviews were transcribed in full and the text was read by the supervisors and presented at the seminars. Grounded

Theory, as a method, aims to be true to the data by allowing theory to emerge rather than proving or disproving an a priori hypothesis.

Presentation of data

“The need to think very carefully about how we present our data, as we have an ethical obligation of care for the subject and avoidance of any harm” (ibid.)

I took into consideration that these women were elderly and had committed their entire lives to this way of life and that they had developed ways of making sense of it and that considering it in a new light might have been frightening. Their defence mechanisms had served them well and it was not my intention to deconstruct these defences. In this way I diverge from the analysis suggested by Cartwright (2004), for the third interview and, to some extent, the FANI (2000) method. At all times, I was sensitive to the feelings of these older women and hoped not to disturb them unnecessarily by my approach. I offered further help or counselling if upsetting material emerged. None of the participants felt the need of help following the interviews. I was aware that none of the women were working in children’s homes, at the time, and that it was unlikely that matters of child protection would arise. Nothing untoward came to my attention.

The use of self as a research tool

“We have to recognise that we bring our own unconscious feeling, that we identify with people so that we can understand the affective states, meanings and experiences. We have to be careful that we do not merge parts of our ‘selves’ with the ‘Other’” (ibid.).

I was aware of my identifications with these women because, to some extent, I had lived through similar experiences, although my life in the convent began in the early sixties when life there was beginning to change. I used my personal therapy throughout this process to think about these identifications and to understand my reactions to the material. *“Analysts must learn to differentiate their own, possibly obstructive, psychic material from that belonging to their analysands (Jervis, 2009: 156).* By extension the researcher has to learn how they might be closed to the material presented to them by their research respondents. Sue Jervis also says, *“It is important that researchers identify with respondents without becoming so undifferentiated from them that perspective is lost” (ibid.).* It is through personal therapy that I have tried to understand how I unconsciously defend myself against psychic pain, in order to be available to my clients and to my research participants.

It is also worth considering the advantages to the respondents of my insider knowledge. There were no points of reference that needed to be spelled out, to make understanding possible. We had a shared field of knowledge. The ease of communication was a basis for trust. In the third interview this allowed them to speak more freely and occasionally to think conceptually about their lives.

I have also remained cognisant of the fact that I had only a limited opportunity (in the third interview) to clarify what the respondent said and that it was not appropriate to make interpretations because of the brevity of the process and because therapeutic change was not an aim. I have tried, throughout the process, to ensure that the conclusions I reached had firm foundations (through the use of Grounded Theory).

The data collection

When considering a method of collecting data, I was looking for a way that would allow the respondents the freedom to tell me whatever they wished about their lives. I had no pre-conceived ideas about the subjects they would engage with or how they would respond to the invitation to speak freely. I was aware that asking questions might further pressurize them and perhaps lead to pat or “correct” responses. I wished to allay anxiety. From my experience of psychoanalysis, I was aware of the defences people use to avoid anxiety. My aim was, through the application of psychoanalytic concepts, to gain some insight into the underlying story which is “*present but not immediately represented other than in its effects*” (Moran, 2004b: 327) and the dynamics of the system in which these women lived and worked.

To this end I considered the Biographic Narrative -Interpretative Method (BNIM), the Free - Associative Narrative Interview Method (FANI) and the Psychoanalytic Research Interview. All have their roots in the narrative tradition, where the contextual nature of meaning and experience is explored. I will give a brief overview of the three methods, followed by the elements adopted for the study, my rationale for the adoption of these elements and the influence of my work as a therapist on the study

The Biographic Narrative-Interpretative Method

The method was developed by the German sociologists Rosenthal and her colleagues, to elicit accounts of the lives of holocaust survivors and Nazi soldiers (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). The basic theoretical principal of the biographical–interpretative method is the existence of a Gestalt informing each person’s life and it is the task of the biographer to elicit this, without the contamination of his/her own concerns (Rosenthal, 1990). A Gestalt, the German word for form, implies that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and that there is an order or hidden agenda in each person’s life story.

The method begins with “*life stories structured by the subjects themselves*” (Rustin, 1998: 113) elicited by the opening invitation, “*Please tell me your life story*” (Rosenthal, 1990). It allows the subjects the freedom to structure their accounts as they wish and relieves them of the pressure of trying to understand and interpret questions.

There is only a minimal introductory reference, by the interviewer, to the subject under enquiry (Rustin, 1998: 112). The only questions asked are those which further develop “*a narrative already introduced or indicated*” by the subject (ibid.). In summary, the

four interviewing principles underlying the strategy of this method are, using open questions, eliciting stories, avoiding “why” questions and following respondents ordering and phrasing (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 53). In other words the interviewer can be considered as a facilitating catalyst whose art and skill is used to assist the narrator in the emergence of the Gestalt. The interviewer is looking for coherence. Coherence is, according to Charlotte Linde, “*both a social demand and an internal, psychological demand ... [a] subjective sense ... that organizes a speaker’s understanding of his or her past life, current situation, and imagined future*”(1993: 220). Schutze (1992) reveals the defensive nature of life accounts, especially those of Nazi soldiers, when it comes to the painful memories of war. He was aware that unbearable memories were being repressed and Hollway and Jefferson (2000) developed this idea of repression into the notion of the “*defended subject*”. They adopted the method and adapted it to suit their purposes.

The Free Association Narrative Interview

Hollway and Jefferson argue for the importance of free association, in adapting the biographical-interpretative method, to accommodate their principle of the defended subject (2000: 53). The Free Association Narrative Interview produces a Gestalt by including unconscious as well as conscious processes. The interviews allow the interviewer access to unconscious processes and enable her “*to pick up on incoherences (for example, contradictions, elision, avoidances) and accord them due significance*” (ibid: 37). The method which, in the interview, attends to emotional rather than cognitive logic, is based on the premise that “*the meanings underlying interviewees’ elicited narratives are best accessed via links based on spontaneous association, rather than whatever consistency can be found in told narrative*” (ibid: 152).

In this method two interviews are held. In the first interview, a number of questions deriving from the theoretical structure of the research are asked, and each question is followed up “*in terms of detail, and time periods, following the order of the narrative*” (ibid: 37). The questions are framed in a way that elicit and encourage stories and associations. This enables the interviewers to interrogate critically what was said and to pick up on contradictions, inconsistencies, avoidances and changes of emotional tone. The second interview is held about one week later, thus giving the interviewees time to reflect and it acts as a check, allowing the interviewers to seek further evidence to test

their emerging hunches and provisional hypotheses. In the analysis of the data the researcher uses data from external and internal sources.

The external data sources include transcripts from the interview, memories of meetings, notes taken after meetings and interviews from other members of the respondent's family. The internal data source involves the application of psychoanalytic concepts, such as holding the respondent in mind and allowing unconscious processes to work on the Gestalt (ibid: 69). The process of working with the unconscious is encapsulated in Anne Alvarez's comment, "*the achievement of sufficient distance from the impact of the patient to think, yet not so much distance that empathic sensitivity and counter-transference receptivity get lost*" (1985: 88).

The Psychoanalytic Research Interview

The Psychoanalytic Research Interview is based on the idea that a psychoanalytically informed interview technique and analysis can yield valuable psychoanalytic insights about a particular research topic, in the space of three or four interviews. The project, initiated by Duncan Cartwright (2004), is a move to "*facilitate a more diverse research initiative within psychoanalysis*" which, he says, has been until now "*limited to the clinical setting*" (ibid: 210). He does not take account of the work of Hollway and Jefferson.

Psychoanalysis is not only a theory but also a methodology in itself, developed specifically for exploring unconscious processes and closely associated with the treatment setting. It has been modified to suit the research interview and encompasses some of the basic principles of the psychoanalytic method. It can be used to understand the psychodynamics and unconscious meaning of many different behaviours, psychological processes, social actions and life situations (Cartwright, 2004).

Context and motivation

The therapeutic encounter, where the patient comes for treatment and help, differs in context from the research interview where the researcher gathers a number of research participants, in order to understand a specific research question. One of the main differences is that, in the interview, the researcher is not obliged to share the understanding, gleaned from the analysis of the interview, with the respondent because the aim is not that of effecting therapeutic change. Another difference is the relatively superficial nature and brevity of the relationship. Cartwright also believes that the respondent cannot free associate in the classical sense because of the researcher's focus

on a particular area. The technique and analysis of the interview method are set out in a number of guidelines. The four epistemological assumptions that have implications for the technique in the interviews are the construction of meaning, the associative nature of interview material, and, lastly, context and inchoate transference-countertransference impressions (ibid: 217).

Construction of meaning

This refers to the co-construction, by the interview dyad, of the narrative around the particular focus in the interview; it is about facilitating the construction of a story or narrative. The narrative is best viewed as a narrative of self, a metaphorical elaboration of what was “fact” rather than a historical or “factual” account of events because historical truth is impossible to access after the fact, as it has been the subject of numerous revisions and interpretations (Spence, 1982).

Contrary to the views of Hollway and Jefferson (2000) Cartwright states that free association proper is not appropriate to the interview but he concedes that the association of thoughts with one another, through unconscious forms of psychic determinism holds “*great importance for understanding the interview dialogue*” (2004: 218). He lists possible ways in which elements of the dialogue are unconsciously associated, namely, the way the interviewee begins to speak about him/herself and then changes to another subject at a specific point, how the interviewee’s tone of voice alters in association with particular subjects and how things are described in different ways. These associations can yield an underlying structure that can be used to understand the psychic processes in the interview material.

There are many influences that impinge on the interview process and lead to a fluctuating and unstable context. They include the interview setting and location, the use of an audio recorder, the reason given for the interview, the subject of the interview, the attributes of the interviewer and his/her technique and the interviewee’s suspicion regarding the interview (ibid: 220). What is important is that these are acknowledged and explored by the interviewer, in order to yield the most accurate interpretative account.

Inchoate transference-countertransference impressions

Cartwright subscribes to the view that transference and countertransference are to some degree present in every human encounter but he considers that the brevity of the interview makes it difficult for these to consolidate. Self knowledge and the capacity for

personal insight are important for the interviewer, in determining what is being transmitted through countertransference. Adverse effects on the interview process can be minimized if the researcher explores his/her motivations, perceptions and conflicts related to the research subject. Societal and personal prejudices and fears related to research subjects require considerable reflection to ensure such influences do not sidetrack the interview process.

Technique and process

The Psychoanalytic Research Interview involves three or four interviews with each research participant. The first two interviews are predominantly unstructured and allowed to take their own shape. Participants are informed about the research project and why the interviewer has chosen to interview them, asking them for their own thoughts about the subject and adding that the interviewer is also interested in hearing anything the interviewee might want to tell about his/her life or background, even if it seems irrelevant or off the topic. The interviews are recorded on audio tape.

In the initial unstructured interviews the interviewer acts as facilitator, noticing where the interviewee chooses to start and where this eventually leads and making mental notes of feelings evoked and any difficulty in accessing some degree of empathy towards the interviewee (countertransference). Following the sessions the interviewer makes detailed comments on his/her impressions of the session, as well as feeling states and other nonverbal material associated with the interview. The recorded material is transcribed for analysis.

The third interview

The third interview uses a more direct structured approach similar to the process suggested by Kernberg (1981), concentrating on seeking clarification on information gathered in previous interviews, confronting the interviewee with contradictions, conflicts, defensive operations and idiosyncratic forms of speech and putting forward preliminary interpretations of the understanding of some of the emerging conflicts, defences, and so forth (Cartwright, 2004: 225).

Adopting a more direct approach gives the researcher an opportunity to ask specific questions about historical and personal details that have yet to emerge in the interview. The main emphasis of the interviews, however, remains with the initial two, in which the associative material that structures the narrative is most prominent.

Analysis of the interviews

The analysis of the interviews is carried out by careful attention to feeling states and corresponding thoughts or perceptions, the search for core narratives and the exploration of identifications and object relations. The procedure of the analysis involves the processes of comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing and re-contextualizing the material. There are many overlaps between the three methods and I chose elements from all three in my interviews.

Adoption and adaptation of the methods

An adaptation of the three methods was the most appropriate for the collection of the data in this study. I chose:

- My method of introduction of the topic and the invitation to talk about their lives and of allowing respondents to speak, without interruption, from the BNIM method.
- The inclusion of the concept of the “defended subject” and the “defended researcher” and the care needed to ensure as much objectivity as possible from the FANI method.
- The use of three interviews, two unstructured interviews and a third interview using a direct approach from the Psychoanalytic Research Interview.

In summary, I chose to do three interviews, two of which closely resembled free association interviews and the third, which I used to get more information and more clarity. During and following the interviews I paid attention to unconscious processes, including countertransference and defences used to avoid anxiety. I recorded the interviews on an audio tape and, later, I made transcripts and I noted my feeling states during and after the interviews.

The concept of the defended subject and the defended researcher was of particular interest to me. It lends itself to the consideration of defensive mechanisms at work in both the interviewer and the interviewee, as they co-construct the narrative. In the present study, my insider knowledge of the life and system inevitably coloured the research and it required intensive personal analysis of my reactions and prejudices to be as objective as possible. It highlighted the need for empathic sensitivity coupled with the use of an internal monitor and an awareness of the value of taking the third position (Britton, 1989) to do justice to the study.

Rationale for the interview method

I was aware that the women in my research, having been subjected to years of enforced silence in their late adolescence and early adult years, were not accustomed to speaking at length about themselves. In fact, I recall that, in some convents, in the past, nuns were forbidden to talk about their families and politics. Until recently nuns have not been required to do job interviews or compile CVs or render an account of themselves. Inviting them to speak about their lives, in any way they wished, without interference or correction, although perhaps a bit intimidating, might also be a refreshing change. For this reason and to develop trust I did two unstructured interviews. I also had in mind that "*Free association allows unconscious ideas to come to the fore*" (Clarke, 2002: 174). An additional reason for my choice was a suspicion that had arisen at the time, of people being tricked by journalists, using false identities, to gain insider knowledge of institutions or agencies. The nuns had become aware, around that time, of abuses that were coming to light in their institutions, in the past, and I imagined they would be suspicious of anyone coming to interview them. The subject of abuse was of particular interest to me and although I hoped to get a perspective on it I did not introduce the subject. However, some aspect of the abuse found its way into the free association interviews and this gave me an opportunity to address it in the third interview.

In the third interview I decided to diverge from the method used by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) and by Cartwright (2004) in highlighting discrepancies, contradictions or the operation of defensive mechanisms because I did not wish to upset the elderly respondents. I used it, rather, to gain fuller knowledge of what was unclear from the first two interviews.

The interview process

I began by telling the respondents the focus of my research and asked them to tell me their story. I explained that there would be two initial interviews where they could speak about whatever they wished and that in the third I would ask some questions. I gave them the freedom to opt out at this stage but they all decided to continue.

By the end of the two free association interviews the nuns were speaking freely and I take this to mean that two interviews gave them time to trust me, to feel more at ease, for a good rapport to have been established between us. In response to my acceptance of them and my gratitude at their generosity, most of the participants spoke at length. Sometimes they got upset when they spoke of emotional events in their past. I contained

these moments by staying with the feelings and as this was not a therapy session it was not in order to make interpretations.

One respondent had already told her story to someone, in the Order, who was recording oral histories and so her story had a feeling of being rehearsed. Another came with prepared notes on the first occasion and I told her gently not to worry about preparing for the second interview. Following the interviews she wrote to thank me and said the interviews helped her to realise she had not grieved for loss in the past. Two of the respondents needed help and encouragement to continue talking and said they would prefer to be asked questions. I was sensitive to their anxiety and repeated that they were not to worry that they could say whatever came into their heads. I interpret their anxiety as their perception that there was a correct way of doing this and they were looking for re-assurance. I was at pains not to overburden a Sister who has a serious heart condition. At the end of each interview, I transcribed the full interview. Following the second interview I examined the texts for gaps in knowledge, especially where interesting ideas had been touched on but not developed. This “*iterative process*” is an adaption of the Grounded Theory method of analysis I used in this research. Glaser and Strauss emphasise the importance of combining data collection with analysis, “*using earlier analyses to prompt further data collection*” (Pidgeon and Henwood, 1997: 258). My approach differed in that I did not frame questions that went across interviews; I used the first two interviews to frame my questions for the third interview.

In the third interview, I did not introduce any new topics as this is not common practice in the therapy situation. This eliminated any element of surprise and respected the individuality of each contribution but it added to the complexity of the data analysis. I was also mindful of not unduly disturbing these women who might, afterwards, be left with unprocessed emotional experiences if I had introduced a subject that they did not wish to discuss. At the beginning of this interview, I informed each one that she was free not to answer any question that she did not want to answer.

The relevance of my work as a therapist

My work as a therapist informed my interviewing process. Attentive listening, being attuned to the speaker is a new experience for most people. I listened for what was said and noted my countertransference reactions. I was sensitive to the anxiety of the respondents and tried to make them feel at ease by being warm and accepting. I was able to contain the moments of sadness or anxiety as I would in a therapy session. I was

conscious of the time boundary, starting and finishing on time and of not tiring the respondents. I am aware of the importance of confidentiality and, as we held many of the meetings in large convents, I was at pains to keep the respondents' identity confidential.

Data analysis

To analyse the data I have used elements of Grounded Theory, which is an inductive qualitative research method that begins by collecting data in the research field and lets the theory emerge or emanate from the data. In recent years there has been an attempt to establish a set of criteria that can enable readers to evaluate reports of qualitative research (Elliott et al, 1999). Most of the problems surround the scientific considerations of reliability and validity.

To refute the charge of unreliability the study must be replicable, that is, another researcher should be able to carry out the same study with a different sample and that the second researcher should obtain near-identical results to the first. Grounded Theory demands a full documentation of the research process and other conventions to this end include the thoroughness of the transcription procedure and the inclusion of substantial chunks of raw data in results sections. Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) also advocate the use of a reflexive journal, or research diary that documents each step of the project.

In this study full transcripts of the interviews have been read by my supervisors and partial transcripts have been discussed in our monthly seminars over a number of years. The analysis of the data has also been discussed in supervision and the representativeness of extracts and conclusions have been thoroughly monitored.

The question of validity, the “truth” about the phenomena under investigation is problematic because of its dependence on interpretation. In this study I have used “triangulation” as a means of assuring validity in as far as this is possible. To this end I have employed different perspectives namely data, investigator and method triangulation.

I have interviewed members of different congregations and from different eras in religious life (a fifty year difference in age between the oldest and the youngest). In the third interview I clarified and asked for further elaboration on points that were unclear in the preceding two interviews. The data was also triangulated with the Holy Rule of one congregation.

Other researchers were involved in discussions on the data at regular doctoral research seminars, and this enabled a wider range of insights to be brought to bear on the research. This often modified my views and opened up important areas which might have eluded me, as the single analyst of the material.

Research findings on the topic from sociology as well as the application of psychoanalytic methods of analysis are used as additional disciplinary perspectives to enhance the quality of the study.

Grounded Theory

The method of Grounded Theory was discovered by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and introduced the idea of an inductive method of generating theory that emanated from data rather than the proving or disproving of an a priori hypothesis. This means that the theory is actually grounded in the data:

our approach, allowing substantive concepts and hypotheses to emerge first, on their own, enables him [the researcher] ... [to] generate his substantive theory, to be more faithful to his data, rather than forcing it to fit a theory

(ibid: 23)

Charmaz refers to the multiple meanings, understandings, misunderstandings and competing versions of Grounded Theory since its inception in 1967 and to the blurring of distinctions between methods as process and the “*theory as product of that process*” (2006: 177). She says that Grounded Theory lends itself to multiple methods of data collection and that the core of Grounded Theory analysis lies in the successive levels of abstraction reached through comparative analysis; that the researchers’ interaction with and interpretation of their emerging analyses takes precedence over external prescriptions (ibid: 178).

Coding

Conducting the analysis entails a number of levels of coding and analysis. Open coding is the part of the analysis concerned with identifying, naming, categorising and describing phenomena found in the text. The researcher begins by searching the data for the existence of codes. It is not always clear what a code should be but Dunican suggests that open coding examines the text for items of interest, with the ultimate aim of accumulating codes into categories (2005: 256). Essentially each line, sentence paragraph or incident is read in search of the answer to the repeated question, “*what is this about? What is being referenced here?*” (Borgati, 2004: 2). Charmaz describes the process, “*We take segments of data apart, name them in concise terms, and propose an analytic handle to develop abstract ideas for interpreting each segment of data*” (Charmaz, 2006: 45).

Having completed the coding, the codes are analysed and those that conform to a common theme are grouped together. This higher order commonality is referred to as a

concept (Allan, 2003). Concepts are then grouped into areas of commonality to form the highest level abstract notion, namely that of a category (Dunican, 2005). A category is a theme or variable that makes sense of the material. It is interpreted in the light of the research question, other material and the emerging theory (Dick, 2005).

By comparing each concept in turn with all other concepts further commonalities are found which form even broader categories. Glaser and Strauss (1967: 105) described this method of continually comparing concepts and categories with each other as the “*constant comparative method*.” They explain a category as a stand-alone conceptual element of the theory, which has properties that are conceptual elements of that category (ibid: 34). Both categories and properties are “*concepts indicated by the data (and not the data itself) ... have a life apart from the evidence that gave rise to them*” (ibid: 36).

Grounded Theory demands that coding should be performed with an open mind, without preconceived ideas (ibid.). This is not always possible, as the researcher is bound to be influenced by his/her life experience, previous knowledge of the research subject or professional background. Anderson gives an example “*the psychoanalytic clinician will bring their psychoanalytic thinking to the data analysis and the development of theoretical codes*” (2006: 333). In my case, my first hand knowledge of the system of religious life has to be acknowledged and considered. As already noted, Glaser and Strauss insists that preconceived ideas should not be forced on the data by looking for evidence to support established ideas.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) do not recommend that the researcher read the literature before the initial coding but, once the coding is completed, they advise reading relevant literature to make comparisons, “*Similarities and convergence with the literature can be established after the analytic core of categories has emerged*” (ibid: 6). They also encourage researchers (1967: 169) to “*use any material bearing upon the area*” of research. The literature can be treated as data and is used to extend the theory, so that it makes sense of both the literature and the data from the study (Dick, 2005: 9).

Glaser (1978, 1992) refers to the researchers’ theoretical sensitivity, that is, their ability to generate concepts from data and relate them, according to normal models of theory in general. Reading widely in other disciplines enhances theoretical sensitivity (ibid: 1998).

Memo writing is given high priority in Grounded Theory. A memo is a note to oneself about a hypothesis one has about categories, properties and the relationship between them or any ideas that come to mind. The final stage of the process is the writing of the

research. Having completed the coding of the data through conceptualisation and categorisation and discovered analytic similarities and differences through memo-writing and widened the scope through theoretical sampling, sorting and integrating categories, the work is ready to be written. I will now give a sample of my method of analysis.

The analytic process

I began by dividing the interview texts into segments of six to ten lines and began coding the meaning found in the segments. There may be more than one code in a section of text.

The following is an excerpt from Lauren’s interview:

Table 3

Interview Text	Code	Concept
I was at the back of the L. Cert class and Kate and myself were talking instead of listening, whatever, and Kate told me she was going to Kildare (meaning entering the convent) and she said, <u>“I think you should go too”</u> . And I said, this was going on at the back of the class, but I said <u>“But you know Kate, I think, don’t you know, well okay.”</u>	I think you should go too Well okay	Making a decision uncertainty
What did I do? <u>I made a Novena nine days</u> , Mass Novena, and during the Novena <u>I was hoping the priest wouldn’t</u> come one day so that I would break the Novena but mind you he did. <u>I decided to enter.</u>	I made a Novena- I decided to enter	A lottery/ superstition decision
There was more that, really and truly at the back of my head I was worried about the family, worried particularly my brothers, now it’s extraordinary more than my sisters, how would they struggle with life and I felt that perhaps if I did, I’m back in 39 now, perhaps <u>if I did something, a sacrifice, get nearer to Christ He would bless my family.</u> That now was behind, nobody in the house knew, I’m just saying it now and that plus that I would be nearer to Jesus	If I did... a sacrifice, get nearer to Christ – he would bless my family	covenant Awareness of sacrifice
But just before I go ahead-a little story before that when we were younger. Maggie, who is now living, and myself were making dolls, rag dolls, and we had up to a dozen, I think, and we were hugging them and all the rest of it. And I don’t know why, I didn’t know anything about nuns, but I said to her, <u>“Maggie, you can have my dolls</u> and says she <u>“and why?”</u> <u>“I’m going to be a nun”</u> . Now I’m back now <u>I was ten or eleven.</u> And she took one of the dolls, <u>“well, I’d like to be a nun too but I’d like to have a baby first”</u> .	At ten or eleven years of age – I’m going to be a nun You can have my dolls	Renunciation of potential babies
I’m telling you that now, that <u>vocation</u> is something that’s <u>mysterious</u> in a way. It’s a call without a doubt for me and I say for those who lived at my time it was a call.	Vocation is mysterious	Mystery vocation
And even that now, I’d recalled it to Maggie, my sister. She had it forgotten but it made a... I keep it. I hold it and I tell it now as something that explains, <u>a vocation goes back long before you give it thought.</u> You know and she said, <u>“I like to be a nun too but I like to have a baby first”</u> . <u>I gave them away</u>	The seeds of vocation go back into the past before thought I gave them away (babies)	Mystery – seeds of vocation before thought

The concept is about making the decision to enter the convent. There was an awareness of the life of sacrifice in the convent (which may be retrospective, but suffering and renunciation for the sake of Christ were part of the theology of the time). Subsequent transcripts are coded. Thus it is possible to trace back through the interview transcripts to the actual content and context of each code. The concepts are grouped and identified as the category of vocation to the religious life.

Through the “*constant comparative method*” similarities and differences emerge in and between the transcripts. These are summarized as follows

Table 4

Name	Coding for vocation
Mary	Wants to go on the Mission in China –influenced by nuns and magazines, is dissuaded by priest from going abroad so entered locally
Margaret	Wanted to enter in Australia but father insisted she stay in Ireland –entered in Ireland in Order she disliked
Annie	Wanted to enter in England – dissuaded by priest and mother from going abroad– entered an Order where she was in boarding school. She felt God wanted her
Barbara	Wanted to enter in England – dissuaded by priest – entered Order where she was in boarding school/ wished to become a saint
Patsy	Believes she was destined to be a nun through coincidental meeting with a relative (nun)
Birdie	Felt she had little choice because of being sent to boarding school –entered but blames her mother- was invited by an older nun to join the convent
Clare	Became a nun because her brother was a priest, entered local convent
Rose	Wanted to work with children and liked the nuns she worked with in London
Jenny	Befriended novice and then thought she could do the same thing

Category of vocation

The category of vocation for this particular sample has the following properties:

1. A desire to get away from Ireland (Mary, Margaret, Annie, Barbara)
2. A desire to do a particular type of work (Rose)
3. Mentions God – he wanted her (Annie)
4. A covenant with God, she would sacrifice herself, God would bless her family (Lauren))
5. No sense of agency (Birdie, Patsy)
6. Identification with another (Margaret wanted to be with cousin in Australia, Jenny wanted to be like Novice)
7. A superior way of life that guaranteed sainthood (Barbara) (1 incident)
8. Bowing to male superiority (Margaret to her father, Mary, Annie, Barbara to priests)
9. An invitation from another (Margaret, Lauren, Birdie)
10. Sibling rivalry (Clare)
11. Family connections, Patsy, Margaret, Annie, Mary

These properties can be further conceptualised as:

Spiritual/Supernatural	3, 4, 7
Practical	1, 2, 9
Psychological	5, 6, 8, 10, 11

Apart from Jenny and Rose, who were working before they entered and are up to fifty years younger than the eldest of this group, none of the others mentions an alternative career choice. They seemed not to consider anything else and felt that this way of life would fulfil their hopes and desires.

The core category of vocation to religious life

A Grounded Theory analysis of vocation to the religious life reveals that the notion of the supernatural calling was only part of the story and that vocation included the practical and the psychological. God's calling was not about a Pauline conversion, being thrown off one's horse and hearing God's voice; it was rather about a supernatural calling being extrapolated from an invitation by someone who was already a member of a congregation or a feeling that God wanted the young woman. There was also the notion of covenant, a blessing on one's family in exchange for a life of service.

The lure of the exotic or simply a desire to get away was expressed by the respondents but they did not say what they were trying to escape. Historical and sociological research shows that Ireland had little to offer a young woman who did not wish to be married and bear many children, while religious life offered possibilities of a career and status.

The conscious psychological aspects of vocation are described but not conceptualised. They are identification with someone who is already a Sister, sibling rivalry, male superiority (the priest or father of the family) and the lack of choice or agency in one's choice of vocation.

In conclusion, vocation was a complex choice which differed from the simple notion of a call from God. Besides the spiritual, there were also the practical and the psychological influences on the women in this study, who decided to answer their vocation to religious life. The application of psychoanalytic concepts to further deepen the study will be discussed later in this chapter. The Grounded Theory process is replicated throughout this study.

The division of the main body of the study

The main body of the study is divided into three separate temporal periods:

1. **1930- 1969** covers the time from the entrance of the first respondent, Patsy, until the changes proposed by Vatican II began to take effect in the convent. At this time there was a symbiotic relationship between Church and State; it was a Church obsessed and an economically repressed society. This period is covered in the chapters, *A Total Break with the World* and *Convent Culture 1930-1969*.
2. **1970- 1999** There was a liberalisation in society with the Church beginning to lose its influence. Ireland joined the EEC and would soon reap the financial benefits of this move. There were further periods of recession but towards the end of this period Ireland was in an economic boom (Celtic Tiger). The most important event that affected the lives of religious during this time was the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65. This Council was a watershed in the lives not only of religious but of the whole Roman Catholic population worldwide. The Church entered a new period of dialogue with its own members and with other Churches. It marks the end of an era in religious life and the beginning of a transitional phase that lasted, roughly speaking, until the turn of the century. This chapter is entitled *Change and Transition*.
3. **2000- 2008** (time of interviews) is about forty years after Vatican II and includes the period of the interviews 2006-2008. The Church had almost lost its influence, especially with the revelations of abuse and their concealment. The society was in the grip of an economic boom. The nuns are struggling with their changed circumstances and there is little hope for the future. This is covered in the chapter *Forty Years on*.

This demarcation also corresponds to three distinct styles of thought in the institutional Church according to which religious women have constructed and re-constructed their identities over the years (Moran, 2004b). They are the theological, the dialogical and the individualistic.

In the first period convent life was almost a closed system where women entered and had minimal contact with the outside world. In the second period Vatican II opened the system to the world and the women experimented with their new found freedoms. The third period sees the institutional system in a state of near collapse with no new recruits

and struggling to survive; the large convent is almost a thing of the past; the Sisters live in small groups or singly with minimal contact with one another; individualism has replaced conformity and community.

Each chapter begins with a brief overview of society and Church and considers the relationship between them. This is gleaned from documentary evidence, papers written by academics, historians, sociologists and one commentator in the psychoanalytic tradition. This gives a context for life in the convent and the society from which the convent gets its recruits. The material from the interviews is supplemented by the Rule and Constitutions of one congregation and the documents of Vatican II where this is necessary for a deeper understanding.

Unconscious processes

As a further layer of analysis and interpretation to that of Grounded Theory, I have applied psychoanalytic concepts to understand what is happening “beneath the surface”, that is, what can be known of unconscious functioning. According to Ogden (1979) psychoanalysis offers another theoretical source to understand human subjects, and Anderson (2006) argues for the usefulness of Grounded Theory and psychoanalysis as suitable partners.

The unconscious is seen to play a part in the construction of our reality and the way in which we perceive others (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009: 3). Freud’s discovery of unconscious processes emerged in answer to the complex idea of “*volition or free will operating outside of awareness. We sometimes feel, think or do things for unconscious reasons. We (our conscious, egoic selves) are driven by something-not-ourselves*” (Long, 2008: 74).

In the research situation the defended subject might not understand her own feelings and would be motivated, largely unconsciously, to disguise the meaning of at least some of her feelings and actions (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 26). For the “*defended researcher*” consideration of unconscious defences is an ethical issue (ibid.).

The consulting room

Psychoanalysis is rooted, both conceptually and in its methods, in the interaction between the analyst and the analysand in the consulting room. Here, through the relationship with the analyst, that which was relegated to the unconscious is brought to light. This relationship is not simply intellectual but is emotional and spans the range of human expressivity. The patient examines his thoughts, feelings and behaviour through “*relevant methods such as play, free association, interpretation and reflection*” (Long, 2008: 73).

Interpretations are generally centred on the patient and reflect the analyst’s attempt to understand the patient’s experience (Gilmour, 2009: 133) but in the case of the narcissistic patient, analyst centred interpretations are used so that the patient does not feel accused (Steiner, 1993). The ultimate aim of the analysis is to help the patient gain an understanding of herself (Gilmour, 2009: 136).

Psychoanalytic treatment continues for many years and there are numerous sessions each week. How then can one in the course of three interviews arrive at conclusions

about people and the meaning of their actions and their lives? As already noted Cartwright (2004) believes that valuable psychoanalytic insights about a research topic can be extrapolated from three or four interviews. In this study the application of a Grounded theory approach combined with the application of relevant psychoanalytic concepts have been used to analyse the data.

There are similarities and differences between the consulting room and this research process. The research process differs substantially from clinical therapy in terms of purpose, technique, and the larger frame of reference of its interpretations (Alexandrov, 2009: 42). Similarities are in the use of containment and the method of free association.

Free association

As already mentioned, two of the three interviews conducted with the research respondents, in this study, were free association interviews in as far as, knowing the topic of the research, they were allowed the freedom to tell their story. One aspect of the rationale for this decision was that *“Free associating manifests the unconscious”* (Bollas, 2009a: 21). By using this method, by allowing the respondent the freedom to choose how she responded to the invitation to tell her story *“associations [would] follow pathways defined by emotional motivations, rather than rational intentions”* and secure access to concerns that would probably not be visible using a more traditional method (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 37). In other words, in the telling of a life story the teller reveals more than she suspects (ibid: 35). Bollas refers to Freud’s theory of the logic of sequence in free association. Many lines of unconscious thought will be found in the sequence and careful listening to the meanderings reveals a chain of ideas, *“This is the latent content not evident in the manifest text. It is the hidden discourse of the unconscious which speaks beneath the surface of articulated ideas; it is the connecting link between apparent verbal ramblings”* (2009b: 25). In the third chapter of the study, the logic of sequence reveals Annie’s anger at mother, as an unconscious reason for entering the convent. She is speaking about how she was *“mad”* with mother and follows immediately with *“But then after Leaving Cert I entered in Kildare.”* Noticing the logic of sequence allows one to make connections of which the speaker is unaware. There are also examples of respondents saying more than they intended. Birdie refers to a *“loose thing”* that comes into her narrative and Lauren says, *“Just look what I’m talking about...”* Both are surprised at their spontaneous utterances.

Interpretation

Britton and Steiner (1994) agree that the analyst uses free floating attention until a selected fact emerges which, when articulated to the patient, requires confirmation of its usefulness for the process of therapy to proceed. The researcher does not give feedback to the respondent and so gets no confirmation of his/her interpretation. Interpretations are withheld and are processed as data.

I found that, having written transcripts of the interviews, having discussed them in our seminars and with my supervisors, and having coded each fragment of data, I was very familiar with the material. This immersion in the material and the constant memo-writing and reflection meant that certain facts emerged for further analysis and interpretation. Menzies Lyth describes how insights that were never shared with participants in the process of consultancy were useful in helping the consultant understand the organization (1988: 121). She described how she used a process of *“internalising the data”* (1988: 128), mentally and emotionally sifting the data, until meaning could emerge. She states *“the data have to be felt inside oneself”*; that is, one has to take in and express the stress in the organisation, much as one does in individual and group psychotherapy (ibid.). She also says that *“one’s understanding of a social organisation, as of a person, are likely to be seriously limited if one cannot gain access to unconscious or implicit elements as well as to more overt ones”* (ibid: 119). However, in the research situation there is no way of knowing that conclusions are correct and this uncertainty has to be tolerated (Gilmour, 2009: 134).

The convent institution

The study is focused on the life and work of the Sisters in the institution so a psychoanalytic exploration of the institution is, therefore, relevant. Susan Long says that *“For Bion and Lacan, the unconscious is not simply an inner force, but represents a potentiality in the wider group or culture”* and in these terms it can be understood that *“unconscious processes occur in groups and organisations”* (2008: 74).

The paradigm used by the Tavistock Group Relations tradition applies psychoanalytic concepts and methods to the study of organizations and, in doing so, has extended the range of psychoanalysis from the individual body to the body of the group and organization (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009: 14).

Freud’s (1921) view is that the family group is the prototype of all groups and in chapter three of the study, there are references to the convent group as family, and parental

transferences to superiors. Dependence and regression were fostered in the convent as a means of control. Bion (1955: 476) felt that Freud's analysis of group as family was insufficient to explain his own experience of groups. He believed that, in addition to family dynamics, the central position in group dynamics is occupied by the primitive psychotic mechanisms which Melanie Klein (1946) has described as peculiar to the paranoid-schizoid position. The psychotic anxieties in question involve splitting and projective identification. Bion concludes that, in addition to working through the stresses appertaining to family patterns, one also has to work through the still more primitive anxieties of part object relationships. This study shows that working through anxieties was not part of convent culture. Following on from Bion's experience in groups, Elliott Jaques (1955) and Isabel Menzies Lyth (1960) conducted research in various organizations and identified the concept of "*the social defence*" as a means of defending against anxiety, guilt, doubt and uncertainty. This system develops as the result of collusive interaction and agreement, often unconscious, between the members of an organisation (Stapley, 1995: 64). The form it takes will develop over time and, once in place, becomes an aspect of external reality. It is then taken for granted by the older members of the institution and the new members must come to terms with it (ibid.).

In the convent, there was no place for uncertainty, anxiety or vulnerability, with the exception of the frailty of physical illness, and it is not surprising that there were many social defences. Laughter was, and still is, used as a way of denying feelings of anger, embarrassment and sadness. This is sometimes conscious and is seen as a way of surviving. Conformity as a means of avoiding anxiety was unconscious. Self censorship, as evidenced in the data, is still very strong and the fear of saying too much results in the Sister quickly recanting or suddenly saying the opposite, as if she will be punished for speaking her mind. Lauren speaks of overwork which eventually made her ill, Birdie recalls the mindless activity in which she was endlessly engaged and Annie tells of the emphasis on minutiae, such as changing one's shoes, all of which defended against the anxiety that reflection and thinking might have brought to the surface. Time was filled with action, leaving no space for reflection.

Defences are, and can only be, operated by individuals. Their behaviour is the link between their psychic defences and the institution (Jaques, 1955). Jaques takes the position that there is a complex and subtle interaction, resulting in a matching between the individual's defences and the institution's. David Armstrong (1997) has developed

ideas about "*the institution in the mind*" where he locates institutional dynamics, whether benign or malign, in the unconscious of the individual.

Countertransference

The exploration of the interviewer's countertransference can be a crucial clue as to what is going on for the research respondent. Respondents unwittingly communicate their emotional states by evoking feelings in researchers that replicate their own, which if the researcher allows in, and then reflects upon, can enable her to more fully understand the respondent. With reference to the role of the consultant (equally applicable to the interviewer) Eric Miller states:

The way in which the consultant [interviewer] is used and experienced, and also the feelings invoked in him, may offer evidence of underlying and unstated issues and feelings in the client system: that which is repressed by the client [interviewee] may be expressed by the consultant [interviewer].

(1990: 171)

It is through projective identification that feelings are aroused in the researcher, which when processed enable her to identify the countertransference.

Projective identification

Sometimes a distinction is made between projection and projective identification but Hinshelwood does not think it is useful to make this distinction (1989: 182). Spillius holds that one cannot project impulses without projecting part of the ego. This involves splitting, and impulses do not vanish when they are projected, they go into an object and distort the perception of that object (2011: 451-452). Following Klein (1946) Bion identifies two forms of projective identification, one used solely for evacuation purposes, for getting rid of unwanted feelings (1967) and a second used for empathic communication, and with a desire for a response. The latter, based on the infant-mother relationship, makes it possible for the analyst or researcher to know what it feels like to be in the patient's or subject's shoes. Throughout the study I processed both forms of projective identification. The second form is explored in chapter five in relation to the experiences of Rose and Jenny, the new recruits, who found they were dealing with feelings which, although belonging to them, can also be interpreted as belonging to the older nuns with whom they lived. It is likely that these older nuns had very uncomfortable feelings, as a result of changes in religious life, that overwhelmed and confused them, and being unable to acknowledge them, they projected them into the newcomers, who were likely receptacles for these projections. Neither Rose nor Jenny

nor the older Sisters had any opportunity to explore these feelings. On the other hand, I also often felt confusion and a sense of not knowing what I was doing, or where I was going, when dealing with the research material. By exploring my own feelings about the subject, I was enabled to manage my feelings and to separate what belonged to me from what belonged to the Sisters, in this difficult period of their lives. This process was not available to the older Sisters nor to Rose and Jenny.

Communicative projective identification is the basis of thinking, while evacuative projective identification leaves the individual depleted (Garvey, 2009: 49). As already noted, in evacuative projective identification a part of the self is split off and projected into an object, where it is attributed to the object, and the fact that it belongs to the self is denied (Steiner, 1993: 6). Any attribute such as intelligence, warmth, aggression can be projected and disowned, and when the reversibility is blocked there is a depletion of the ego and the person no longer has access to the lost parts of the self (ibid.). At the same time the object is distorted, by having attributed to it the split-off parts of the self (ibid.). This has been identified in chapter four in relation to obedience. Blind obedience was the order of the day and the Sisters had to obey without question. Sometimes they could not fully acquiesce, but they could not offer an opinion, nor could they disobey. So the question is, what could they do with their own sense of agency and authority? To avoid conflict they most likely projected it into the superior, who then became like God. The result was, that the superior was then not truly seen as separate, but with the self projected into her, and related to as if it she were God. In that case, the Sisters lost touch with aspects of their personalities (their own sense of agency and authority), that permanently resided in the superior, with whom they became identified. This process was also common in relation to male authority in the Church and in the family.

It is essential to normal mental functions to be able to use projective identification in a flexible and reversible way (ibid.). This means, that one has to be able to withdraw projections and to observe and interact with others from a position that is firmly based in one's own identity (ibid.). This created enormous problems for the Sisters after Vatican II, when blind obedience was no longer required. They were then expected to participate, as individuals, in a consultative form of obedience while, up to this, they had been positively discouraged from having an individual identity or to think for themselves.

Splitting

Splitting is very common in the Roman Catholic religion where everything is seen in absolute terms of black and white, good and evil, God and the devil, virtue and vice, heaven and hell. There is no space for doubt or uncertainty or shades of grey. It is used in Scripture to distinguish between Mary Magdalen and the Virgin Mary and even extends to the words of Christ when he says, “*Anyone who is not with me is really against me*” (Matthew, 12: 30). It serves as a threat and an admonition to strive for perfection, as nothing less is acceptable. It allows for projection onto an enemy; it externalizes, as the enemy, what might be difficult to face in oneself, for example, blaming the devil for one’s wrongdoing rather than looking at one’s internal evil. Splitting is part of normal development in the paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1946) but in the depressive position a more balanced, ambivalent state of mind prevails. Throughout life the individual moves to and fro between these positions or states of mind (Bion, 1963).

Mental life is impoverished by splitting, because it involves not only splitting off parts of the self, but also of mental functions (Bion, 1967; Steiner, 1993). This means that, when a person splits from painful or unbearable emotions, she is also splitting from the part of the self capable of having that emotion. This has the ultimate effect of restricting or even depleting the personality of valuable emotional empathy. The splitting of the ego is always a consequence of defensive processes and will require later mental work (Hartke, 2009: 152). Sometimes the contents of the mind remain within the ego, sometimes they are repulsed to the unconscious and sometimes they are expelled to the exterior by projection (ibid: 153).

In the study, splitting is most evident when it comes to the story of the Magdalen asylums. Margaret is affected by her memories of the laundry but has split off her knowledge. She is stuck in the paranoid-schizoid position and therefore, not affected or worried by what she knows, but denies. Bolognini states that the splitting of inner parts of the self simplifies and impoverishes the self, but allows the individual to “*travel light*” and be relatively symptom free, though she may, at times, tend to be maniacal (2009: 77). There is a loss of agency in the forging of one’s destiny, and a break in the continuity of mental life, as well as a diminution of the capacity to be responsible for feelings and actions (da Rocha Barros, 2009: XVIII). The break in continuity, in the generation of one’s history, deprives the individual of what Ogden’s calls “I-ness”, the capacity to interpret one’s own meanings, through “*a mediating instance between one’s*

self and one's lived sensory experience" (1992: 614). This leads to emotional superficiality and interferes with the process of constructing meaning and of the capacity to produce symbols (da Rocha Barros, 2009: XVIII-XIX).

Symington sees holiness as being consistent with integrated ego functioning and discrepant behaviour as being a possible result of a split ego. He helpfully defines aberrant holiness:

the ego is split: from one part of the ego comes one piece of behaviour, and from another, another. It is possible that the individual may consciously not know about one set of behaviour when in the identity of the other.

(1994: 19-20)

This has important implications for Sisters, who might keep the rule and be "holy" (but not whole) in the convent, while perpetrating abusive acts on the vulnerable in their work situations.

Psychic retreats

Steiner (1993) has identified two states of mind arising from powerful defence systems that I find to be particularly relevant in the context of convent life. They are "*turning a blind eye*" and the use of "*psychic retreats*". Turning a blind eye is one of the ways in which contradictory versions of reality are able to coexist. It is a means of knowingly deciding not to know (Steiner 1993: 94). It will keep facts conveniently out of sight and will allow the individual to know and not to know simultaneously, which can lead to distortions and misrepresentations of the truth (ibid: 129). The reason for turning a blind eye is the fear of the truth and a reality that cannot be faced (ibid.). In this study it is not always clear whether Sisters were aware of injustices or unfairness at the time they occurred, but it seems that many turned a blind eye, because to know would have meant a responsibility that might have required action, so it was better not to know. This state of mind is revealed in the study when a respondent is coming to a realisation, then suddenly stops, and contradicts what she has just said. Both Lauren and Barbara turn a blind eye to their school experiences and elect to enter convents where they know injustice and unfair punishments are tolerated. Margaret turns a blind eye to the stories she knows about the way the Magdalens were maltreated. Turning a blind eye raises the question of corporate responsibility for wrongdoing; is everyone to blame for not seeing or can those who did no wrong be exonerated? It also raises the question of whether one can be guilty through inaction.

Steiner (1993) explains a psychic retreat as the withdrawal of the patient to a place of relative peace and protection when the analysis touches on a sensitive topic that will cause pain or anxiety. Such patients, “*withdraw behind a powerful system of defences which serve as a protective armour or hiding place*” in order to avoid intolerable anxiety (ibid: 1). The psychic retreat is a state of mind arising from the operation of a powerful system of defences and one of its features is an avoidance of contact with reality (ibid: 2). It is clear, from the study, that the convent operated a powerful social defence system (Menzies, 1970), in order to protect the individual Sister from paranoid-schizoid and depressive anxieties; the former being the fear of being blamed and the latter the fear of feeling guilty. Through its routine activities and avoidance of thinking (Bion, 1963), it offered the individual a psychic retreat from painful realities. The woman who entered became institutionalised, which means she was initiated into a way of being that she accepted and continued in a mechanical fashion. In chapter five an analysis of the situation shows how Rose became institutionalised, but Jenny refused to accept the status quo.

For most people ego defences are temporary states of mind, used to manage crisis events and unbearable feelings, and which they reverse, once the crisis abates. They always stunt psychological growth and, while some people move in and out of the states, others become stuck. If the defences continue over long periods or strengthen they may become inflexible and psychological help, in the form of psychotherapy or psychoanalysis, is required to regain equilibrium and restore the personality (Steiner, 1993).

Conclusion

This chapter set out a methodological framework for the thesis. It covered the selection of the sample, the ethical issues, the data collection and analysis, as well as giving an example of the analytic process, and finally an overview of unconscious processes.

The ten respondents were introduced, giving some detail of their backgrounds. What is of significance is that most of the eight older respondents came from a rural background and attended schools run by nuns. All were teachers, and entered the convent as soon as they had finished secondary school and all eight have persevered in religious life until the present. The two younger members had lived in cities and worked in offices before they entered; they did not become teachers, and they left the convent after some years.

I discussed the attention I paid to the ethical issues surrounding the project, making sure that the respondents did not feel constrained to take part; that they understood that the material would be published in the PhD but that their anonymity would be respected. I explained the care I took to maintain a third position (Britton, 1989) in as far as this was possible, by taking part in the doctoral research seminars and dealing with my personal issues in my therapy sessions.

I gave a rationale for my method of collecting the data, using a combination of aspects of BNIM (1993), FANI (2000) and Cartwright's (2004) Psychoanalytic Research Interview. I also discussed my Grounded Theory approach and gave an example of how I used it in the analysis of the data. This approach allowed me to discover a complexity in the material that might otherwise have eluded me. This I found gratifying, as the close reading, the consideration of the material and the seemingly endless memo writing had produced results. I gave my rationale for the division of the thesis into three temporal parts. Finally I discussed the psychoanalytic concepts of free association, interpretation, countertransference, projective identification, splitting and psychic retreats which were essential to the understanding of unconscious processes.

1930-1969

A Total Break with the World

Introduction

The period from the 1930s, when Patsy, the first and oldest research respondent entered the convent, until the late 1960s is covered in chapters three and four. This was during the era, now known as the pre-Vatican II era. At this time, there was a convent in almost every town in Ireland. The nuns educated the local population and provided assistance to the poor. The convent institution was firmly embedded in, and respected by, the society of the time and, in return for services rendered, provided the recruits that ensured the continuation of the institution and the provision of those services. Although the convent was separate from the world, its recruits were influenced by the culture from which they came.

This chapter will include an overview of society of the time that will give a context to the world in which the respondents found their vocation. The eight respondents, who entered at this time, will give an account of their vocation and two of them speak of the day they left home. Some of the restrictions imposed by the convent, to keep the nuns separated from the world, will also be discussed and this will be followed by a conclusion.

Recruitment to religious life is voluntary and when women (and men) commit to following the path of religious life they feel they are answering a supernatural calling. They respond to the Gospel command, *“If you would be perfect go sell what you have and you will have treasure in heaven: come follow me”* (Mark 10: 21), and journey on a *“quest for the transcendent spiritual dimension to human existence”* (Wittberg, 1994: 19). Having decided she had a vocation, the young woman separated herself from family, friends and social ties, with the conviction that she had been chosen to become one of the virtuosi, one *“whom God has vouchsafed to call to this state of perfection”* (Rule and Constitution, 1863: 4).

However, besides the spiritual, there are other more worldly factors that influence people in their choice of vocation. Wittberg claims that a religious family upbringing and especially, a devout mother are the most reliable predictors and motivating factors. On the negative side, a dysfunctional family background can *“result in a religious addiction which is superficially similar to true religious virtuosity”* (1994: 20).

Cultural and societal influences are also important in how, and whether, a vocation is answered and each era needs “*a widely understood and compelling popular theology*” to explain what religious are doing and why they are doing it, in order to inspire recruits to join them (Wittberg, 2007: 3). It is not within the scope of this study to determine the functionality or otherwise of the families of the young women who decided they had a “vocation” but the society, in which they grew up, had no problem in accepting their choice.

Not all of the research respondents articulated the supernatural aspect of their vocation. This can be attributed to the fact that there was an understanding that entering a convent, meant one had a vocation and that it did not need to be made explicit. The continuance of convent life, by encouraging recruits to join, was taken for granted, by the almost totally Catholic society.

In common with many young people, who emigrated to escape the claustrophobic atmosphere prevalent in Ireland at the time, some of the participants had a fantasy of (and wished for) exotic or faraway places in which to follow their calling but settled for the more mundane, on the advice of the priests, who dissuaded them from entering a convent abroad. Again, they did not say why they wished to go away, but perhaps it was because emigration was so prevalent at the time. Neither did they question the male voices of authority that advised them; they lived in, and accepted, a male dominated society.

Some identified with family members, who were religious, and this seems to equate with entering the family business (five of the eight respondents had siblings who entered and Clare’s brother was a priest). Others answered invitations from older nuns which might be seen as God using the “other”, to make His will known. But not all reasons were conscious and a psychoanalytic interpretation reveals motivations, such as anger with parents, early separation from mother or a refusal to enter adulthood as being unconscious, beneath the surface, and not readily accessible to the conscious mind of the individual participant.

The break with the world meant submitting oneself to the restrictions imposed by the monastic enclosure that was obligatory for all active women’s congregation at this time. For those who entered the gates of the convent, the perception was, that their connection with the world had been forever severed; that they would never “*get out again*”

(Timmy)⁶. The only contact with the outside world pertained to fulfilment of the apostolic function of the Order, or for medical treatment and hospitalization. Where the Sisters were engaged in service to the public, those involved came onto the site, either daily or for longer periods, but they never entered the cloister or enclosure. The nuns rarely went outside the gates, except to visit the poor in their homes (visitation of the poor), so the schools, the hospital, the orphanage or the Magdalen laundry were all situated on the convent grounds.

The convent, as an institution, had aspects of the related concepts of Goffman's (1961), total institution and Coser's (1974) greedy institution. One of the most distinguishing features of both the total and the greedy institution is the total break (for a substantial period of time) from family, home and society. Goffman's concept is characterised by the totality of residence, while Coser highlights the totality of commitment, both of which are part of convent life. Coser argues that organisations that set themselves off from the larger society can thrive only if they are able to absorb their members totally within their confines. Whatever draws the members away from the religious community, threatens its continuation. Weakening the ties to family and friends and to the outside world aimed to intensify the link to community, insulating individuals from relationships that might have competed with the convent by providing a social identity. In this way, social claims on the individual were obviated. Wittberg suggests that isolation from contaminating outsider ideas must be enforced, in order to protect the unifying ideology from competition (1991: 19). *"This deliberate isolation is especially necessary to the extent that the community's way of life is based on values and beliefs which are different from the mainstream of the society in which they are located"* (ibid: 12).

⁶ The man, who drove Lauren to the convent

Overview of Church and society, 1930-1969

The institutional Church in Ireland developed in tandem with the new nation State and culminated in a triangular structure of power between the Church, the State and the Nation (Penet, 2008). As a result, the Catholic Church played a dominant role in Irish society. In the years from the 1920s to the 1950s, the institutional Church was at its most influential. It operated in what Moran called a “*theological style*” where it thought itself to be the harbinger of theological truth, understood in absolute terms, that is, to have knowledge of right and wrong understood in terms of black and white; to know God’s plan, understood in prescriptive terms; to have answers to life’s questions and to hold unquestionable authority where humankind’s deepest needs were at issue. In other words, the Church taught, preached and acted “*in the name of the Father*” (2004b: 303). This mind-set precluded doubt, and ensured absolute certainty about what to think, and what to do, in all aspects of life. The key concept in this approach was, according to Moran, the notion of the absolute, which she says is not dependent on a belief in the Absolute (God).

The Catholic ethos was evident in a typical Irish home by “*a picture of the Sacred Heart, a crucifix, an image of the Virgin Mary, a holy water font, images of other saints also, and a picture of the Pope*” (Mulcahy, 2004: 359). In most homes the family would pray the Rosary together at night; people went to Mass on Sundays and feast days and to regular confession. Church members did the “First Fridays”⁷ and in large towns and cities belonged to Sodalties⁸. There were religious processions on important feast days and forty hours of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament on relevant occasions. The spiritual and the sacred were in evidence everywhere (ibid.).

Fintan O’Toole puts forward the idea of a “*cradle to grave*” welfare system that was developed by the Catholic Church. He says, that at this time, an Irish person was likely to be born in a Catholic hospital, educated at a Catholic school, married in a Catholic church, have children named by a priest, be counselled by a Catholic marriage advisor if the marriage ran into trouble, be dried out in a Catholic clinic for the treatment of alcoholism, be nursed in a Catholic hospital and be buried by Catholic rites (1998: 67).

⁷ Attending Mass and receiving Communion on nine consecutive first Fridays of the month, guaranteed a place in heaven.

⁸ Groups named after Saints met, in Church, on regular occasions for prayers.

It was an era when a stagnant society was presided over, by a repressive and sexually obsessed Church, from which the younger generation had to flee, a society where to be perceived as a good practicing Catholic brought social and economic advantage. It helped to “*get contracts and jobs, be elected, be educated, be well-known and liked*” (Inglis, 1998: 11).

The place of women

The woman’s place was in the home, upholding the Catholic tradition. The Church preached the centrality of marriage and the family and saw the image of woman’s role as self sacrificing and altruistic, as homemaker and as transmitter of Catholic teaching. It held up the Virgin Mary as the model of all women, idealizing motherhood, while abjuring all manifestation of female sexuality. It preached the evils of sexual activity not aimed at procreation, campaigned against birth control and condemned sexual activity, outside marriage, as evil (Horgan, 2001).

Married women were not allowed to work outside the home. This meant that the only life women were expected to have outside the home was, while waiting to get married. If and when they married, they were dependent on their husband’s wages so many couples lived in poverty. Faced with the choice between a life of poverty and dependence in marriage and a relatively decent single life, it is not surprising that many decided to stay single (ibid.).

But career possibilities for single women were limited. In 1936, the then Minister for Industry and Commerce, Sean Lemass, prohibited the employment of women in industry (ibid.). As a result, large numbers of women emigrated, rather than remain unemployed or dependent on relatives. Most of the Irish women emigrants were single and travelled alone. In 1960, more than half of the women aged 15 to 19 in 1942 were living outside Ireland (ibid: 4). Four out of every five children born in Ireland between 1931 and 1941 emigrated in the 1950s (Lee, 1989). It could be said that the political-commercial-religious elite in Ireland has been a male dominated one and that this was reinforced by the existence of exclusively male elite schools and an exclusively male religious hierarchy (Horgan, 2001).

In conclusion, one could say, that Ireland, at this time, offered little to the young woman with ambition. The prospect of a life at home, rearing children as good Catholics, in straitened financial circumstances was not an attractive proposition, at least for some. Emigration offered an escape for the non-conformists and those aspiring to better

things. There was, however, another alternative and that was to become a member of a religious congregation which was a highly respectable calling but one that required a call from God to follow Him, commonly referred to as “having a vocation”.

Vocation

With the exception of the two respondents, Rose and Jenny, who entered in the post Vatican era (1970s and 1980s, respectively), the other eight respondents entered between 1930 and 1955, at about eighteen years of age, as soon as they had finished their secondary education. Each one tells her story of her vocation.

Patsy, the oldest Sister in the study at ninety three years of age, recalls the two-storey-house with the *“first slated”* roof in the town, built by her father around 1920, which suggests that they were a family of some means. Both her mother and father had cousins in religious life. Her story of her young life was dominated by the wishes of others but she did not feel any anger at being deprived of choice. Her decision to enter the convent was based on chance, on synchronicity. Her mother’s cousin (who was a Mother General) visited the school that Patsy attended and she recalls, *“she didn't know me or I didn't know her but somehow a bond was struck between us.”* She later learned that this woman was her cousin and *“from that day out it seemed to be destined I was for the religious life ... so that's how I landed in Kildare.”* Patsy laughs, as she tells this story, and offers no further elaboration of this rather strange *“bond”*. She is describing a family bond; she followed her many relatives into religious life; she joined the family *“business”* and she enjoys the sense of mystery she creates. She immediately continues with, *“And at the time there were about forty in the Noviceship. And they were all young and enthusiastic and beautiful and we had a most happy time and they were intelligent.”* Patsy links herself with this select group and continues to take an upbeat attitude throughout her narrative. Her vocation seems to have had more to do with status than spirituality.

Unlike many of the other Sisters, **Lauren** came from a less well off area in Ireland. She recalls:

And looking back on it now, in retrospect, our family, we were struggling with life. You wouldn't call us poor, we were never hungry or that now. At the time we were like all the others round about us. We were just day-to-day living really and we had no high notions of going to school unless we happened to get a scholarship. And I'll say this, to give Sister Agnes and other nuns like her, they were instrumental in helping others like me, of leaving the place I was in. Education now was the way to get on in life. Eh not so much emigration, at my time, as working the head and getting a scholarship. So I got a scholarship and

as I told you I didn't know anything about boarding schools or anything like that.

She went to boarding school and spent five years away from home. In her early years there she suffered at the hands of more worldly-wise and cruel companions and found that the Sister in charge colluded with this, because, Lauren says, “*she wouldn't have that understanding*”. She recalls:

My English naturally wasn't up to the standard of the girls around me and at that particular time, in the 30s, there were girls there that were a bit snobbish- You know they got me, we used to read when meals were on I think, and they got me up, first term, to read in English. I remember a small stool and I standing on it and I was shaking and I remember I kind of felt they were taking advantage of me.

As she speaks, she can still feel the humiliation, “*it has remained with me and I do talk about it with the same bit of feeling, kind of, that I had then.*” In spite of this unfair treatment, Lauren decided to join this convent and telling her story brings the incident to mind. In the past she may have had to turn a blind eye (Steiner, 1993) to this knowledge so that she could happily join these nuns.

Lauren is clever and she was awarded a University scholarship from her Leaving Certificate examination which means she could have gone to University but she decided to enter the convent. At first, it seems as if she were not taking responsibility for her choice but as the interviews continue it becomes clear that she was very serious. There were many layers to her calling. The first call was from a classmate who was taking this step and invited Lauren to join her.

I was at the back of the Leaving Cert class and Kate and myself were talking instead of listening, whatever, and Kate told me she was going to Kildare [entering the convent] and she said, “I think you should go too”. And I said, this was going on at the back of the class, but I said “But you know Kate I think, don't you know, well okay”.

She continues, “*What did I do? I made a Novena, nine days, Mass Novena, and during the Novena I was hoping the priest wouldn't come one day so that I would break the Novena but mind you he did. I decided to enter.*” Implicit in this superstitious action was the belief that if the priest failed to turn up, she did not have a vocation. She projected the responsibility for her decision onto the priest who, of course, was unaware of the part he played. The next layer was a covenant she has never divulged until now:

There was more that, really and truly at the back of my head I was worried about the family, worried particularly my brothers, now it's extraordinary more than my sisters, how would they struggle with life and I felt that perhaps if I did, I'm back in '39 now, perhaps if I did something, a sacrifice, get nearer to Christ He would bless my family. That now was behind, nobody in the house knew, I'm just saying it now and that plus that I would be nearer to Jesus.

This covenant was a private one, unspoken until now. It demonstrates the power of the Catholic Church's teaching, preaching that the nun, by sacrificing herself, was in a position to save others' souls, as well as her own. It would be considered an omnipotent fantasy from today's more rational and enlightened perspective but was a reality to Lauren, at the time. In exchange for blessing her family, Lauren offered her life to God. She then makes a link with a "little story":

Tess, who is now living [still alive] and myself were making dolls, rag dolls, and we had up to a dozen, I think, and we were hugging them and all the rest of it. And I don't know why, I didn't know anything about nuns, but I said to her, "Tess, you can have my dolls" and she says "and why?" "I'm going to be a nun." Now, I'm back now I was ten or eleven. And she took one of the dolls, "well, I'd like to be a nun too but I'd like to have a baby first."

She repeats the last sentence and adds, "I gave them away." She is reviewing her life, in order to come to terms with her decision. At about ten years of age, she gave her babies away to her sister. She had somehow taken in, that not having babies was a good idea and this is not surprising, when one considers the hardships suffered by many women in Ireland, at the time. Most of them reared large families with less than adequate resources. Lauren believes that a vocation "goes back long before you give it thought" She believed she had a vocation, "vocation is something that's mysterious in a way. It's a call without a doubt for me and I say for those who lived at my time it was a call." There is a hint here that this perception of a call is now, somehow, in doubt.

Magical thinking, mystery and sacrifice, as well as an invitation, were part of Lauren's decision to enter the convent but there may, also, have been an unconscious component to her decision. She had been awarded a scholarship to a boarding school, run by these same nuns. The nuns offered advancement and opportunity to the less privileged and one wonders, if girls who were given scholarships and free secondary education, by the nuns, unconsciously felt that they were obliged to repay the debt, by sacrificing their lives for others and joining the nuns in their work. Another research respondent, Barbara, was coached for a state scholarship, by the nuns, and also entered in spite of

having had bad experiences at school. Both women had split off their feelings and recall them, as they relate their stories.

Annie describes her childhood as happy, “*I must say we had a very happy childhood. There were five of us, four girls and a boy and eh my father had a business, he shared it actually there were three, it was a very big business.*” She proceeds to relate a number of incidents which could be seen as childish pranks and disappointments but, when taken all together, might result in a reluctance to move into an adult world that she did not experience as affirming. One such incident reveals a deeply unconscious link (Bollas, 2009b: 41) between her anger at her mother and her decision to enter the convent:

Funny thing not long ago I was thinking. I used to be mad. My Mom would be out in Brennan’s the night before and I knew well the next morning at my breakfast I’d be hearing about the lovely tray Margaret brought in that night and I always felt it was a rub [snide remark], you know and I thought to myself, sure maybe her Mom had it all prepared and she just carried it in. But then after Leaving Cert I entered in Kildare.

Annie thinks she might have been duped or tricked by the mother /daughter couple next door. They might have colluded, to make Annie look badly and Margaret certainly looked competent and socially aware. Annie’s mother used this against Annie, making her “*mad*”. In Annie’s eyes Margaret’s mother was a better mother than her own and Annie raged at it. The quick switch to doing her final exams and entering the convent show a deeply unconscious link between her anger at mother and becoming a nun. Was entering the convent a way of rebelling against her mother and searching for a better mother in the Church? She later reveals:

I felt that the Lord wanted me. I remember very well on the 8th December 1938 we had Adoration that day. I was only in Leaving Cert at the time and I felt very, very strongly, that day, that the Lord was calling me and I can always remember being very sorry I had to go out to my lunch. I wanted to stay in the chapel... Oh, I have no doubt it was the Lord himself talking to me. And for a while I used to dream about entering in the Carmelites.

Spiritual food was more important than lunch. Mother offered actual food but God offered appreciation and comfort, superior to that of mother. She continues:

Well like, I thought of giving myself completely and entirely to the Lord and then in February I was over at my aunt’s reception; that was in London, and they were all saying there. “Come back now, won’t you, in September.” I thought I would. It was lovely. It appealed to me and all the rest but then we had our Retreat and I can always remember the priest at the Retreat telling me, you’d be

better off entering with the Sisters you know, that you have been in school with. And then another point there was my Mom didn't want me to go over to London

Mother's sister had left Ireland and she did not want her daughter to follow. Annie was consciously influenced by mother and the retreat priest who made their wishes known to her. She is unaware of her resentment towards mother, as she chooses God, who, she feels, loves her and accepts her. Annie also had a sibling who became a nun. In the convent, Annie accepts the status quo and leads an obedient, albeit childlike, life but the price she pays is a loss of agency and a less than full emotional existence.

Birdie links her entry into the convent with her parents and, particularly, with her mother. Her early life was dogged by tragedy, with the death of three baby brothers from pneumonia, "*and then I had a little sister who was killed in an accident*". She says she "*met with death early in life*". Her parents decided to send their three remaining daughters to boarding school, at a time when Birdie was in her mid teens. She watched her broken-hearted younger sister, Sarah, cry with loneliness in the study hall and felt for her. Birdie makes no distinction between being sent away from home and her decision to enter the convent. She says:

... my parents came and they saw the boarding school and they thought it was great it would take me off the streets. And I was sent to the boarding school and poor Sarah was sent as a first year and she crying and I trying to keep up. And I remember saying to my mother at the range, "Mammy I'll never forgive you for sending me to Ballymore" and if I hadn't been I wouldn't have entered because I was having too good a time. I never regretted entering, no matter what I went through. I was always basically happy. So that's a loose thing now that came in.

Of course, going to boarding school does not mean later becoming a nun, but in Birdie's mind they are linked. She now dares to give voice to the "*loose thing*" that has come from her unconscious and finds expression but Birdie immediately recoils from her feelings of unhappiness and rage.

It is not beyond the realms of possibility to imagine, that father and mother were looking for a safe place for their surviving children, and handed them over to the nuns who, they believed, would take good care of them. But Sarah, Birdie's youngest sister died as a young adult:

Oh she was only 20. She had begun training as a nurse in Dublin and got a wetting coming home one day. And they thought it was appendix and it was pleurisy and it went astray on her – developed into TB. If only they had diagnosed, anyway there was precious little cure for TB and she was a fine girl, she was lovely, she was a fine girl, the only one of us that was a fine girl.

At the time, Birdie was at university and she suffered a mental breakdown following this death, and was unable to continue her education. Birdie exchanged the “good time” at the warmth of mother’s “range” for the “cold” of the convent but, of course, mother had been unable to save the lives of her five children and the warmth of the range could never have become a reality for Birdie. The cold remains as a constant, throughout her narrative, even to the present. The trauma of death is ever present and in the convent:

on first Sunday⁹ oh you were in deep silence all day and we used to have an interior examen at 1.30 and the first question was: am I ready to die? I never got past that one never, sat wondering was I? Was I?

The inability to answer the question points to Birdie’s trauma at the death of her siblings. What kind of God allows one’s siblings to die? She may also suffer from survivor guilt. In relation to her vocation Birdie goes on to say, “*there was something there calling me. I don’t know what you’d call it but there was something there, and then I’d try to forget about it and wouldn’t want to do it and all the rest of it.*” Perhaps the guilt at being a survivor called her and she felt she had to sacrifice herself; she opens her first interview with the words, “*I’ll talk about religious life when I entered. Now of course, everything was very severe and of course we accepted it because we came in for a life of sacrifice.*”

Birdie was invited to enter by a teaching nun, “*and when I came to school, I remember Antonia approached me and asked me would I like, what would I think of entering and I remember saying to myself, ‘Oh my God, I’m not hearing this again.’*” She seems quite angry about the whole experience, as if there was some force, outside her, drawing her in. She attributes this to God, while, at the same time, attributing it to her mother and to the nun who invited her. She knew that answering God’s call meant “*a life of sacrifice*” but had the sacrifice not already started when she was “*taken away from the gay life that [she] had at home.*” There is a struggle between the spiritual, the longing for a transcendent experience and the world of mother and father, who had lost many children and who, through their lack of thought, had determined Birdie’s future. Birdie never resolves her problem but continues to lead a life, dominated by a feeling of coldness and loneliness.

⁹ The first Sunday of each month was a retreat day, a day of silence and prayer.

Mary describes a situation in her small town in 1946, the year that she entered the convent, which offered limited opportunities for young people:

I'm thinking of ourselves now, going to Secondary School the jobs that were there, the Civil Service, nursing and teaching and it was hard enough to get teaching. I don't know, otherwise you went abroad or you stayed at home.

Those who stayed at home “got married young” and many had to depend on money sent from abroad, by their husbands, to support them, “*the fathers of families ... a lot of them were gone to England. And the wives and the mothers were left at home, waiting for all this money to come.*”

Mary and her three sisters entered the convent and her two brothers joined the Christian Brothers:

Well, actually my brother joined the Christian Brothers. My second brother tried it and he left. He said, actually they were only fourteen when they went. He said he just drifted along and then he saw it wasn't for him at all.

She comes from a family where becoming a nun was part of the family tradition. Her father had three sisters who entered the convent, “*My father had three sisters, nuns. So that probably influenced me and influenced my parents in allowing me to be a religious.*” Mary remained ever obedient to the wishes of those in authority, that is, until the authorities decided she had to leave the convent where she was living and she took her own authority and decided where she would like to spend the remainder of her life.

She was born in Cork and when her father, who was a policeman, was transferred to Galway she was left in Cork with her grandparents. This was a long separation:

I was with my grandparents you see, nobody else young there. Now I often thought back since of how I happened to be down there but at home there were three more born after me and the fifth was coming so I suppose they said I'd be minded down there and out of the way.

She rejoined her parents in Galway, when she was about five years old, having completed her first year at school. Nobody gave her any explanations. She presumes she was left behind because there were too many children for mother to look after. It was not unusual for her parents to leave her, without explanations. On another occasion, when she was seven, she was playing with her siblings:

The next thing I looked across and I saw my parents skipping along very quietly. I knew they didn't want me to see them. . So I went over to the house later on anyway and the girl who was working for us at the time said they were gone over to the station [to meet father's sister]

There is some evidence that Mary's early break in her attachment pattern, may have left her with some residual unconscious rage that influenced her decision, to want to leave mother, and go to China to become a nun. She is aware of the influence of "*the Missionary Sisters coming into schools telling us about what they were doing and of course, my aunts as well.*" She was attracted by the photos in the magazines:

And of course I saw their lovely habits and the work they were doing in China. So I was going to China ... and I remember well coming home, my mother was in bed, sick, and I showed her this book and I said, 'That's where I'm going' – to go out there, never to come back.

In this decision, Mary is rejecting mother's life, in favour of the fantasy of an exotic life in China. However, a priest, whom she suspects of being in collusion with the local convent, told her:

...you think you are going to be baptising babies, black babies, but you'll either be in a school or in a hospital, the same as you would in Ireland. So he talked me out of it and finally I said, okay.

She conformed to the priest's wishes, like a "good girl" who bows to superior male authority. The notion of collusion is reinforced when, as a schoolgirl, she was given a book (by the nuns) on the founder of the Order and also when she was the first young woman from the locality to be accepted into the convent, "*there was nobody from the town in our Convent...they didn't have any policy of taking town girls or even those around the locality because they would have had cousins and friends and everything.*" The pupils of this school, who wanted to enter the local convent, were sent to other convents. It seems as if the nuns had wanted Mary to join their ranks.

She may be angry about the collusion but she is not in touch with her feelings and uses her siblings as a way of expressing her anger (Bollas, 2009b). They were, she believes, coerced into becoming nuns. One, she says, was "*talked into becoming a Sister*" and another was told that "*she was disobeying the Will of God if she didn't enter*". Does she feel that, she too, was coerced? There is evidence of collusion but religious life offered her some compensations. She has had a successful career in religious life and was in positions of authority for over eighteen years. However, she feels she was eventually let down by the congregation and one wonders about the adequacy of the compensations.

The effect of Mary's early break in her attachment pattern emerges again, when she is a Mother General, in charge of almost two hundred nuns and many convents. She is speaking of her first visit to a childcare home, in her jurisdiction, and she says, "*I knew*

nothing about child care and in fact I would have said it's something I would like to do." Then she continues:

But I remember the first day I went in and I opened a door into this room. Maybe I told you before; you'll say it doesn't matter anyhow. There were three little children there and they were screaming, they were running out and screaming "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy" and they gripped me. And I discovered afterwards that the father hadn't visited them for six months and then he had come and he had gone. And then I discovered that some of the children there they were a result of incest and some of them had the same mother but so many different fathers because the man was getting men to pay for his wife's services. That was a whole new kind of experience I had.

What was not new for Mary was the fact of children not seeing their parents for a long period. She is aware that she can repeat her story; she tells it because it means something to her. This first experience of troubled, abandoned children, crying for their father, seems to be too much and she no longer spoke of working in the area.

She relates this anecdote, without any expression of emotion, making no comment on the suffering of these children. The encounter may have evoked some painful and unbearable feelings that could not be acknowledged. She may have found it overwhelming because of her own past, where she had to suffer years of separation because her mother had too many children to look after. As a result, these feelings had to be kept out of consciousness. This is accomplished by splitting and projection (Anderson, 2006: 336). Mary's anger and upset, at her early separation, are reinforced in the retelling of this incident and the lack of affect attached to it. The anger and upset are split off and projected¹⁰ and, like Annie, Mary may have looked for comfort and stability in the convent.

Margaret shared Mary's desire to move away from Ireland. She wanted to enter in Australia but she was forbidden to do so by her father, who told her, "*If you want to be a nun you'll have to enter in Ireland.*" She, like Mary, bowed to the superior male authority saying, "*That's the time that you did what you were told and I did what I was told and entered in Tramina because there was a crowd there from my home town.*"

Margaret, whose mother died when she was about eighteen months, moved, along with her older brother, around the extended family for many years, until her father remarried. She does not seem to have formed particular attachments but loved all her caring

¹⁰ These unwanted and unacknowledged feelings were projected into me, as the listener, and registered as my countertransference which I later analysed.

relatives more or less equally. For this reason, she may have been particularly suited to community living. She does not know where her longing for Australia originated but imagines it may have been connected to her relatives there and, in particular, to one cousin with whom she identifies:

I had cousins out there and I was longing to go, to Perth, Australia because one of the Sisters, Sr. Andrew was a first cousin of my father, she was reared in our house. My Grandmother reared her because her mother died when she was young and I used write to her and I said I'd love to go to Australia. I loved the Geography of Australia, I think that was the reason really I wanted to go.

Her longing to join her cousin has more to do with wanting to travel, to escape, than with a supernatural calling “*I had some kind of longing, craving, I had to go. I don't know at all whether it was a vocation.*” Margaret went to school to a particular Order of nuns but she decided not to enter with them because joining them would not have offered any possibility of travel. So she was convinced to join the Maryville Sisters because of the persistence of a neighbour, Martha, who was a Novice in that Order:

I had letter after letter from Martha saying please come and join us. I hadn't a notion of joining the Maryville Sisters, not a notion in the wide world. I didn't like the Sisters of Maryville at all. I didn't know them.

The only thing she knew about them, was that they ran the Magdalen Laundry:

And even as a youngster coming in and out from home, up the road a few miles, I didn't. I shouldn't be saying that, eh, this out loud, passing here I used to shudder, shivers would go up your back, you associated it with the Magdalens.

The ideas she got about the place were, “*Not good because you'd hear stories and you would come in with the odd tablecloth for Christmas. You would see the women.*” She says, “*You got this feeling that this was eh --.*” She is stuck and cannot bring herself to finish her sentence. Margaret is hinting at the public perception that there was something untoward going on in the laundry but she cannot bring herself to articulate it. She does not speak about making a decision to join this Order but says, “*in the heel of the hunt I entered there, I don't know why.*” She did not enter the particular convent with the laundry attached but she ends up there, following the amalgamation of the convents in the province, and she lives there at present. Reflecting on the subject of her vocation she says, “*It was strange (laughing) I don't know whether I had a vocation, I probably got it on the way.*” Perhaps, like Patsy, and Margaret, entering the convent was like joining the family business, “*I was kind of brought up on religion because a lot of people were coming home, coming and going cousins and a lot of relations in other*

Orders as well.” As well as having a desire to go abroad, both Mary and Margaret shared the experience of early separation from mother and an identification with other members of the family who were in religion.

Clare was the youngest of a family of six and lived in a small town, ten minutes away from the convent. In part, her vocation stemmed from sibling rivalry, *“I had a brother who went on for the priesthood and I remember the day he went saying to myself, well if he is going to be a priest I’m going to be a nun.”* When she finished school, she was allowed to her first dance:

And then, as a big concession, the July before my results came out, I was let go to the dance and I got a new dress and I got new high heels and I was in heaven (laughing). I thought this, because you see when you are the youngest of four girls it was mostly hand me downs but here I was coming in my very own new dress that’s just something and I thought it was heaven on earth and of course I was only home from that dance when I was on for the next dance and all the rest but I still felt in all of that it would strike me in the middle of the dance, “ is this all there is to life, is this all there is to it?” and even though I was bursting to go to the dance and I enjoyed it no end but when it was over there was always that sense of there must be more, there has to be something more in life.

She struggled with the decision, *“I had prayed a lot about it; I prayed a lot. I used read the Imitation¹¹ every single night”* and she spoke to a priest and the principal of her school. Finally she made the decision and she describes the reaction of her parents:

My mother was delighted ah, she was delighted, she was delighted altogether. This was the second one, she was going to have a son a priest and a daughter a nun that was as good as you would get.

It seems as if mother’s place in heaven was now guaranteed. Father was not as elated *“My father said, he didn’t say anything. He was quiet about it all. You know he didn’t talk too much about it.”* Clare’s parents’ reactions represent the two sides of the coin; the joy and status of having a nun in the family and the loss of your daughter and her potential family. In Irish society, at the time, having a son a priest and a daughter a nun bestowed respectability of the highest order. In spite of her sibling rivalry Clare took a measured approach to her vocation, looking for *“something more”* from life.

¹¹ *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis

Both of **Barbara**'s parents were professionals; mother was a nurse and father was a policeman. She recounts an idyllic childhood and a very close relationship with a father she "adored". She mentions a highlight:

I also remember it was my first Midnight Mass. We went in to the Redemptorists for Midnight Mass and I thought it was heaven, I thought it was heaven; the beautiful choir and I remember the holly garlands; they used to make holly garlands; they used to string the holly. I'd come home then and my mother would have lovely cake and raspberry cordial.

She was sent to boarding school, at ten years of age, because her father did not want her cycling to school in the rain. She says:

That was a real culture shock to me to find yourself in a real cold house because it was very cold; there was no central heating or anything at that time and I remember when I would get up in the morning my clothes would be damp. Now there were fireplaces in all the bedrooms in our house ... my mother would have fires lit every single night in the winter time – it was cosy – you know how cosy it is when you have a fire. So this was an awful shock to me I couldn't believe it. So anyway I didn't like it.

She was also shocked to see nuns having an argument, "Another awful shock I got was – I was coming down to the back hall and I remember two nuns having a row. I was, I was gobsmacked, I couldn't believe that nuns would fight." She found the nuns were very cross:

I was afraid of my life of them because they were always slapping us ... Oh slapped, slapped. You see I wasn't used to it. My mother and father never lifted a finger to me in their lives, never. I never got a smack, never ever in my life. So to be getting slapped was something out of my ken altogether. And then to have nuns slapping you I thought was the pits altogether.

In spite of this, Barbara joined those nuns. What attracted Barbara to this life that was so different to her experience of family life? There was a sense that something was not being said. Did Barbara really not know why she entered? Had she simply followed her only sister who had entered the previous year? Or was it related to her relationship to her father? In the third interview, when she returns to the subject, Barbara says she entered to become a saint and that she had the desire to outdo mother and father by choosing a way of life that was considered superior. It became clear that Barbara was angry at her choice and she felt deceived, by the Church, into thinking that her choice was superior to that of her parents:

I thought – I really did think it was the way to sainthood and I thought that my mother and father and all those that got married were in the halfpenny place. I really thought that we were, that priests and religious were way up there. Not up

there in the sense that I would look down on anybody – do you know that in the spiritual life that we were away up there. Yes I did and then another wrong, a misunderstanding whatever you like to call it that line in the Gospel, ‘put your hands to the plough and turning back [leaving the convent] you’re not fit to (pause)’ [enter the kingdom of heaven] now that was drilled into us.

She was taught that the punishment, for leaving the convent, was eternal damnation. She gives voice to the view that was prevalent in pre-Vatican times, that marriage was inferior to religious life and that nuns were spiritually superior. Barbara had surpassed her parents in her choice of vocation. She had done better. She follows the religious claim to superiority with the words “*another wrong*” so she now feels wronged by what the Church taught. Heaven (sainthood) and hell are juxtaposed and Barbara made her choice. Barbara here links the decision to enter the convent with her decision to remain there. The retrospective view, of a superior way of life, is likely to have been one she learnt when she was already in the convent, which leaves her reason for entering, unanswered. A way of remaining as father’s adoring and adored daughter was to take the inimitable Christ as her spouse and become a nun. It was a way of refusing adulthood and the resolution of the oedipal situation where one renounces one’s desire for the parent, by recognizing the parents as a creative couple, of a different generation to oneself, and having identified with the same-sex parent, one finds a partner in one’s own generation (Britton, 1989). Later, Barbara fell in love with “Father” Bill but the prohibited relationship soon ended. The resolution of the oedipal complex, for the female, means that she renounces the actual father and takes someone like father as her love object; she has achieved the ability to think symbolically.

Barbara diminished the parental couple (the “*halfpenny place*” they are in), in choosing something superior to a marital relationship. She renounced the idea of a kindly warm family, where she was never struck, for the harsh cold atmosphere of the convent where she suffered many indignities. She paid a high emotional price for her choice, very likely to have been made in a place of turbulent, unresolved feelings that she could not bear.

She had wanted to enter in England but once again the male viewpoint held sway when her mother’s priest friend said, “*don’t let her next nigh or near an English convent*” because “*they were terrible*”. The bad was projected onto England, implying that Irish convents were better but Barbara was soon to learn that “*our own were as bad*” when she entered the convent, attached to the boarding school she had attended.

What all of these young women have in common, is a convent education which gave them some familiarity with nuns and a life shared, at some level, exclusively with women. They were on the cusp of adulthood, with little or no life experience, little experience of self agency, the world of work or finance. They do not speak of having had relationships with the opposite sex and they come from a sexually repressed society, dominated by the philosophy and morality of the Catholic Church.¹² For the most part, they are not aware of the complexity of their motives, both conscious but unexamined and also unconscious.

¹² In contrast to these young women Rose and Jenny, who entered in the 1970s and 1980s, were older, they had already finished school and had worked in the world. They came from a different worldview and with very different expectations of religious life. They had little in common, in terms of vocation, with the nuns who entered years earlier. They came from a different background; both spent their early lives in urban areas in England and neither had been in boarding school and so they were not so familiar with nuns. They both spent some time working in offices before they decided to enter the convent. Rose came to Ireland to enter and Jenny stayed in England.

Leaving Home

At the time the eight elderly respondents left home for the convent, they believed that they would never see the outside world again. It was a momentous step in a young life and yet, only two of them mention this day. **Lauren** exchanged home life for convent life in 1939. She felt the parting intensely; it felt like the end of the world for her:

... the evening before I went out by myself and I looked at the sun setting. This is perfectly true; I looked at the sun setting, could almost see it now. I looked at it and looked at it and the tears came down because I thought I'd never see a sunset again (long pause); absolutely so and I can still see that sun set now, behind the lakes.

Lauren becomes poetic when she reminisces about her home. On her journey to the convent, she was accompanied by her mother, her cousin and Timmy the driver. On the way, they came to a beautiful place and Timmy said, *“Oh this is a lovely place, there's a lake there and the mountains and we'll take a snap. Imagine we took a snap and I never saw it; they thought they could never send it to me.”* Lauren's journey was immortalised in a photo but she was deprived of the pleasure of seeing it. One could say that a photo is a third position, something that could be viewed objectively and in the convent, third position thinking was not something that was encouraged.

Entering a convent was like a death, a complete break with the outside world. When they arrived at the convent and the luggage was taken out Lauren forgot her umbrella and Timmy went back for it, *“Take this, says he, because you'll never get out again.”* There is a long pause and she continues, *“That's okay, we went in and so on and so forth, we got tea and there were four [other postulants] in before me and you see the whole regimentation – I wasn't used to it but we behaved rightly.”* People were aware of the enclosed life and they believed that the young women would never be let out again because nuns were only allowed to go home at the Superior's discretion, and never without being accompanied by another Sister.

Lauren continues with her story, *“So Timmy, my first cousin and my mother left.”* This is followed by another long pause. The sadness is palpable as she says, *“There was no – for that sunset, for the lilies that Mona, we plucked beside the lake, 'twas dangerous, the wild lilies. We went across the mountain to get them. They're the things I was lonely for - the ceihli [visiting] of course, the pond, Brigid, my friend, Mary and the rest of*

them. So – really –if I were – into this.” It seems that the gaps, like the sorrow, have no words. It is intense. The years have not lessened the intensity of Lauren’s feelings.

Then she says, *“It was an absolute surrender, the word I didn’t even know or did it occur to me, but was a real absolute, surrender to all things that my heart, didn’t again crave so much now as really – carried them in my heart.”* And now she was in the convent:

And I had to face this new life – big house – people with their eyes down, people looking at you sideways, sizing you up. You know the way these – my heart was so much in between. Well anyhow it would take a whole book to describe that.

Lauren relives the experience in an intensely sad and quiet mood. Then suddenly, the tone changes and her voice gets stronger and she straightens up, as if she has left the world of reverie and memories, to deal with the facts, *“So six of us entered. I was the fifth that day and a fortnight after, another one entered. She was a bit older than us.”*

This sudden change in Lauren seems to be an enactment of Lauren’s convent self; she snaps into convent mode, standing to order, dealing with the facts in “Gradgrind”¹³ fashion, defending against feelings of sadness, loss and pain. It demonstrates what happened to her symbolically, in the transition between home and convent. It appears that the culture of the convent instantly provided a social defence system against feeling the pain of loss (Menzies Lyth, 1970). Lauren made the break from all that she loved and cared about, something she later describes as *“alienation”* and the tone of her narrative changes to a more formal, less poetic one. It seems as if part of her became lost forever.

When **Clare** was leaving home, *“None of the family would come, no, they were all busy. It’s amazing how busy they all got that day”*; Clare lived ten minutes away from the convent. Her siblings, with the exception of her brother, the priest, did not want to be part of her leaving home forever. She describes her father’s upset:

And my poor old father when the dinner was over I was inside in the sitting room putting my pieces together and he came in and said to me, “if you’re not happy come home to us.” It was as much as he was able to say but it said everything (distressed, long pause). In actual fact I never got home in his lifetime. He had died before I got home. Mmm but you know he was heartbroken.

Although she did not visit her home again, while her father was alive, she was able to be with him in the hospital when he died. When she arrived at the convent, she got:

¹³ Thomas Gradgrind, the schoolmaster, a man who dealt only with realities, facts and calculations, in Charles Dickens’s novel *Hard Times*.

A lovely tea, we got buns and cakes and everything. I thought it was great. I remember the older nuns saying to me, "eat plenty now because you won't be getting them every day." Ah I didn't take much heed of this. I thought this was great altogether.

They were all given some comfort food, but it was only for one day. Lauren's and Clare's moving accounts of leaving home, give witness to the sadness and loneliness of the many people, especially emigrants, who left their homes, in Ireland, for an unknown world. Perhaps, the other respondents would find it too difficult to remember the day they left home, so they have repressed the memory or, it may be, that the real break came for them when they left home, for boarding school, in their early teenage years.

A Total Break with the World

The young women made a break with their former lives and joined the many nuns, already in the convent. There they started a process of training which lasted for a number of years. The first stage was postulancy, followed by novitiate, and then temporary profession of vows and, finally, a permanent lifelong commitment to the life. The restrictions of monasticism, that were an inherent part of the life, began in the Novitiate and continued for all until the early 1970s. Some convents were stricter than others but all were bound by monastic enclosure. The nuns could not get out; no one was allowed in; there was no news of the world; there were no secular books, no private letters and there was no speaking to outsiders. There was limited resistance from those who circumvented the prohibitions but the deterrent was the threat of expulsion and the disgrace of being viewed by the world as a “spoiled nun”.

The enclosure

The rule of enclosure meant that the Sisters had to get permission, from the Mother Superior, to leave the premises and they could never go out alone, “*No sister shall go out unless she be accompanied by another Sister*” (Rule and Constitutions, 1863: 9). **Clare** says “*we weren’t let outside the gates at all. It was locked at four o’clock*”. And **Birdie** emphasizes “*I mean you couldn’t go out anywhere. You see, we were never let out on walks or anything and going back from holidays¹⁴ it was like going back to a prison.*” She felt that the freedom of her late teenage years was effectively stolen from her when her parents sent her away to boarding school which inevitably led (she believes) to her becoming a nun. She felt imprisoned, in this enclosed environment, but she is one of the few research participants, who admits to disobeying convent rules. She, and her companion, flouted the rule of enclosure, by stealing out for walks “*at dark at night and we’d put white hankies on our heads, so that the traffic, whatever traffic there was, horses and carts, bicycles, that they’d see something.*” The mention of horses and carts and bicycles, on the road, is a vivid reminder of the period in question. She tells about one such walk:

One night we went down by the station and Dr. Gormley’s house was up for sale and I said to Dominica “Sure I was never at an auction in my life” and she said, “neither was I, come on, let’s go in” and I said, “no Dominica, if anyone sees us we’ll be killed” so Dominica got real mad with me and said, “okay if you

¹⁴ From 1948 these Sisters went together on an annual holiday, usually to a convent by the seaside.

won't go I'm going." I said "all right, I'm going home" but she changed her mind and came home. We were at our supper and news came in that the floor had gone down on all that were in the auction and they were all brought to hospital. Talk about a miraculous escape! Jesus Mary and Joseph if it had come out that there were two nuns in the catastrophe and we not supposed to be outside the door at all. Oh good God!

Birdie can now look back, with some fun, on her escapade which is probably how she reacted to her lucky escape.

Getting home even for funerals was, for the most part, out of the question. **Annie** says, *"Oh they were very strict like that you hardly ever got home"* and she mentions several people who were not allowed attend their parents' funerals. She explains, *"Mother Colmcille had made that rule that we wouldn't get home for funerals."* She was not allowed to an aunt's funeral but she *"got over it"* in the practical way encouraged by the culture of the convent. **Lauren's** sister was a nun in England and she was not allowed home for their mother's funeral, *"I'm here, they won't let me home to my mother's funeral"* is what her sister said. A kindly nun took a photograph of the dead mother to send to her. **Birdie** was not allowed to visit her younger sister, Sarah, who was dying in hospital. She was very close to her and when she died Birdie attended the funeral, but she later had a nervous breakdown, as a result of the stress. She did not return to her University education and she taught, as an untrained teacher, until she retired. As already noted, Sarah was the fifth sibling who died in this family and Birdie's breakdown was an indicator of the level of trauma she had suffered. It is not surprising, that she can never escape the feeling of *"cold"* that permeates her life. **Clare** also had a sister who died:

She was a young woman: a young married woman at the time, so that was a heavy blow. And of course in those days I wasn't allowed home. Now she died in England. There was no question of going to England and I wasn't allowed home either. That was tough, that was very, very tough mmm and you know – you look back and you say (laugh) what was wrong with us? We all had some intelligence, why did we accept these things? We did and you know I suppose that was that.

Clare was not even allowed to walk ten minutes, to her family home and she looks back, in amazement, at what she tolerated. She adopts a matter of fact attitude and her laugh deflects from the real feelings. Her reaction is similar to Lauren's who, also, deflects her feelings, but being matter of fact, is part of the culture of the convent and the social defence that protects against feelings of anger.

Visitors

Not only were the Sisters not allowed out on social visits but there was also a curtailment on visits, from family and friends. **Clare** is the only one who specifically mentions the restriction on visitors “*the regulation in our place was one hour once a month which was quite strict you know so they [the visitors] were just allowed to come once a month you know. Eh that was hard enough.*” Clare lived ten minutes away from the convent, “*I could see the roof of my house from the convent.*” Clare accepted whatever was demanded and, even yet, she is hardly critical; she does not allow herself to feel angry.

Goffman understands the prohibition on visitors, and “*visiting away from the institute*”, as a deep initial break with the roles of father, friend, employee and husband and the loss of the ability to perform the function associated with these roles (1961: 24). In the convent, the Sisters replaced the functions of wife, mother and employee with those of sister (to the other members) and subject (of the superiors) and teacher or nurse where appropriate.

Media and fiction

As well as being cut off from family, friends and most of society, the nuns were also cut off from the world of reality (current affairs) and fiction. Goffman sees the “*the unavailability of fantasy material such as movies and books [as] greatly [increasing] the psychological effect of the violation of the self’s boundaries*” (1961: 51). The nuns had no access to television, radio or newspapers. In less strict convents there was some access to library books. As a young nun, **Patsy** lived in a remote convent with some older nuns:

It was a difficult time – a testing time, to be on your own but there was a branch of the county library and Mother Patrick told me I could go up and choose my books, you know and she never said, “what did you get or what did you not get” and I read every book in the house, (laugh) And all these books so that was it.

Patsy replaced companionship with books, but she also speaks of being overworked in that convent, which hardly left her much time for reading.

Annie describes how Breege, whom she admired as someone who was her own person, was an avid reader, who got her books from the local doctor and from the local library (very likely breaking the rules of enclosure to do so). Breege, was someone who entered later in life, having been a matron in a hospital in London. She seems to have had a

more developed ego than those who entered at eighteen years of age and she did not seem to bow to the pressure to conform.

Birdie, on the other hand, bemoans the fact that there were no books available in her convent “*nothing in the way of books that would educate us, then no way could we read anything – I don’t know how we escaped at all, how we’re half normal*”. Looking back Birdie sees how harmful the regime could be but, it is possible that at the time, she accepted it as part of the life of “*sacrifice*”.

Cutting people off from the outside world of reality and the world of the imagination is akin to psychological imprisonment, and leaves them totally immersed in the here and now. In the convent, there was little or no external stimulation except, perhaps, what came from work. Being cut off also meant that the organisation, and those within it, lost touch with the changes in the world outside the convent.

Privacy

The infringement of privacy in the Sisters’ correspondence with the outside world, was a further violation of the self’s boundaries. **Birdie** reminds us that, from the beginning, all letters were read by the Superior, “*Then the letters we sent out were read and the letters we got in were read.*” She continues with an anecdote:

I remember a past pupil sent me a letter telling me about – this friendship and that it was a Platonic friendship and Mother Patrick opened it, of course, opened the letter, well she didn’t know the meaning of Platonic, she thought it was something terrible, well, she said I wasn’t to write to this girl any more so I got a letter out to her, to tell her to mind what she was writing to me and the next letter she wrote a big plaster “private” on it to get me into more trouble, good God.

Once again, Birdie has managed to circumvent the rules, by sending a letter through forbidden channels, but of course, she was unable to control the letters that arrived, and she feared the repercussions. On this occasion, she escaped punishment. Some families knew that letters were read because their daughters had experienced this intrusion in boarding school. **Barbara** says “*my mother knew our letters were read*” and **Lauren** speaks of sending a “*sly letter to my mother*” when she was in school, meaning that she had broken the rule by having a day pupil post the letter for her. The only way to communicate privately with anyone in the outside world was by disobeying, but no one else mentions having done this.

Social intercourse

The Sisters were forbidden to speak casually to outsiders. **Barbara** gives an example of where she was not free, even in the course of her duty, to speak to the boarders:

I had the kids for recreation; I was talking to them at recreation time and she, [the superior] came up with the arms akimbo and she called me and she brought me around by the tennis court. You see, I was in charge of the games and there actually was, fortunately there was a basketball thing broken, thanks be to God, I wouldn't normally say that, I'll tell you why in a minute, so she read me for that and read me for talking to the two girls and when I went back they said, "Sister, did she give out to you?" and I said that she was pointing out to me the broken basketball thing, which was half the truth but at least I didn't have to tell them a lie.

The pupils had some notion that the nuns could be reprimanded by the superior.

Birdie says that "if you were talking to a priest, at least you were supposed to go and tell what you said to them" and once again, she was not deterred from talking to the priests and refused to tell the superior the content of the conversations. She relates how Angela "was talking to Father Mac in the sacristy and they took her out of the sacristy and they put her out to mind Trixie, the dog." It is not clear, how Angela reacted to this punishment, but the incident became a legend in this particular convent.

Most of these incidents relate to a time when the Sisters were finally professed. The Novitiate may, at times, have been more severe. The separation from the world helped to keep the inside in, and the outside out. The outside, representing "the world, the flesh and the devil" (1 John 2: 16), had to remain outside the convent walls. The implication was, that what was inside the walls was holy and saintly (and, until recent times, nuns were referred to as the "holy nuns") and what was outside, was the domain of the devil.

Conclusion

The oldest respondent entered the convent, in 1930, at a time when the institutional Church in Ireland was at its most influential. The boundary between the sacred and the secular was practically non-existent and to be a good practicing Catholic brought both social and economic advantage and, having a vocation, was often seen as the highest possible calling.

Besides the theological, the “call from God” to follow Him, implicit in responding to a vocation, the respondents presented many more practical and psychological reasons for entering the convent, such as the conscious desire enter a convent abroad or the fact that relatives had made this choice. Their stories reveal the less conscious or unconscious reasons, such as a refusal to enter adulthood or anger at parents.

The respondents were women of their time, bowing to male superiority and obeying male authority figures, without question. There was no negotiation or possibility of arguing a point of view. This mirrors the Catholic population’s response to the Church, at the time. The Catholic Church did not allow free thought; in every area of life the Church was the interpreter, of both secular and religious matters, for the faithful.

Although the respondents’ views on their vocation were retrospective, and following many decades of freedom, there was little analysis or reflective thinking on the choice they had made. There was also no reflection between interviews; when asked if they had any thoughts about the previous interview, they said they had not thought about it; there was nothing to add. This shows that, to some extent, their early conditioning of “non thinking” was still operative.

Once they entered the convent, the Sisters rarely went outside the perimeter of the convent boundary. Severance with all links to the outside world served to intensify the bond with the community, and reinforced the convent ideology that precluded doubt and uncertainty, and offered eternal salvation and even sainthood, as a reward for fidelity and perseverance.

The reality of convent life replaced the reality of the outside world and became a psychic retreat (Steiner, 1993) for some of its members. The limit on letters, visitors, newspapers and radio blocked any knowledge of what was happening in the world. There was little opportunity for reality checking because of the enforced silence and the constant vigilance, even at recreation times. The restriction on relationships, fictional

reading and contact with reality outside the convent, forced the Sister back into her internal fantasy world, the world of daydreams, childhood and the past. This situation continued until the changes, effected by the mandates, of Vatican II (1962-65).

The complete break with the world, meant that Sisters inevitably lost contact with changes in society and this left them somewhat anachronistic and increased the difficulty when they, later, tried to fit in to the contemporary world.

Convent Culture 1930-1969

The convent was a grey stone building with hundreds of small curtainless windows like so many eyes spying out on the wet sinful town. There were green railings round it and high green gates that led to a dark cypress avenue.

O'Brien (1960: 73)¹⁵

Introduction

The eight young women in this study, having made their break with the world, had to engage with their enculturation into the convent. Essentially, the convent in pre-Vatican II times, was swathed in a culture of superiority, in relation to those who were not members, that is, in relation to society in general. This feeling of superiority, although not explicitly expressed by the respondents, can be intimated from the number of young women who entered, in the belief that they were specially chosen by God. In the light of recent revelations of abuse in the Church, Professor Twomey, a priest and Doctor of Moral Theology, states that this sense of superiority now, “*beggars belief ... priesthood and religious life became a status symbol.... They were above suspicion- and they knew it*” (2009: 10).

The superior in the convent, held a position of authority that was considered to be infallible, and this was known as the “*grace of state*”. The notion of superiority is clear from the exhortation to the novice mistress, to teach her novices, that they are in the privileged position of knowing that:

Obedience provides an infallible means of knowing and fulfilling the will of God in its fullest perfection; – an advantage of the greatest importance which the religious soul enjoys beyond the most pious and virtuous who remain in the world. She shall endeavour to form in them a sublime idea of our holy Congregation and a cordial love for it and to instil into their hearts the most tender compassion and love for the Poor.

(Rule and Constitutions, 1863: 63-64)

It is precisely in the love for the poor that the nuns eventually failed in their duty of care¹⁶. This came to light in the 1990s. But in the period under consideration, it was publicly “*known*” and “*not known*”, (Steiner, 1993: 129) that all was not well with the

¹⁵ Edna O' Brien's novel, *The Country Girls*, was first published in 1960 and initially banned. Copies were burned outside a Church in Limerick.

¹⁶ This neglect of the poor includes the lay Sisters who came from the less affluent strata of society.

nuns' treatment of the poor children in the industrial schools that were part of the convent. Parents threatened their recalcitrant children with the "convent" as punishment for their misdeeds (Raftery and O'Sullivan, 1999: 317). However, the child, who was badly treated or abused by a nun, did not find a willing ear in the harsh ethos that was part of the infamous "Truby King" methods of childrearing. An adjective other than "good" or "holy" was not publicly attributed to nuns at this time.

The nuns provided education and assisted the poor in the local town and were held in high esteem. Edna O'Brien hints at a more sinister view of nuns. She has some experience of nuns, from her five years in a convent boarding school. Her novel reveals aspects of an inside story, of the hidden life, of the convent. Both sides of convent life are considered in this study, but there is a particular emphasis on the hidden life.

Religious life, at this time, can be encapsulated in the concept of a religious congregation that demanded an adjustment to the institutional system. The woman, who became a member of the congregation, was obliged to internalise and identify with an institutional culture that demanded a total transformation of her person. The psychological impact of this transformation, on the young woman, was of particular importance for her future. Both the institutional culture and the individual within this culture will be considered in detail.

This chapter will give further consideration to the convent as institution and to the new family to which the candidates were introduced, as well as the three vows and the sacrifices entailed in the fulfilling of these vows. Some Sisters tried to rebel while many somatised the stress. Attention will be given to the respondents' reactions to the life-transforming demands, made by the institution. It is well to remember that their views are retrospective, and through the lens of over forty years of change. What appears now, as unbelievable, was accepted at the time, and to think otherwise would have led to unbearable inner conflict.

The religious institution

As noted in the literature review, religious life, in this period, was an institution built on what Wittberg (1991) calls the “commitment-fostering mechanisms” that corresponded with many elements in Goffman’s (1961) “total” institution and Coser’s (1974) “greedy” institution. These mechanisms are an essential feature of monastic life, and were an imposition on religious, who had to carry the burden of being both monastic and apostolic/active. The founders of some indigenous women’s Orders, in the 19th century, wanted their convents to be free from monastic constraints, but were forbidden to do so, by Rome. This was not a new idea. As early as the 16th century the Jesuits broke with the monastic tradition, in order to travel the world, “*Any permanent attachment either to persons or places is definitely discouraged, while mingling with the ‘world’ is implied in the Jesuit’s life goal of active apostolate*” (Coser, 1974: 120-121).

Commitment-fostering mechanisms

The commitment-fostering mechanisms can be seen as the interior framework, that supported the institution, and they form the basis for this chapter. They held the institution by their inflexibility, rigidity, and above all certainty. The religious congregation existed in the certain world of Catholicism, where everything in this present life looked forward to the next; heaven being the ultimate reward, and hell the ultimate punishment, and purgatory in between, where the not so good could be purified, before they entered the gates of heaven.

The commitment-fostering mechanisms were, and still are, part of the monastic tradition, and consist in the public profession of the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and a promise to serve the “*poor, sick and ignorant*” (Rule and Constitutions, 1863: 21). They include separation from the world (monastic enclosure), and all that the living out of the vows entails.

The individual in the institution

The pursuit of perfection was a top priority in the convent. Perfection was achieved by obeying the precepts laid down in the rule, that is, by adhering to the maxim, “*keep the rule and the rule will keep you.*” It entailed assiduous attention to the detail of one’s “*ordinary actions*” (ibid: 33). The nuns took Christ as their model, and they wished to be like Him, to emulate Him. The rule exhorted them to “*animate their zeal and fervour by the example of their Divine Master, Jesus Christ*” (ibid: 4). Having perfection as the

aim, and Christ as the model, they took the institution as the ego-ideal (Schwartz, 1990). This ensured that the individual always fell short and was continuously faced with the shame of failure, or of being less than was required. The institution was never wrong or inadequate and all blame for failure or inadequacy lay with the individual (ibid.).

Individual uncertainty and doubt were cloaked in the certainty of collective belonging, clear to all by the wearing of an identical habit. The individual Sister was relieved of any personal responsibility for her actions, by the vow of obedience; she merely had to follow instructions to the letter. The nuns were viewed as a collective, like the police or the army. The nun was addressed with the undifferentiated title “Sister”. Each individual, within this system, was able to hide behind the collective and the collective was seen as a group of “holy” or “good” nuns, who lived in the convent, and spent their time praying.¹⁷ As already noted, group identity was fostered by loosening bonds with the outside world, with family, friends, and former life, so that there was no opportunity for a social identity, outside the convent. News from outside the convent, and all imaginative forms of literature were forbidden. Everything was constructed to protect the convent ideology from competition.

The transformation of the individual

Once inside the convent, the individual Sister was asked to sacrifice herself, and to undergo mortification of the body, for the sake of the kingdom of God. This was supported by the Gospel promise of a hundredfold reward in this world, and salvation in the next. But it was not merely salvation that was aspired to, it was sainthood, and it was not only oneself that was saved, but everyone for whom one prayed and worked (Moran, 2004b). The humiliations and mortification of the self were used to lower self esteem, and encourage a sense of group. This was facilitated by a lack of privacy, confession of faults, and deprivation in all areas of life, in order to weaken self determination, and intensify control. Control was also exercised by a relentless routine of work that often descended into mindless activity, such as, cleaning and polishing unnecessarily. In some cases the respondents attribute illness to the burden of work, to which they were subjected. There was an over emphasis on minutiae and trivialities, that kept the mind from thinking about other more consequential matters.

A total transformation of the self was accomplished through a dying to self, stripping oneself of one’s individual personality, will, and identity, and an adoption of a

¹⁷This is what Mary thought about her local convent before she entered.

collective, religious self, or identity. The Sister sacrificed her individuality and her developing selfhood (ego) to the collective/group ego of the institution because “*ego destroying pressures must be used to re-socialize members*” (Wittberg, 1991: 23). The initial period in the convent was a period of socialization.

Socialization

Socialization involves a process of learning the value system, the norms, and the required behaviour of the congregation; learning the ropes, the process of being indoctrinated and trained (Schein, 1988). As an example of socialization, Schein refers to the extremes that religious Orders go to, in the initiation rites of Novitiates. There were two years of novitiate, in most congregations, the first of which was extremely strict, with little or no contact with anyone outside the novitiate quarters, and the second year was less strict, after which the novice made temporary profession of vows. The transition from the world to the Novitiate was marked by a reception ceremony, where the aspirant, dressed in wedding attire, became a “bride of Christ”.

Socialization induces varying degrees of anxiety in the individual, ranging from a mere “*ruffle*” to boundaries (Stapley, 1996: 110) to the culture shock of “*being a stranger in an alien and unfamiliar world*” (Hunt, 1989: 33). Hunt explains that immersion in an alien culture is an intense experience, evoking a mixture of feelings of confusion, anxiety, excitement, frustration, embarrassment and depression. She describes how some compare it to an experience of dying, or of anxieties about bodily health, or of feeling like helpless children (ibid.). The extent of the disruption, depends on one’s ego strength, on the successful outcome of one’s early environmental (maternal) “holding” (Winnicott, 1971), and “containment” (Bion, 1962), as well as one’s negotiation of adolescent development.

Psychological development

Wittberg believes that, as a result of the novitiate training, “*the normal maturation process to psychological adulthood may become thwarted ...*” (1991: 23). Most of the women in this study entered at about eighteen years of age,¹⁸ at a time when they were still negotiating the developmental tasks of adolescence. The main tasks of adolescence include, establishing a mind of one’s own, one’s identity as a separate person, developing the capacity to be one’s own person, learning to take responsibility for oneself, engaging with emotional experiences, and dealing with anxiety, rather than

¹⁸ With the exception of Rose and Jenny who were older

defending against it (Waddell, 1998). These women had little or no experience of adult life in society and most of them had spent about five years in boarding school. They were partially conditioned by this experience. Those who had not been in boarding school were, most likely, “*emerging from the often addictive complexities of group life and of the multifold and shifting relationships which have hitherto been part of the process of separating from parents and family*” (ibid: 158). On entering the convent, all were once again in a group situation, similar to, yet very different from their families of origin, but not very different from boarding school. Those who had been in boarding school separated much earlier from their families, and were likely to have been less mature, and more malleable than their counterparts. In the convent, serious conflictual situations were set up, between the developing ego of the individual, and the demands of the institution, and this often led to a splitting of the ego. Unconsciously splitting the ego is a way the human mind has, of managing over-whelming conflict (Freud, 1924). The culture in the convent demanded that the Sister give up her creativity, spontaneity, and will. In order to give up her ego identity, in favour of conformity and a collective ego, the individual Sister had to split her ego, at least temporarily.

The extreme demands on the individual were not accidental. Coser states that the “greedy institution” aims at “*maximizing assent to their styles of life by appearing highly desirable to the participants*”, in spite of rigid controls (1974: 6). In the convent, the young were forced to believe that their sacrifice was for a “*just and noble cause*” because to have seen it otherwise, would have led to unpleasant mental conflict. Paradoxically, the stricter the demands the more attractive the life, “*the more one has given up for it, the more sacred and valuable the goal may become*” (Wittberg, 1991: 20).

In contrast to the collective view of nuns, this study gives some insight into how eight individuals¹⁹ responded to the demands of the system. The view is retrospective, and from a position, where everything had changed. The respondents were not asked, specifically, about this early period of their lives, so the opinions they proffered, are those they wished to share. Margaret and Mary hardly mentioned the convent in this period; Annie spoke about it without much feeling; Patsy denied any problems and Lauren saw everything, but had to turn a blind eye to most of it. Clare had mixed feelings about it and Birdie and Barbara found it intolerable.

¹⁹ The remaining two respondents entered the convent in a later period and will be discussed in chapter five.

The new family

Once inside the convent, the new recruits met the new family. Coser (1974) introduces the idea of the monastic family being based, probably unconsciously, after the model of family, in which each member was bound by loving ties to the other members, while all were guided and directed by a protective, yet stern parent, in the person of the (mother/father) superior. This was endorsed by the manner of addressing one another; the Discreets²⁰ in the convent were addressed as “Mother” and the nuns were called “Sister”.

Patsy says, “*They all ... they’re not supposed to be family, next door to it.*” The notion of family with its feelings of kinship and belonging, supplanting the family of origin, encouraged solidarity and enabled a group identity. The Sisters lived together, ate together, prayed together and dressed alike. They were bound together by the Rule, that dictated that charity (agape/love)²¹ was the cornerstone of religious life, and they were urged to make it “*their favourite virtue, as it was that of their Divine Master*” (Rule and Constitution, 1863: 39). In doing so, they were emulating the love and union of the blessed in heaven, so that it could “*be truly said, there is in them only one heart and one soul in God*” (ibid: 40). This is in accord with Freud’s view, that group solidarity rests, in part, upon sublimated or “aim inhibited” (i.e. not overtly sexual) libidinal ties of collective identification among group members. Libidinal relations encompass all that may be comprised under the word “love”, “*love for parents and children, friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to concrete and to abstract ideas*”(Freud, 1921: 22). This “wider sense” of the emotion Freud attributes to St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (Freud, 1921: 22-23)²².

The Sisters, however, were not children living in loving relationship with parents, and in the convent “family” it was difficult for them to maintain their adult status. **Birdie** had a paternal transference to the superior. She says, “*You see in my home it would have been my father I was afraid of, not my mother*” and she lived out her life in fear. The fear was, probably, of the punishment that would be meted out for transgressions. Living in fear engenders rage at not being allowed to be adult (Welldon, 1988: 8). Birdie did not

²⁰ *The Mother Assistant, the Bursar, and the Mistress of Novices, shall be the Discreets or the Council of the Mother Superior (Rule and Constitutions, 1863:65)*

²¹ love known as *agapé* (i.e. one that transcends affection for any individual and is rooted in religious ideology) compensates for the usual sentiments and ties among biological family and kin members (Ebaugh, 1993).

²² “*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity (love), I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal*” (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)

take back her projections and, in phantasy, the superior continued to be “father”. She also felt overprotected by the superiors (she was sent to boarding school to take her away from her free life at home). She says:

They were suspicious and they were suspicious of everything and another way they showed suspicion was you were forbidden to do this and do that and meet people and be natural with them. The whole thing was protecting you instead of letting you face dangers and see how you coped with them but that wasn't their way.

She is angry that her development was thwarted.

Clare also sees, in retrospect, that her psychological growth was arrested:

Well, I would come in at eighteen, not fully matured really, and whatever growth my stage was at, when I came in at eighteen, it was cut off. It was cut off there. There was no growth after that. There wasn't; there was regimentation after that, you know and that's probably (pause) I think that's why it was difficult.

Barbara is very angry about the past, and she claims that, “any bit of personality we had was beaten out of us, beaten out of us.” She remembers the unfairness when, as a Novice, they:

had to take the Superior's cup and saucer and wash it, you see. Now, if Maggie took it, she got a handful of sweets. If I took it, she wouldn't even say thank you to me. She wouldn't even utter the words, “thank you”.

Annie, looking back, gives voice to the infantilisation, “In convents, in religious life, you were treated as a child. There was a great respect for the superior, and so forth, and you were kept more as a child.” Freud (1921) holds the view that, in the group, the individual's mental activity regresses to that of a child, while Stapley asserts that the group elicits the phantasy that participants are equal, at the all-powerful and self-sufficient breast of the mother, experienced as a part object (1996: 47). Children are dependent on their parents and the nuns became completely dependent on the convent for their survival.

The Reverend Mother was believed to hold her authority from God (Rule and Constitutions, 1863: 18) and saw herself as His representative here on earth. This gave her additional power. **Clare** remarks, “The people who were in charge they were like God.... They were just God Almighty.” **Birdie** supports Clare's view, “It's just that they had so much power and their word was law and you daren't oppose them and oh God you couldn't”. Looking on humans as gods, who cannot be opposed, deprives the individual of her source of personal action (Symington, 1994). What Birdie is referring to is projective identification, where the individual's authority and individuality was

passed into the object (superior), resulting in the individual losing her authority and individuality, while the superior was invested with what did not belong to her (ibid.). For an ego that is weak, it is further weakened and impoverished by projective identification (Bion, 1967). Stapley also comments on the godly status attributed to leaders in any group:

The group treats the leader as some kind of godlike individual who is perceived as omnipotent and omniscient...who has the capability of achieving anything and everything if they only wait long enough the leader will produce the sought for magic cure.

(2006: 208)

Most young women, who entered convents in the past, joined in their late teens, when their transition from adolescence to adulthood was still in progress, and so the transition from home, or boarding school, to convent in terms of the authority structure, was unlikely to have been too difficult. They came from a society that believed in the authority of the Church. The certainty of the structure of the convent hierarchy, accorded with the certainty with which the Church proclaimed its message. The group then provided a safe haven, a psychic retreat (Steiner, 1993) for these women and they were likely to fit in with whatever was demanded.

The certainty of the past had its benefits and compensations, as **Clare** nostalgically recalls:

I think everything ran quite smoothly. There was one person in charge, there was a superior, there was a bursar, there was a mother assistant who gave you your garments if you wanted anything and there was a Novice Mistress and each of them had their job and they met and you know that was it. Then you had the senior stratum, your senior sisters and they had to be I suppose, respected, kowtowed to, depending on which word you want to use. (laughing) I would make a distinction between both words and then there was the ordinary, the rank and file, you know, sort of the chiefs and the Indians really and there was a great security and a place for everyone and everyone in their place.

Clare's distinction, between the words "kowtowed" and "respected", is evidence of her present ambivalence towards the past. Was it a system that demanded servility, or were people motivated by esteem for the seniors? She is not sure. She introduces, albeit unconsciously, the tension that exists between the past monastic traditional setup, and the present freedom from monasticism, with its ambiguities and ambivalences. The certainty of knowing where one stands can be reassuring. However, in her hierarchical order, Clare omits a certain group in the convent, and their position therein, namely the

lay Sisters, who were placed on the lowest rung of the social ladder, beneath the Novices.

A social class system

A little nun poured us two cups of tea from a big white enamel tea-pot. She was so small I thought she'd drop the teapot. She wore a white muslin apron over her black habit. The apron meant she was a lay nun. The lay nuns did the cooking and cleaning and scrubbing: they were lay because they had no money or no education when they entered the convent. The other nuns were called choir nuns. I didn't know that but one of the senior girls explained it to me.

(O'Brien 1960: 75)

The notion of the new family became a rather disappointing one for some, when they discovered a somewhat hidden aspect of convent life, namely, the existence of lay Sisters. All convents operated a social class system, with the lay Sisters at one end of the spectrum and some convents had “grandees” at the other end. This split was likely to leave each group available for projections, from the other. The lay Sisters carried out most of the least attractive tasks in the convent. They often looked after the children in the industrial schools and the boarders and worked in the Magdalen laundries, while the educated nuns held the more prestigious, high profile positions of teachers and headmistresses or nurses and matrons of hospitals.

Historically the lay Sisters, who came into the convent without a dowry, were servants of the choir Sisters (Horgan, 2001; MacCurtain, 1997). All of the respondents are choir Sisters, and were aware of the lay Sisters' lack of education, but not aware of the issue of the dowry. The rule demanded that all should have compassion and love for the poor, so how could the convent, then, treat the poor nuns as domestic slaves? Poverty as a reason for their plight had to be denied, and be replaced by a lack of education.

Annie takes it as a foregone conclusion that one made a choice and the matter was settled:

Well if you made that choice before you entered, oh yes, you had to make the choice before you entered that you wanted to be a lay Sister. They mightn't have got as much education as the others. And they weren't able for it after they came. I'm not really sure and that was it.

Annie both knows and does not know so she takes a position of not being sure. She came from a well-to-do, business family and she has had a secondary school education and it is likely that she never thought much about the lay Sisters. Annie never

questioned; she merely accepted the status quo. **Clare** knows that being a lay Sister was not as simple as Annie thinks:

They resented²³ being lay Sisters. They worked like, they worked in the kitchen. They hadn't secondary education – they did the cooking and the laundry and the sick with the nurses. The nurses used to do a lot with the sick. And we had a dairy as well because we had a herd of cattle, a dairy and making the butter and the milk and all that.

Clare does not take an ethical stance on the situation, but she admires some of these women, “A lot of these were really great saints, were saints, no doubt about it.” One has to ask why she sees them as saints. Is it because the lowly status they were assigned demanded more of a sacrifice than others, and the greater the sacrifice, the greater the reward in heaven? Yet, Clare says, they resented their position. Calling them saints elevates them to a higher status, the status to which all of the Sisters aspire. This might be a way of assuaging the unconscious guilt Clare feels at the situation; after all, the fantasy is that they will be rewarded in the next life. There is no evidence, in this study, that the lay Sisters freely accepted their position.

Lauren found herself shocked, when she discovered the chasm that existed between the middle class nuns, who came from wealthy families, and the lay Sisters. She had her first experience of wealth and grandeur in the Novitiate, when a new wealthy postulant arrived:

Nancy came with a big case (change in voice, slower) everything somewhat grander than we had and I was feeling then an inferiority complex, not saying anything, walking away, laughing when I should, doing everything, but inside me I was feeling – not that I should. Nancy was lovely. We were great friends until she died. But you see, it was the first time really I was touching grandeur because she had very grand things now.

As she speaks Lauren is reliving her memories, and she continues:

And I had a feeling how humble my things were. My blankets were actually; we got them from the sheep ourselves. We got them, whatever you call this turned them into thread in our own place we made blankets of them. And therefore you know they wouldn't be the posh blankets that Nancy would have had. Now I was passing no remarks, some were passing, saying that they were lovely you see. But inside of me, I'm that type anyway up to the present day. Inside, I wasn't jealous now, more this inferiority eh you wouldn't call it that. There was no need for me to, she was lovely. Well I was very new. It was a new life. Another look at life out of that trunk and I remember it so distinctly

²³ Jenny, who entered in the post-Vatican II era, speaks of the hurt and anger of many of the lay Sisters she met in her congregation.

Lauren makes no pretence now of her humble beginnings, but in the past she felt inferior. She is surprised at what she is saying, “*Just look what I’m talking about, sunsets, snaps, going into the Convent, my mother leaving. She possibly was proud of me.*” In the context of her homemade blankets, she remembers her mother. This is one of the few times she speaks about her. She remembers her mother leaving on the day she entered, and presumes that she had made her proud, by entering the convent.

Lauren also noticed the lay Sisters, she says:

I was there, very raw if you like in many ways, you know, right enough, but raw at the same time, but I saw women in our, round about me, with little white aprons on them, and they’d take that apron off and put on a check one, and I noticed, and I did ask why are these nuns, why are they wearing an apron. And they told me they were lay Sisters.

She was given an explanation:

And they told me they possibly hadn’t the chance [of education] we had and therefore they were looked upon as lay Sisters. And I felt, now ‘tis true, and I felt in my heart for them, that for a few days I thought, I’ll become a lay Sister to fight my way. It’s true. I didn’t; the way I was now, feeling and touching wealth, grandeur.

The reason she felt so irate, was that these women reminded her of the womenfolk at home. She identified with the inferiority, that the uneducated from humble backgrounds were made to feel, and the unjust way they were treated but her fantasy of defending them had to be suppressed:

I came down to my roots if you like when I saw this nun, nuns beautiful, all so lovely to me, with the little apron, not going to the Office²⁴ with us, not having Mary²⁵ in their name, eh, not being with us, not being with all the nuns. They’re just like the people I left behind but I didn’t do it but I had it here in my heart – and my, the ordinary person from my background feeling – this was a blot on the loving picture that I had before me.

Her ideal picture of convent life was besmirched. In speaking of a “loving” picture, Lauren is revealing a fantasy of religious life that did not correspond fully with her school experience, where the Sister in charge allowed her to be ridiculed by the English speaking pupils, (Lauren spoke English with an accent because she was a native Gaelic speaker). At the time she did not understand, and in the convent, she heard about the system that discriminated against the uneducated; she was facing one of the hidden aspects of convent life. Lauren’s “loving picture” was the picture of religious life that

²⁴ The Divine Office, which was recited several times a day

²⁵ Choir Sisters were always given the name of Mary e.g. Sister Mary Peter.

society held at the time, and early in her convent life, Lauren came to know it to be false. One could say that, until she came face to face with the discrimination in the convent, her knowledge of injustice was an unthought known (Bollas, 1987), as she had already experienced it in school. It is something she had known, but never thought about.

The wealthy had a place in this convent. The inequality left Lauren in a dilemma and she found herself struggling with her feelings of love and admiration for the upper class Novice Mistress, who, she says, was “*a grandee but lovely; I loved her*”. Part of this woman’s duty was, “*to teach us custody of the eyes, how to sit up straight in the chair, how to speak properly and our manners very much and prayer*”. Lauren unconsciously mentions prayer last in her list. Prayer became an addendum to the observance of religious decorum, and emphasizes the importance of appearance over substance, and the attention to the detail of outward behaviour.

Lauren is intelligent and received an education gratis, from the nuns. She came from a poor background and, although she made a covenant with God, that He would bless her family in exchange for the sacrifice of her life, she nevertheless felt she abandoned them, by entering the convent and mixing with wealthy people. Now, as she takes part in this research, she becomes aware of, and reflects on her guilt.

In spite of the difference in social class, Lauren became a lifelong friend of the wealthy postulant, and she took the wealthy Sister as a model:

She was a woman of prayer; lovely watching her at the Stations²⁶. Now I did, now even though she was a bit grand and all that, I felt she was holy. She was somebody you’d like to be like, even though she might be a bit grand.

Lauren was seduced by the woman’s style and holiness. Lauren was still in her late teens and her adolescent “crush” on the older woman was quite powerful. She was trying to reconcile grandeur with holiness. It feels as if there was a contradiction between being a grandee and being holy. Being a grandee was unacceptable, but being holy and a woman of prayer was admirable, and worthy of emulation. Lauren saw through the outward behaviour, to the qualities of the woman she admired, and would like to inculcate in herself, but she had no opportunity to speak about her thoughts and feelings, relating to the inequalities she observed, and learned to repress.

²⁶ A devotional exercise; fourteen pictures or portrayals of Christ’s passion hang around chapel and church walls, are called stations and one moves from station to station contemplating and praying.

The nuns educated girls like Lauren, but they did not educate the lay Sisters. If the lack of education was the reason for making slaves of the lay Sisters, why did the convent not educate them, and give them equality, with the many thousands of poor girls, they educated free of charge, by offering scholarships. It can only be assumed, that it suited the system to maintain the inequality. Living in the convent meant coming to terms with the established and the unquestioned, and accepting the established, without question. In order to survive, one had to turn a blind eye to what was unacceptable (Steiner, 1993: 116).

In their response to the inequalities of convent life, both **Annie** and **Clare** accepted the status quo. **Lauren** saw and disapproved, but quickly silenced within herself the voice of disapproval. Speaking out was not an option for the Sisters, who always risked being sent away. The vow of obedience led everyone to believe that, somehow, all that was approved and commanded, by the superior, was indeed what God wanted. Everyone became caught in the myth of superiority and certainty of the convent system, because after all, the superior knew God's will.

The Vow of Obedience

Accepting a place in the new convent family meant assenting to all it demanded. The vow of obedience in religious life was the most powerful and all encompassing aspect of this life, because it held sway in all areas, as the manifestation of the Will of God.

The Rule states:

They [the Sisters] have for ever renounced their own will, and resigned it to the will of their Superiors. They are to obey the Mother Superior as holding her authority from God, rather through love than from servile fear. They shall love and respect her as their Mother.... They are to execute, without hesitation, all the directions of the Mother Superior.... They shall never murmur but with humility and spiritual joy carry the sweet yoke of Jesus Christ.

(1863: 17-18)

This is clear in its precepts, the individual Sister had to surrender her will, her ability to be an agent on her own behalf to that of the superior, and this she had to do joyfully, and without vacillation or complaint. She had to meld into the group of “subjects”, and no longer be a person who thought for herself. There was no opportunity for negotiation or reflection; what was expected was an automated, unquestioning response to be carried out “lovingly”.

A life in which one is totally subject to the will of another, is the ultimate in self abnegation and self denial. To submit totally to the will of another, to abandon one’s common sense, can only be accomplished by splitting one’s ego, and projecting one’s authority into the other (the superior), thus leaving the personality in a rather depleted state, and giving the other additional status (Steiner, 1993: 6).

As soon as she entered, the postulant learned that she was, no longer, in control of her destiny, but was subject to whoever held office as Mother Superior. **Annie** describes the time as, “*the regime of everything was God’s Will.*” All the decisions, from the truly important to the least significant, from the choice of career or ministry to the choice of reading material at meals (Rule and Constitution, 1863: 84), were made by the superior.

Career choice

The convent, at this time, had a rather perverse way of looking at talent; it was thought that developing individual talents would lead to hubris and the sin of pride, so one was not asked to do what one liked, or was good at. **Clare** explains:

I know in our early days there was this thing, that if you had any bit of talent at all it was kind of, you weren’t, you got nowhere with it. It would have been seen

as a kind of, you would have been better to have humility – no, the thing was that if you had talent there was a danger that you would get proud, so that talent then wouldn't have been used.

Margaret had a similar experience, “*I was supposed to be excellent at art. I never did a bit of it.*” **Birdie** says, “*Then you were never asked what you would like to do, nursing or teaching or anything else you were just sent to something.*” Birdie was sent to the University but could not continue when her health broke down, following the death of her younger sister. **Margaret** recalls being told, without any negotiation, “*You're going to the University to do your degree so that was it.*” Although Margaret spent many years teaching, she was later able to be true to herself, by choosing the work she wanted, with the homeless in England (after Vatican II).

Rose, who entered after Vatican II, was sent to work with blind children, which she really enjoyed, and she thought she would like to continue, “*This is good I like that and they said 'you won't be doing that.' So that was a good start!*” Depriving one of choice in one's career or lifework, sets up a struggle within the Sister, between a true, inner sense of value (what one might like to be, where one's talents lies) and a value that is not true to the self (Symington, 1994: 101).

Transfers

Although many convents were diocesan²⁷, independent units, some convents had many branch houses and Sisters were transferred when the necessity arose. The Sisters, however, had little say in these transfers. **Annie** remembers being summoned by the Superior to be told, “*I'm sending you to California.*” She was shocked, “*Well, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry or what to do.*” When Sisters in this convent were being transferred they used the term “*getting your obedience*”. She says, “*You always got your obedience with 'it is God's Will that you go to ...'.*” The will of God brooked no opposition. Moving the Sisters around frequently meant that they developed “*strong cathetic bonds of attachment to the group at large*” (Wittberg, 1991) but it also meant that they could not become too attached to a particular companion or place, or that they could not stay long enough to gather forces to question or rebel, as happened in **Birdie's** convent, where there was less movement.

²⁷ Under the jurisdiction of the local Bishop

Blind obedience

Blind obedience was the order of the day. Common sense was to be put aside and the Sister had to obey. **Barbara** describes the demands of obedience as “*pure obedience; blind obedience*” and most of the nuns remember the teachings of the famous sixteenth century Christian writer, Alonso Rodriquez, who promulgated this view and went as far as to say that the nuns should even “*plant cabbages upside down*” if told to do so by the superior. **Patsy** refers to it as “*the daftest book you could imagine*” but admits that “*there were many good sentences in it.*” **Annie** gives an example of the magical thinking advocated by Rodriquez:

You don't dot your “ i” or cross your “ t” after the first stroke of the bell and he told stories about somebody stitching something and she an obedient novice and when she came back wasn't her sewing finished for her miraculously. He had a lot of stories like that ... his writings were held in high esteem.

It is hard to believe that anyone could believe such a story. Yet the rule demanded many unbelievable things, such as seeing the call of the bell as God's call. The rule states, “*They shall obey the call of the bell as the voice of God*” (1863: 19). Everything was regimented and sanctified, to make it acceptable. Reinforcement of magical thinking, in the name of God, left little space for doubt or incredulity in young enthusiastic minds. The dearth of reality testing and the separation from peers and the outside world enabled belief in the incredible. And any inner conflict had to be split off, as the individual forced her mind to accord with the group mind (Hartke, 2009: 152).

Obedience of this kind can become so deeply ingrained in the psyche that it can override personal emotions such as guilt, sympathy, or a belief in moral conduct (Milgram, 1974). And those carrying out orders, do not see themselves in control; they are merely a tool or an extension of the authority and therefore not responsible for their actions (ibid.). In the convent nothing excused disobedience. Disobedience was the sin. This view is borne out when, in the *Ryan Report* (2009) on child abuse, the Provincial of one congregation cited the vow of obedience in defence of some Sisters who had used corporal punishment and employed an extremely harsh, physical regime on the children in their care²⁸.

²⁸ Report on Newtownforbes, *Ryan Report* Chapter 10

Conformity

Group conformity is a concomitant of obedience and group identity. Obedience is acting alone, under another's authority, while conformity is acting in concert with others, acting as part of the group, doing what others are doing (Milgram, 1974). Conformity exerts a pressure by peers, who have no right to impose authority, or direct behaviour. The group models the behaviour for the individual, who is to conform, and it can be unspoken or implied. There need not be overt demands placed on an individual, in order to gain conformity (Gardner, 2007). People will deny conformity because it seems to be felt as vulnerability. Stapley argues, that conformity to the requirements of the group, acts as a defence against anxiety (1996: 119). Freud sees conformity, as suggestion and contagion of feelings and ideas in an identical direction, gaining strength by reciprocity, until the individual *"is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will"* (1921: 8). This means that the group identity, takes over from self identity and the ego is split, in the service of the collective ego.

Conformity in the group unconsciously reinforces beliefs and puts pressure on the individual to be the same as everyone else. Peer pressure ensures conformity. Being in good standing in the group defends against anxiety. In the convent, conformity was reinforced by the common life, the wearing of the habit and other aspects of the life.

The system of blind obedience was based on belief/faith and not on fact. Looking back, the nuns can hardly conceive that they once held the belief that the superior's will was the manifestation of God's will. Other examples of magical thinking, that were part of the system, are reminiscent of childhood beliefs in Father Christmas and fairies. It is only when one learns that it is possible not to believe, that one realizes that one had a belief, and *"did not know a fact. It is the shift from thinking one knows a fact to realizing that one has a belief which is linked to self-awareness"* (Britton, 1998: 14). This study offers the nuns the possibility of third position thinking; they can look back and see their relationship to their beliefs. The dangerous outcome of blind obedience and conformity is that the individual does not feel responsible for her actions; she is simply carrying out orders or accepting things as the way they are.

The Vow of Poverty

When the young woman had quit the world, she had, in taking the vow of poverty “*renounced all property in earthly things*” (Rule and Constitutions, 1863: 15). The model was the simplicity of the life of Christ and his death “*naked on the Cross*”. The rationale was to liberate the individual from the worries and anxieties of this life. The cultivation of the virtue of poverty was linked with having no possessions. Dispossession of property was part of the vow. The simple vow of poverty taken by active religious, did not forbid them to own property but forbade the use of any profit (usufruct) deriving from it. The rule states that all gifts and earnings “*must be considered as received not for the private use of the individual, but for that of the community*” (1863: 16). And, Canon Law states that whatever “*the religious acquires by [her] industry, or by reason of [her] status as religious, is acquired for the institute*” (Canon, 580: 1983). Renouncing the right to possessions and ownership was reinforced by the use of language. The nun substituted the possessive adjective “my” with “our”. “My habit” became “our habit”. The “I” was submerged in the “we”, representing the submerging of the individual identity, in the group identity.

Birdie came from a business family and she believes that the convent exploited her parents because they were wealthy. She was in hospital, for sixteen weeks, as a Novice, and her parents were told they would have to settle the account, because she says “*the Community wouldn’t be able to do it – they’d have to get rid of me ... and my parents paid for me.*” That is not all, “*apart from the dowry – for your training in the Novitiate there was a fee every three months.*” So, in addition to paying a dowry, her parents paid a fee every three months. Birdie doubts if others had to pay, “*It was just because they felt that mine had it. They drained everything they could out of them. So much so there was very little left for the others [her siblings]. Yea, that’s a fact.*” She is still angry about this and tries to forget it, “*you know it annoys me when it comes up.*”

Margaret tells how, as a Novice, she got lots of money on her visits home. It was not unusual, at the time, for nuns and priests to receive money from relatives and friends, but they could not keep the money. Margaret thinks it was because people had, “*the height of respect for you now, absolutely.*” She continues:

We used come home for one day at Christmas, this was first profession and we'd come back with a load of money. Uncles, aunts, cousins everyone, going from house to house, and I remember Mother Dominic saying, “do you know now

you're like the Wren boys²⁹.” And you know you gave every penny of it up. You'd never see a penny of it, not a penny, even for years later. But they did. You're kind of a special person

Lauren also gives some insight into her situation, in the past. She was teaching and earning a Department of Education salary at the time, and yet, she was expected to get money from home:

Sister Joseph, she belonged to a very well off family now from Dublin and my poor brother Seamus who is now dead. He had ulcers in his tummy and he had a big operation and I wanted to go home to see him. But that time the sisters used to get the money from home. I'm talking, I'm gone farther back than you are now, than you can think. You know Sisters, a bit of snobbery. Well maybe I'm wrong in saying that but maybe now. Well, we'll leave it that way. If they broke their watch well somebody at home mended it for them. Oh yes, and anyhow here am I and ordinarily I would write home and ask them to send me the money and I wouldn't. I couldn't. I was teaching and I was better off than my family and poor mother. Joseph I put this to her and I told her, "I'd love to go home but I'm not going home because I cannot get the money from home" and she said this. "I understand fully" and I told you she was from Dublin from a well off family. "You will go home and you won't be sending home for money". That stands out for me. What is it – a friend in need? Yes.

Lauren had to be vulnerable, in this situation, and yet take a stand. The fact that she now relates it, probably, means that it was unusual for her. **Clare** laughingly recalls how, on her very first day in the convent, she was sent to work, in the school, and she “*got no pay either*”. Her laugh is her way of avoiding her feeling of annoyance at being obliged to work on her first day.

Barbara remembers her time, at University, when she had no money:

No money at all. You had a certain amount of money for bus fares but you had to write down every single day and we were so innocent we never wrote down five shillings and got sweets. It would never have entered our heads to buy an apple or to buy a banana or anything. Would you believe that?

She had already internalised the notion of obedience, poverty and deprivation and she was unable to imagine not conforming. She continues, berating herself for her naivety:

I don't know. It just never dawned on me to spend it where I shouldn't spend it. It never dawned on me; I think I was very naïve. I really think I was; I was stupid. But anyway I didn't. I was very honest.

²⁹ In the olden days a wren was killed and placed on the top of a pole and the "wren boys" would carry it around to houses and beg for money to bury the bird, as it was considered to be evil.

The idea of not having any right to make decisions about money had already been inculcated in Barbara. She is angry, and critical of the system, but she turns her anger in on herself, because she has internalised a way of thinking, in which the institution is always right (Wittberg, 1991; Schwartz, 1990). Even in the present, when there is no longer any need to defend the institution; she attacks her own intelligence, and blames herself, instead of the unreasonableness of the convent regulation.

The nuns had to hand up any gifts they received. **Birdie** is still angry about that, as she is about the favouritism that was shown to some:

Just to tell you any gifts we had had to be handed up – money, I remember getting toothpaste and soap and all these and sewing material, needles and thread and all these things ,all taken up from me but the hard part was they were often given to someone else that was in favour. That's that now.

Barbara tells how ridiculously she acted, in the past. She had a cousin, Kitty, in the boarding school:

I remember Kitty gave me a banana one day. This will tell you how stupid I was I handed up the banana to Mother Augustine and she took it. Sure, she probably ate it herself but I didn't think of that. It's only since, what is it? She took the banana instead of saying, "Barbara, enjoy it". A banana, that's stupid or idiotic or naïve, call it anything you like. (pause) That happened, a banana. I mean that's a hard one to credit

Looking back, the story seems incredible, but once again, Barbara blames herself instead of the institution that encouraged such extreme behaviour. The institution controlled the individual by making her dependent and taking away her sense of agency, even in the least significant aspects of life.

The common life

The vow of poverty extended to what is known as the regular or common life. In the average convent, everyday life in the community was usually organised around a teaching or school day. A horarium or timetable was posted, where all the activities of the day were listed; a time for rising, praying, eating, working, recreating and sleeping. Every minute was accounted for and any deviation had to be punished. Coser believes that constant activity is a way of preventing thinking. He says, "*To be always at the highest pitch of involvement, commanding the entire span of attention, prevents the mind from running in other than habitual grooves*" (1974: 134).

In the convent, there was a rule for everything and choice was inconceivable. Most of the research participants speak of the importance of the work ethic. **Annie** gives us a glimpse of the morning routine in her convent:

The call was at twenty to six and you had to be down for Morning Prayer at five to six and you had, if you were late you did a penance. You had to go out and kiss the floor and say you were sorry for being late and you had to do that before everyone else. But then we had meditation first. Then we had Office after that and when that was over we all, of course, filed out and we had to. At that time our rooms were called cells and we had to do our cell. There were rules for the way you did everything. Then you prepared your bed and all that and you had to be back for Mass at seven fifteen or thirty. Then after Mass we went into breakfast and then we made another visit (to the chapel) and we came back to manual work and you had to be sure to be on time for manual work. And we all had different jobs around the house, you know.

Part of the common life, was to keep busy, which often degenerated into mindless activity, as a defence against reflection. This emphasis found its roots in the rule and in the aphorism, “*the devil finds work for idle hands*”. The rule urged the Sisters never to indulge in idleness because, “*Idleness, according to the Holy Ghost, teaches ‘much evil’ and as we must render an exact account in judgment of every moment of our precious time*” (1863: 37). Many of the respondents mention this. Having to account for every moment of life on the last day, the Day of Judgment put enormous pressure on the individual Sister, who no longer felt that she had ownership on time. She would have to answer to God for her every action.

Barbara, speaking of life in the convent, says, “*it was regulated from morning till night; every minute was regulated.*” **Birdie** comments, “*the great emphasis was to keep you working. We washed floors, but we were all the time polishing and dusting (pause) sure we killed ourselves waxing and polishing*”. Eventually life became predictable and boring. Birdie felt the monotony:

first recreation we sat down and we sewed or did knitting. Second recreation was much the same – monotonous was the word I was trying to think of there. I don’t know how we got through it. I still think of Sunday evenings and I have a dread of them but it was the same every evening. On a Sunday afternoon, 1.30 to 4.00 we sat in the community room at study, correcting copies – oh it was terrible, awful now.

The work ethic and the unrelenting busyness, burdened the soul. **Patsy**, on the other hand, laughs as she recalls recreation:

And you could laugh, anyway, I mean nobody prevented you from laughing. If you had two good humoured people, one each side of you, you would laugh at something (laughing). And then you sat in the summer house and if you had

stockings to darn you had them out of your big sleeve and you darned away while the conversation was on, you weren't meant to be idling

Clare recalls that, in addition to doing their work, during the day, the Sisters, in her convent, had to be on call at night, “*Now in those days we were doing night duty in the convent as well. We had older sisters and you had to get up to get them out to the loo at night and we did that for thirteen consecutive years.*” **Patsy**, thinking back on her time as a teacher in school, and as bursar in the convent, has this to say:

My mind was divided there and I feel that I should have been more sensible and told the “Government” body at the time that I'm like, that eh no one can do two things or more than two but that was my fault (laugh) I'd say the pupils ... I didn't do them full justice, but they got on well and they did well in life. But, of course, they would have done better if I had done better.

Similar to Barbara, Patsy blames herself for not telling the superior that she was overburdened and she now has regrets. She thinks she neglected her pupils, something she acknowledges but immediately dismisses. She cannot bear to stay with the thought of neglect and she recants, as soon as she hears herself uttering the words.

Lauren also has regrets about work. She is distressed when she remembers:

I got a brain haemorrhage I did. It was the hard work. I gave my blood and I mean that. I talk about it and it's a mistake (almost crying). Work was emphasised in my day. Thank God it's de-emphasised, well, not as emphasised today, which is a good thing. But I got a brain haemorrhage.

This caused Lauren to lose her sight, which she later partially recovered. Now, she gives voice, in the safety of the interview, to her distress and rage about the overwhelming burden of work, and its effect on her life. She suffered many illnesses, and much distress at the positions she was asked to undertake, in her career as a teacher. She never refused to do what she was told and, looking back, she regrets the emphasis on work. Constant busyness left little time for reflection and deprived the Sisters of a critical function necessary for maturation.

Food and accommodation

Part of the vow of poverty for the Sisters was to be “*content with the food and raiment allowed them*” (Rule and Constitutions, 1863: 16). Three of the research participants mention food. In the early days, **Birdie** did not get enough to eat, while **Annie** got “*healthy food*”. **Patsy** is unsure. Early in the interviews, she takes a defensive stance and has a concrete approach to whatever is mentioned. She constantly repeats that she did not hear anyone complain, implying that if she did not hear complaints, there were

none. At first, she takes this line with food, *“the food was (pause) good. I never heard anyone complaining about it.”* Later, when she is less defensive, she admits that, *“they were hard times and food was bad, well not bad, we got plenty of eggs and butter and bread you know nourishing plain food.”* The only negative comment that Patsy makes, is about the lack of spirituality in the convent. Interestingly, she conflates food and spirituality and one feels that she really never had enough of either. At one point, she says *“The feasts of the Church were kept well.”* And one expects to hear about spiritual celebrations but instead she continues, *“We had the usual breakfast and then dinner or what was normally called lunch now we had very nice trifle. They used to make a very good trifle. It was a work of art.”* It has to be remembered, that at the time, complaining about things would, probably, have been a punishable offence. Sometimes, what was provided for the Sisters can only be classed as deprivation.

Deprivation

Goffman believes that the loss of comfort, is likely to reflect a loss of self determination (1961: 47) and the Sisters talk of much deprivation in their lives. **Barbara’s** acceptance of deprivation was related to her ambition to become a saint, to do better than her parents. Her parents provided her with comfort and heat, while the convent offered cold and deprivation. She found that, in the convent, similar to her experience in boarding school, she was faced with damp and cold:

Again I hated the damp rooms because they were damp when we came. We didn’t get in the storage heaters until Canon P. was made parish priest and Sister Gerard told him that there was no heat (pause) no heat good bad or indifferent; no hot water; there was one tap down at the toilet, down on the landing and we used to bring our jugs to get hot water. And by the time you got as far as it, it was cold, because it couldn’t do the whole crowd of us that were there.

Barbara compares this to her home where there was a fireplace in every bedroom and *“[her] mother would have fires lit every single night in the winter time.”* In the convent, Barbara found herself sleeping, with three others, in the *“outer room of the laundry, underground. I’m not exaggerating, the ivy was coming down the walls and the blue mould or whatever kind of mould and the plaster all falling off.”* Too many Sisters had been taken into this convent and there was a lack of decent accommodation. Collective sleeping arrangements ensure that the person is never alone (Goffman, 1961: 31). Barbara cannot understand why she tolerated the deprivation *“Well I have asked that question a thousand times ... and people would say to me that if you opened your mouth*

you got the door. (pause) But I stayed myself in spite of all of that, you know.” Besides the offering of heat and comfort, Barbara’s mother invited her daughter to return home, if she was not happy in the convent. But Barbara stayed; she was somehow drawn to deprivation.

Birdie also felt the hardship of deprivation:

The light was put out at ten at night (pause) and we only had cold water and I used to be awake half the night with the cold and then we used to be hungry as well. You got some kind of a light supper at night but it wasn’t any good.

And **Mary** remembers that, until the 1970s, “*You know we were going around with basins and ewers and the older Sisters were going around at night trying to bring water up to their rooms.*” When **Clare** reflects on the elderly Sisters, who took to their beds at four o’clock in the evening, she concludes:

Now again looking back, I think that a lot of these old creatures went to bed because they were perished with the cold. I mean the house was cold. We didn’t have radiators. There was one pipe running through the rooms; they weren’t radiators as such.

One feels some sympathy for the deprivation endured by the older nuns, over which they had little or no control. Most of the nuns accepted the deprivation of the convent about which their relatives, or the outside world, knew nothing. Visitors to the convent were “wined and dined” in the lavishly furnished parlours and they thought the nuns had the same. The renunciation demanded by the life was underpinned by the Gospel promise:

Amen, I say to you, there is no one who hath left house, or brethren, or lands for my sake, who shall not receive an hundred times as much, now in this time, and in the world to come, life everlasting.

(Mark, 10: 29-30)

Given a culture that emphasised the reward of heaven for deprivation and poverty, it is not surprising that the religious were willing to embrace sacrifice for that reward.

A life of sacrifice

In community, individual identity was sacrificed to the group. Demanding sacrifice increases commitment to the group and the greater the sacrifice the “*more sacred and valuable the goal may become*” (Wittberg, 1991: 20). The life of sacrifice included the renunciation of privacy, the chapter of faults, the use of the discipline, the imposition of silence and punishment for transgressions.

The renunciation of the right to privacy

Coser (1974) believes that “greedy” organisations cannot allow privacy because it allows a withdrawal, be it only partial, from the group’s control, so a distinction between the private and the public sphere cannot be tolerated. He thinks that the public exposure of the self symbolises, in effect, a more complete submission of the person to the community. The shield of privacy must be withdrawn, if the member is to be fully immersed in and controlled by the group (ibid.).

The reading of private letters and sleeping in dormitories have already been discussed as infringements on privacy. Other invasions of this right were the obligation to reveal one’s thoughts and the public confession of one’s faults, at the chapter of faults. **Lauren** recalls a time the Sisters were obliged to make their thoughts known to the superior, if she demanded it (an interesting parallel with psychoanalysis). She tells the story of a novice who stood up to the superior, “*And there was a Mother Calasactius and there was a novice bringing up a candle and Mother Calasactius was going up the stairs; the novice had a candle going before her.*” This novice was the candle bearer for the superior, as they went up the stairs. Lauren continues, “*your superiors, only your superiors, not the sisters, superiors could say to you or to me ‘now Sister, what are you thinking about?’ and you were supposed to tell exactly what you were thinking about.*” Mother Calasactius asked the novice, “*what are you thinking about now?*” *The Novice said “well, I was just thinking if both of us were out in the world now, you would be carrying the candle for me.”* The Novice took the opportunity to put the superior in her place for her intrusiveness. She was commenting on the upside down world of the convent.

The chapter of faults

Goffman sees the exposure of the self, through forced confession of faults, as a violation of the boundary between the individual and the environment (1961: 31). In the convent, self criticism, in the form of accusing oneself voluntarily of one’s peccadilloes, at the

chapter of faults, was an invasion of privacy and a means of control. Every night at night prayer, when the superior tapped her pew, each Sister, in order of seniority, stepped into the aisle, confessed her faults aloud, and then kissed the floor³⁰. Once a month, in a similar practice, the nuns publicly confessed all their faults in that month.

Lauren first experienced this practice in the Novitiate when a Sister:

...went out to the middle in front of the Mistress of Novices and kissed the floor, "I'm very sorry for breaking an egg cup yesterday." An egg cup (pause) Well I went back again [in her mind], to my place at home. What if they heard this, they'd be telling it in the pub.

Lauren would have felt ashamed, if her family had known about this practice, but now the time has come, when she can speak about it. **Annie** already mentioned kissing the floor for being late. The point of the exercise seems to have been to humiliate the individual and to develop a sense of guilt and worthlessness, even about trivial matters. **Annie** also comments on the mindlessness and the emphasis on minutiae when she refers to changing one's shoes, *"and then we changed our shoes again. That was a very important thing. Oh, if you wore your house shoes out or if you wore your outdoor shoes in the convent it was a big thing"* The convent, by stressing the trivial, turned ordinary living on its head.

Birdie recalls:

Then small breaches of discipline like breaking silence especially the great silence³¹ at night was greatly exaggerated you'd nearly think it was a mortal sin. You weren't allowed to talk to people. You went to bed at a certain hour and you went in silence. You got up in silence. No ordinary family would behave that way.

No tiny element of behaviour was beyond consideration and attention because *"by the virtue of Obedience... actions most trivial in themselves become in a certain manner divine, and of great worth and merit for all eternity"* (Rule and Constitutions, 1863: 63). This is an exaggeration that is hard to fathom, but it encouraged attention to detail for the reward of heaven. No part of life was private. The stress on minutiae distracted the mind from the consideration of more important issues and concerns. The observance of details of outward behaviour, in order to avoid exposure and humiliation, acted as a form of control on the individual. It also eroded the sense of self, as a separate person, with a mind of one's own. The boundaries around the self became diffuse and one melded into the group.

³⁰ Personal experience

³¹ There was an enforced silence from 10 pm until about 5.30 am

The discipline

The Sisters used the discipline as a form of mortification of the body. It might also be seen as a form of masochism. **Lauren** describes it:

A bit of twine, twine we call it, three bits out of it and a top and you see I never used it (laughing, as if it was too silly to do). I never used it. You were supposed to slap yourself there and there (indicating her shoulders). You were supposed to do it every now and again. I don't know that many of them did it, to be honest. When I was a novice we had it (pause). But the idea behind it was to mortify yourself. It was very important when we were novices to mortify ourselves (laughing). And that was one of them. I'm not saying for one single moment my Mistress of Novices believed in it but she had to do it. But it died away. It died away possibly within five or six years after our entry.

This form of self flagellation was practised in Lauren's convent, until the 1940s and she shows her embarrassment, by laughing.

Silence

In line with the monastic tradition, the nuns were always in silence, apart from recreation, as **Annie** remembers “*Oh I should have told you there was silence at every other time.*” This means that there was no opportunity to communicate with one another, except in the group, at recreation. Looking back, **Birdie** realises how abnormal this was, “*Now another thing when we look back on it was the silence, silence all day and you'd meet a companion and you just looked at them which was very queer, very queer.*” **Barbara** thinks the continuous silence left no room for compassion:

there was no opportunity for showing compassion because you couldn't speak except for the half hour of recreation; you were meant to be silent all the time except for that half hour; you didn't speak to the people you met in the garden; you didn't speak to the children.

As well as being a means of control, silence demanded self discipline, and those who had been in boarding school had become accustomed to it. **Clare**, who had not been at boarding school, found it extraordinary:

Again I think I would have been totally spontaneous (pause) if a thought came into my head I verbalised it and I suppose coming from the background coming from the family I came from where there were ten of us, there was the rough and tumble, you said things, you did things, you let go of things but it took me a long time, a very long time to learn that in religious life you couldn't do that.

But breaking the silence was punishable, “*Oh, infringing on the silence that was such an awful and sure I couldn't keep my mouth shut. I was always talking. I couldn't see any sense to it at all so that would have been something I got a lot of flack over.*”

Lauren criticises the enforced silence because it prevented the Sisters, who were looking after the children in residential care and the women in the Magdalen laundries, from speaking about this difficult work, “*They couldn’t do that; no they couldn’t do that (pause) no, no the silence was very holy*” She says this slowly, as if she regrets what has happened in these institutions.

Punishment

Infringement of the rules, incurred punishment and the Sisters had no redress if they were treated harshly by the superior. The only option was to leave the convent and this was not a step that could be taken lightly. Barbara and Birdie give examples of the kinds of punishments that were meted out. **Barbara** suffered at the hands of her superior and, although this was well known by others, no one dared speak up. She recalls:

I fell asleep one morning in the chapel at meditation imagine and she put me out in the garden for meditation every morning for weeks after that and it was winter and it was dark and I was scared out of my wits, out in the garden at that hour of the morning. She said that, since I couldn’t stay awake at my prayers I could go to the garden every morning for meditation and Camillus, that would be half five in the morning. I was terrified.

Barbara tells of many such incidents. When she was teaching in the school, she slept in the boarding school, sharing a bedroom (cell) with her companion:

so we were upstairs in that cell and I can tell you honestly, Camillus (pause) we were very naïve and I can tell you honestly when we went inside that door we never broke silence, you can believe that or not but that is as true as you’re sitting there.

Then:

One morning I was in class and Benedict sent for me. She said, “you are to bring your mattress and your bedclothes down to the convent” and Joseph was sent up instead of me (long pause) I don’t know what that was about and I was ashamed of my life coming down in the middle of class with my mattress and my blankets.

This pre-emptive punishment sounds both humiliating and unjust. According to Barbara, Benedict was aware of how she treated her:

I remember one evening at supper we had recreation for I don’t know what and it was the big long tables and I actually happened to be opposite her. I don’t know what she was talking about but she was saying about how nervous she was about dying and all that kind of thing and I said, “Sure Mother what would you be afraid of dying for? For God’s sake you gave your whole life in religion what would you be afraid of?” And she turned to me and she said, “It’s all right for you to talk but you never deliberately set out to hurt somebody”.

In this, Benedict admitted to and owned her sadism. One wonders why Barbara became the object of Benedict's sadism. Barbara says, that Benedict told Mother Teresa, who was superior when Benedict was an old woman, that she regretted her treatment of Barbara. Barbara tells the story of Benedict's death. She had no cell, at the time, and was sleeping in the infirmary:

Yes, (very quiet and eerie with short silences during this part of the interview) and the irony of it all was, I was sleeping in the infirmary³² and there was a knock at my door at three o'clock or two o'clock in the morning, "come out, Benedict is dying, see." So I came out and we said the prayers and she died and wasn't she put into my bed and I had no bed to get into. Well they screeched, they said, "Barbara she had you in life and she got you in death." She had an incredible set on me.

Birdie relates how she accidentally brushed against her companion (who evidently reported it) and as punishment, the Reverend Mother told the Novice Mistress to put Birdie "*sitting at the vegetable table in the refectory*" for all her meals, for a week. Birdie continues:

That's the truth and Reverend Mother passed me one day, oh, it was awful, and she said, "Who put you there dear?" And she had done it herself. That was that now. Just to tell you the unfair, there was lots of unfairness.

Lauren, Barbara and Birdie are the people who recall much of the negative in religious life, at that time. There is a deep dissatisfaction and sadness that has not, until now, found a voice.

³²In this convent nuns were laid out ("waked") in the infirmary when they died

The Vow of Chastity

Although the Sisters were exhorted by the rule to “*mutually love one another*” they were forbidden to form dyadic relationships, either inside or outside the convent. The vow of chastity considered as “*the most angelic virtue*” was to be preserved by observing “*the strictest guard over their senses.*” The threat to chastity was levelled at the devil, named as the “*enemy*” who was “*constantly on the watch*” with the ability to “*penetrate*” through the senses to the soul and “*tarnish, in the least, the purity of their hearts*” (Rule and Constitution, 1863: 17). To emphasize his power the devil was anthropomorphized, as a sexual predator. The rule took a negative stance in relation to friendship:

The Sisters of this Congregation shall not admit particular friendships, attachment, or affections among them; and shall scrupulously avoid private parties and unions as the source of discord and of division, and as hostile to purity of heart, to charity, and to the spirit of religion.

(1863: 41)

The overt reason for the prohibition on dyadic relationships was to avoid sexual encounters between individuals. The less obvious reason, was to avoid energy being diverted from the group because, “*An intimate dyadic relationship always threatens to short circuit the libidinal network of the community and drain off its source of sustenance*” (Slater, 1963: 348). Affective relationships are considered to be a threat to organisational discipline, and if they become too strong, they may bring about the disintegration of the group (Freud, 1921). And Coser holds that members involved in such relationships “*are likely to be less controllable, less devoted to the exclusive service of the organisation, hence, less reliable*” (1974: 106).

So, consistent with the principles of chastity and group coherence, any emotional involvement with another person, inside or outside the convent, had to be avoided. The Sisters in the study, in spite of the prohibition on friendship, have been able, to some degree, to have had adequate companionship throughout this period, and some tell specific stories of more intimate relationships. The opportunity for forming relationships, outside the convent, was almost negligible. Many of the respondents also loved their pupils and got satisfaction from their work.

Patsy is not very forthcoming about her relationships. She is cryptic, so that it is unclear if she ever had a relationship. She says that, if she ever became involved, she became “*very involved*” and adds, “*And that didn’t happen very often – and eh – if I did I would*

say it was – my thoughts on it were protective” of the other. She enjoys being mysterious. However, others speak at length, about relationships that have caused them pain, because they have been frustrated, through separation or through vindictiveness.

Thwarted relationships

Birdie admits, “*The hardest thing in my religious life was loneliness. Now it wasn’t loneliness for my parents or my home. It was loneliness for a man.*” She adds, “*And then to make it harder you weren’t allowed friendships at all. You know they were totally condemned – cracked.*” She recounts a budding relationship with a young priest:

I was sick in the infirmary and he’d steal up to me. Jesus Mary and Joseph when they’d be at their breakfast he’d steal up to me. You know he was affectionate with me – just a kiss or a hug and that was it. I wasn’t the type to have scruples³³ about things.

But the relationship came to nothing because the priest was transferred:

Then he left – and I had to go through all that suffering on my own and no one knowing about it and I was so lonely and I swore to God that never again would I get involved with anybody – and that was I suppose the hardest separation for me.

Birdie sees living without friendship as a conquest:

For me it would have been a conquest that I was able to go through life and not feel that awful need of friendship and someone, I suppose someone to love deeply – you fought the battle of being able to do without that friendship so you just fought the battle and you were delighted when you fought it and were able to carry on without it.

The metaphor of life as a battle or war will be discussed in chapter six. In her early days in the convent, **Lauren** was very fond of her friend, Caitriona, and she was prepared to break the great silence, to be with her:

You weren’t supposed to go in at night to talk to anyone or anything like that. But now, I remember Sr. Caitriona, she was my co [companion] and I thought they were going to send her home. She had to go and I remember my heart was broken and I said, “Tell them I’ll go home instead of you.” Only telling you the way we could feel for one another. And you’d break the rule to do that. Yes, break the rule to do that. And we weren’t breaking rules, they were to us, it wasn’t breaking anything.

The superior told Lauren, that she and Caitriona could get too fond of each other. Lauren didn’t really understand and she says, “*And I was so horrified, and that did happen but then I went with it. They were rules, yes, they were rules. They were silly,*

³³ Some Sisters suffered from what was called scruples – an exaggerated form of guilt about the inability to do things perfectly. It may also have been a euphemism, in the convent, for mental illness.

really. Some of them were silly really. I was going to go home over this.” She reflects on this, now:

Oh you know when you think of it, later on in life, for me it was wrong I thought because friendship was a wonderful thing. But em I suppose today, do you see the idea (pause) we were thrown together as a crowd of women, we had given up so much more things, you know, and they were watching. Well, not watching, these were part of the rules to help you to protect you to keep you, not to get too near anyone and then that in a way that I wouldn't say anybody that I knew, there was (pause) I had no doubts about them ever.

She goes on to say, “*Oh yes, she [the Novice Mistress] told me, the creature, that I was too fond of Sister. And when I said it to Sister Caitriona, that, she was the one she said, ‘we’ll begin now’. It was a cod. It was fun*”. She cannot remember the word “lesbian” but recalls a phrase from Horace, “*Vivamaus mea lesbia atque amemus, about a lady who was of that sort*”. Lauren’s sentences are fragmented, as she tells the story of her fondness for Caitriona and of how she was sent home (possibly because of the relationship). She and her companion defended against the prohibition on their friendship, by laughing and making fun of it, “*You see humour was a marvellous thing. It was now, humour now helped us. Because when we’d come together, we’d laugh at it.*” Throughout her life, Lauren has had many friends but she seems to retain a particular sadness about the loss of her friendship with Caitriona.

Barbara, also, tells her story of thwarted friendship. She had two good friends, one a companion and the other a priest from the nearby monastery, “*I was great friends, as I thought, with Maria and I became good friends with Fr Bill*”. Barbara met the priest when, as a student, she was appointed to look after guests in the parlour:

I was very friendly with him. You see, how I got friendly with him was during holiday time when I came home from College they put me on the parlours to serve the breakfasts and the teas and the dinners and he was just about a year or two ordained; he was very young; he is three years older than I am, maybe three and a half and I remember serving him his breakfast and all that kind of thing; I didn't have much time; you'd have a few words with him, standing, before you'd run off or whatever.

She became very fond of him and Maria knew of her feelings. Barbara did not have much opportunity for meeting Bill and she never went to see him without Maria. She and Maria went for walks, “*and I'd often bring her in to see him, or for a chat or whatever*”. His life was freer than hers and he was able to phone her and to give her “*chocolates*” and, “*money to go to the pictures in Dublin or something and I'd always share it with her [Maria], you know.*”

The incident, that caused her such distress, took place when she had already been finally professed and a fully trained teacher for five years. One day, Maria came to her and said, "*Fr Bill was up to see me and he said to tell you the engagement is off.*" She recalls her reaction, "*I was speechless, I said, 'what?' 'He said to tell you the engagement was off.'*" Barbara did not understand what this meant, as there was no "*engagement*" in the usual sense of that word. Barbara knew that friendship with a priest was, "*condemned out of efface*" and she says, "*sure we scarcely ever saw one another. This was back in the days when you might see him in the distance when you were out on a walk.*" Later, Barbara discovered Maria had sent for Bill, on that day, and that, "*she made him promise that he would never reveal to me what she had said to him*". Maria worked as receptionist in the convent, and had access to the phone and Barbara says, "*we'd come in to night prayer at night and she'd say to me, 'Fr Bill was on the phone and he said to tell you he was asking for you (pause) letting me know he was talking to her, (crying) I couldn't figure it out.*" Barbara continues the story, still sobbing, "*So anyway to make a long story short he did try and make it up with me and I used to talk to him but that was it. I had lost trust completely*".

Although Bill later criticised Maria, Barbara says, "*but that didn't wash with me at all because he should have stood on his own two feet and so I struggled with that*". Years later, when Barbara was in America visiting her sister, Bill was in California and he invited her and she spent, "*one night or two nights in his place but he still wouldn't tell me what Maria had said.*" She says, she had lost trust completely and is still struggling with it. There is a long pause as she cries and then she continues, "*I couldn't tell you what it did to me (whisper) I trusted nobody.*" In spite of this, she continued her friendship with Maria, "*And when I was in America then I used to buy nice skirts for her and I used to give her nice gifts. I thought that was somehow or other forgiving her, (very distressed) I don't know what I thought it was.*"

Barbara has since made several attempts to speak to Maria about the incident, but, at first, Maria denied all knowledge, but recently, when confronted with some of the facts, she responded with, "*Well, anyway 'there was no malice in it'*" and Barbara says "*she kind of apologised to me there and then*". Barbara goes on, "*But I couldn't tell you what it did to me (distressed again). I thought she was my friend and he was my friend. I couldn't tell you, the shutters, I just shut down.*"

That Barbara can be so distressed, more than forty years later, is indicative of the profound effect this incident had on her. Fr. Bill was probably Barbara's first love and,

although the relationship was, of necessity, restricted by convent rules, it was Maria's intervention that spoiled it. She was obviously motivated by jealousy and she destroyed what she desired but could not have. It is possible that she was demonstrating her inability to tolerate demonstrations or even intimations of affection, as this was a culture in which feelings had to be obliterated. One could, also, imagine that Maria unconsciously acted on behalf of the group, to put an end to a relationship that would ultimately have affected the group. This behaviour would have given Maria a sense of preserving the group integrity, without her full awareness. Such was the pressure of group conformity.

Sisters, at this time, had little opportunity of meeting people in the outside world. They met the local priests and, as Birdie has related, any conversations with them had to be repeated, verbatim, to the superior. The enforced silence, the constant busyness and the unrelenting surveillance, militated against the formation of exclusive friendships among the Sisters, and with outsiders.

The fear of the maternal

Molly had told me that Mother Superior helped my father get over his drinking bouts. She brought down flasks of beef tea when he was in bed, and gave him little books to read prayers from.

(O'Brien, 1960: 123)

Lauren tells two anecdotes, from her early life in the convent, which seem to indicate that motherhood was deemed to be a greater temptation to the nuns' virtue, than taking care of men. The excerpt from O'Brien's novel supports the view that nuns were willing to visit older men, even if they were in bed. While Lauren was still a postulant, she was disturbed by an incident that occurred, when she was on visitation. At the time, it was customary for the nuns to visit people in their homes. On this occasion, Lauren was accompanying Sr. Evangelista, who was from a "well off" family. Lauren was being initiated into this charitable work. As they went on their way:

A wee little girl ran across to her, passing me by and ran across to her and said, "Mammy wants you." And she said, "what does Mammy want me for?" and the child said, "she has a baby" and now I'm back now in the 40s and she said, "we don't go on those occasions to the house".

Lauren was shocked and she "nearly turned back and went home." This was one of the many times that Lauren thought of leaving the convent. When reflecting on it, she says:

Where would I go? I was in Kildare, new to me. I had left home. Was it? I think I am being too hard on myself. And yet do I not go that far and put out a foot. I belong to the times and I have not the (pause) I had the conviction but I hadn't,

what could you say? The courage to come back, to knock at the door, to know where I was even and say I have to go. I haven't come to grips with it.

She knows how hard it would have been, to leave the convent. Yet, the story of the baby has always been difficult for her to reconcile with her values and principles. She cannot understand how this “*beautiful*” nun who “*loved the poor [and] whatever money she got she gave to them*” would do such a thing. She says “*this was the rule.*” Somehow, Lauren gets worried, when she hears herself tell this story and she says, “*Maybe I shouldn't be saying this*” and “*You can cancel it; the things that are coming back to me*”. Once again, she finds herself in a situation where she has to deny her past. She is shocked by her unconscious. The fear of speaking, without censorship, is so strong that she wants to withdraw what she has said. The reason she was so upset is that her “*mother was a handywoman. She'd be called out at any time to bring little babies into the world*” and Lauren would stay up, to find out if the baby delivered was a boy or girl. Lauren faces a juxtaposition of her family and her convent. Previously she had to deal with her identification with the lay Sisters and now she identifies with her mother. She does not blame Sr. Evangelista for rejecting the mother and her baby, because:

That was a rule at the time that we, nuns didn't go to a mother who had a baby. Maybe the baby was born there, may be. I got the idea that the little baby, the idea about the baby being small. Well, why am I talking about them? Erase it. (pause) This is coming from somewhere (pause). It isn't the Sister but that she couldn't do it.

Lauren is surprised by her thoughts; she has obviously not articulated them before this. At an early age, she renounced motherhood and mother's life, in favour of the religious life (when, as a little girl, she gave up the idea of having babies). The rules of this new life conflicted with mother's life, and the family's interest in newborn babies. These thoughts are painful, but she does not condemn Sr. Margaret, but blames the system, the rule. She thinks that this rule related to the vow of chastity but she does not elaborate. Contact with newborn babies brings one in contact with one's maternal instinct and with thoughts of sex; there is a possibility of becoming “broody” and desiring a baby of one's own, and in this convent, such a temptation had to be guarded against. Until 1936, Sisters were not allowed to study medicine or midwifery (MacCurtain, 1997: 251) and the Church's prohibition may have infected this convent with a fear of motherhood. Another interpretation might be that, contact with a mother and baby, could have unconsciously re-ignited the Sister's early primitive experience with her own mother, that corresponded with her experience of the convent (as mother), and this could have

had a very unsettling effect on the Sister, who may have, already, been struggling with these archaic feelings.

Lauren, later tries to balance the story of the baby with another story. A certain Jimmy who came from the North, in 1918, had a brother with TB and:

He told me shortly before I left Arcady that the old nuns, the old, that is two generations maybe three before me, that when his brother was dying of cancer, and at that time nurses and doctors were not very plentiful, that the nuns came over every day to help them until the man died. I'm just saying that.

Lauren is telling this story because, having criticised the Order, she wishes to redress the balance, *"This is important for me. I balanced it then by the other one about the visitation that Mr. Mc Dermott told me about. In the times that you would think they wouldn't do it"* Then she returns, immediately, to the story of the baby and repeats it. She does not wish to criticize the convent, but she cannot help herself, because she finds the prohibition on contact with mothers and babies, so difficult to comprehend. It is not clear if this prohibition existed in other convents. At the time, mothers who had given birth could not return to Church, until they had received a special blessing. They had to be "churched"³⁴ so, in the mind of the Church, birth was unclean. In this account, Lauren fears being critical; she demonstrates the constant self censorship, in which the nuns engage; there is an internalized fear of speaking out. **Birdie** has already said that conversations with priests had to be reported to the superior and the prohibition on speaking one's mind was so powerful, that it is still active.

Observing chastity, took on negative connotations in the convent. It reflected the Church's fear and obsession with female sexuality and its willingness to punish female, but not male, sexual transgressors. Women, who transgressed, were punished by being incarcerated in the Magdalen laundries, while the men remained free. In the convent, instead of promoting friendship and love, the vow of chastity prohibited ordinary social intercourse between the Sisters themselves and those with whom they came in contact. Emotions could not be tolerated. This brought a lot of misery and may have led to a dampening of all feeling. Empathy and understanding are necessary qualities for those who work with deprived and vulnerable people, and the Sisters were expected to give something they were not accustomed to receiving.

However, for the respondents who worked in schools, the work provided them with some relief from the difficult life, as **Birdie** recounts:

³⁴ A medieval practice of purification after childbirth

Then school and supervision of study that was a great escape for us. 'Twas great to get away from discipline and confinement (pause) I loved the pupils. They were not like they are nowadays, they were grand they were lovely you felt among them and em I was very happy.

Barbara was sent to teach:

So the next year was fine because they put me teaching and I was out of their claws altogether. I was up in school all day long (pause). But I suppose I compensated because I loved teaching; once I got teaching I loved it, I absolutely loved it, so I don't think I was hard on the kids in school. I don't think I was, you know (pause) Yes, I loved the teaching. Yes, sure I'd go up there on a Saturday and a Sunday and I'd be up there all day, preparing my work and that and I suppose I thought I was being really conscientious and getting my classes ready and I was really but I think it was an escape from down below at the same time.

When asked about friends, **Patsy** responded, *"I didn't have any (pause) Well eh (long pause) my confessor asked me that one time. I didn't have any. My interest was in the children. I didn't feel the need of it."* For her the children in school took the place of friends.

Annie had to leave her pupils and move to another convent and her response was, *"I loved it, loved the school, the children and everything"* and later of her time teaching in the US she says, *"I loved the children."*

Lauren also loved her pupils:

And every day of my teaching life I loved. We had ups and downs. We had misunderstandings. We had all that but I loved the children and my teaching life, everyday of it. If I had the energy or if I could live life over again which I cannot I would do it again. Now I won't tell you would I enter the convent again because I don't know.

These respondents show that their work offered some rewards. The regime in the convent has shown itself to be extremely harsh, and most of the respondents look back with less than pleasurable memories. There are, however, some examples of rebellion against the system.

Rebellion and illness

Rebelling against the system was not something the research participants reported, to any great extent. In retrospect, it seems, as if the nuns were passive subjects, in this system. However, in the context of the times, rebellion was, for most people, unthinkable, because they thought they were doing God's will in everything.

Birdie tells of several attempts to overthrow those in office, when the Sisters felt they were too long in power. On one such occasion clandestine meetings were held at night, "*oh yeh, they used come up to talk to me in the basement in the boarding school and to say to vote for to get rid of Benedict and Dympna.*" However the attempted coup "*leaked out*", reported by one of the sycophants, who always surrounded those in charge and reported regularly on the nuns. The rebels were banished to the mission in the USA; they "*were shipped off to Tampa.*" Birdie says:

They would have shipped me too but my father was very good to them, in the way of giving them coal and tea and sugar and things in the war years and I should have been gone too and one day Benedict said to me "I'd have sent you on the Missions only your father asked for you not to go."

This is the only example, in the study, of an outside influence on the course of events in the convent. Birdie has already related how the superiors exploited her parents, by extracting money for her hospital fees, and a three monthly payment, while she was in the Noviceship. In return, her father's wishes were given precedence, and she was not punished, while others were banished.

In many convents, two people held office for up to twenty five years, alternating between the offices of superior and assistant superior, playing "*musical chairs*" is how **Barbara** describes it. The other respondents do not mention any attempts at displacing superiors.

Looking back at her life, **Birdie** sees herself, as someone who disobeyed. This was another aspect of her rebellion:

I wouldn't have been obedient at all, I'd have been doing my own thing, you know, I'd be disobedient. I'd say I did what I liked a lot of the time. I didn't do what I was supposed to do. But then there would be people who would be too correct now to behave that way.

She seems to take pride in the fact that she was not cowed by the system but she admits to finding life difficult. She recounts how her companion (the one with whom she used to sneak out for walks) was locked out one night and the Canon lifted her "*over the wall ... and she tried to get over the wall and he helped her.*" Such things Birdie says "*made*

life kind of juicy for us. We did our own little things, only not to be caught (emphasised). *That was important. Don't get caught.*" The fear of being caught was a childish way of being, and can be considered to be acting out of the superego, rather than from conscience. Symington makes a distinction between two sources of action within the mind: conscience and superego: "*actions that flow from conscience are known; actions that flow from the superego are felt*" (1994: 161). The latter belong to "*primitive religion*" the former belong to "*mature religion.*" He says that when one acts out of the superego, one is punished by the group, and when one acts out of one's conscience, one "*acts freely*" from one's "*deepest reality*". Living at the level of the superego, is living "*at a surface level*" where mental life, the truth and the good are aborted (ibid: 163). However, he concedes that even in mature religion, there is always a tendency "*to regress to the mentality of primitive religion*" (ibid: 11). **Birdie** has already spoken of living a life of fear and her disobedience was a kind of childish acting out.

Annie was never rebellious or disobedient but, at times, she managed to be quiet and obedient by projecting her unmanageable feelings into an older nun, Breege. Breege has already been mentioned, as someone who visited the local doctor's house to get reading material. She flouted Church rules, of fast and abstinence, in order to celebrate her feast day, ordering flowers from Dublin for this event, something that in the culture of the time would have been inconceivable, for most people. Annie says Breege was "*a wonderful character. She was herself, she would rule the roost and nobody would say a word to her.*" She was wonderful in Annie's eyes because she was her own person, her own boss and she brooked no opposition. Annie saw her, as someone who acted out of conviction rather than conformity. By doing this, she rebelled against the system. By projecting the rebellious aspect of her personality into someone like Breege and identifying with the projections, Annie was enabled to be content with her own obedient and unquestioning life in the convent, but at the expense of splitting off part of her ego (Klein, 1946). She then admired the split off parts of herself in Breege, who could rebel against the rules, by making her own decisions, without attracting retaliation or punishment from her superiors.

Lauren is the rebel who did not rebel "*My rebellion was inside*" is how she puts it. Lauren had to turn a blind eye to the injustices that she "knew about", but could not allow to become conscious, in her early days in the convent. She uses the interviews to

take a third position (Britton, 1989) and to reflect on the past and she finds that she says many things, she has never voiced before.

None of the other research participants speak of disobeying or rebelling. However, keeping one's rebellion and anger inside, may have led to illness, to a somatisation of internal conflict, "*when we are unable to deal with conflict at a mental level, it is pressed down into the body and finds expression in physical complaints*" (Stokes, 1994: 128).

Lauren suffered many illnesses, in her lifetime, some of which she attributes to overwork. She, who turned a blind eye, through necessity rather than through choice, lost her sight, for a period, and is left with permanent eye damage.

Barbara has felt her life in the convent, to have been traumatic:

I say to people now that my memory is so bad that I think that it is the trauma of religious life that is to blame (pause). And there are an awful lot of gaps [in her memory] an awful lot of them and I really believe it was the tough life; I really do believe that.

Clare believes that her surgery was as a result of a "*backlog*" of suppressed anger and she attributes illness, in the past, to suppressed feelings. The nuns' illness benefitted the doctors and kept a large Dublin hospital in business. As the convents always paid private health insurance the nuns could avail of private health care:

Mother of God, sure we kept the Mater Private going for years. Yes, we did. It came out in illness definitely. Ah, it did. Sure there were creatures that used go up to the Mater for a holiday. These men (doctors) made a fortune on us. They did really. I mean you look at it now you don't see that happening nowadays, you know. But there was an awful lot of illness. People ill and getting tonics and going to the doctor and over to the doctor every day and I think all these things were cries for help.

Clare's insight is retrospective, and unfortunately, there was no one, at the time, to hear the nuns' cries for help. Life was very difficult at this time, and there was little that the Sisters could do against the system. Illness was the only legitimate way the nuns had, of getting in touch with their bodies. The harsh life had to be endured until the change came in the late 1960s.

Conclusion

Monastic life, with its strict, inflexible commitment mechanisms, was the cornerstone that supported the convent institution. This consisted in enclosure, the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and the promise to carry out charitable works that included education and some form of social work. Convent rules and constitutions were approved, by Rome, in the mid-nineteenth century, and they remained unchanged until Vatican II (1962-65).

The pursuit of perfection was the goal, set before the individual sister, and this could be achieved by strict adherence to the rule, and conformity to the group ideal. The interpretation of the rule and the smooth running of the convent were presided over by the superior, whose will was seen as the will of God and whose every wish became a command, under the umbrella of “blind obedience”.

There was a social class system in operation in the convent that designated the lay Sisters, as second class and discriminated against them, by assigning them to the lowliest tasks, while the choir Sisters were educated and afforded opportunities to work with the public.

The practice of the three vows ensured that life was determined by forces outside the self. Blind obedience deprived the individual Sister of choice and relieved her of responsibility for her actions. Conformity defended against any anxiety that might have arisen through the operation of conscience. Conscience, the use of judgement and free will was superseded by superego, obeying the will of another, in the manner of blind obedience. Chastity forbade emotional involvement with another, inside or outside the convent and poverty ensured that a lack of financial resources, left the individual powerless, dependent and exposed to neglect and deprivation. Constant unremunerated activity, at work or in the convent, left little space for reflection and deprived the Sisters of a critical function, necessary for maturation.

The common life, praying, eating, working, sleeping, recreating together without any private space or time, encouraged immersion in the group and increased control over the individual. The phantasy of a common life was intended to eliminate envy. The observance of details of outward behaviour, in order to avoid the exposure and humiliation of the chapter of faults, developed a sense of guilt and worthlessness, even about trivial matters. Ritualistic behaviour became meaningless and expended energy

that could have been put to better use, in the common good. Every aspect of convent life conspired to weaken self determination and self esteem, in order to strengthen the sense of group and resulted in the individual personality and identity being sacrificed to the collective. Separation from the world precluded any form of reality testing and the boundaries around the self became diffuse and the individual melded into the group. Feelings of guilt and shame were encouraged, while feelings of frustration and anger had to be suppressed, and were likely to be redirected onto subordinates (Shapiro, 1998). The emotional experience of anxiety, doubt, guilt and uncertainty can be defended against, by a social defence system (Stapley, 2000: 63). The social defence system (Menzies, 1960) that became clear, as the interviews progressed (which means it is still operative), include turning a blind eye to avoid insight; cutting off feelings by maintaining a matter of fact attitude or laughing to divert or deflect feelings; retreating from insight by retracting what has been said; attacking one's intelligence or blaming oneself, rather than the institution. If one takes the institution as the ego/institutional ideal, then it must be perfect, and wrongdoing must be personal, rather than institutional (Schwartz, 1990) and the individual feels shame and blames herself, and continues to strive for perfection. Then the institution is never scrutinised.

Being in good standing in the group was of paramount importance and, only the strongest egos were able to withstand the pressure to conform. The renunciation of self identity, in favour of group identity; the response of blind obedience; conceding to the dependency culture and the sidetracking of common sense required a splitting of the ego, at least on a temporary basis. Most of the respondents adapted, to a greater or lesser extent, probably, because they had, little or no experience, of being an adult in the world.

Non-conformity was punished and rebellion was quelled. Some Sisters became ill and found some nurturance through their illness. Some of the respondents attributed their illness to the stress of life in the convent. However, they all found solace in their contact with their pupils when they were teaching and many were able to circumvent the rules and make friends with others in their communities. In retrospect, some of the respondents wonder how they tolerated this "*unnatural*"³⁵ life but realise that to have left the convent, at that time, would have meant facing the social stigma of failure and the risk of putting their eternal salvation in jeopardy. Control was the underlying

³⁵ This is how Barbara summed up the life

motivation for those in authority, resulting in the disempowerment of the individual Sister, the stultifying of creativity, the destruction of the personality and the dampening of initiative.

1970-1999

Change and Transition

Introduction

This chapter will cover the period from the early 1970s until the turn of the century, which was a time of tremendous change in Ireland, both inside and outside the convent. An overview of the external changes in Church and society will contextualize the changes within religious congregations. The Second Vatican Council was the catalyst for this radical upheaval that brought about changes in the ideology and structure of Church organizations, and their relationship to the Irish people.

The changes relevant to this study were the call for renewal of religious life (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 1965), the universal call to holiness that emphasized the importance of the role of the laity in the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964), religious freedom and the supremacy of conscience (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 1965) and the notion that Catholics should get to know Christ as a person (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963).

The redefinition of religious life called for a return to Gospel values, values that foster authentic humanism, having at their centre the protection and growth of the human person. It called for a re-visioning of the spirit of the founder and an adjustment to the modern world (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2, 1965). This is further explicated in *Perfectae Caritatis*, 3:

The manner of living, praying and working should be suitably adapted ... to the modern physical and psychological circumstances of the members and also, as required by the nature of each institute, to the necessities of the apostolate, the demands of culture, and social and economic circumstances.

Any change or experimentation had to have the imprimatur of a General Chapter (ibid: 4), which is the supreme governing body of an Order, and consists of elected representatives.

The first time the Congregation, to which most of the respondents belong, held General Chapters was in the early 1970s. Prior to this, the convents were independent. Jenny's convent was in England so there was not an overall coherence, about the changes, as they are recounted.

Active religious Orders were released from the trappings of monasticism, which had burdened the Sisters, and there was a change in the status of religious women. In the years following Vatican II the focus has been on the external, outward changes and all

that these imply. There was little attention to the emotional impact of change and no help with the anxiety and uncertainty, that change inevitably engenders (Long, 2008).

Two of the research participants entered the convent during this time, Rose in 1974 and Jenny in 1983. Both, later, left the convent and returned to the world. A retrospective look at some of their experiences, from a psychoanalytic perspective, gives some insight into the dilemmas that faced all of the Sisters, in the process of change.

The chapter will give an overview of society and consider the change in status for religious, how the changes were managed and implemented, and finally a psychoanalytic perspective on this period.

An overview of Church and society, 1970-1999

The early 1960s, in Ireland, saw the first signs of a secular influence. The two major events which coincided were the industrialisation of the Irish economy by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Sean Lemass, and the Catholic liberalisation of the Second Vatican Council, convened in 1962, by Pope John XXIII, to adapt the Catholic Church to the modern world (Penet: 2008).

Urbanisation

Lemass abandoned the old policy of near self-sufficiency, in favour of opening up the economy to foreign-owned multinational companies. Ireland joined the EEC in 1973. In addition, the Irish involvement in the United Nations peacekeeping forces, were signs of the opening of the country to foreign influence (Penet, 2008).

A process of urbanisation was having its effect on society, resulting in a conservative, rural versus liberal urban polarisation. Tom Inglis believes that television was an important factor in the transition from a rural agricultural society to an urban, industrial and individualistic society. It provided a forum for public debate and international awareness. It supported change and offered an alternative value system. Literary censorship ended, in 1969, and the beginnings of violence in Northern Ireland in that year, hastened the removal of clause 44 of the Constitution, according a special status to Catholicism.

In spite of the recession, in the 1980s, values and attitudes continued to change. The growing tolerance to difference and alternative social values were evidenced in the abolition of the law forbidding homosexual relations between men, in 1993, and the legalisation of divorce, in 1995. By the end of the decade, the Irish had become the most materialistic nation, in surveys taken of member states, in the European nations (Tobin, 2007).

The position of women

There were a number of changes that had a positive effect, on the lives of women. In 1967, the introduction of free secondary education for all, offered opportunities to girls to continue their education (Horgan, 2001: 12). In 1973, the removal of the marriage ban, in the public service, and the growth in the economy, opened the job market for women. As a result, women growing up, expected, and demanded, a life outside the home (ibid: 13, 18). The then Minister for Health, Charles Haughey, introduced a bill to

make contraception legally available, on prescription only to married couples, for family planning purposes only, “*He described the law as an ‘Irish solution to an Irish problem.’*” (ibid: 13). In 1985, the sale of condoms, without prescription, to over 18 year olds, was legalised. Inglis suggests that, once women were able to access alternative sources of power, through the workplace and public life, they were increasingly freed from the ideological power of the Church (1998: 199).

The election of Mary Robinson and her successor Mary McAleese, as president, worked to encourage a civil society, less dependent on the traditional authority of the priest, and the politicians, with whom there was widespread disillusionment (Tobin, 2007: 2). Mary McAleese, who is also a lawyer, is quoted as saying that, “*being a Catholic does not mean that you can’t think for yourself and that you do exactly what the Bishops tell you. I see the Catholic Church as something that is moving and dynamic*” (Cleary, 1997).

The contribution of women to Vatican II

Women have always held a lowly position in the Catholic Church, and this was never more evident, than in the almost total exclusion of women, from the decision making process, of the Second Vatican Council. When the Belgian Cardinal, Leo Suenens, complained that half of humanity, women, had no representation at the Council, Pope Paul VI appointed 15 female auditors. The Cardinal was not happy with the draft on religious life:

The draft does not please me. We should give up the habit of treating nuns as minors, an attitude so typical of the nineteenth century, which is still found in many religious congregations today.... Let us abandon these customs which perpetuate a feeling of inferiority among women religious.

(Suenens, 1965: Third session)

The ratio of women to men, in the drafting of the documents, was three to two thousand five hundred.

The challenge of change to the Catholic Church

Following Vatican II, and the changing face of Irish society in the 1960s, Catholicism, as a source of national identity, diminished. After decades of symbiosis, the Church and the State were being decoupled. Irish society had become more secular as the Catholic Church began to lose its “moral monopoly” in society (Inglis, 1998).

Moran (2004b) sees the attitude of the Church as having changed to a more dialogical style of thought, from a position of speaking with certainty and authority, to one of

listening and dialogue. Listening to the world, meant that the notion of absolute was gradually replaced with the idea of the relative; right and wrong were no longer a matter of black and white, life had become various shades of grey. In psychoanalytic terms, it shows a move from a paranoid-schizoid, black/white position to a depressive position (Klein, 1946) encompassing ambivalence and uncertainty. Moran says, “*The blueprint of perfection lost its validity, new ways needed to be forged*” (2004b: 305).

However, the fast pace of change presented the Church with a major challenge. In 1978, a working party of the Catholic Bishops concluded that, “*for many the practice of religion is more a matter of law/routine/social pressure, rather than a result of intellectual or personal conviction*” (Kirby, 1984: 35). In the 1990s, the Church was shamed by shocking revelations of sexual misconduct among clergy, abuse within the welfare institutions of its Orders, and subsequent efforts by the hierarchy to cover up the evidence. This led to the operation of religious institutions being opened up to critical examination; a decline of religious involvement in public institutions; the expansion of the State itself and its penetration into social affairs and an increased demand for professionalization (Tovey and Share, 2003).

The quick and massive transformation in Irish society, meant that the religious institutions did not have a chance to adapt. When the transition period is too short, the tendency is for institutionalised religion and traditional structures of control, to give way to hedonistic consumerism (Martin, 1978). The way was open for the Celtic Tiger, the short-lived economic boom, enjoyed by Ireland until 2008.

The change in status for religious

The convent walls come tumbling down, is how Frances Moran describes the removal of the enclosure for active Orders of religious. This emotional phrase expresses the loss of the container that held the religious, however restrictive, it may have been. Religious no longer understood their commitment in terms of sacrifice, a giving up of the world Moran says, but rather “*in terms of living fully in the world but not of the world*” (2004b: 307). This was a radical shift from the past, where there was a paranoid-schizoid split between the “*world, the flesh and the devil*” and the sanctuary of the cloister.³⁶ The nuns had to negotiate re-entry into the world; they had to find the ambivalence of the depressive position, recognising that there was both good and the bad in the cloister, as well as in the world.

The opening out to the world is symbolised by **Clare**’s reference to the opening of the convent gate and the nuns getting out:

I mean to get that gate opened after four! That was huge. To be able to go down town and to buy your own stamps that was massive. To be able to get your skirt cleaned, to be able to buy something new, to be able to go down and buy a pair of shoes, they were huge things. I mean women are women are women. And all that area of your life was gone. So those changes and I’d say like in one sense they were great years, there was a kind of activity and excitement in the air.

The gates were literally opened and the nuns began to move out, but they were not moving out, solely, to do their apostolic work, they were resuming normal life and finding it exhilarating. **Barbara** cannot find the words, “*But I’d say until we got into regular clothes and could move out and got cars and that kind of thing; it was just like that there was no –; it was regulated from morning till night; every minute was regulated*”, perhaps she means there was no life.

Eventually, lay people were allowed to enter the enclosure. In a metaphorical sense, the world penetrated the cloister. The excitement and activity masked an anxiety that could not be thought about. The opening of the convent also meant that the convent lost its mystique. The stated reason for the removal of cloister was the extension of mission but a further reason is revealed in the Vatican document, *Lumen Gentium*, (1964).

³⁶ Nuns, called by god to lead a life of perfection, fled from the world the flesh and the devil by promising to be poor, chaste and obedient (Weaver, 1995:78)

The universal call to holiness

The document *Lumen Gentium* (1964: 5) declared a universal call to holiness, that "*all the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for the holiness and perfection of their own proper state. Indeed they have an obligation to so strive.*" This had serious implications for the status of religious.

Schneiders (1987) recalls the former teaching of the Church, where religious vocation was seen as a calling to a higher or more perfect life than that of the lay person. The religious life was perceived as forming a bridge between the human world and the divine world. Religious were seen as mediators or intercessors between an inaccessible God and common humanity. This made the religious superior to their secular counterparts and, in order to maintain this superiority, separation from the world in the total institution became a necessity. This new teaching put religious on an equal footing with their lay contemporaries in the world.

The declaration of equality obviates the need for special intercession by the religious on behalf of the laity (Mulcahy, 2004) and therefore for separation, because religious and laity are deemed to be equal in the eyes of God. This removes the physical split which had facilitated the emotional split between good and bad. The Church has now adopted a depressive position (Klein, 1940), in relation to religious and the laity. Religious consecration, as a way of life, is not superior to other Christian lifestyles; it is different (Schneiders, 1987). Religious are now seen as working in solidarity with, rather than separation from; they are neither separate from nor superior to the laity and this brings its own problems, "*No longer extolled for having chosen a superior way of life they had to re-imagine religious life in secular terms*" (Weaver, 1995: 78). This important re-positioning of religious life and the end of "specialness" is not mentioned expressly, by any of the research participants. Can it, therefore, be assumed that it did not penetrate the conscious minds of the ordinary religious, and that it became the domain of the theologians to engage with it, while the religious assiduously attended to their new found freedoms? If it was heard and was an unthought known (Bollas, 1987), did it lead to the secularization that is now the position of religious in today's world? This is not unrelated to the vow of chastity.

Chastity

The new teaching on chastity states that "*The chastity 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'* (Matt. 19:12), *which religious profess should be counted as an outstanding gift*

of grace. It frees the heart of man in a unique fashion (1 Cor. 7: 32-35) so that it may be more inflamed with love for God and for all men” (Perfectae Caritatis, 12). Schneiders states that, in praising celibacy as an “outstanding gift of grace Vatican II significantly refrains from citing, even in a footnote the teachings of the Council of Trent [1810] that it is better and holier to practice virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God than to marry” (1987: footnote).

Through the universal call to holiness the Council fathers have, without clarifying it, changed the status of the vow of chastity. Virginity is, no longer, considered to be superior to marriage. This important shift in the attitude toward Christian marriage blurs the distinction between first- and second-class Christians in the Church, a distinction built up over many centuries, starting with Saint Jerome and continuing with the teachings of Saint Augustine until Vatican II (Hart and Hart, 1984).

This equalisation left the nuns without a particular identity, and the task of finding one fell to the female theologians. Schneiders muddles through an explanation about witness value and complementarity that is not very convincing, by claiming that religious life and marriage are complementary states, each needing the other as witness to fulfil their Christian obligations. The religious who have chosen not to marry and not to experience the fullness of human sexual love, “*need the witness of marital consecration if they are to resist the tendency to seek a disembodied holiness in isolation and self-absorption.*” Married Christians need the witness of religious if they are not “*to lose themselves in the intimacy of human love, relativise their search for God*” and spend all of their energies on their families, forgetting their baptismal vocation to “*foster the reign of God*” (1987: 5). This is a difficult position for religious who have spent most of their lives living celibate lives, at a distance from the intimacy of family love, and who were forced to renounce even ordinary friendship with one another. It also implies that they may have lived in “*disembodied holiness in isolation and self-absorption*” in the past.

Barbara is the only research participant who refers to the superiority of religious life over the married state and she now labels it a “*mistake*”. She feels she has been misled. For her and for others like her, who have chosen to persevere in this way of life because they thought it was the path to certain sainthood, this change in the Church’s teaching feels like a betrayal.

Patsy is aware that there is now little difference between her secular counterparts and religious:

I have lived through massive change and it's not anybody's fault. It's just the evolution, you know, time. I would say that anybody looking at the small body of religious professionals who were left would say well, they're like ourselves, they're good women and we're good women and where's the difference?

She is at the end of her life and she is not concerned about change.

Managing change

Mary's community was asked to make suggestions for change, and she recalls what she and her community wanted from the first General Chapter, "*The three things we decided on were: three nights at home, the use of bicycles and experiment with the habit. Imagine (laughing)! Oh Lord!! We laughed. That was June of 72.*" At that time they probably laughed with excitement; in retrospect, they can laugh at how restricted their lives were.

Three nights at home (in one year), meant returning to reconnect with family, after decades of occasional visits from relatives and seeing the family at funerals. The gates were opened and the Sisters wanted to move out. To ask for cars was beyond their expectations so they opted for bicycles. **Rose** (who is not a member of Mary's community) used her bicycle to good effect, "*I used to go by bicycle; I was a great woman on a bike I was on the bike day and night, that was my salvation. I used to go to town every day to see what was going on.*" Getting away can be a release. **Margaret** also enjoyed the freedom afforded by her bicycle, "*I had a bicycle there; I could cycle all over the place.*" The third request, to experiment with the habit, meant discarding the restrictive and identifiable garb and this will be discussed later in the chapter.

Managing change

Two of the research participants, **Clare** and **Mary** held office, in their respective congregations, at this time, and were responsible for the implementation of change. Their contributions are not intended to be representative of the way in which change was managed; it is coincidental that they are part of the study. Both lived and worked in different parts of the country. Clare was a local superior and Mary was first elected to the office of local superior, and later to that of Mother General. Neither is trained in leadership or management. **Clare** is aware of this lack:

I was going into that with utterly no training whatsoever, good, bad or indifferent. That was the way it was. It was no comfort to the person going in, that's the way it was. You brought your own integrity which to me would be very important and you brought whatever skills you had but the flip side of that you brought your own baggage too. You had your strengths and your community's strengths and that was it and you had then your own weaknesses and the community weaknesses. So it was a very mixed bag.

She was clear about what had to be done, at a practical level:

You know we had it all spelled out at the time what was to be done. Do you know we had the constitutions and what do you call the other book, the interpretation of the constitutions! We had for our own diocese, we had drawn up our vision, our goal, our aims it was all there but to try and get that; that was to be the new structure in place of what was gone.

This is what Menzies Lyth (1988) identifies as a “*blueprint*”. The “*blueprint*” she writes deals with structure and role, but ignores the change in attitude and culture. Clare learned, to her cost, how difficult the implementation became, “*but to try and get that was very difficult, it really was difficult and how far did I succeed or not succeed? I have no idea.*” There was no feedback for Clare and the advisor, Fr James, a canon lawyer, could tell her what was going to happen, but was of little help in thinking things through and empowering her:

I always remember Fr James coming to us and he saying to me “now Sister”, in his very grand accent, “Now Sister you will have no trouble with anything the Sisters like, any of the new freedoms, they will be delighted but when you try anything else you can expect it won’t be as pleasant.” How right he was how right he was and that was a reality.

Clare identifies the “*anything else*” as spirituality and prayer. She says:

Now I never cease to look back in amazement at how quickly the old order collapsed. You know I just think, I often think, was it like a hollow shell and just one tap and it all went. Because the speed at which we lost all of the pious practices and everything else.

Clare does not say what, if anything replaced the pious practices. In general, the research participants do not speak about their spiritual lives. One wonders if the subject is somewhat taboo. The excitement of freedom overtook the spiritual and **Clare**, who was ever conscious of the spiritual, found this disconcerting, “*You know it was very difficult, sometimes people had no idea; they couldn’t understand why you were flogging something like Scripture study or these kinds of things.*” She mentions that pious practices are discontinued but does not elaborate. She speaks of her personal spirituality, which she has brought into line with the Council decree, “*that it was the person of Christ, now, rather than the ideal*” (*Sacrosanctum Consilium*, 1963) that was important. She continues, by comparing this change in her spirituality with her past striving for perfection, “*that I had to do everything perfect and everything had to be right, and I had to keep at it, and I began to realise that there was another dimension, and I think that was a great blessing.*”

Barbara, who finds religious life very difficult, is the only other respondent who speaks about her prayer life:

I really think my salvation certainly; round that time was the first Retreat we made with Father Pat and he made religion so, he made our relationship with Jesus so real that, that I suppose it was my turning point where prayer was concerned, not saying I know how to pray or anything but certainly I got away from reading books and being able to talk to Jesus as my friend. Now I have to thank Pat for that.

Praying to Jesus as one's friend, can be seen in psychoanalytic terms, as having Jesus as a good internal object.

Jenny, who entered at this time, thinks that the people, with whom she lived, were not very spiritual. She says, "Maybe it was just assumed that spirituality was done and dusted" (an interesting pun) and she adds "If we were living as a community of spiritual people together with a bond of some kind of motivation as [the founder's]³⁷ whole aspiration for the Order and the people in it, why were people so cruel to each other?" Jenny was not impressed with what she found in religious life. The issue of cruelty will be discussed later in this chapter.

Clare says she "suffered intensely" in those years, with the resistance and confusion, in her community and she realizes it was because of the lack of "any good psychology on how to deal with people and I would have been quite a sensitive, very sensitive, all of that now I did find that awfully hard (coughing)." Clare's cough is probably an indication that she is still struggling with the memory. She is aware that adaptation requires more than instructions on a page, and that the necessary psychological help was not available to her. In fact, the only help that she mentions is the training in how to take turns at meetings, which, in retrospect, appears funny to her:

But the change for religious, to talk and to do things (pause). And the Chapter came, the meetings came and as I say, Fr James and co. they were kind of training us how to hold meetings and get people to talk one at a time and (laugh) it was great, very funny.

The nuns were offered the chance to speak but, until now, these women had lived silent, enclosed and very restricted lives, where no one was interested in what they had to say so teaching them how to speak at meetings was not very productive. They first needed to be helped to think, not just to have thoughts, "thinking has to be called into existence to cope with thoughts" (Bion, 1962: 111). Laughter is part of the social defence system

³⁷ She mentions the founder by name

in the convent, and Clare's laugh probably defends against the embarrassment at the ineptitude of these adult women and the sadness at their plight. Clare knows that what was provided to adapt to change was inadequate.

Mary lacks Clare's reflective ability. As superior, she busied herself making practical changes, and she was assigned to convents that needed renovating or practical solutions to problems. As local superior, she went with the flow, "*So, Fr James then appeared on the scene and again we were off to meetings.*" She was appointed as Mother General, at the First General Chapter, and her life was taken over by travel, meetings, moving people about, closing and opening projects and implementing changes, without much thought. She obeyed Fr James without question, "*Fr James said that I was to go to the States almost immediately. So I went to the States.*" He was the advisor and had no authority but Mary ceded her authority to him, much in the same way, as she obeyed all authority, unquestioningly and mindlessly, because, in the Church, all men were deemed to be authorities. This is another example of projective identification, where the Sister projected her authority into someone she believed to be superior, leaving her with less of a sense of agency and augmenting the power of the one who identified with the projections (Symington, 1994; Bion, 1967). Sometimes, Mary seemed to lack empathy. When she was on visitation in the US, as Mother General, she was unaware of the effect of her power on the Sisters. She says:

And in both houses the fear was that they would be brought home³⁸. Yea. That didn't enter my head and they had a gardener in one of the houses and he would be chatting me during the day, telling me the great work they were doing and everything.

The gardener was an advocate for the Sisters but Mary failed to see this, at the time. She later encounters difficulties in thinking about the revelations of abuse in the convents that came under her jurisdiction as Mother General. This will be discussed in chapter six.

³⁸ Transferred back to Ireland, against their wishes

Implementing change

Class distinction

In the convent there was an attempt to realign the balance of power; to move from an autocratic to a more democratic way of being together. This was effected, firstly, by the use of language and secondly, by the abolition of the status of “lay Sister”. Vatican II (1965) decreed that, “*care should be taken that there be only one class of Sisters in communities of women*” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 15). There was an end to the use of titles of “*superior*” and “*mother*” and these were substituted by “*leader*” because the ruler/subject, adult/child relationships which these titles both expressed, and encouraged are inappropriate in a community of co-responsible adults called to Gospel friendship (Schneiders, 1987). However, changing the language, does not mean that an internal change or, in fact, any other change will follow. The Church included the female nouns and pronouns in the Liturgy but this did not effect any change in the status of women in the Church.

The practice of having lay Sisters was ended, by no longer professing Sisters as lay Sisters. However, the scars of this irregularity remained in those who had been the victims of this system. **Jenny**, who entered in 1983, met and empathized with some of these women:

What I found quite upsetting really was the lay Sisters, it was the Sisters who didn't have a teaching qualification were the ones who were in the kitchens and did the laundry and who did the cleaning.

She mentions one particular Sister who always felt, “*a second class citizen within the Order because the Sisters were there teaching, being headmistresses and all the lay Sisters were doing, was washing their underwear, you know.*” Jenny says, “*There was a big gap in the responsibilities that happened and I think that a lot of the older lay Sisters really felt that discrimination quite deeply.*”

Many years previously, **Lauren** had, also, identified with the lay Sisters, and wanted to become one, and fight for their rights. For both women, the lay Sisters reminded them of their own families. **Jenny** says she was “*in tune [with them] because they lived the simple life; they peeled potatoes, they got lunches*” and she concludes:

The title went; they weren't called lay Sisters any more, they were all Sisters but they all had different jobs. That's why I think the life was a bit of a contradiction

in the sense that this was the fruit of Vatican II. Well it didn't mean anything; it didn't mean enough.

Jenny sees the change as cosmetic, and believes that changing the title did little to redress the balance of injustice.

Name change

In line with the emphasis on baptism, the nuns were given the option to return to their baptismal names, because religious consecration is deeply rooted in that of baptism. The practice of adopting a saint's name, at reception, came to an end. **Rose**, who entered in the early 1970s, says that she, and those who entered with her, "*would have been the first to keep our own names.*" Moran (2004b) suggests that divesting oneself of one's religious name means formally re-identifying oneself within one's family context. Permission to return to baptismal names emphasized the end of specialness but only two of the research participants, **Margaret** and **Mary** changed back to their baptismal names; six chose to continue to be called by their religious names. This may be evidence that the importance of baptism and the change in status of the religious had really not been assimilated.

Experimentation with the habit

Experimentation meant a shorter skirt, showing hair under the veil but being restrained by colour; only blue, grey or navy were allowed:

The religious habit, an outward mark of consecration to God, should be simple and modest, poor and at the same becoming. In addition it must meet the requirements of health and be suited to the circumstances of time and place and to the needs of the ministry involved.

(Perfectae Caritatis, 17)

This was the first step on the way to complete secular dress, to appearing the same as women in the world. The nuns were becoming materialistic, like the rest of society, imbibing the societal ethos. The restrictions imposed by Vatican II were eventually disregarded. **Clare** speaks with amusement of the older nuns in her community:

Changing habits and people started dyeing the hair. Oh mother of God will I ever forget it, the day of the change and I saw the owl [old] ones coming down with grey heads and black heads and medium grey heads. Oh, I fainted laughing. I remember them talking and I standing at the bottom of the stairs and I dying laughing. Do you know it must have been awful hard on them when I think of it now, probably it was hard. But I was amazed at the ones that had actually dyed their hair, people that I wouldn't have thought, quite conservative and here they come with the dyed hair.

She thinks back, with distaste, to the cutting of the woman's hair at reception:

The thing you were told that the hair was a woman's crowning glory. You were giving it all to Jesus. I'm not so sure at all, poor Jesus, I'm not so sure. When I think of it now; I cringe at it now. I didn't like it then but I like it less now. It was ah, it wasn't good!

In Clare's terms, the women were reclaiming their crowning glory and, perhaps, trying to turn back the clock, trying to find the identity that had been subsumed in sameness. **Rose** speaks of clothes, in relation to identity. When she left the convent, she had difficulty deciding what suited her and, in retrospect, she thinks "*What would suit me – trying to make out my own identity in the way I present myself? I think that is what I was doing and I didn't know.*" But, it is not only those who left the convent who had to find a new identity. All of the nuns, in the past, were forced to embrace a collective identity, but after Vatican II they found themselves, increasingly, having to forge a new individual identity. This may, to some extent, explain the preoccupation with dress and appearance, especially as there was little help available with internal change.

Poverty

The new poverty decrees that nuns should continue to be poor, in fact and in spirit, and the new catchphrase is, "option for the poor" because the lives of the poor "*point to the absence of compassion and love, justice and peace*" (O'Donoghue, 1985: 11). Vatican II was prescriptive in its decree, urging that "*it is not enough to use goods in a way subject to the superior's will, but members must be poor both in fact and in spirit, their treasures being in heaven*" (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 13). This removed the superior's discretion in the observance of poverty in her jurisdiction, but this is difficult to monitor. Although the nuns generally lived frugal lives, the buildings, in which they lived, gave an impression of opulence, so Vatican II urged them to "*avoid every appearance of luxury, excessive wealth and the accumulation of goods*" (ibid.).

Living in community has always been a feature of the religious life-style, but over the generations, O'Donoghue (1985) claims, it has become institutionalised, stylised, fossilised and functionalized. She sees small groups of nuns, living in small houses that can be part of the local Christian parish, especially in poor areas, as the way forward. The new recruits in this period, Rose and Jenny, are the only ones who speak about the new poverty and the option for the poor but, at this time, they were not permitted to take on the challenge.

Jenny entered in the 1980s, imbued with the desire to be poor, in fact as well as in spirit, “*and a few of us came in saying, “we want to be poor, we want to live a simple lifestyle, we don’t want to be living in these great big colleges with a great big chapel and fantastic surroundings.”*” She uses her background as a yardstick for the environment, in which she found herself in the convent:

Well I suppose the measuring up thing was I’ve come from a relatively poor Irish family who had nothing and will have nothing to leave me. I’m not privileged; I’m not from a privileged family so everything that I saw around me just seemed so opulent and big.

She seems unaware of the constricted and difficult life that nuns have had, up until now, in spite of the appearance of riches and opulence. Her view could be said to represent the view of visitors to the convent, who were unaware of the deprived circumstances in which most of the nuns had previously lived, and were only aware of the opulence of the parlours. For Jenny, the ideal of “*three or four of us living in a little flat or on a council estate doing our jobs, having prayer evenings or whatever else, never happened.*” She says:

It was mooted but I don’t think they trusted us enough. Yes I don’t think they trusted us enough that we would have the responsibility to do it somehow. In a way there was a funny attitude towards us. They looked on us as children or naïve people, though we had more of a life experience than they ever had when they entered at the age of sixteen.

It makes Jenny angry that she was not trusted, and that she was overprotected by these nuns who, she feels, were less worldly wise than she. One could speculate that some of the older nuns were feeling envious of the enthusiastic young Jenny, and they were also resisting the changes that were happening all around, which they were unable to withstand.

The model **Rose** wished to emulate, was that of a Sister she knew, who lived on the dole in a very deprived area in a large city “*in the middle of all that chaos*” and Rose “*wanted to do something like that*” to get “*a sense of the reality of poverty but that wouldn’t be heard of. I couldn’t do that, out of the question, out of the question.*” Nuns moved out of their large convents into small houses because large unwieldy buildings, with fewer inhabitants, were no longer viable.

Living in small houses

Of those who speak about their experience of living in small groups, only one, **Mary**, seems to have been happy in her house, “*we worked there together. It was great; we*

had four great years. We could share everything. We had our differences and everything but still it was a very up-building time. You could depend on the group.” Others were not so lucky, and found that living with difficult people can be quite a challenge. **Clare** gives an example of how disorder reigned, when two “*stronger personalities*” lived in the same small group:

... the two difficult people they seemed to feed off each other. Do you know they were great when things weren't great do you know what I mean? They'd be agreeing with each other, just making life difficult really watching and assuming and criticizing and things like that I found hard. There's a certain stress attached to that kind of thing. They were friends and then they'd squabble and when they were friends God help the rest of us. When they squabbled life was very good for the rest of us.

Barbara could not meet the challenge of difficult people and she had such an unhappy experience of small group living, that she decided, at one time, to take a sabbatical:

The end of that year I thought I was going to get a nervous breakdown and I took early retirement without asking anybody if I could take it and I wrote to the team and I said I wanted a sabbatical so I went to Berkeley for the year.

At the end of the year, she decided to stay on in the States, because she could not face the group in Ireland. When she returned to the house, after two years, she found that “*there was war*” going on, because of the actions and attitude of difficult people. She mentions one nun, who could not tolerate the situation, and left, “*broken- hearted*”. Barbara found an alternative house in which to live. What cannot be measured is how much the research respondents contributed to the situations they describe.

Clare offers an explanation why everyone finds particular individuals difficult. She thinks:

Everybody then was beginning to go their own way in a sense; stronger personalities began to emerge, people who would have been under a good superior's thumb. They began to emerge; they began to assert themselves and do you know that could make life difficult for others.

She is describing the lack of containment and holding of these, more difficult characters. In the past, they were kept under control through fear of superiors and punishment. Now, when they are no longer oppressed, they need to be heard and to be contained. It seems that levels of anxiety are beginning to rise; the excitement of change may have masked this anxiety, and now, there is a fear of a loss of control.

The use of money

Living in the world required new financial arrangements, and by the early 1990s, some nuns were receiving a monthly allowance and money for holidays. This allowed them to travel abroad. **Jenny** tells of her experience:

And so what they introduced was everybody could have an amount of money to use to go on holiday. So we were given I don't know how much it was, a couple of hundred quid for the first time ever, here was us living on ten pounds a month and then suddenly we were given this amount of money and at that time we could go all over the place for that.

She went on holiday, with her friend and explains that:

It was the first time ever that I could even go out for a meal with her and be able to pay my own way because I hadn't got any money. I didn't see any of my earnings apart from the ten pounds a month and if we went out as a group of friends from work they would always pay for my meal for me because I didn't have the money to do it.

Jenny was surprised that the nuns got money for holidays, but yet she felt happy enough to be able to pay her way. The allowance of ten pounds per month could hardly be called extravagant. However, this holiday had a rather paradoxical outcome, because, although Jenny seemed happy with the money, it was on this holiday that she decided to leave the convent. She was with her friend:

So for the first time in my life, in my religious life I was there, we were going out for drinks or whatever, a pizza or meal at night and I was there putting as much in as she was and it kind of got me thinking and I remember we were on the beach in Turkey and I said to her, "I've got to jump over the wall Susan, I've just got to jump over the wall, I've got to do it and now is the time before it's too late, before I get too old.

She desired to live simply and without much money; she was given enough to go abroad on holidays and it was in the freedom of the holiday that she realized that this life was not for her.

In the 1970s **Margaret**³⁹ travelled, but she got the money from her family, "This aunt of mine she took me places, we did the shrines of France back in the Seventies you see". Again, in the 1990s, she travelled to Australia where she wanted to enter, many years earlier:

I have longed to go to Australia. I went since, you know, with Kate who died only last June. She had three sisters in Australia, John of God Sisters. I had two first cousins so she asked me would I come to Australia. I loved it and my family they gave me money and all that kind of thing to go. I got £500 that time 1997.

³⁹ She always wanted to travel and was prepared to enter a congregation she did not like, in the hope of one day being able to go abroad.

Margaret is persistent in she wants and she is willing to wait, even for years. Other research respondents, also, managed to travel but they do not speak about money; it has now become part of the culture that nuns have money at their disposal.

Obedience

Similar to poverty and chastity, old notions of authority were challenged by Vatican II and obedience was placed at a discernment level (Moran 2004b). The decree states:

Subjects should be brought to the point where they will cooperate.... And so superiors should gladly listen to their subjects and foster harmony among them for the good of the community and the Church, provided that thereby their own authority to decide and command what has to be done is not harmed.

(Perfectae Caritatis, 14)

This is a very confusing decree, as it asks the authorities to listen to their subjects, but to retain the final say, which is very difficult. Obedience was never intended to become majority rule. **Annie** looks back and sees:

After the Chapter some became independent a bit. Before that everyone took everything that was said as gospel and holy obedience, you know. Then people started questioning things or else it's my memory. That all changed in [19]70 and when you would be changed [transferred] after that you would be consulted about it.

The seeds of individual independence were sown and the diminution of the power of authority was underway until, as **Clare** says, “*there was no longer the superior having the final say.*” The decision making process became “*more group decision making and you see that was a minefield because if you went with the majority rule it could be a very good decision or it could be a very bad decision.*” Majority rule was not envisioned by the Council. One of the tasks of obedience, is to read the “*signs of the times*”, to read God’s will in life and history, so that the mission, as consecrated people, is being fulfilled. This has resulted in obedience becoming very complex and confusing. **Rose** gives an example of the complexity and the confusion of the new obedience. In spite of the decree to listen to those in their charge, she felt she was not heard by her superiors. She describes a number of transfers and her reactions to them. When the big convent closed, she moved to a house in the country, with five other Sisters, and found herself in a time warp. She voiced her disapproval of the move, “*I was totally against the move and nobody would listen.*” This demonstrates the difficulty facing superiors. They may, in fact, have heard Rose but decided that they did not agree with her

representations. If this were the case, then the failure was in communication; Rose was left without a response, thinking she was not heard. The result for Rose was, that she was not in accord with those with whom she was cast. The nuns, with whom she had to live, had not changed their lifestyle and Rose felt she lived in an alien world:

It was the same Order but you'd think we were two different Orders. They never went out anywhere much. We were on the road every day. We were out every day; we were always mixing with people.... And they didn't have enough room in the convent, so we went into what they called a little chalet house. So we were kind of stuck together. And I found it terribly difficult to mix. Because I felt that we were gone back in time. I'll never forget it. And we had a very small group and we were all huddled together in there and I found that very difficult because that was more institutionalised than where I'd come from. Oh, I couldn't cope with that.

Some groups were more progressive than others and Rose found this group impossible:

Everyone would know where you were, what you were doing, what time you did it, how you did it. I just couldn't get into it, just couldn't get into it. I walked a lot. I used to keep walking because I just couldn't...

This was a new form of institutionalisation, without the safety and space of the big convent, and the next decision of the Order added to Rose's distress:

And then they built a new convent, with twenty six rooms.... I thought that was the daftest thing ever. And we had to all move in there then. That was a nightmare. Anyway we moved in and it was a huge complex, a square, and it was all glass so everywhere you moved, everyone saw you. I used to wander in one door and out the other, just to annoy them.

Personal exposure became an issue, once the nuns were allowed to emerge as individuals. There was a sense of panic about the inability to come to terms with the state of affairs, and Rose found it impossible to maintain her equilibrium. She regressed and began to act in a childish manner, mirroring the way she felt she was being treated by the authorities, who deprived her of her voice. The authorities annoyed her, so she deliberately annoyed the old fashioned nuns. The collaboration between the authorities and the nuns, advocated by Vatican II, did not seem to be working successfully in this instance, and resulted, ultimately, in Rose deciding to leave the convent. As time goes on, obedience became more problematic, and by the end of the century, the Sisters are less than happy with the situation.

Ministry

Rose and **Jenny** feel that, in undertaking work, other than teaching, they “*break the mould*” in their Orders. To some extent, this is true but many congregations had already

decided to branch out from teaching into other work. **Lauren**'s institution decided that nuns would not continue to hold managerial positions in their ministries. Her Mother General *"got the idea into her head that she liked that we would be finished with being principals and the administrators and all of that."* One wonders if this was an abdication of responsibility, a retreat into a world where everyone is equal, and no one can hold a position of authority. **Clare**, on the other hand, is critical of those *"who gave up teaching"* and took up other work.

All of the research respondents, with the exception of **Jenny** and **Rose**, were teachers, and all, except **Margaret** and **Lauren**, continued to teach until they retired. **Mary** and **Clare** had periods when they held office as superiors, but they returned to teaching, when their term in office expired. **Lauren** had to retire from teaching when she became blind from overwork. Some sight returned and she worked with the blind, for many years.

Margaret took the decision to leave her teaching post before retirement age and return to England, to work with the homeless. She had begun this work during a sabbatical. Her superior's response to her request was not enthusiastic and is reminiscent of Margaret's conversation with her father (about entering the convent in Australia), many years previously. At that time, Margaret ceded to father's wishes, but now, she challenged the superior. She had been an obedient servant in her congregation, for over forty years, and now she took her own authority, and made her own decision, with the reluctant approval of the superior. She lived in the North of England and worked with the homeless from 1993 until 2001, *"I loved it because it was Connemara people all the time."* The men who were there had been *"working on the roads and canals in England, in North England. So, I said, I enjoyed it. They spoke the same accents as they did in Galway ... these down and outs."* Margaret spent her time there, *"getting lunches, preparing vegetables, and talking to them, of course."* She tells a story about a homeless man she took home to his mother in Connemara. It was nearing Christmas and Margaret said to Seánín:

"You must write to your mother for Christmas." *"I'm not able to write"* he replied. *He had a bottle of methylated spirits in one hand and some kind of beer in the other, mixing, and that was the beverage. The man is nearly poisoned, drinking, drinking all the time. So I said, "Listen, you're going to write to her, I'm taking you in a card tomorrow, and you'll write on it to your mother". So I took him one with a flock of sheep it might appeal to him. He said, "I'm not able to write." The hand was shaking. "I'm not able to write". And I said, "You tell*

me what to write now and I'll write it". So I sent the card home and the poor mother she hadn't got a letter or a card since God knows when.

She then decided to take this man home, to Ireland, to visit his mother:

So down I went and booked the two places [on the coach] and we got Seánín, he was stocious [drunk] because when they heard he was leaving to see his mother all the other winos gathered round him and they pawned, they pawned the suit he had ready to go home and he hadn't a thing and he was footless going home.

In spite of his drunken state, she managed to take him back to, "his mother and I really enjoyed that work." She does not say that his mother enjoyed his return, probably because she imagines that reuniting mothers and children is a good thing. Her mother died when she was eighteen months old, and she was told by her father that, following her mother's death, she searched for her in cupboards. One could speculate that, in taking Seánín home to his mother, she was repairing an aspect of her own loss.

Jenny belonged to a teaching Order that catered for middle class pupils. As a novice, she was given a choice in her ministry (unlike all the Sisters in pre-Vatican II times):

And I was asked "what are you going to do, are you going to teach or what are you going to do after Novitiate? We need you to decide what you want to do. We want you to teach." And I said, "I don't want to teach I don't think I am; I don't think I could do it, what about social work?" And they said there was nobody in the Order who was a social worker; it was a teaching Order.

She was allowed to train as a social worker, but found that "Everything around the day was based on teachers, the school. So that, in itself, isolated me from everybody else."

Rose worked initially as a childcare worker, and she was successful in turning a "madhouse" into a "family" and was duly praised for her achievement "I got great praise from the Provincial as I pulled it together." This is described more fully in chapter six. When she finished in childcare, she wanted to work in the Health Board, as a community worker, but she met with much opposition from the congregation, because no one had ever done this kind of work before. Breaking new ground was difficult:

Getting the job in the Health Board was a nightmare, a living nightmare. But anyway em I had to go the Provincial to ask permission to go for the job, to apply for it. So I wrote to her. But they said that they never did anything like that before. And I said "well maybe it's the best way to do it", "but we usually pray about it" [said mother superior], but I said "I'm worn out praying, worn down praying about it".

She got the job but she was annoyed that "they [the nuns] had heard that I got the job in the Health Board before I got time to tell them." She recalls the anger of those in charge when she undertook this work:

They nearly went mental when I got the job. They nearly went out of their minds because it was never done like that “we usually pray about these things.” I said, “I’ve done all the praying I need to do. I got the job and that’s the praying I’m doing and I’m going to it. They thought that was desperate because normally you are missioned.

She was angry and intolerant of her superiors, who were so slow to change, so she defied them. This was the beginning of her leaving process. She later applied for a course in child protection at a prestigious University but did not tell the superior “*until the right moment*”. This superior was “*a very forceful lady, liked to stand very near you and you know talk down to you a little bit.*” So the right moment came and she told the superior after tea:

Well Lord God if you saw the face of her, well she was furious I’d say. Because I don’t think she thought I had it. Because you know I don’t know what she thought I was, but anyway when things didn’t agree with her she used to play the organ. We used to have evening prayer after tea. And when things weren’t good or if there was a tiff at all she’d blow the thing up high. And she’d have the volume up on high doh. The minute I heard the music I thought we’re bad, tonight. It’s gone down very well!

Rose overcame the obstacles to get the education she needed, in spite of the opposition. She also found a way of getting back at those who opposed her. It is clear that her Order had great difficulty in extending out into work that did not fit the traditional pattern. There was a fear of moving out into the unknown. However, following this episode, Rose felt she could not remain in the Order:

I began to think there’s something wrong with me here. I’m not able to do this, so I thought I must leave, I must leave, I’m not going to stay here, I can’t do this, because I felt I was insincere about the whole religious life stuff. And I was just performing.

The authorities seemed to bring out the worst in Rose but she blamed herself, rather than the institution, which is part of the institutionalisation in the convent. Later, from her position outside the convent, she came to a different realisation:

Do you know it gives me the feeling that it’s the person. This may be wrong because they go, that you don’t fit into the cog any more. Or that you don’t fit into the regime any more. So therefore there’s something wrong with you. Did they ever think that what’s inside that might be the cause? Or what’s going on within the group that might be the cause.

Rose now knows that the institution is slow to question itself. She is, no longer, part of the convent, and she can take a third position and look back and ask serious questions about the institution.

A psychoanalytic perspective

In the process of inducting new members, the group unconsciously gives the message, “this is how we ignore what is going on- pretend along with us, and you will soon be one of us.” It can be called settling down, or it can be called institutionalisation. In fact, it is a collusive group denial of the work difficulties.

(Obholzer, 1994:174)

This section takes a retrospective overview of the experiences of the two research respondents who entered in a different era, and are considerably younger than the other eight respondents. Their responses can throw some light on the dilemmas facing some of the older nuns, during this time of change. As has been already noted, Rose and Jenny were the new members who entered the convent during this process of change. Both of them found it hard to settle down, because they experienced disturbing feelings. They were faced with the dilemma of ignoring these feelings, and becoming institutionalized or refusing to accept the status quo. Rose settled initially, but later found it too difficult. Jenny never settled. Both eventually left the convent. Psychoanalysis can help to discover what was happening beneath the surface.

Countertransference

In recent times, the range of psychoanalysis has been extended to uncover, amongst other things, the affective communication from the group to the individual, through the use of counter-transference (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009).

The feelings experienced by ... any member of an institution, while interacting with it, constitute the basic countertransference response on which the understanding of unconscious institutional processes is based.

(Halton, 1994: 18)

This owes much to Klein's (1946) concept of projective identification, which is an unconscious process through which unwanted parts of the self are psychically split off and projected into another, who is then identified with these parts (ibid.). Bion (1967) argues that, sometimes, this is the only way individuals can communicate what is happening in their psyches. The older nuns have had the decrees of Vatican II imposed on them. They may not have attended General Chapters (because only delegates attended initially) and have been given little or no help in identifying and owning their feelings about this imposition. They were, therefore, likely to get rid of these feelings by unconsciously projecting them into the newcomers.

In her first days in the convent (in 1974) **Rose** thought, “*I’m not staying here I thought I can’t be bothered with this if I have this bad feeling, or this uncomfortable feeling. It’s not for me.*” Rose recognised that her feelings were coming from her experience of the convent. She felt “*bad*” and “*uncomfortable*” and she was unsure of what she was doing, and she thought she would have to leave and return to the world. One can hypothesise that the nuns in Rose’s convent were feeling bad and uncomfortable and unsure about what they were doing, and that they would have liked to leave it all, and return to the past.

Rose says, she thinks she enjoyed her Novitiate but she is not sure:

I think that I really enjoyed the Novitiate. I really enjoyed the fun of it. This was a lot of young people. I had great fun. Maybe I didn’t understand looking back what I was doing. It is interesting that the whole day was filled. The whole day was filled and eh...it was like you didn’t have time to think. It was easier not to think maybe. I remember when I entered they were putting numbers on clothes. My number was 261 and I thought imagine I am only a number! This was the Novitiate. I’m not staying here I thought I can’t be bothered with this. If I have this bad feeling, or this uncomfortable feeling it’s not for me. Well anyway one morning I got up and there was no feeling and I thought ohhhhhhhh this is alright. Em I felt that it was oh such a big thing. Everybody seemed to know what they were doing except me.

As she became institutionalised, Rose’s bad feelings dissipated and she reached a state of “*no feeling*”. The only way to survive seemed to be in a state of “*no feeling*” and Rose succumbed to this conditioning. This state was part of the social defence system, an adherence to collective mechanisms that defended against any form of individualism (Menzies, 1970).

Jenny (in 1983) initially experienced unhappiness in her convent. She says that:

as soon as I walked into this community I just felt this immense heaviness over me ... and I just knew as soon as I got there that I’d be so unhappy and I was. It was the most unhappy house I have ever been in.

The feelings of unhappiness were not addressed. Unlike Rose, Jenny continued to feel unhappy, in spite of her resolution to succeed. She did not become institutionalized; she did not internalize the social defence system of “*no feeling*”. The nuns in this convent did not, or were unable, to acknowledge their feelings, and they did not face the emotional difficulties involved in change. In the past, feelings had to be denied and now, there was no one available to help them with the feelings that had been evoked by all the changes, they have had to make. The old way of dealing with things had become dysfunctional, in this new set up.

Rose settled because she lived with the children in the group homes, for eighteen years. But when she left and moved back into a convent, she found it very difficult. She found a different mindset, in this convent, that was hard to tolerate, but it was with the authorities that she had a real problem. She saw the Provincial turn a blind eye (Steiner, 1993) to the situation in the convent. She speaks of the “*performance*” that took place in preparation for the visit of the Provincial of her Order:

Now within hours, days there were new toilet roll holders and there was this and there was that and I thought that was all kind of show business and I don't like that. Other people see me as I am. I said “pity they didn't come sooner we'd be posher.” I used to say things like that. And eh, I think people were afraid. It takes courage to speak out and some people may not have the courage. I certainly would not have had the courage to speak out to that extent. I would have explained, yes, at visitation how difficult it was to live there, that I didn't feel part of it at all and that I couldn't stay where I didn't feel part of.

It is unclear whether Rose was speaking her thoughts aloud, or whether she was passing her funny remarks to her colleagues. What is clear is that she was unable to be fully truthful to the Provincial, who was turning a blind eye. The Provincial came through the ranks, and is, very likely, to have had knowledge from experience, of what happened at local level, when a Provincial was expected. In this case, she chose to turn a blind eye to the “*performance*” that was put on for her and to the double life, the irreconcilable split between the old and the new that appears to have existed in this convent. The superficial was good enough for the Provincial and she had no desire to look beneath the surface. She was unable or unwilling to pick up on the “*fear*” of speaking out, and was either unable or chose not to address Rose's inability to conform. In retrospect, it is easy to be critical of the Provincial, but it is likely that, similar to Mary and Clare, she had no training for her role.

Institutionalisation

Rose believes that the nuns, who were causing her concern, have not been able to change their lives; they are institutionalised and cling to old habits, “*I couldn't be listening to them - whether the jam or the marmalade was on the table did it matter and the place outside was falling apart.*” She recognises the importance that was attached to inconsequential things and this has not changed, “*There's no work in the house to do, only clean it and tidy it. We did that all day. You don't need to do that all day,*” She says the nuns are all busy, “*What are they busy about? Is it putting the cups straight and keeping the knives and forks straight? It's nearly a reverse back to the beginning*

because they're not active within the community" (the parish community outside the convent). Rose feels that these nuns have not been able to change their mindset from the emphasis on mindless activities. It is likely that their actions are a desperate attempt to assure themselves that things have not changed, so they continue with their mindless activities. Institutionalisation is an internalisation of a culture, and these nuns resist change, not through stubbornness, but from an actual inability to change their way of life. They have been cut off from the real world for so long, shielded in their psychic retreat (Steiner, 1993) and would, as Steiner states, have needed psychological help to restore their personalities.

Jenny's experience was not unlike Rose's. As time goes on, she felt the gap grow wider between the work she was doing and the mindless activity of convent life:

I used to feel when I came back from work particularly when I was doing the child care social work, I'd be involved in a lot of difficult abuse cases or I would know of them even if I wasn't involved in them. I would come back to the community and they would be arguing about who left the bread out of the bread bin the night before or who left the butter knife in the butter. Oh God it's all the stupid things that community life is about and "who is going to clean the bath?" "Well it's not my job," "who is going to do the shopping this week?" "Oh I'm not bothered." "I'll do it, I'll do the shopping." You know it's kind of – the priorities for me were very different in how I worked so it's not surprising that they didn't understand it really.

Having become aware of the respondents' accounts of life in the convent, before Vatican II, of the insistence on minutiae, and the punishment for non-conformity, it is understandable that many older people were unable to change the habits of a lifetime. By clinging to old habits, they are attempting to provide continuity and trying to convince themselves that nothing has changed. It is no less understandable, that younger people, fresh from a different society, with a different expectation of religious life, find this way of life intolerable.

The nuns, described by Rose and Jenny, are using the old ways to help them manage the changes. They can be identified as a particular group within the system; it does not mean that all the elderly fall into this group, as many of the research respondents are elderly, and have continued in useful occupation until old age.

Regression

Jenny has many unanswered questions about the life she encountered in the convent. She found some of the nuns she lived with, very immature:

And the way they would fuss over the priests when they would come into the community used drive me mad and how they would flirt with all these priests who would come in and sit at the table it just made me laugh.

Jenny's laugh is not one of pleasure. The nuns have, either regressed to their teenage years, or they have never developed past this stage. Some are antagonistic to the young, as this anecdote reveals:

I remember going in to watch an Irish football match. I think it might have been a boxing match, Barry Mc Guigan. And I sat down and one of the Sisters came in and just sat on my knee because I was obviously sitting in her chair so I had to move and I remember sitting on the little pouf by the door watching this boxing match thinking well that's it, I'm isolated yet again from the rest of the community.

Ten year olds, at play, behave in this manner. In this case, the behaviour is indicative of destructive envy. This Sister could not tolerate what Jenny stood for, so she obliterated her; Jenny did not exist, so she could sit on her chair with impunity. Metaphorically, this could be interpreted as this nun's unconscious desire to "sit on" Jenny by curbing her, and bringing her into line with her own wishes. Jenny felt the isolation and rejection intensely. Another nun, Jenny says, "*ended up communicating with me on yellow sticky notes that she'd leave on the table in the hallway.*" This particular nun could not bring herself to speak to Jenny, as one human being to another, so she communicated indirectly, making Jenny feel unworthy and humiliated. The nuns' behaviour is childish and immature. It is not surprising that these nuns are incapable of acting, in a mature way, as adults. They probably entered in their late teenage years, with little experience of life in the world, and the convent did not provide the containment necessary to manage feelings, of any kind. New, young members, who show their enthusiasm, become easy targets for the resentment and antagonism, that these disgruntled nuns feel towards those who persecute them, with the demands of cultural and structural change.

Jenny compares her experience to the ideal of "*living the spiritual life together. What is it all about then? I couldn't work it out. I had a simple philosophy about my life and nobody seemed to grasp it.*" And she adds, "*None of it seemed to make sense to me*" and she wonders if the nuns felt threatened by those who wanted to bring a new spirit to the Order. Jenny concludes:

Yes it was this kind of double life, I felt I lived a double life; that I was on the edge of two worlds all the time and that neither of them, neither life was fulfilling me at all in how I wanted to live it. I wanted to be, I wanted to live, I

just felt I wanted to live a simple life in community with other likeminded people but nobody really felt like that within the community.

This isolation and exclusion was very disconcerting for Jenny, and she had a fear of growing old and becoming warped, *“I was so unhappy and I just couldn’t reconcile myself to the way people were living and I know that I would have become bitter and twisted and been like the worst kind of old nun that would have been there.”* The worst kind of bitter and twisted nun, reminds Jenny of her mother’s view of the nuns, who taught her:

My mother saw the image of the Irish nuns who taught her as being cruel and vindictive and ungodly. And I purposely wanted to dispel the whole image of what nuns were so I went out of my way to be somebody that isn’t anything like that.

Jenny reveals that one of the reasons she came into the convent, was to change mother’s view of nuns. Now, she was discovering that she was not being allowed to fulfil this objective. She had grown up with mother’s perspective on nuns. She feared she would become one of these cruel nuns, so to prevent this, she decided to leave the convent. She says:

It was a gradual thing. I never wanted to go, never wanted to leave. I really did want to make final vows and that be it for life but I just felt that people had so many personal agendas about how they wanted to live religious life.

Both Jenny and Rose came into the convent determined to stay, but found they could not stay in this troubled environment. An exploration of unconscious processes has shown that the fault lines have resulted from the life the nuns led, before Vatican II, and the impossible task that faced them, when their old defensive ways of living had been exposed. They had great difficulty in adapting. They were psychologically unprepared, and one might say ill-equipped, for the challenges that beset them.

Conclusion

In this phase of Irish history, society gradually became more liberal and, in spite of periods of recession, the economic situation improved and entered a period, in the 1990s, of unprecedented economic prosperity, known as the Celtic Tiger. Accordingly, there was an increase in feminism and women began to find a more fulfilling role in society. The Catholic Church opened a window into the world with the calling of Vatican II, in 1962.

The two main issues, arising from Vatican II that concerned religious life, in this study, were the removal of papal cloister and the universal call to holiness. Papal cloister refers, both to the convent enclosure, and the lifestyle of the Sisters, which made its removal very significant (nuns, that is, contemplatives retain papal cloister because they continue to live a monastic lifestyle and their contact with the world is, by virtue of their particular commitment, very limited).

The universal call to holiness meant an end to the special position, previously held by religious, as mediators between the laity and God. This former position identified Sisters as better and holier, than the laity who required the Sisters' intercessory prayers, in order to, easier, obtain eternal salvation. This position was directly related to the vow of chastity and the state of virginity. Following Vatican II, the word "virginity" was replaced by "celibacy". The document on the Church calls vocation to the consecrated life, "*that precious gift of divine grace*" to be lived out, in "*virginity or celibacy*" (Flannery, 1975: 401). There was, no longer, a distinction between the laity and religious and this left religious without a special identity in the Church. Sisters, who had based their beliefs and trust in religious life, on the fact that they were special, now felt let down by the Church.

The removal of papal cloister, besides opening the convent to the world and allowing the Sisters the freedom to go out, as they pleased, meant that the structural framework of monasticism and its commitment mechanisms were removed. It is well known, that in community life, the greater the number of commitment mechanisms, the greater its chance of success (Kanter, 1972). The emphasis was, now, on ministry and the original vision of the founders.

In order to renew religious life, a plan was formed, that concentrated on structural and role change, rather than on a change of attitude and culture. The two respondents

(superiors) in the study, engaged in implementing the change, relied on their own skills to accomplish this and there was little psychological help or training available to them. Initial changes, in the aftermath of Vatican II, were modest, but over the years they increased. The nuns had been so oppressed that, as soon as freedom beckoned, some embraced it so wholeheartedly, that it became difficult to hold a boundary. Over the transition period of forty years changes occurred in all areas of life, from living in large convent communities, to living in small groups or singly, in ordinary houses; from the idea of collaborative obedience to the practice of majority rule or individual freedom; from a single community ministry to innovative individual or group projects and individual career paths; from reunion with family and friends to the formation of secular relationships; from a small pecuniary allowance to enough money to travel abroad on holidays; from cycling on bicycles to driving in one's own car and from modest changes in the habit to full secular dress. Pious practices eventually gave way, for some, to a more spiritual relationship with the person of Christ. The rate or amount of change did not happen in an orderly fashion across convents or Orders, and some individuals or groups resisted the change and clung on to the old way of life. This often led to conflict between the old, who struggled with institutionalisation and internalised ways of behaving, and the younger, more progressive recruits who later joined the various Orders.

The older members, who had not been helped with cultural change, seemed, from the perspective of the two newer respondents, to be trapped in former ways of relating and behaving. They continued with the defence of "*no feeling*" that is, finding no expression for their unwanted feelings, in this case of discomfort and disorientation, but instead, unconsciously projected them into the newcomers. They often had recourse to behaviour which can only be classified as destructive envy.

What was not attended to, throughout this period, was the internal or cultural change that is required to bring about successful change in an organisation. There is no evidence of mourning the loss of the good aspects of the past, for example, the esprit de corps that inevitably existed in such close knit communities that had bonded, through the adversarial conditions, over many years. However, it is doubtful if internal change were possible, especially for those who had become so institutionalised that the convent had become a psychic retreat (Steiner, 1993).

2000-2008

Forty Years on

Unless the management of organisations is sufficiently stable to be able to provide a clear definition of purpose and a reliable container for the inevitably ambivalent feelings of those they employ towards those in authority, then the organisation will express its disorder through individual and interpersonal disorder in its members.

(Stokes, 1994: 128)

Introduction

This chapter concerns the present, more than forty years after Vatican II. The intervening years were times of experimentation and interpretation of the decrees of Vatican II, and at this point, one could have expected a renewed and somewhat stable structure for religious life. Instead, one finds the nuns struggling for survival, both inside and outside the convent. In the view of the world, as a result of the exposure of the scandals of the past, the nuns have lost their prestige and their witness value, and they struggle with their portrayal in the media as bad, cruel people.

Inside the convent, the nuns still grapple with their re-socialisation, their adaptation to the changes following Vatican II. The authority structure and the nuns' response to it seem to be rooted, at least to some extent, in the internalised model of obedience of the past. There is some dissatisfaction with the leadership, and there is a view that the leadership lacks empathy and transparency. The nuns are gradually losing their group identity, as large convents are closed and they move to small houses, or live singly. They are struggling to carve a new identity. Allegations of misconduct and abuse continue to come to light, and all have to face the corporate responsibility for the victimisation of the weak and vulnerable in their care. Prospects for the future are far from bright.

Rose and **Jenny**, the research participants who entered in the period following Vatican II, left the convent in 1997 and 1995, respectively. Their conscious reason for leaving was their inability to straddle two worlds, the old and the new. This situation is not untypical of the times:

A vast number of religious in the 55-70 age bracket ... find themselves caught between two worlds; the old world in which their present way of life is rooted and the here-and-now world, one that is without a clearly defined "framework of meaning.

(Moran, 2004a: 1)

The research participants who remain fall into the elderly category, and it is their viewpoint that is represented in this chapter. The chapter will give an overview of the Church and society at the turn of the century and discuss the situation in the convent, pertaining to authority and obedience and the Sisters struggle for survival, as they cope with their changed lives. The question of abuse will be examined, as far as that is possible from the data and, finally, there will be a glimpse into the future of religious life from the nuns' perspective.

An overview of Church and society at the turn of the century

Following the period of unprecedented economic growth in the 1990s and the myth of the (now defunct) Celtic Tiger, the Irish became more self confident and outward looking, and the representation of Ireland, as a rural community, became a thing of the past (Penet, 2008). The main influences in the transformation of the Irish economy, were permanent contact with other nationalities, facilitated by cheaper airline tickets, and continued integration into the European Community; foreign investment especially from North America and the new, social phenomenon of immigration. The influential US magazine *Foreign Policy* voted Ireland “*the most globalised country*” of the year 2001, (Coulter and Coleman, 2003: 110). After years of material want and self denial, Irish people were now assiduously pursuing a culture of material gratification and individual self indulgence (Tobin, 2007).

The surge in economic growth added to the momentum of social change in Ireland (White, 2002). Ireland has been identified as a “*late industrialiser*” and, as such, has had insufficient time for its religious institutions to adapt to the transformation (Martin, 1978). The lack of adequate time for a smooth transition from the past was problematic, “*The speed with which Ireland has undergone this process of social liberalisation has indeed been dizzying, and clearly there are those who have been disorientated and estranged by it*” (Tobin, 2007).

The Church’s position in the Western world

In the Western world, the Church finds itself on the sidelines. It has lost its authoritative voice of the past and its dialogic stance of early, post Vatican II times. It is, no longer, a strong cultural influence in Western society. There are many contributory factors to this, including the Church’s hypocritical response to sexual abuse scandals, and its perceived irrelevance in the contemporary world, “*the Church with its credibility in tatters, has almost no authoritative voice. Few listen to it. The dialogue is well nigh over*” (Moran, 2004b: 308).

In Ireland, the people are moving away from the “*the moral community*” of former times, the religiously structured view of society, by which they, automatically, conformed to Church teaching, and accepted the roles assigned to them. They are working towards a societal organisation, free from Catholic influence. In the old, moral community, where being a good Catholic gave one social prestige, the Irish tended to

have a rather passive, legalistic vision of the Church (Penet, 2008). The Church's loss of influence on Irish society means that it has become increasingly more difficult for Irish Catholics to live out their faith in an institutionalised manner (ibid.).

The Irish, no longer, expect the Catholic Church to influence Irish society and politics, that is, to define Irish identity for them. Catholic identity and belief have become privatised, individualised and therefore plural (ibid.). The secularisation of religious institutions and narrowing of their domain, increasingly, limits religion to a private expression in individuals' lives (Berger, 1967). The sacred becomes a personal experience, outside the teaching authority of the institutional Church (White, 2007: 54). Contemporary Irish culture sees an upsurge in individualism. What is important and of value now, is to be understood in individualistic terms, *"the disaffection of the traditional Church has led many to a spiritual quest of their own"* (Maignant, 2003: 74). With an increasing lack of trust in institutions and people in positions of authority, each person seeks, *"to look after self, to satisfy self, to develop self. Decisions are made on the basis of what brings self the best outcome and actions are justified according to the individual's own code of behaviour"* (Moran, 2004b: 309). This era of the ego and hyper-individualism contradicts the denial of the self required to maintain a one, true and universal, apostolic Church (Penet, 2008: 11), and leads Inglis to believe that the traditional Church is like *"a fish out of water"* in this society *"saturated with media messages of self-development"* (1998: 214).

Church control in welfare services

In spite of the continuing control of the Church of primary and secondary schools, the Church no longer possesses its historic role in defining Irish society and establishing its cultural values (White, 2007: 51). Penet states that there has been a *"progressive secularisation of the two traditional strongholds of the Catholic Church in Ireland – education and the health system"* (2008: 11). This process had already begun, following the revelations of abuse, in the 1980s and 1990s. The decrease in religious vocations has left the religious Orders unable to continue to provide personnel, in sufficient numbers, to carry on as before. By this time, vocations to the priesthood and religious life are nearly non-existent (Twomey 2003: 17-29).

Women

Life for women has changed considerably. They are having fewer children. Nearly a third of all babies are born into non-traditional family units and there is, no longer, a

stigma attached to a woman having babies outside marriage. Inglis (2003) finds the change surprising, since, in the recent past, women in such circumstances were treated so harshly. The access to third level education gives women more opportunity in their chosen careers, with expanded roles and expectations. The disintegration of the moral authority of the Catholic Church helped to reinforce women's growing freedom to shape their own private lives. The revelation of the sex abuse scandals, in the 1980s and 1990s, has been identified as the reason for the failure of the Church to be a force, any longer, in respect of sexual morality.

Authority and obedience

At present, the leadership model, in most Orders of Sisters, is of a central leadership team with an executive function that deals with the more global aspects of the Order, the general policies and problems. They are the spokespersons for the Order and deal with Rome, on the one hand, and with the Provincials and the main body of members on the other, although the average nun has little to do with them. The Provincial teams manage in their respective jurisdictions, and local leaders are in charge of convents and small houses, where the administrative and housekeeping duties are shared by the Sisters. Sisters living alone, or singly, is a more recent phenomenon, and one that is highly disputed, and on the increase. Major decisions, such as closing a convent, or undertaking a major new project, are the responsibility of the Provincial team.

Vatican II introduced a new model of obedience that departed from the old authoritarian structures, and introduced a more consultative model that intended to give the nuns more agency in their lives. A consultative model intends to give the leader and the individual Sister space to discern the best way forward, while keeping the overall mission of the congregation in mind. The same applies to proposals from General Chapters. Any consultative process involves collaboration, negotiation and often compromise, as means to an end, and demands an involvement from both parties. This appears to be impossible, because both the leadership and the general body are either operating out of the old model of obedience, or a new model of individualism.

It does not seem possible to take a third position that would ensure that projects undertaken, both at congregational and individual level are in accordance with the mission of the congregation. There is a lack of transparency in the actions of the leadership team, and a lack of emotional holding, which leaves everyone feeling lost and abandoned. Each one is left, trying to find a way forward. In response to authority, the elderly Sisters have retained the old form of obedience, because they internalised the notion of blind obedience, at a time when they were most receptive to whatever the novitiate training demanded. But there is also some evidence of a different outcome where there is a repetition of childhood patterns, a “return of the repressed” or the “compulsion to repeat” (Freud, 1905); some are able to speak where, formerly, they would have remained silent.

There is a lack of confidence in the leadership. The group is larger because of amalgamations that took place over the years. In the previous chapter, **Rose** and **Jenny** described how difficult it was to live with older nuns, who retained the mindless activity of the past and often resented younger members. Rose felt that she had no voice and that the authorities refused to listen. Similarly, other respondents have their problems with the leadership. **Lauren, Mary, Birdie, Clare** and **Barbara** feel that the leadership has, to a greater or lesser extent, failed them and they each have their unique response. However, there is a sense that where blind obedience has been internalized, it is difficult to move from this position. Clare sees conflict between individual freedom and the group mission. She is the only one who takes a broad perspective and she fears speaking her truth. **Patsy, Annie** and **Margaret** have, in their own ways, managed to accept what life offered.

At the time of the interviews, **Patsy** lives in a big convent and is well cared for. She never made any major decisions about her life. She says;

No, I didn't make the decisions, I often think of it and if there was such a word as providence it entered my life anyway. Well, what I wanted to do a lot of the time coincided with, coincided with what was being done.

Her only complaint is about spirituality:

The one weakness we had, I would say, was we were probably more oriented to the professional side of our lives than the spiritual side more like, yea. While we did say our prayers and all the rest of it, again I'm only speaking for myself, it didn't occur to us that our first priority was the spiritual - we probably - well it was demanded I mean - one had to - if one stayed in the barque, you know - so there you are now.

She thinks that nuns have chosen the better part (like Mary in the Gospel who sat at the feet of Jesus, while Martha did all the work). She maintained her equilibrium and her contented state by splitting off her negative feelings and thoughts. She is aware of this. At the end of her first interview she says, with a laugh, that some people would be quite negative and that I would want to get both sides of the story.

Instead of articulating the negative Patsy projects it into the political history of the time, and the fight for independence, from England. She claims that her knowledge of the harsh regime in the convent comes from hearsay; the people she knew were “*decent, spiritual women*” and she adds “*I better go back to the history of Rossnowlagh*” (which is about the fight for independence). This is an example of the “*hidden logic that connects seemingly disconnected ideas*” (Bollas, 2009b: 4). The harsh system is related

to “*the fight for independence*” and is linked to two British coastguard stations being bought, and converted into a holiday house for the nuns. This could be interpreted as decent, spiritual women in a harsh system, fighting for their independence (and getting “*two weeks holidays at the seaside*”). She uses the metaphor of the fight for independence throughout her story, as a way of distancing herself from her feelings about her own thwarted desires, which she dare not articulate in a straightforward way, because it might appear as a criticism. When asked, in the third interview, what she imagined the negative in the past would be, she responds with:

Well, eh, this would not occur in the early years. It would occur in the years of enlightenment. After Vatican II people would say the system was (pause) there was a note of harshness, that all [was] regimented and that it eh, prevented growth, personal growth eh, personal responsibility for oneself and eh, they would possibly say, I would say eh it couldn't be put into concrete examples. Well, I feel genuinely that I was dealing with very decent, spiritual women.

She uses others to give expression to her beliefs. She feels that she has done better than her siblings:

I know my sisters who have grandchildren are totally immersed in them. They think you know that there are no children like their children. Well, grandchildren you know, but I can take a very keen interest in them all. And eh I say I have a wider scope than the grandmothers because I can take them all in.

She is happy with her life and thinks the nuns do not deserve the “*bad press*” they are receiving.

Annie has retired from the US, where she was sent, at forty eight years of age, and where she spent eighteen years. She is now living in a large convent complex where everything is laid on. She keeps in contact with her American friends by email, and meets them, when they come to Ireland. Similar to Patsy she has never made any decisions about her life, since she entered but has trusted in God and accepted the superiors' decisions, “*Well I find it personally, but it's my own make up, that I take it as God's Will and I found out that it always works out for the best. I trust God that he'll always do what's best for me. I have a firm conviction of that.*” She thinks that nuns:

could get very self centred, kind of selfish if you want. But I think it was a great thing when we, the Sisters, were allowed to go home and you could see that people at home had a lot more to put up with, and take you out of your comfort zone, you know. Of course, I always think that, and of course it was good to be in school to see what parents had to put up with and to do.

She is content with her life. Her contentment may be the result of projecting parts of her personality into others. There is evidence, in the study, that she does this with superiors

and people she admires. She takes little responsibility for her life. She projects the difficulties in her life onto others and she is convinced that *“people outside have a much harder life.”*

Margaret has returned from England, where she spent eight years looking after the homeless, following her long teaching career in Ireland. She has fulfilled her dreams of travel, and has seen many countries in the world, including her beloved Australia, where she wanted to enter the convent. At sixty one years of age, she had to defy her superior, in order to leave Ireland, to take up her work with the homeless. Up to that time, she had been obedient and moved from convent to convent, although, each time, she felt her *“heart was broken”* but eventually she settled in, mainly, she thinks, because *“you feel you're being a success in your job, getting on with your work you know, liking it.”* She certainly liked her work with the homeless in England.

She lives, at present, in a convent that once housed a Magdalen laundry, and where some of the Magdalens now live in the basement. This is not Margaret's first choice, but it suits her because she is near her family, *“Nieces and nephews are really lovely to me all the time.”* She visits people in the town and likes to see them *“brightening up”* when she arrives. She says, *“I get my kicks out of visiting.”* Interestingly, she does not call the convent “home” but rather her brother's house. She says *“No matter whether it I go to Australia or England for eight years or Carrick for ten years, no, it's always back there.”* She is happy to live in this convent, for the present, and she thinks she will later retire to the nearby convent nursing home.

The other nuns are less than satisfied with the leadership. **Mary** always obeyed without questioning or understanding why. At the end of her life, she felt she was being treated unfairly and she took her own authority and resolved the matter in a relatively satisfactory manner. She had committed herself totally to the work of the congregation, and served to the best of her ability, mainly in positions of authority as local superior, Mother General and principal of a school, positions that really did not suit her personality, and finally she found herself rejected. She was suddenly asked, for no apparent reason, to move out of the house where she lived, *“That was a shock to me now because I was being asked to leave a place, rather than go and do something.”* She found it hard to believe that she was no longer considered useful. As a child, she lived apart from her parents for several years. There was no one to help her understand her apparent abandonment, or give the emotional support every child needs from their parents. Now at the end of her life, she found herself alone and unappreciated, but this

time, in order to get the best result, she broke the rules, by asking for a place in her present convent:

This was the only place that I could think of, or go to. So I met the local leader and I said to her, would there be a room. I did this when I shouldn't because you see, the negotiating I think it should have come from them [the authorities] or whatever, the house to be consulted and so on.

She found a voice in her own defence, and defied the protocol she spent her life obeying and imposing on others. Although this might have been frightening, she is “*beginning to see it has been good for [her] to come* (uncertain laugh).” Her laugh betrays her disappointment. When asked where she would call home, she answers that she would “*have to call here home now because there is no place else under the sun.*” For many of the Sisters home has to be an internal home because of the lack of stability in their congregations and the knowledge that they have no guarantee of continuity of residence in any one place.

Birdie found her voice to ask for what she wanted, but she was refused at first. She is eighty seven now, and she was transferred a few years ago. She says:

I begged Assumpta [the Mother General] to let me come with the group I knew because I was at home with them. She couldn't because there was no room, so I had to battle that. I can never honestly say that I was at home in Nazareth. I remember wakening in the morning and I hated facing the day. Hated it (long pause) would I have left? No, that something that was there but I hated facing my day for a long time- quite a few months then gradually I felt at home and I settled down. I had a massive heart attack and I often thought that it was the stress but I think there was a lot of cholesterol in my blood, do you know? I don't know maybe it was still the stress in Nazareth. I was pulled away from everyone I knew all my life.

Birdie suspects she may have somatised her feelings and it is interesting that she, who had to live without the intimate relationship that she desired, got a heart attack. As soon as Birdie says her illness may have been as a result of stress, she begins to doubt. While she often criticizes the convent, she also feels she has to defend it, by telling herself she has always been happy in it. To get in touch with how she really feels might be intolerable. Birdie now lives with her former companions, but she lives at a superficial level:

Then of course, at any time you're not going to talk at a deep level. I just don't want, that kind of a way and I don't need it now, no I don't, thanks be to God. I don't need it. Take any of them in the house. There's none of them, I'd talk and give out my opinion in a very ordinary way which is nice but for talking in a deep way about myself I wouldn't be on for doing it. I don't want to do it and I

suppose I don't want to delve into myself either. It would do me more harm than good.

She may, at another level, be commenting on the interviews, which she fears may take her, in emotional terms, to a place she would rather not visit. She has used the metaphor of “cold” to describe every aspect of her life, from the day she entered until the present. The word appears repeatedly throughout her narrative, until one wonders if she is addicted to feeling cold and could not live without this feeling. As already noted, five of her siblings died as infants or in early life, so it is not surprising that she continues to feel cold. Everything, including the warmth of friendship and companionship, must continue to be sacrificed, because the life of holiness is linked to renunciation, self effacement and suffering. If this has been internalized, then it is difficult to enjoy any pleasure that life offers.

Lauren is in her nineties, and recently has had to move over fifty miles, far from the friends and people she knew. Now, she is too old to make new friends and acquaintances, and she is very lonely. Her rage is directed at the way in which the move was orchestrated by the leadership team:

And do you know what they did? I'm saying this because we have it all written and said. Once a week, one left – well 80 something, these are the over 80s. I was nearly the last, I think. One person left – quietly – and next week another one. The people were seeing it but it wasn't public. There wasn't an uproar and they did it badly, very badly. They're re-building now, so that in a way they have seen. Well, we'll say they have. To have done what they have done now. It's a pity. They could have got a house for us in Ballyfree.

Lauren says that many of her companions died since this move “Six died since I left a year ago.” Stapley states that it is a well know phenomenon that the elderly frequently react badly to a change of location, and often deteriorate rapidly following such a move (1996: 57). Lauren feels that she can speak about her move now, because she has written to the authorities and complained about their actions, something she would not have done in the past:

I've written that to them and said “never to do that to anybody again”. You know, you're old your life's work is over. And the friends are made if you like. The history is made. And you're taken out, uprooted out and sent away.

There was, also, something of Lauren's past history being re-enacted in this transfer. As a young girl, she was uprooted from her native, Irish-speaking home and sent away to boarding school, from where she entered the convent, and was forever alienated from her home. She makes the link, “This is now. I'm talking about [19]34. I'm here in this

and you see, if you like, there's a relationship. There is, when I went to boarding school I missed all that was going on around home and in the home itself. And then, now here." The past and the present are intertwined. In the past it was the "*distance between the life I was leading and the life I was brought up to at home - it's the alienation.*" The distance is cultural, psychological and geographical. Now in her old age, she finds her voice and speaks for the past as well as the present pain of separation, and in some small measure, she makes reparation to herself for the silence, the "*sins of omission*" of the past. The changed situation has given Lauren the courage to be her own advocate at last. The leaders carry out decisions, without taking the emotional impact on the elderly into consideration, and sometimes they withhold information and by extension, moral support.

Clare and **Barbara** are in their early seventies, and they were asked to leave their homes and transfer to a small house, to look after some elderly nuns. When they arrived, they found that there were lots of people who could have been assigned to this house, instead of drafting in two people from miles away, "*Sure when we came here we found there were loads of young ones around but none of them would come here.*" The history is that when the convent closed, the old nuns were sent to this particular house, and the younger Sisters went to live in rented houses, outside the town. This is reminiscent of the problem that Rose and Jenny had, in tolerating the older members, who were having difficulty in managing change. In this convent the split between the old and the young is seen in the separate living conditions:

Most of the old ones came in here. So again the change was coming that the younger people weren't all that anxious to come in and stay with older people. So it was only when I came here I realized that, that is why we came, that nobody else would come in.

Barbara, for her part, is angry at the leadership:

The team didn't give us any support really. So we went down then to Fordham for the few years and eh of course the team, and I think they are wrong; they told us nothing about it and none of their own sisters would go into the house. It was a very, very, very difficult house.

One can assume that, if they had been told about the difficulties, they might have found it more difficult to go. Clare and Barbara carried out their assignment without complaint, because compliance has become second nature for them. Lauren, on the other hand, complied but later found the courage to speak her truth.

Obedience without question

Looking at these stories from another perspective, it is clear that as yet, the practice of obedience has not come fully into line with the teaching of Vatican II. **Clare, Barbara** and **Lauren** find that they have obeyed without question, and are now aware of it. The old way of being is difficult to resist, because it has become part of the personality. It has been assimilated, at a time when the women were in their teens and still impressionable. **Clare** is aware that she did not ask any questions about the assignment to Fordham:

It never dawned on me to ask that question. Why am I being asked to go there? Or to ask or query what's it like up there or. It never dawned on me and now I look back on it and they said, to help make community and Barbara was approached at the other end⁴⁰ and she was as smart as I was; she didn't ask any questions either

As a Novice, Clare thought refraining from asking questions was saintly, because it advanced detachment from family and by extension from the world. She practised this, much to the amazement of her mother. She recalls, with affection, an incident from the past when her parents came for their monthly hour with their daughter in the convent:

When Mammy and Daddy would come like I refrained from asking about home or about this that or the other, you know I was just so good. Anyway one day Mam came up and she said, "we got a new press into the kitchen." Oh God I forgot all my abandonment to Divine Providence⁴¹ and I began quizzing her, "and where did you put this and where did you put that and where" the hour flew by and they said good bye to me and they went out and Mammy sneaked back and she said. "Oh Thank God you're yourself, you were awful queer for the last while." So much for my, for my efforts at sanctity but I did; I took it quite seriously.

Clare looks back with amusement at her detachment and her unquestioning obedience, but unlike Lauren, she does not connect it to her present response to authority. She blames herself for not asking the relevant questions, but fails to recognise the link with her Novitiate training. It has become part of the personality to obey without question.

Discernment

Clare has an ability to think about the whole picture, and she has much to say about the new system of governance. She thinks that there is a failure of discernment, and a lack of holding, that leaves her feeling insecure. Those in leadership roles have relinquished their authority, in favour of majority rule, in what **Clare** and **Barbara** see as a "rarefied

⁴⁰ Barbara and Clare lived in different parts of the country before coming here.

⁴¹ As a Novice, Clare was given a book with this title to guide her in the spiritual life

atmosphere” of General Chapters where projects are proposed that seem irrelevant “*and people go along with it*”. Clare recounts her conversation with a member of the provincial leadership team:

I said, “you know such and such a thing is daft” and she said, “you know these things are drawn up and we have to implement them because that is the charge we are given, to implement them,” she said, “to implement the decisions of the Chapter.” But you can get awful queer stuff.

Leadership is led rather than leading. There is no overall conception of, or differentiation between viable projects and the “*queer stuff*”. Clare describes what she sees as the current position:

There are people who are not able to see a thing through, to start it see it through to the bitter end. They start it and it sounds great and they get fed up with it and they jump on to some other thing and they are at that for a while and they get tired of that and they move on.

This process reflects a leadership and a membership that is still immature. In the study, there is just one example of this, given by **Mary**. She refers to a house in her congregation where the function and name were changed several times “*I’ll call it St Mary’s even though they changed the name and this is funny too - A group came in and they called it Slanu and then they walked out.*” This group set up a holistic healing centre, without enough expertise and without negotiating with the others who lived in the house, so the undertaking caused friction in the group and came to an end, “*Anyway a new leader came along and she decided Slanu was to finish so Slanu finished.*” It is possible that those involved here are still in the experimentation phase, trying to make up for lost time, trying to find a niche where they will find fulfilment. Some elderly members and the authorities feel pressurized by this.

The failure to keep the institutional mission in mind also extends to discernment at an individual level. Clare describes a potential scenario:

Like someone will say “I feel called, I feel called to do this” and what on earth is discernment nowadays? I have seen so many instances of discernment, I saying, “this is what I want to do” and you [the leader] saying, “That’s all right, go on, go ahead and do it.” That’s not discernment in my book. Now there you are.

Clare has the ability to keep the overall situation in mind. She feels angry about this individualism because it raises the question of organizational mission; she sees the conflict between the individual and the organization. This individualism is part of modern society in “*changed attitudes*” where “*self promotion has overtaken loyalty*”

(Long, 2008: 31). It is described by Gordon Lawrence (2000: 102) as the fifth basic assumption “*Me*” and has already been noted as part of the culture of the time in Ireland.

Vatican II enabled the individual nun to take back some of the personal freedoms denied in the past, but it seems this has led to less commitment to the overall mission of the congregation. **Clare** reflects:

I think everybody wants to be a chief now. You know, I think that, in that everybody wants independence. Now while I can see that each person is entitled to independence but I think that the good of the whole is greater than the good of one person and I don't think the whole can be sacrificed for the good of one person.

She has an ability to reflect but her perspective is not shared:

A lot of people wouldn't agree with me on that at all. They say, well I'm entitled to this and I'm entitled to that. This is my right and I'm an individual and I'll accept all that but I still feel we committed ourselves to a Congregation of Sisters to work as a group, do you know what I mean, with a common vision - though people go their own way I would still feel where is the mission now? And where is the focus now on our mission in the Church?

Clare is making an important point, but it seems that years of repression and submission have left many people with little appetite for the overall mission.

Lack of holding

The result of the present situation, where the structure is uncertain and faltering, is that the Sisters no longer feel held. Once again, it is **Clare** who understands this, “*I mean you had people beginning to be free to say things, to think things, to do things. Then who is the person at the top who is able to hold that together and keep the aims and the ideals of the Congregation?*” With some nostalgia she recalls the safety of the past:

But if I were looking now, and I'm not saying this by way of criticism, I say where is my support? Like we go back to the pre Vatican times and see the support and where is my support now? You, you do the best you can but there is nobody to catch you (laugh) if you are falling.

Clare's laugh has a very sad ring to it. She realises that the organisation lacks a framework for effective functioning. She is referring to an internalised holding environment, a psychological holding, analogous to that felt by the infant held by Winnicott's “good enough” mother (Stapley, 1996). Emotional support is lacking, and Clare feels in freefall. There was no emotional support in the past, but there was a group of like-minded individuals, a person in charge and a rule. Although this was very

restrictive and repressive, it left one with the feeling of knowing where one stood. It is clear that the leadership role is not an easy one, and now positions of authority are difficult to fill.

Positions of authority

A lack of clarity predominates, about the roles of authority and membership, as well as confusion about the role of the organization, in the context of society. As a result, the members do not wish to take on positions of authority. As **Clare** mentioned earlier, being in authority is not very easy at a time of uncertainty and confusion. She says that:

There are no superiors today to take the job, that's the reality. No matter how the leadership tell us about clusters and participative leadership etcetera, etcetera; there are no superiors; nobody is able to take the amount of hassle and what people expect from somebody in charge; they are just not able for it; and nobody will do it in today's world, that's as I see it.

Barbara agrees with this view and adds the additional factor of the age of the group in her community, “*What I think is happening nowadays is that most of the people are too old to even show any interest in it [leadership in her convent] but there were a number of people nominated for this place but I'd say people didn't take it.*”

What becomes increasingly clear is the gradual dissolution of the system, through the fragmentation of the authority structure that fails to hold the members and give them a sense of purpose, as a functioning group. The result is a group of individuals trying to find a *raison d'être*.

The battle to survive

One cannot but be struck by the fact that words for war or battle appear throughout the study. There is a continuous struggle, which has lasted up to the present. **Barbara** says that life is better now:

I would say people lead a more normal life. We are not living in fear, you know the fear of talking when you shouldn't be talking or making noise when you shouldn't be making noise or breaking a plate; there was an awful lot of fear in the past.

But all is not well in Barbara's present convent. She describes the relationship between the nuns and her present local leader as a "cold war". She lists the many complaints she has against the leader but adds "Except that she couldn't abuse you the way Benedict could." Up to this she did not use the word "abuse" to describe the treatment meted out to her by Benedict. As to the members, Barbara says they are too old to look for what they need, "I think for a lot of people that the fight is gone out of them; they are just gone beyond the age when they want to fight for their rights." Why do they need to fight? This is how she sees it, which may be a projection on her part. She may feel too old to fight for her rights, so she splits off and projects her fighting feelings.

Barbara cannot confront this leader who acted unfairly towards her, on many occasions. She has had to suppress her feelings in the past, and now, she continues to split off and compartmentalize her unwanted feelings. She makes a definite conscious split between her life and her prayer, so that her prayer is not contaminated by life. She claims that she has Jesus as her friend, and yet she cannot bring her troubles to Him. She explains:

So that's why I feel if you start confronting her and challenging her and all of that; I will lose my peace of mind anyway and then you go to prayer and you are giving out about her in your mind, like that rip and what she did and what she didn't do and you're going to end up in chaos in there as well

But the feelings are not actually cut off; they are kept at bay, at prayer time. She has previously said that her spirituality is a relationship with the person of Jesus, so Jesus has to be protected from her raging feelings. Of course Jesus is not a real person; he is an internal object; an internal object that has to be protected from rage and chaos. She feels she has to protect the good internal object at all costs. For her the good Jesus is not strong enough to survive. Compartmentalization involves splitting and keeping things apart. In this case bringing the parts together is feared, because she thinks it would cause chaos and destroy peace of mind. Barbara has a fear of speaking her truth, even to

herself in prayer. The split is between her internal and external self. Meditation involves leaving the world of the ego behind, and moving into a mystical space, but this does not seem to be what Barbara means. She is talking about the impossibility of confronting the leader about her actions, for fear of disrupting her relationship with Jesus.

Clare also uses the language of warfare. There are serious issues to be discussed, in relation to the mission of the congregation, but Clare says it is not possible to speak at a General Chapter:

Now I'll tell you something, if I were to go to a Chapter and say what I have just said to you I'd be bombed out of it. I'd literally be bombed out of it. You are a marked person when you speak your truth that way. Because these people can be very strong when they get back at you and if they even perceive that you are saying something about them so I don't know where that can bring us.

This is the rhetoric of retribution, and is disturbing to hear especially in convent life.

Lauren is also in a warzone. When speaking about the abuse and its repercussions Lauren says, *"It's (she struggles to find the words) it's like war."* She says, that when she was upset, she did not speak to anyone, she kept her thoughts to herself, *"I had it in here (pointing to her heart) you see that's important. I see now I didn't see it at that time. This not opening out - my rebellion was inside."* She explains what she means, *"Well, that's what I was saying when I was talking about the rebellion bit. It's like you thought things and you had them in your head but yet you never get together [with others] to do something about it."*

Birdie uses a *"battle"* metaphor to describe her inner conflict with the demands of the vow of chastity, *"Well you fought the battle of being able to do without that friendship so you just fought the battle and you were delighted when you fought it and were able to carry on without it."* She resolved that she would never again become *"involved with anybody."*

War is about unresolved conflict, and there are usually winners and losers. What war is being fought? Many have felt that they were always in a warzone, while others feel they have been cast into one, because they cannot communicate with one another, and hostilities and tensions remain unexpressed and unresolved. The excitement of change, following Vatican II, has long since settled, and everyone has to face reality. Each one seeks happiness, the hundredfold promised by the Gospel to those who give up their lives to follow Christ in religious life. But somehow, the theology of the past has been transformed through Vatican II, and the emphasis is now more on the human, than on the theological. As **Lauren** says, *"When the changes came and everybody was running*

to get their own bit out of life, what they had missed out, you know. Well I'm exaggerating a bit there but you know it's right, within a certain understanding, you know." Lauren may feel she is exaggerating, but it is true that the nuns are struggling to find an identity and fulfilment in what feels like a formless void. Expectations of future salvation, in heaven, are no longer mentioned, and one wonders if the nuns feel as if they have done it all for nothing. To contemplate this would be unbearable, the loss would be incalculable.

Seeking a path to fulfilment

Some Sisters seek their fulfilment through the practice of alternative therapies. They have become involved in counselling and alternative therapies such as "*massaging people*" which might be a way of using touch, as a compensation for the lack of touch in their lives, in the past. These Sisters are not part of this study; they belong to the "other world" and they play an important part in the congregation, but are known to us only through the references of the elderly. **Clare** has doubts about those who have chosen to counsel others:

I remember a guy saying to me (laugh) very funny; he was some kind of psychologist and I remember meeting him in a waiting room and there were only the two of us and we were chatting away about religious life and he said to me, "do you know one thing that is awful strange" he said, "the number of nuns that are studying counselling and you know" he said, "they come up to us looking for jobs and I'll tell you the truth some of them I wouldn't put them in charge of a henhouse."

This is a rather harsh judgement and she adds:

Well I'll tell you something; an outsider's view of an awful lot of the people who would be going doing this, they haven't sorted themselves out at all really. They haven't sorted themselves out and it's almost as if, I don't know.

She wonders if it is a "*search for unfulfilled - Now I think there had to be a lot of unfilled lives,*" because, she believes, in the past, the spirit had gone from religious life and "*it all became kind of automatic*" and the nuns are trying to compensate, and to sort out their own lives, by being counsellors. It also gives them the feeling of being needed. They have lost their status, and their function, by the decrees of Vatican II and they search out caring professions, unconsciously reversing their own need to be cared for, and comforted. It is well known that this is not good practice, "*we are only in a position to give when our own needs go some way to being acknowledged and satisfied.... This puts a lot of responsibility on helpers to be active in trying to satisfy their own needs*

and continue to learn” (Hawkins and Shoheit, 2006). One feels sympathy for these nuns who have led a life of emotional deprivation and are trying to catch up. Others leave the group and live alone.

Living singly

...religious are still vowed persons – persons vowed to ideals that have lost their meaning as a consequence of time. The translation of vows into an individualistic frame of reference provides an individual religious with new meaning. But it begs the question as to why one needs to live as a member of a group.

(Moran, 2004a: 1)

At this stage most of the large convents no longer exist, and the Sisters are either living singly or in small houses. But living in close contact with others, in a small house, calls for a maturity and a degree of interdependence that many cannot find in themselves. **Mary** has recounted her happy experience for a few years in a small house and **Clare** and **Barbara**'s time together in a small house was a happy time but Clare say that this situation is not replicated in other houses:

Now I know other houses where there might be three and they never meet, they never sit down to a meal together, in some cases they mightn't even talk to each other, not that they might be fighting with each other but that they're, "it's my life."

These Sisters seem unable to live interdependently, perhaps because they have not fully come to terms with their independence, having spent most of their lives in a dependent culture.

Birdie thinks that people do not wish to live together because it is too difficult, *“Community life is the most difficult part of religious life, definitely and I suppose that's why people are going to live in apartments.”* The Sisters are choosing to live alone in ever increasing numbers. It can be seen as a way of leaving community without leaving the Order; a way of keeping the financial benefits offered by the convent, without having the worry of supporting oneself, in other words, having the best of both worlds. This is something for which they can hardly be blamed, when one considers the life they led before Vatican II. Living singly is an extreme reaction to the total lack of privacy and the deprivation of that time. **Clare** is dissatisfied with this development. She attributes it to the growth of individualism, *“Now this thing has crept in, 'my life' and a sense of self you know and 'I have to have this and I have to have that and I have to have the other' and this is where single living has come in.”* She reflects on this change

and notes that it was never a General Chapter decision. She seems quite angry about the way things are evolving and wonders what the limits are:

There was never a decision at congregational level in our congregation to go into single living and yet it's all over the place. Somebody decided and got leave to do it and it took off. I mean you look at ourselves, you look at Ballyfree, they've built 18 apartments beside the Convent. I mean what were they saying to everybody? Was that weak leadership that caused that? I don't know. I don't know. But like where you have everybody going their own way and the sky is the limit with what people are asking for. The sky is actually the limit. Where is the, where is the, I mean I don't know what we are about now. They say all this, now these people who are living on their own, now they can cluster together but the reality is that they don't.

Clare has several questions about the direction being taken. She asks how the public see the building project in Ballyfree. The underlying question is how this fits with the vow of poverty and option for the poor. She asks if this is a reflection on the leadership. She has already indicated the leaders are coerced by stronger personalities, and act against their better judgement. If this is the case what do the leaders fear? Clare is indicating that there is no direction from leadership, no holding of a position that is grounded, and that those who are living alone, are being disingenuous in saying that they will “cluster”, that they will meet together at regular intervals, because they do not do so.

It is clear that the collapse of a shared, formative “*framework of meaning*” has created a “*meaning vacuum*” (Moran, 2004a: 1) and each one, according to her lights and ability, is trying to create her own meaning. There is much confusion around leadership and membership, the loss of group identity and a sense of belonging. The confusion and anxiety is compounded by allegations of abuse that have come to light in the 1990s and the Sisters await the results of the investigation into institutional child abuse.

Revelations of Abuse

At the age of ten, my education, such as it was, dwindled down to three days a week because on Monday and Wednesday I would leave the classroom at ten o'clock to go to the laundries. I did the roll call (to please the school inspectors), said my prayers, class commenced and it would be "Laundries?" "Peelers"⁴²?" and that was more than half us orphans done for the day.

(O'Malley, 2004: 105)

At the time of the interviews the nuns were being faced with many allegations of abuse from the past, as **Lauren** says, "*It is only now that these things are coming out. And they are coming out now abundantly.*" This section will use the perspective of the research participants to define abuse, as it is conceived by them. It will look at the situation in Industrial Schools and Magdalen Asylums and it will try to understand what lies beneath the surface, how abusive situations were condoned or remained undetected until recent times, and it will look at how the nuns are managing to cope with the allegations. It does not seek to determine whether or not abuse took place but to understand how those committed to a life of love (of God and of neighbour) could have perpetrated acts of abuse. As far as can be ascertained from the study, none of the respondents were perpetrators of abuse, but they have some opinions about it.

Definition of abuse

The definition of abuse has changed considerably over the decades. What was once accepted as normal practice, slapping or beating children is now seen as abusive. **Barbara**, who was never slapped by her parents, has been told repeatedly by her companions over the years, that the "*sally rod was always on the mantelpiece*" in their homes. Until recent years, corporal punishment was permitted in schools. As a little child at school, **Clare** had to keep her handwriting between the lines but "*at times I would get so nervous that my hand would jerk*" and then she was slapped by the nun. This shows how the fear of punishment can lead to anxiety, and one inadvertently does what one is trying to avoid, thus setting up a cycle of fear and punishment. **Barbara** tells of being systematically beaten by teachers, both lay and religious, in her early years in school. The first experience was with a lay teacher, and when she told her father, he spoke to the lay teacher, and the beatings stopped. However, she did not volunteer this information too readily, "*it reached the stage when I wouldn't go to school, so*

⁴² Some of the children left school to peel potatoes.

eventually I told them” but she did not tell her father when she was being slapped by the nuns, something she describes as, *“the pits altogether.”* Nuns and priests were held in such high esteem, at this time, that children did not report abuse to adults. Somehow they sensed that they would not be believed. **Lauren** is also very clear about what used to happen. When speaking of the lay Sisters, who looked after the boarders, she says, *“Oh, they would slap, that’s for sure.”* She says there was *“Oh, too much, oh, too much.”* She adds:

And that would have been in the schools, as well. I never slapped. But in the Primary [school], in time, they slapped. And some were given to the slapper. Yes, that’s true. But then slapping went on at home and if you told something that happened in school at home you’d get slapped. They wouldn’t listen to the whole story. They didn’t like you to get into trouble. It went in on one ear and out the other.

Lauren is intimating that parents were afraid of trouble. This triggers something for Lauren, and she begins to talk about a book, written by an ex resident of an industrial school, in which she is mentioned by name, something she finds very disturbing.⁴³ *“My name was mentioned twice and there was nothing in it, nothing in the world.”*

She continues:

Now the big point and possibly was that this one [a child] and I forget her name. She died and she [the author] believes she died as a result of a blow from a Sister. And that’s not true or anything but she believes it and wrote it in the book and while she did that and gave the name of the Sister who happened to be now dead.

Lauren then says *“Do I believe that that could happen? In the circumstances yes, But I don’t believe it but I believe it could happen.”* She believes it and she doesn’t believe it. It is not clear when this happened. What is clear is that Lauren is finding herself in a difficult position. One wonders if she has spoken about the story before. Why does she decide to tell it now? Lauren is very open during the interviews and she is also cross with herself for her *“sins of omission”* in the past, about keeping silent about injustice and turning a blind eye. It seems as if she believes that it is possible that a nun could have fatally struck a child, although it is rather extreme.⁴⁴

⁴³ In order to protect confidentiality it is not possible to discuss this further.

⁴⁴ A report in *Suffer Little Children* says that many children died in this industrial school. A full quotation would identify Lauren’s convent (Raftery and O’Sullivan, 1999).

Industrial schools

Rose is the only respondent who has worked in an industrial school. She describes the appalling conditions she found when she started in the late 1970s⁴⁵.

There was nothing in the house. They had broken everything. There was very little in the house. The sitting room consisted of a piano, a record holder with no records, an old table chairs that had been broken and jumped on and a television. And I thought that this is terrible. A dirty carpet!

She thought:

This is awful. How can children do any good here if this is like this? But you see anything up to eighteen Sisters that had passed through that particular house, between novices and people doing placements and Sisters didn't stay because it was chaotic. And there was all butter on the walls and I'd say people would throw things and I thought this was something else but anyway I thought sure I'll have a go at it.

Rose worked very hard with these children. She entered the convent to work with children and was happy to do this work. She recollects the first party in the house, “We had a packet of balloons a chocolate cake, a sponge cake that I bought down the town and bubbles. And it was the best party that we had to this day that I can remember. And we had great fun.” When the children moved from the institution to a small house she describes the move:

And we moved with two prams. And we put wardrobes on top of prams and we carried them past the Social Service Centre and we used to keep our heads behind the wardrobes so they wouldn't see who was walking. And we did it by night when the children were in bed. And we used to go down the back stairs with the wardrobe and carry it over and leave it there so somebody else would bring it up.

She did not seem to get much assistance but she was determined to help the children and she worked hard and succeeded. She says:

And the only way I pulled it together was doing good things with the children – doing things that they'd remember, trying to think of things that they'd remember and that might bring them round – with little but with great fun.

She was commended by her Superior General for her success. She spent eighteen years in this work. She tells how a care worker in this institution was jailed for ten years for sexually abusing some of the boys.

⁴⁵ The allegations of abuse in residential homes, run by the nuns, were of deprivation of basic needs, sexual abuse by a male staff and serious physical abuse. In primary school they were often singled out for harsher punishment than other children (*The Ryan Report*, 2009).

Birdie's friend worked in residential care and she was sometimes very upset because of the way the boys were beaten by the nun in charge, in the 1980s. She describes the manager as *"a bully"*. **Mary** believes that, in the past, in the institutions under her jurisdiction *"there would have been Sisters [there] who would have beaten these children."*

The Magdalen laundries

This study has shown that until the late 1960s the nuns lived in a disempowering and harsh regime where, for some, fear predominated. **Barbara** says, *"It was a very harsh way of life."* A similar regime existed in the Magdalen Laundries, run by the nuns. **Barbara** feels that she was abused by superiors in the convent, but things have now changed. Although all is not well with her relationship with her current superior she remarks, *"She could not abuse me the way Benedict did."* **Rose** describes one of her superiors as *"very powerful lady who if she didn't get you on the spot, she'd get you later. There was an element of abuse in it, verbally and emotionally."*

Magdalen laundries were part of the setup in some convents and once again it is **Rose** who had direct experience of this work. She worked in two of these laundries. **Margaret** had some experience of the Magdalens in her youth, and is now living in the same convent as some of the former inmates and **Mary** was a Superior General with responsibility for at least one such institution. One could say that the Magdalen homes were places where society could put those they did not wish to see in their midst and one has to ask the reason for this. The women were sent to these institutions for various offences, some not yet committed. Their punishment was pre-emptive. **Mary** reports that, sometimes the family *"were afraid that they would be interfered with by parents ... it was often the parish priest [who sent them] sometimes it was the parents, if a girl became pregnant."* **Rose** says, *"Some of them were there because they had babies and what was wrong with that? I was a bit ahead of my time and I thought this was awful to do this."* She belongs to a different generation and a different culture, she entered in the 1970s and she had lived her early life in England. She adds that some women were there because of petty criminal offences, for example stealing a bicycle, and she sums it up with the phrase, *"criminal offences and no support from family"*. There is one reference to sexual abuse in the Magdalen homes by **Mary**, who says, *"There was one lady from the Magdalen said that a priest interfered with her in confession."* When **Mary** confused the film (*The Magdalene Sisters*) with reality I, the interviewer, became very

confused. What was film and what was reality? I was left with the task of separating it out which took some time and effort. Mary fears her knowledge and becomes confused as a way of denying it.

Seeking an understanding

There is some understanding, in the study, of the reasons for the abuse; people were working in isolation, there was a fear of vulnerability among the Sisters and there was an inequality of educational opportunity in the convents. Rose was interviewed by the Health Board about a man who abused the boys in her institution. She did not know the man; he was later convicted and jailed for ten years. She says:

If you look back it was all activity. Then in the end, in the summing up he said [the inspector, who interviewed her] “you hardly had time to know what was going on.” I said the houses were all very separate and we didn’t know what was going on because we didn’t have time to know what was going on.

She wonders “*were there things happening and I didn’t see them?*” She has some idea that this may be possible. In her two placements in Magdalen Laundries, run by her Order, she says that “*Nobody questioned they just got on with it*”.

Lauren, for her part, now realises that it was not possible, at the time, for the nuns who worked in these institutions to admit that they were vulnerable. It was impossible for them to say, “*It’s hard to mind these girls [in the Industrial schools] and show us how they feel. They couldn’t do that, no they couldn’t do that. No, no, the silence was very holy* (drawn out) (pause) *I’m not saying the cause of it. They could - this lack of education of all kinds now.*” In an institution where perfection of one’s ordinary actions was the aim, it would have been inconceivable for anyone to admit to anything less than perfection, so those (often lay Sisters) who worked in these areas had to deceive themselves and others, into believing that they were doing well. Lack of education is seen by Lauren as a contributory factor in the vulnerability.

Mary explains the situation, in her way, “*Yes, it’s a big number of them up there, children crying and someone needed to go up and look after them and here I am and something else to be done.*” She is making the distinction between those having too many children to look after, and the teacher who is busy about other things. She says of her own sister (sibling) who worked in an industrial school:

My sister, she was the principal she was the head of the school, they [the children] had a school of their own- they didn’t go to the primary school and she was actually the principal and she was very caring of them because you know

people would want them taken out to do jobs⁴⁶ and she just wouldn't have it. See there was no child care training; they were getting in-service training.

The division of the nuns into those who were educated and taught in the more public schools and those who were uneducated and worked in the hidden laundries and industrial schools with the most deprived and despised members of society, was bound to have implications for the care provided in these institutions, and for the self esteem of the nuns who worked there.

The Magdalens and the nuns

A closer look reveals a more complex interrelationship between the nuns and Magdalens. **Mary** sees the latter as “*semi-Sisters*” as some kind of “*third order*”. She lists the similarities in the lived life of both groups (Table 5) and this is inadvertently corroborated by others. On the other hand, there is a belittling, a kind of dehumanising of the Magdalens that is indirectly supported by society through the circulation of stories about them. These stories belong in the past, but, in the present, **Mary** and **Margaret** both portray the women as being less than human. This complex relationship can throw some light on projections between the two groups, and is linked to the projections of society onto both groups.

Table 5

Magdalens	Nuns
Prayer- prayers in common and Mass (Mary)	Prayer – prayers in common and Mass (Annie)
Routine – daily followed by all (Mary)	Routine – daily, followed by all (Annie, Birdie)
Slept in dormitories (Mary)	Slept in dormitories (particularly as novices. Often shared accommodation (Mary, Barbara)
Unpaid workers (no vows but no choice) (Mary)	Unpaid workers (vow of poverty) (Clare)
Workmen who kept boilers (laundry) going (Mary)	Contact only with priests except in work situation (Rose)
Most had sexual experience and produced babies (implied by Mary)	Vow of chastity- no sexual experience Friendships forbidden (Barbara)
Hair cut as punishment (Mary)	Hair cut at reception (Clare)
Couldn't live outside because of former life (Mary)	Couldn't live outside convent because of dependency (Barbara)
Immature (Mary)	Immature (Birdie)

Table 5 Column one shows the points made by Mary about the Magdalens and column two shows the similarities with the lives of the nuns made by other research respondents (names in brackets)

⁴⁶ This is corroborated in *Childhood Interrupted* (O'Malley, 2004)

The similarities, in the lives of the nuns and the Magdalens, are striking. The nuns took vows that governed their lives; the vow of poverty included stipulations on accommodation, common life and work. The vow of chastity included a prohibition on all relationships, sexual and otherwise, both inside and outside the convent. The vow of obedience covered all aspects of religious life, and encouraged dependency which led to a lack of maturity, as Birdie describes, “*We behaved very childlike and very immature and that’s the wholly all of it.*”

The question is why the Magdalens were expected to live a parallel life when they had taken no vows⁴⁷. The Vatican is ultimately responsible for the subordination and tight control of the nuns, and they in turn subordinate and control the women in their care. Other similarities also arise. **Birdie** speaks of the nuns being “*watched all the time*” and of living “*in fear*” and **Rose** experiences the same feelings when she is working in the Magdalen laundry, “*I suppose I was young and I was afraid of them. I didn’t know what people were doing. You felt you were being watched. I did anyway.*” It is likely that Rose, who was the newcomer here, was picking up these feelings from the inmates. **Mary** admits that there was one Sister who worked in a Magdalen Laundry who aroused fear in her companions, “*I know some of the Sisters who would have lived with her and they would have been afraid of her themselves.*” Both in the convent and in the Magdalen laundries, there was a feeling of powerful, overseeing figures, who inspired fear. Both groups were separated from society, the nuns by cloister and the Magdalens because they were not welcome in society, and were brought back by the police, if they tried to escape. A consequence of the lifestyle was, as **Rose** suggests, that both the nuns and the Magdalens were institutionalised.

The crossover from similarity to difference is expressed in **Rose’s** comments on sexuality, when she wonders how the Magdalens managed their sexuality:

And their lack of a chance of making a relationship with the opposite sex was a thing that struck me because they were all women. How did they deal with their own sexuality and while community is similar but you had exposure to the opposite sex?

What Rose forgets, is that most of the Magdalens had already had sexual experience, and it was for that reason that they were committed to the institution. They had deviated from the rigid expectations of the Church that were imposed on society in Ireland, at the time. The only reference to the opposite sex, besides this one, is to males accused of

⁴⁷ In a Galway convent, the Sister in charge told Halliday Sutherland that the Magdalens took a vow to remain in the Magdalen asylum for life (Sutherland, 1995: 82)

abuse; men (priests and relatives) who committed the women to the institution; and of the men who looked after the boilers in the laundry. Men were not incarcerated for their part in the sexual acts that led the Magdalens to be taken out of society, and often led to the children of these unions being put into industrial schools. Both society and the Church see men, as not culpable or answerable when it comes to sexual transgressions.

The Magdalens and society

Margaret shows how society viewed the Magdalens when she was a young girl, about sixty years ago. She introduces the subject with the words:

And even as a youngster coming in and out from home, up the road a few miles, I didn't, I shouldn't be saying that, this, out loud, passing here I used to shudder, shivers would go up your back, you associated it with the Magdalens – you'd hear stories. You would see the women – you got this feeling that this was eh -

She cannot continue with her sentence. She is stuck. She implies that there is something that cannot be spoken about, some terrible stories that can only be whispered. She saw the women and it frightened her. Even sixty years ago, the people in the vicinity were aware that something untoward was going on in the convent, and stories were circulated. Like Margaret, the people would come in “*with the odd tablecloth for Christmas*” to be laundered by the women. The women washed the public’s dirty linen, so that they could celebrate at Christmas. At an unconscious level they cleansed away the dirt, while at the same time holding something frightening for society, something that could not be put into words. Margaret is aware of her reaction, yet she denies all knowledge of what occurred in the laundry. She cannot bear to bring herself to acknowledge the unthought known (Bollas, 1987) and like everyone in the society at the time, she prefers to turn a blind eye (Steiner, 1993) and she continues to claim ignorance of the injustice being done to the women in this institution.

Lauren also shows that society was not unaware of the plight of these young women⁴⁸ who were forced to make reparation for wrongdoing. She refers to them as “*laundry girls, penitents*” as she struggles but cannot find the word “Magdalen”. **Mary** also sets them apart from others when she says “*some of these women had strange stories.*” The women were set apart in the public mind, and the nuns’ comments also paint them as different. **Margaret** attributes less than human behaviour to the three remaining

⁴⁸ Society was aware and not aware of the situation in industrial schools. Recalcitrant children were threatened with the local industrial school, “... *these places were known to be unpleasant it is likely that people did not draw any precise connection between making the threat and a detailed awareness of just how terrible conditions were for the children in these institutions*” (Raftery and O’Sullivan, 1997: 317).

Magdalens who now live in her convent “*the three of them would be at one another’s throats with the jealousy*” if the occasion for feelings of jealousy arose. **Rose** supposes that “*some of them had mental health problems as well which may not have been identified the way we would be able to identify now and they grated on others and they used to fight.*” And **Mary** refers to them somewhat disparagingly:

But it seems the poor creatures (laugh) they would be very angry and vexed among themselves and they would be fighting among themselves. Dorothy [a nun who worked with them] was saying that one could throw an iron at another and whatever happened it was generally among themselves

Mary’s laugh is disconcertingly condescending and dismissive. The women were openly angry, and as long as they directed their anger at one another, the nuns were not affected by it. They were not versed in the social graces, and were left to their own devices, to fight it out. Are **Margaret**, **Rose** and **Mary** referring, unwittingly, to the nuns’ split-off, unwanted and unsafe feelings of anger and jealousy that have been projected into the Magdalens?

Denials and projections

Mary introduces the concept of punishment for wrongdoing in the Magdalen homes which she then partly denies, “*And they were talking about their hair being cut if they did something wrong. Now that could be true, that a Sister would have cut their hair. I’m not too sure now because I wasn’t there.*” This is a denial on **Mary**’s part of any punishment of the Magdalens; she can’t know because she was not there. She admits to the dependent culture that prevailed in the homes:

Now at one stage they were given permission, any of them wanted to leave or go home or whatever was. Some did, some did and came back. There were a few there who were back when I was there. They couldn’t live outside because of the life they were leading up to that time.

She seems to regret that these women were not taught, and realises that their lack of education left them immature, and deprived them of their reflective ability:

That’s one thing I thought should have been done for them - teaching them to read and write. But an awful lot of them were slow. They weren’t really fully mature at all. They weren’t able to think for themselves or anything but whether they were like that coming in or not, I don’t know.

She then retreats from self criticism or the criticism of the Order, by saying that the women were slow, implying they couldn’t be taught in any case. She is grudgingly open to the possibility that all of these women may not have been lacking in intelligence, but

that the lifestyle imposed on them may have been detrimental to their developing personalities, but she cannot stay with the thought and immediately adds that she does not know. Each time Mary begins to reflect she retreats and takes another course. The nuns were involved in educating the young people of the nation, and yet they did not teach the Magdalens. One can only suppose that this was not accidental; keeping the women illiterate kept them in their place, a place of servility and slavery. They were also necessary receptacles for the projections of the nuns and of society.

The question that arises from this complex relationship between the nuns and the Magdalens, is whether the Magdalens (in Jungian terms) have been carrying the shadow side of the nuns while mirroring them? Were both parties locked in projective identification, in order to keep the repressed aspects of the nuns hidden from conscious knowledge? All of the nuns (except the lay Sisters who carried out the more menial tasks in the convent) had the name “Mary” as part of their names, thus identifying them with the Virgin Mary. The Magdalens were identified with the sinner Mary Magdalen, “penitents” in need of reformation. According to Catholic teaching the Virgin Mary was conceived immaculately and remained a virgin, free from sexual contact, pure, good and holy and she became the Mother of God. The nuns were identified with the Virgin; they had a vow of chastity, the “angelic virtue” and remained pure. The Magdalens had transgressed, by having illicit sexual contact and were by implication impure, bad and unholy. The split in the Gospels between the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalen, between good and bad, God and the Devil, saint and sinner was, it seems, played out in bold relief in the lives of those who lived in religious institutions, especially where a Magdalen laundry was attached to the convent.

If the nuns were to retain their perceived position of perfection, then they needed the Magdalens to offset it, and as receptacles for their projections. Any expression of rebellion on the part of the Magdalens would have had to be quelled, and any transgressions representing the repressed aspects of the nuns, would have had to be punished. There was no place for the third position (Britton, 1989) that would reveal the underlying, unconscious and repressed aspects of both groups and lead to depressive position thinking (Klein, 1940) where the whole is acknowledged as containing both the bad and the good.

The Magdalens and the children in the industrial schools

The children in the industrial schools were closely connected with the Magdalens. Both **Mary** and **Rose** attest to the fact that the women gave birth in one particular home, and then returned to the Laundries. **Mary** says:

and then they were separated and that's one of the things that has been brought out, that they weren't let see the babies or vice-versa and or children who were here in care weren't allowed to see their mothers. That was one of the things. I don't believe that but maybe it could happen.

Mary's confusion about the truth of the matter could be a way of denying the feelings of anxiety and distress that the women must have suffered, in being deprived of their babies. And of course, when Mary was a little girl she may not have seen her own mother for some years, when she lived far away with her grandparents. All feelings have to be split off. **Rose** says, "*there were no babies, the babies were adopted you see.*" Those not adopted found themselves in industrial schools, often on the same site as their mothers, with contact between them forbidden.

The link between the Magdalens and the children in industrial schools is important, in that the children may have been seen by the nuns, as impure and sullied by their connection with their mothers. Their punishment then could be regarded as justified, because of this connection; avenging the transgressions of the mothers through the punishment of their children.

Mary thinks that the nuns were also abused, and she singles out the convent in Aughamore to make her comparison, "*I'd say in Aughamore now and the kind of abuse they [the Magdalens] complain about was something that maybe the rest of us were suffering from too.*" This is an amazing statement especially, from someone like Mary, who rarely comments negatively on the convent.

Power and powerlessness

Another aspect that has become clear, from the study, is the power differential between the different groups. Chapter three and four of the study have shown the powerlessness of the nuns in their lives in the convent, before Vatican II. Circumstances determine one's position in relation to power. Abuse of power can lead to identification with the aggressor. The nuns were in different positions of power. In the convent, they were subject to the rule, the regime and the superior, and any attempt at defying or rebelling against these powers was punished in various ways. At work the same nuns were often in positions of power.

Table 6

Convent - Regime powerful	Nuns powerless
Convent - Superior powerful	Nuns powerless
Magdalen Laundries - Nuns powerful	Women powerless
All Schools - Nuns powerful	Children powerless

Table 6 This table shows the different positions of power and powerless of some nuns.

Those who were victims attracted the aggression of the bullies. Those who refused to be bullied were unlikely to be cruel. In the institutions run by the religious Orders, the “convent victims” were often in positions of power in the schools or Magdalen laundries. It is possible that by identifying with the aggression of convent life they became the aggressors in the institutions where they held power, and carried out aggressive acts on the vulnerable in their care.

In the convent, feelings of rage at disempowerment were not allowed expression. **Barbara** says “*Well I think you weren’t meant to have them*” and she adds “*Well you see I would have tried to suppress anything in that line*” [meaning her anger]. **Birdie** is of a similar viewpoint:

...you were in a little shell, that’s what you were in. And then, wasn’t it terrible that we lived in fear. It makes my blood boil now to think that they could, Mother Augustine, I don’t think they had the likes of her in any other community.

Birdie can now give voice to the rage she feels, at the way she was treated in the past. What Barbara and Birdie are saying is that, at a conscious level, in order to survive, they had to repress or suppress their feelings of rage. One can assume that they were not alone in this. The result was that the isolated affect may have been displaced, unconsciously, from one content to another, “*The split-off affective tone of an ideational-affective complex may be expressed in a different setting by virtue of displacement (kicking the cat instead of the boss)*” (Shapiro, 1991: 324).

Clare gives expression to just such a displacement when asked how she thinks the Sisters coped with their rage, “*I reckon they took it out on the next one (laugh).*” She illustrates her point with an anecdote, as is her wont:

I always think about the yarn about the man, he was up all morning; he was going on the train and he was up at all hours and he was ready anyway. God almighty whatever happened to him didn’t he arrive at the station and the blessed train was just pulling out of the station and the poor old porter had bent

down to pick up something and the man he went and he gave him a running kick, "even you and your old [old] train". I think that happens in life all the time. I think it does.

Feeling powerless or being treated badly in the convent, may have led the nuns to take out their anger on their subordinates.

Managing the allegations of abuse

At present, the nuns are trying to come to terms with what they are hearing about convents in the past. They cannot escape a corporate responsibility. They are "*All under one umbrella*" is how **Margaret** sees it and **Lauren** says, "*we could go back and where did we fail? Yes, this is fair enough to ask ourselves. (pause) Why did nobody see?*" The answer is that if one saw what was happening one was left with the option of concealing the knowledge or of taking some remedial action. Unconsciously turning a blind eye was the only solution at the time, although in retrospect, the failure to see, is difficult to sustain. These revelations are very disturbing and they give rise to much confusion. Splitting off and repressing unwelcome knowledge, as well as denial both of knowledge and of a corporate responsibility are some of the ways the nuns have of coping.

Patsy is a very old nun and she feels angry at the claim that the children in the industrial schools were poorly fed. She was told that the superior in her convent at the time, "*bought 150 acres of land to feed the orphans who now say they weren't fed at all. They must have been fed.*" She believes the stories "*are untrue*" because she has "*the facts*" although she has them on hearsay. She admits that she was not there at the time, "*When I came here the orphanage had just closed so I had no experience.*" She is upset by the accusations "*Well to me it always felt that a lot of it was totally undeserved. I don't know any nun that I ever knew would conform to what I read of in the press - (silence).*" She is baffled, she cannot finish her sentence. She belongs to a generation that believed the nuns could do no wrong; to believe otherwise would be unthinkable and has to be denied. Patsy was not there but she claims to know, while **Margaret** and **Mary** claim not to know, because they were not there.

Mary held a position of authority in the years when some of the Magdalen laundries were closed. There was at least one such laundry in her jurisdiction. She says "*I might not have been in charge the time it closed*" which is difficult to understand. One wonders how she could forget such an important event. She repeatedly asserts that she does not know because she was not there. She is evidently very frightened about the allegations.

Margaret is very confused; she lives in the convent with some of the ex-inmates of the Magdalen laundry. She splits between the nuns and the Magdalens; she stutters that the women “*love it here*” although this convent would not be her own choice “*it wouldn’t be a place I’d choose to live.*” She has a very strong countertransference to the situation she experienced when she was a child, when passing the Magdalen laundry, “*it sends the shivers up my back even to think of it*” but she is unable or refuses to speak about it. She says she “*doesn’t let it affect [her].*” She ignores her feelings. She is still operating in the culture of the social defence of “*no feeling*” to defend against anxiety (Menzies, 1960, 1970). Then she says she has been reading a book which tells her that the inmates in this laundry had “*it tough*”. She uses the book to admit that it was a difficult life; the book keeps the information at a distance. The only ways she can cope with her confusion is to tell herself that it has nothing to do with her. She has been speaking about the Magdalens and she then says, “*I don’t let it in on me. I wasn’t here. I don’t know anything about it. I never put a foot in an orphanage in my life. And I don’t know, don’t know anything about it.*” Just as **Mary** and **Rose** have done, she conflates the Magdalen Laundries and the orphanages. It seems that they are not separate in the minds of the nuns who have had contact with both institutions. **Margaret’s** way of dealing with her confusion is to deny her knowledge. Of course, she is not personally responsible for the Magdalens and the industrial schools, so it could be said that her denial mirrors that of society. It is also the way many of the nuns, who were not working in these institutions, deal with the abuse. The question of corporate responsibility is a thorny issue.

Lauren speaks of the inability of others in her convent to listen to allegations of abuse on a radio programme. A woman “*talked about being abused by priests and then she brings in nuns, in whatever way, you know and the worst people being priests and nuns.*” She feels sad that the nuns have had no advocacy on such a programme, but she continues to listen. She finds it “*very painful but I think we have to face, I think there isn’t any sense, there are some who wouldn’t listen to it. Well now I feel that I have to listen to it.*” On the one hand, she is willing to face the problem, but on the other she is annoyed that those, who were in industrial schools, think that the religious “*have money.... And if they have money- get it out of them. Well, that’s the game.*”

Estela Welldon’s experience, garnered from her clinical work with victims, is helpful in thinking of the abuse. She says that when psychological growth is thwarted, the individual regresses to an earlier stage of development, and this often leads to feelings

of victimisation. She attributes the adjective “perverse” to those who suffer stunted psychological growth:

The perverse person feels she has not been allowed to enjoy a sense of her own development as a separate individual, with her own identity; in other words she has not experienced the freedom to be herself. This creates in her the deep belief that she is not a whole being...

(1988: 8)

The victims often becomes the victimizers when, “*In their actions they are the perpetrators of the victimization and humiliation previously inflicted on them*” (ibid: 9). She continues, “*they treat their victims in the same way they felt treated themselves ... [this is] a manic defence against formidable fears related to the threat of losing both mother and a sense of identity.*”

Many nuns, especially those who entered at sixteen years of age, were in danger of being damaged psychologically by some of the harsh practices to which they were subjected, especially the quelling of their critical faculties, and their emergent sense of self, in their efforts to become obedient, self effacing nuns.

Those who commit evil acts can also, because of a splitting of the ego, appear to lead holy lives and be unaware of the evil they commit, keeping it separate and out of consciousness (Symington, 1994). This denial is difficult to overcome and it is well known that many perpetrators of abuse never confess to their crimes.

In the institutions run by nuns there was also systemic failure, in terms of accountability and statutory responsibility, especially for the minors in these institutions. Inspections and checks by the State are not mentioned by any of the respondents and Rose speaks of the “performance” that is put on when her superior is about to visit.

Amongst the many reactions of the nuns the most compelling is the confusion of feelings, of not knowing exactly what to think or feel, denying, and then acknowledging the possibility of abuse. In this they reflect society’s reaction; there is a difficulty in coming to terms with the responsibility for abuse and also the level and extent of it.

Section five: The Future

The interviews for this study took place between 2005 and 2008. Most of the research respondents have a perspective on the future of religious life and opinion is divided.

Lauren thinks the nuns should have handed over sooner to the lay people. She thinks that their work is over, *“finished the work that the founder began with the needs of the time. They were complete. Lay people ready to take over.”* **Annie** believes that there will always be a place for the contemplatives (as opposed to the active Orders, such as her own Order), *“Still I do believe that there will always want to be contemplatives and prayer, monks I do think that.”* She thinks she knows what God wants, *“He seems to be asking too, to involve the laity more in the Church, that’s what He wants. He’s putting more on the laity now. That’s my honest opinion.”* **Patsy**, who always says things by implication, puts the emphasis on the positive, the passing on of the torch to others, *“The day of large communities is over and past and it’s what will happen now and what must happen is people, the few people who are left will have to say well we’re handing over to you.”* She means passing on to other women, *“they’re like ourselves, they’re good women.”*

Margaret is indifferent to the lack of vocations and the number of those who leave; in spite of the evidence to the contrary she is convinced that religious life will continue, *“That they are leaving or not coming, that doesn't bother me in the least because religious life will go on in some form. The church will go on.”* **Jenny** agrees with Margaret, *“I think some Orders won’t but religious life in itself will. I think it will die a natural death and it will re-emerge as something completely radical all over again, that’s what I think.”* **Barbara** thinks it will *“only fizzle out”*, which according to the dictionary meaning is to fail, after a good start. She does not look fondly on religious life, *“I think it’s a very unnatural way of life. I really think it’s an unnatural way of life.”* She *“wouldn’t encourage anybody”* to enter at present, which of course, is not surprising when one considers her experience. **Birdie** is of the same opinion, she says:

I think they should let it go. Certainly they might want another form of it but not as it is at the moment. There’s very little difference between our life and people who are not in religious life. They are making far more sacrifices than we are you know.

She sees less value in a life that has less sacrifice, which is part of the old philosophy of the life. She separates herself from the decision by saying *“they”* should let it go. She has always made an *“us and them”* distinction between the nuns and the superior.

However she comes to the core of the problem when she speaks of little difference between religious and the laity. Finding a place, being lay and religious at the same time has been one of the greatest dilemmas created by Vatican II. Solving this problem would probably involve a new form of religious life, as Birdie suggests. **Rose** is not as optimistic. She gets the impression that it is on the decline and she does not see a regeneration, *“It’s on the way down the hill. It has lost its vibrancy. It gives me that impression.”* And **Clare** does not hold out much hope for the future *“Ah (laugh) I think I see it downhill from now on. I think it is endgame. You see historically too, you see most active apostolic congregations lasted about 200 years.”*

There is an awareness that religious life has come to the end of an era, but the nuns speak without sadness or regret; they retain their matter of fact attitude and one is left wondering why they show no emotion, having spent their lives and their energies building religious life.

Conclusion

Some of the elderly sisters live in relative happiness but at a cost. They continue to practise denial and other defence mechanisms to rid themselves of unwanted feelings. This is not surprising when one considers their advanced age. Others are angry and critical of the leadership for the lack of holding and containment. Authority and obedience bear little resemblance to the clarity and certainty of the past and these Sisters struggle to find meaning in the new paradigm of obedience as discernment and authority as consultative. While some find themselves wondering about their inability to question authority, others have been able to be advocates on their own behalf. Since the amalgamation of the many convents, there is a new and less person-centred model of leadership. On the other hand the difficulties encountered by the leaders, in a partially individualistic organisation, result in a dearth of Sisters willing to take on the responsibilities of leadership.

One of the elderly respondents sees a conflict of interests between the demands of the individual and the institutional mission leading to a fragmentation of the system. However, speaking one's truth in public still engenders fear of retaliation. The respondents relate stories of younger nuns who follow their individual career paths and are not willing to live with the elderly. These younger and more able members chose instead to live singly or in small groups.

It is clear that emotional containment is lacking but it doubtful whether it would have been sufficient to bring about the transformation necessary for those, who had been formed in the pre-Vatican II convent regime, to fully adapt to the new conditions.

The convent at this time mirrors society in the disorientation of some Sisters, the growth of individualism, and the necessity to think about abuse in their organisations. Although I believe none of the respondents perpetrated abuse on others they have views on why abuse occurred. There is evidence that convent life, as it was instituted in pre-Vatican times, because of its repressive nature and lack of transparency, was conducive to abuse at many levels.

Some superiors were, at times, abusive towards their subjects and the abused had no redress. The silent majority either turned a blind eye or were too frightened to speak. There was no outlet for expressions of vulnerability on the part of overburdened or overwhelmed Sisters or those who felt they were unable to perform their duties adequately. There was no questioning of the system. Sisters were so busy they had no

time to reflect or to observe what was happening in other units of the organisation. There was no forum for discussion or reflection. Taking a third position, observing from an objective viewpoint was not possible. The knowledge of abuse was defended against by turning a blind eye or when knowledge was conscious, of denying that it existed. The Sisters felt powerless in the system.

Looking below the surface at unconscious reasons for the perpetration of abuse reveals a set of circumstances that could explain why abuse took place. In the convent, there was little, if any, outlet for the expression of feelings especially feelings of anger. Where people feel victimized they are likely to identify with the aggressor and transgress by abusing. This can happen when feelings of frustration engender aggression which if it cannot be discharged is likely to be redirected (Shapiro, 1998), to the less powerful such as children or other subordinates. A similar situation arises when psychological development is thwarted and the victim becomes the victimizer perpetrating on others the victimization and humiliation previously inflicted on them (Welldon, 1988). Where an adult cannot process the feelings of her own early deprivation, evoked by looking after deprived children, they are likely to abuse these children (Canham, 2003). Adults have to manage their own anxieties, in order to detoxify and make manageable anxious feelings, for the children in their care (Anderson, 2006: 76). Children, taken from their homes and placed in industrial schools were likely to have had enormous anxiety and fear, as well as feelings of loneliness and disorientation. They needed mature adults to help them with these feelings.

The Magdalens, despised sexual transgressors, incarcerated by society and put under the care of the Sisters, possibly served as receptacles for unwanted, unacknowledged and split off feelings of society and the Sisters alike. These feelings were probably introjected by the Magdalens and their feelings of worthlessness thereby augmented. Therefore they deserved to be punished and to do penance on behalf of all, in order that the sins of all could be washed away (by their work in the laundry). Children in industrial schools, linked by association with the Magdalens were likely to have been subjected to the same fate (also, often working in convent laundries). Both Magdalen asylums and industrial schools required mature Sisters to run them. There is no evidence that this was the case or that the authorities ever reflected on what was required but instead acted as custodians of these women and children on behalf of the State.

Psychologically, the unconscious splitting of the ego, necessary, at times, to survive in the restrictive and repressive system of the convent would have allowed “holy” people

to keep the “unholy” or abusive part of their lives completely separate (Symington, 1994) and such splitting when continued over a long period is difficult to heal or integrate.

Although these reasons for abuse cannot be attributed to the research respondents they offer some understanding of how, under certain conditions, abuse could have occurred.

Final Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the hidden aspects of religious life in Ireland in the twentieth century. It has traced convent life in women's active Orders from the 1930s until the present day, through the personal stories of ten individuals, eight of whom were over seventy years of age at the time of the interviews.

It is a psychosocial study taking unconscious as well as conscious dynamics into consideration (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009). The method of collecting the data, over three meetings (Cartwright, 2004), was uncomplicated. The biographic method (BNIM, 1993), using free association (FANI, 2000) gave an opportunity to those unaccustomed to formulating a coherent story, to tell about their lives in their own way, without pressure, while, at the same time, building sufficient trust to discuss the aspects of their stories that needed clarification, in the third meeting. It shows that data can be collected in a non-threatening, non-intrusive way.

The analysis of the data used a combination of a Grounded Theory approach and applied psychoanalysis. Grounded Theory provided a method of sorting and gathering information to allow core categories and themes to emerge. Psychoanalysis enabled me to look beneath the surface, to uncover the defence mechanisms that were used to inhibit critical thinking and to understand the group dynamics that were in operation.

In accordance with the tenets of Grounded Theory I did not set out any a priori hypotheses nor did I read any literature until I had done some analysis of the data. The core categories that emerged from the data were vocation, life in the convent before Vatican II (1962-65), convent life following Vatican II and life at the time of the interviews.

The literature was mainly historical or sociological and I found the correlation between my research and the published sociological research quite surprising. The stories of life in the convent, in the early period, corresponded to much of Wittberg's (1991) "intentional communities", Goffman's (1961) "total" institutions and Coser's (1974) "greedy" institutions and these were used as supportive material in the analysis of religious life. This study, however, went further. It did not take situations at their face value, but looked beneath the surface to understand the system more fully and, secondly, it acquired the data from the personal experiences of people who had lived religious life for many years; in that it is unique.

The core categories that emerged divided chronologically into three temporal periods, 1930-1969, 1970-1999 and 2000-2008. The questions that arose from the data were about vocation, the system in the convent from 1930 until 1969, and its effect on the respondents; the changes resulting from Vatican II; the situation in convents, at the time of the interviews, and the abuse that took place, mainly in the earlier period. I divided the data into the following chapters:

- **1930-1969** *A Total break with the World and Convent Culture 1930-69,*
- **1970- 1999** *Change and Transition,*
- **2000-2008** *Forty Years on*

In our doctoral research seminars my colleagues had difficulty understanding the way of religious life and often saw the nuns as passive agents, who willingly submitted to an unhealthy regime. The nuns were people of their time and, as such, influenced by prevailing societal values and cannot be judged by present standards, so in order to situate them in their societal context, each chapter begins with a section on society and the Church, as background information. Also, I used the Holy Rule of one congregation as a point of reference, to add substance to the framework. The rule was approved by Rome, in 1863 and continued to be followed for over a hundred years, until new constitutions were written after Vatican II, in the early 1970s.

As the study progressed I realised that the framework highlighted the institution, rather than the personal story of the individual as a Gestalt. The stories were, up to a point, being sacrificed to the life of the institution. I considered this, and realised that in the convent, the individual was not important. I tried to redress the balance by using lengthier quotations and repeating small pieces of information that would help the reader to see the person in the institution. I remembered that we were always told in the convent, that we were not indispensable; that there would always be someone to replace us. This was intended to prevent hubris. The study was, in this respect, a mirror of convent life in the past.

The analysis of the data found that, in relation to vocation, the respondents allowed themselves to be diverted from their initial intentions and desires by male authorities. In general they showed a lack of analysis, in their retrospective descriptions, of how they came to enter the convent. Many unconscious reasons, such as anger with parents, the search for a “good enough” mother (Winnicott, 1971) in Mother Church or a refusal to enter adulthood came to light. The young women entered a system that through its enforced isolation, replaced the reality of the outside world with the reality of the

convent, thus providing a psychic retreat (Steiner, 1993) for those who fully committed to its demands.

Convent life from 1930 until 1969 was dominated by blind, unthinking obedience and group conformity. Settling down meant becoming institutionalized (Obholzer, 1994), accepting without question whatever one found to be the norm and engaging in “collusive group denial” (ibid: 174). The rule and constitutions set the parameters for the vows, the work and every aspect of daily life. The aim was perfection, to become the “living rule”. However, all was superseded by the will of the superior, who was seen as God’s substitute on earth. She knew what God wanted through her “grace of state” (sometimes ironically called a “hotline to the Holy Spirit”) and her every wish was granted the stature of a command. The actions of some superiors, in the study, were not above reproach but there was no redress for the individual Sister. Conformity ensured that transgressions of the rules were of a minor nature. The emphasis was on external behaviour while abusive situations remained hidden and unacknowledged.

Vatican II (1962-65) called for a humanisation of religious life and an adaptation to the modern world. The special status of religious women was removed, making them equal with, rather than superior to, their lay counterparts and deprived them of their function of mediators between God and the laity. In addition, the end of papal cloister, that is, enclosure and the structures of monasticism (with its commitment mechanisms) left religious women searching for a new identity.

New rules and constitutions were formulated and implemented. Sisters enthusiastically welcomed the freedoms, especially those that concerned their personal lives. They embraced the new image, represented particularly by the change in the habit. Initially their personal demands were modest but they gradually increased, over the years, particularly for those who could avail of them, namely the younger, more vibrant members. However, there was little change in the culture and a chasm between the older and the younger members developed, as the older members held on to their cherished pre-Vatican II ways of behaving and the younger members sought, ever increasing, personal freedoms.

Forty years after Vatican II, finds religious life on the verge of fragmentation. There is conflict between the institutional mission and the freedom of the individual to choose her own lifestyle and life path. The elderly are still confused about the new obedience and some are unhappy with the leadership. The struggle between the old and the new way continues in the conflict between the search for personal freedom and the

congregational mission and is compounded by the allegations of abuse that beset the nuns and demand attention. The study can throw some light on this abuse when it considers the psychological effect of the period between 1930 and 1969.

In order to survive in the harsh system, the Sister had to erase her individual ego in favour of the collective, group ego and, at times, to split off her ego or the sense of self that knows. Some Sisters managed, by projecting unwanted aspects of themselves into others and many projected their authority into superiors. This made the superior more powerful and it depleted the Sister of a sense of agency. In this culture of dependency and authoritarianism the Sisters felt powerless. In the telling of their personal stories many defence mechanisms were activated and revealed a social defence system (Menzies, 1960) that defended against disturbing emotional experiences.

The psychological effects of their early life in the convent have been profound. Institutionalisation, in a dependency culture, thwarted development and left many nuns immature and incapable of adapting to the changed environment of post Vatican II religious life, when they are expected to take personal responsibility for their lives and work. Personality development ended, as soon as they entered, and spontaneity and creativity were stultified.

There is evidence that the Sisters also suffered abuse at the hands of their superiors and there was no redress for them. Of necessity, the silent majority turned a blind eye. The lay Sisters were treated as servants; uneducated and untrained professionally for the work they carried out. This left many of them resentful, hurt and angry. Until the 1970s, there was no professional training for the Sisters who worked in industrial schools. Those who worked in Magdalen asylums received no training. These Sisters were often the most vulnerable, carrying out the most difficult tasks. In a system where perfection was the aim, there was no place for the expression of feelings of vulnerability. Overwork left no space for observation or reflection on the overall mission and those who felt overburdened continued, in silence. There was never any questioning of the system.

The nuns colluded with society, in keeping the Magdalens and deprived children out of sight, in their institutions, where they became the receptacles for the unwanted or bad feelings of both groups. They introjected these feelings and their badness was augmented. They could, then, be punished with impunity. Identification with the aggressor, in this case the harsh convent regime, as aggressor, and the acting out, in violent behaviour, of unacknowledged and unexpressed rage, on the less powerful

women and children, are further possible causes of the abuse. All children need mature adults who can contain and detoxify bad feelings (Anderson, 2006) and enable them, in their turn, to mature and develop. In the convent institution, it is unlikely that such adults were available to fulfil this function. It is important to state that there is no evidence that any of the respondents perpetrated abuse on others.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the complications of the abuse, it is clear that it was the commitment mechanisms of papal cloister or monasticism that held the structure of the convent together. Paradoxically, the greater and more intense the commitment mechanisms the greater is the success of communal groups (Kanter, 1972) and the more attractive the lifestyle. Religious life, at present, with its emphasis on personal freedom and individualism (mirroring the situation in society) lacks a unified vision and the commitment essential to its survival. It is too similar to life outside the convent to present a challenge that is appealing to young people. In terms of working for the good of the Church and society it has nothing extra to offer; it has lost its identity and its function.

Historically, religious institutions have a limited lifespan and it seems that the religious congregations explored, in this study, are about to disappear when the last of the present cohort of Sisters has passed on. On the other hand, a new form of religious life that answers the needs of the time may emerge but this looks less likely when one considers the falling number of practicing Catholics, in Ireland, at present.

This study has the limitation of being a single case study, however, three congregations are represented and it seems unlikely that a further study with the same age group would produce a different result. Members who entered after Vatican II and are still in their congregations are not part of the study and their input might be interesting as a further project. This is the first study of its kind to be carried out and it has implications for the understanding of the position in which religious now find themselves, having come from the public perception of “good and holy” to “bad and abusive”. A similar study of men’s congregations would make an interesting comparison. My own particular interest is with young people who, now, live in residential care or have recently left it; how do they fare in the care of the State? Anecdotal evidence suggests that they do not fare very well.

To finish on a personal note, holding a third position (Britton, 1989), trying to free myself from convent conditioning has been one of the struggles of this project. It required constant vigilance and many hours of disentangling my countertransference

reactions. A case in point, was of writing about my novitiate companion who perpetrated abuse on young people; as soon as I had written it I removed it, with the thought that I could not write that. I had lost my third position and was once more in convent mode. I rewrote it and knew that many of my former companions would be unhappy that I was letting the side down, by admitting that one of us could offend in this way. Such is the burden of the search for truth and meaning when only light is allowed and the shadow must be denied.

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Appendix

The following is a transcript of the three interviews with Jenny. To protect confidentiality all names and places have been changed.

Interviews with Jenny

(Note: The interviewer's interventions are in italics).

Jenny: You know they bought me one of those when I was secretary of the Irish Society and I couldn't use it (tape recorder), so I could take the minutes so I could get a grip of it. I couldn't work it out at all. (laughing)

Camillus: *Right then, Jenny we can start and you can tell me anything at all about your life.*

Well the way I got in contact with the nuns was their Novitiate house was here, just down the road, in our local parish in the early eighties, and it was then, that I, well I was asked to befriend one of the Novices because she was around my age, and of course in some of the orders the people were a lot older. So one of the Sisters came to me and said, would you befriend Maria and do things with her, you know, just make her feel welcome. She is from Scotland and do things with her, go out socially or whatever, for walks and stuff so em. So I got to know her and of course that would mean popping into the Convent and picking her up and going off walking or whatever. We didn't do very much really. We just palled around like young people do really and it gradually came to, well what's stopping me doing this? I always felt I needed to do something more than just working in an office or whatever and so gradually, I was 21 and I decided I would give it a go so I em said to them, I'd really like to try this. And they sent me off for psychological testing and all malarkey and came back absolutely floored by that, I had to go and see a guy called D B in London and I had about three or four sessions with him and I was just completely devastated by the kinds of things he was saying to me about me as a person. And I remember coming back I was absolutely sobbing in the car coming back from this therapy session when he gave his conclusions about the kind of character that I was.

So I went to the Convent in tears I didn't even tell my family about it. I went to the nuns and I said this bloke has just torn me to pieces and they said, 'look do you want to come and try it out, you're going to have to move from Norfolk, we're going to have to move the Novitiate if you join us. You're too close to home'.

So my Mum and Dad were devastated, my Mum didn't speak to me for a month and my Dad was just, he found it so difficult to think that I'd be moving away and at that time in the early eighties if we joined we wouldn't be able to go home for a year, that was in 1982. And so I was based in Birmingham and it was really strange because as soon as I

walked into this community. I just felt this immense heaviness over me because I'd spent a few months in Norfolk. I went there in the January and it was looking at starting my Novitiate in September in Birmingham. And ah I just loved Norfolk and I loved the chapel and I loved all the Sisters; they were the older generation, they were in their eighties, wise owls and sorry as well about a lot of the stuff they did when they were younger you know they would tell me they would, like send out Novices to water dry sticks to test their obedience and all that stuff you know. And I used to sit, I was fascinated by them, fascinated by their lives and then after that time, September came and the Novitiate was all set up in Birmingham and then I went to live there and I just knew as soon as I got there that I'd be so unhappy and I was. It was the most unhappy house I have ever been in.

It wasn't already a Novitiate was it?

No,

They just changed it for you?

Yea, it was a community house that they made into the Novitiate. I don't know if it was especially for me

Did they move the others then?

Yea everybody went to the same place. So, all the Novices for the next few years went to Birmingham house. Yea, so I started my Novitiate, went on my 28 day Retreat

At the beginning?

It was kind of a year and a half into it. I had to do it before I was, before I made first vows. So I went to St Bino's in Wales for my 28 day Retreat and that was just, it was an amazing experience but it kind of rooted me in that whole spirituality thing and I kind of feeling that life was always too complicated, even in religious life it was too complicated, it need to be much simpler.

And I found that the Sisters were very selfish, at a certain age they were very selfish people. And I was asked 'what are you going to do, are you going to teach or what are you going to do after Novitiate? We need you to decide what you want to do. We want you to teach'. And I said, 'I don't want to teach I don't think I am; I don't think I could do it, what about social work'. And they said there was nobody in the Order who was a social worker; it was a teaching Order. Everything around the day was based on teachers, the school. So that in itself isolated me from everybody else. There was an education welfare officer in Scotland, that was as near to what I was doing as anybody was. So I was a bit of a strange fish for them I think in the way, in what I was doing

anyway. And once I, I qualified to be a social worker in 1989; I was then looking for jobs and they wanted me to try and come back to Norfolk to work here.

From Birmingham; you studied in Birmingham?

I studied in Birmingham, went to the Polytechnic, and I qualified in 1989 so I was Junior Professed by that stage so I was asked then to go to London and I had to start looking in London for jobs and I went for an interview in Westminster. I got the job and I worked there for ten years in the order as a social worker and I lived in London and I just commuted into Westminster every day, went to Mass in Westminster Cathedral before I started work, whereas the rest of the community were all at Mass before school started in the chapel and whatever else, it was all geared towards the teachers and I used to come in at 6 o'clock at night and the food was there on the table ready and that was it. Yea. I was just walking in the door as they were sitting down to eat and even now I find it so difficult to walk in and I have to have some time before I have my tea or dinner or whatever. And on Sundays I hate having a Sunday dinner because it was an established thing in the community we'd have to take turns cooking and we'd be cooking Sunday dinner for 14 people and if someone had guests coming there might be 16 or 18 people around this huge table and you'd spend the whole day preparing the food and cooking it and then the day would be gone and you'd be back to work on Monday morning. Mmm yea that's basically how it started really. I lived in London. There isn't a convent there now. They sold it off. They got I don't know how many millions they got for it. There were two houses together. Yea two great big five storey terraced houses in London and they interconnecting doors on each floor so they were separate communities but they came together for different things and also it was a base for all the visiting nuns from all over the world so I'd come in from work and as soon as I would come in the door I'd see all these suitcases at the bottom of the stairs and I'd know that all we'd be doing would be making beds and running a B&B. I'd be doing my job and I'd be criticised for going to bed early because I was tired. And I'd be saying I'm doing child protection work. I do child abuse. I'm not running a B&B here and I felt they had no understanding of the pressures of my job whatsoever.

And I remember the General Superior came over for the Provincial Congregation, she came over for. Her name was Nan, she was the General she was based in Rome but she came to the English Province for meetings and I was meant to see her. I was meant to see her and I'd move from child care into adult work, working with people with disabilities and old people and I ended up having to place an old woman. She was in

hospital and we found she lived in this one single room in woman's house in the basement. She didn't have a sink, she didn't have a cooker she couldn't cook food or anything and eh and she just sat in this chair and obviously got ulcers or whatever and had been admitted to hospital and two of us had to go back to this place to find her belongings and we didn't know where this room was in this woman's house and anyway to cut a long story short I was late back to this meeting with the General because I had to do this emergency admission.

And I was just completely exhausted and she went into all this thing, am I happy and is it right and I just fell into her arms crying. I couldn't stop crying, I don't know what I'm doing, I don't know what I'm doing here and I just felt I was living on the edge of two lives all the time. My work was so specialist and so different from everybody else that I was finding that my main support network were people I worked with and not people I lived with. And it was only when I left that I discovered that I had been so lonely living in a community of people. I was more lonely there than I was living on my own. So that was, it was a gradual thing. I never wanted to go, never wanted to leave. I really did want to make final vows and that be it for life but I just felt that people had so many personal agendas about how they wanted to live religious life and they were beginning to, they all seem to be living in sheltered housing on their own in flats, especially in Birmingham, three or four of them are in a sheltered housing block, all living in separate flats on their own, And I thought where's the community in that? Where's the sisterhood or whatever you want to call it, and all that sort of thing and I just thought, I might as well leave and do it myself. I might as well do that myself and do it in my own way without any restrictions from anybody and it took me a while. It took me a while to decide but I think it was the isolation and the loneliness. You know people couldn't understand that I might want to go for a drink with my friends or go to the pictures or things like that you know. Or go for a walk on Hampstead Heath with good friends I had made from work and that's all it was. You have to kind of explain your life away and I thought it's too restrictive; I'm not living my vows the way I want to live. I just thought I'm going to become a really old and twisted nun if I don't do something about this so I basically took a couple of years. I asked the Provincial if I could take some time out and we had these discussions, 'do you think it's time you went to Africa, you want to live this simple life, why don't you go to Kenya with the Kenyan nuns or why don't you go to Peru?' And I was going, why didn't you do this before, why didn't you why has it come to this now? Why didn't you think that this might be something that I

might want to do? You know because I had always said, I'd worked with the homeless, in my job as a social worker I worked with deprived older people, deprived children- it's worlds apart from teaching and I felt I was following the charism of the Order more so than many of the others were. But they didn't recognise it for whatever reason I don't know. I really wondered if some of these middle aged nuns who were in their forties when I was in my twenties were quite threatened by younger people coming in and wanting to change things and wanting to bring a new spirit to the Order or whatever that they didn't agree with or didn't want to know about. And you know, I'll be fifty this year, they'll be probably be in their late sixties and vocations have dried up so you know, I don't know what will happen but I found it a very sad experience really because it was something I never wanted, I never wanted to leave

(long pause)

But I do some kind of Ignatian prayer sessions at our local church. I do some Ignatian spirituality prayer sessions and it started off quite well but I think the night was just wrong for the parish so we've ditched it now for a bit but I go through the exercises and do a simple kind of a prayer session for people to follow and just half an hour of quiet prayer with some music in the background. So I haven't lost it all; I suppose I've just adapted to the way I live now. I don't know I don't know where it's going. I was, I met up with a couple of nuns last year, one of them is Maria, who was on the Provincial Council; she came up because one of the Sisters in the parish here was retiring back to the Convent in Wales and it was so lovely to see her. She came down here and I cooked lunch and we just talked for about three hours about me going and the why and wherefores of it all. I don't know, I don't know what more to say really. I just found it a very selfish life and when I explained that to people who weren't Catholic or weren't Christian they were just really shocked. When I spoke to my family or friends who were Catholic they weren't shocked at all. I don't know

When you say your family

My parents, my brother and my sisters and stuff, my cousins, my best friends from home here and from Ireland. I think what you said earlier that nobody knows. I was based in this community in Birmingham I was doing the first year of my qualification course and one of the nuns ended up communicating with me on yellow sticky notes that she'd leave on the table in the hallway. What I'd try and do is – you know when in all the communities when you have a car you know share it and look after it and all the rest of it. This particular nun would book out the car every day of the year as soon as the

new diary came in. She would put her name by the car every single day of the year so that nobody else would be able to have it. There were probably two cars in the community in Birmingham and what she would do was she would drive this car from the community in Birmingham go and see her own blood sister who was based in Altringham, about 9 miles away. So she would drive that community car over to Altringham they would then get in an Altringham community car so one car would be left on the drive that nobody could use because it belonged to the other place. Then they would get in the other one so that would stop anyone from that community using that car to go anywhere for the week end

Her blood sister was a nun?

Yea. The two of them were blood sisters within a few miles of each other and from what I heard they both live together in a flat. I haven't heard any more about them. Yea and this particular one nun used to communicate with me on yellow sticky notes and she reported me to a member of the Provincial Council for, I don't know what I did. I can't remember what I did, took a car without permission or something because I went out somewhere

Did you have a car yourself for work?

No, I had to get three buses to the North Birmingham General Hospital every morning

This was when you were training?

When I was training, when I was a student and the idea was apparently that I could sit and write notes on the bus but she would use her car to drive to the chaplaincy at Birmingham University and it would be parked out there all day because she wouldn't be going anywhere else. She would be working with the students at Birmingham University which would be on the bus route from the community house and she would never ever consider that I you know it was all part of my learning or whatever and humility to get on three buses to get to North Birmingham Hospital. I think it was just control. They were a bunch of control freaks, particularly in that community.

How many were in that community?

At that time there were probably about eight of us and it was a house, it was huge, it was massive, it probably had about twelve bedrooms or thirteen bedrooms in it on the outskirts of Birmingham,

And that continued to be the Novitiate?

It did for a few, for a while after that and I think it moved to Islington then. I think it moved to Islington then but it was in Birmingham for quite some time because there

were another four Novices who came in after me. Yea so that was kind of an experience in itself. And I remember when she had reported me to this Provincial Councillor I just, the two of them were sitting in the front room and I went in and I just laid into them. I was just so angry and I said to this woman herself that she didn't have any respect for anyone or anything, that she was so mean and if this is what community life is about then you can stuff it where you want. They then thought that I needed to be moved because it wasn't the best experience for me and

You were still in the Novitiate at this stage?

Yea, was I? I didn't make final vows till ninety three, so maybe I made first vows in eighty five. Yes by the time I had started my course, my social work course I was already temporary professed. So I stayed in Birmingham then and qualified and that took two years but because it was such a difficult community I had to go to Llandudno in North Wales as part of their community instead of the Birmingham community because there was more support in Wales for me. So in term time I stayed in Birmingham and then in holiday times I used to go out to Wales and I was in placement in Wales at one stage as well while I was temporary professed. But they knew there was a whole bunch of really weird people in Birmingham, in the Birmingham house

So that was a different experience?

Well it was the retirement home so it was spending time again now with all the ones in their eighties and nineties who told stories about when they entered and one of them told me that she was out in the fields in Ireland cutting the hay with her family and her sister was asked if she wanted to go to the Convent and she said no and so the parents turned to this one Brigid and said, 'Right Brigid, she won't go, it's your turn off you go'. And she left and joined the Order as a Sister and the stories that we'd have and the fun that we'd have. I just couldn't stand the younger ones who would be my age now who would be in their forties or fifties. They just seemed to be so selfish and they thought they were the elite squad because they were, a lot of people joined from Birmingham; there was a whole cohort of them from the College in Birmingham that joined around the same time. So there was a big Birmingham mob. I don't know what their motivation was, I wouldn't know anything about that; I think they purposely made life very difficult

So they joined in Birmingham even though they were from Birmingham and you weren't allowed to join here because you were from Norfolk?

Yea, yea (as if she had never thought about that before). Yea, I'm presuming the Novitiate was in Birmingham, it might have been in Wales

But they were all together anyway

But there was a whole bunch of them anyway, a whole mob around the same age, they joined within a few years of each other and they'd all gone to the same school and then there were some sisters, blood sisters who joined. That was this particular pair, they thought themselves the foundation stone of the Order; that's what their parents, that's what their mother had said of them actually

Their mother had said that to them?

To the Order, they're lucky to have them because they'd be two of the foundation stones of the Order

So they were joining with their parents approval and they were English were they?

Yes. Some of the older Irish nuns were, I just loved them, I just loved their wisdom, I loved their simplicity of life and the ones I got on with were the Sisters who would be peeling the spuds and cooking the dinners and cleaning and mopping the floors and the people who were the intellectuals who were the teachers I just had nothing in common with them at all. So I'd be sitting making the jam or the marmalade, so a whole crowd of us would just sit around the table with the oranges making the marmalade and jams up. You know they would be more special to me than any of the others really and eh eh that's probably about my upbringing as well in such an Irish household. You know our house, at home the door wouldn't even be locked; a Tipperary family we've got loads of, my Mum and Dad came to Norfolk because my Mum's father was dying when I was born. He died the week I was born and my parents were coming over to Norfolk to join my Mum's older brother to work. He had started some kind of business, machinery business and sadly he died the day after I was born and then my Granddad died three days later. And so my Mum and Dad had come over to England when they were younger and had kept going back home because my mother's mother had died when she was a child and so my Granddad had brought up twelve of them working for the Council in Tipperary and they lived in Newport. My Dad lived in Cool Bawn which is in Tipperary. So the links with home and Ireland were just really strong

So originally someone came over here to work

Yes my Dad came over when he was a teenager

And that started the link

Yes, then he met my Mum. The two families had known each other for a long time because my Mum's Dad worked for the Council so loads of people knew Jim Gleeson. So the families got together but the interesting thing was, I always remember our priest saying to me once he said, 'you've got a fantastic family background don't ever forget how fantastic it was that your Dad became a Catholic' because my Dad was part of the community of Coolbawn in Tipperary that was Church of Ireland. And in my family I've got Church of Ireland, I've got Presbyterians, Baptists and Catholics. It's probably one of the most ecumenical families there is going. And my Dad was Church of Ireland and his Mum and Dad were caretakers of the Church of Ireland church. So when he married my Mum he became a Catholic and then a lot of his brothers and sisters also became Catholics but there were two who didn't. There was his sister Mary who is still living in Ballinasloe now, she never became Catholic she's still C of I and my auntie in Belfast who is Presbyterian and my Dad's cousin who are Baptist we are not very close to that side of the family. I would kind of know who they were but they wouldn't know who I was. Yes so that's the background so eh as my Granddad was getting more and more ill my Mum and Dad went back to Ireland and lived with my Granddad until he died and then my sister and I were born in Tipperary and then after he died they came back to Norfolk. And all the plans for this big business were shelved because my uncle Jimmy had died and so they had to start from nothing really. Yes so links with Tipperary are very strong

And you mentioned your household here being open door

Oh open door, nobody made appointments to see anybody, nobody rang, we'd all, my uncles and aunties we'd have sing songs, we'd be just sitting in the sitting room playing cards or, everyone had their own turn to do, we'd sing a bit of a song or tell a story or. You know we were brought up on all these tales of their childhood so I suddenly then go to this house in Birmingham and without thinking I'd be in the Novitiate, I'd been to an Easter Retreat and I just said to the girl from Norfolk who'd dropped us off, 'well come in and have lunch with us' there's always an extra plate in our house. I was lambasted for not making an appointment for not telling them that this girl was coming

This was the girl you were looking after?

No this was a girl from Norfolk I'd known for years and she'd come on the same Retreat and picked us up and dropped us in her car at the Retreat house and then dropped us back. She hadn't even had a cup of tea so I invited her in unbeknowns and they were all mad because I hadn't rung them to say, 'do you mind, can she come and'.

It's like my whole history is why. We are supposed to be inviting people in, we are supposed to be. She had to go to drop us at the gate and drive off

She got no tea?

Nothing not even a glass of water. So I just couldn't reconcile the life style to the way I'd been brought up and we didn't have anything, we didn't have anything and to me I had gone from being a working class student at secondary school and not doing very well to living this middle class life style and like you were saying, the delph in the cupboards and all the rest of it. I would just walk around these parlour rooms and look at all this furniture and stuff and think, I don't want this, I don't want this. There being this huge chapel in Altringham and I always used to say to the community there that it was very minimalist but minimalist in the most ostentatious way that you could. The furniture was all made of fabulous oak and it was such a contradiction to me. It was, they spent thousands and thousands and thousands on this chapel and I just thought what's that all about, what is it for, why are all these thousands of pounds being spent on something like this and you know buying cars. It was just all beyond me, it was all beyond me. I didn't want any of it. I remember in the community in A I was actually doing A levels then because I didn't have enough qualifications to do the social work course so I went to a local college in Altringham so I stayed in the community in A. I did my A levels there and I remember going in to watch an Irish football match. I think it might have been a boxing match, Barry Mc Guigan. And I sat down and one of the Sisters came in and just sat on my knee because I was obviously sitting in her chair. so I had to move and I remember sitting on the little pouffe by the door watching this boxing match thinking well that's it I'm isolated yet again from the rest of the community. So my aspirations, I think they thought I was too unrealistic about what was going on in the world and young people have all these aspirations about the way of life that is completely unrealistic

In terms of spirituality is it?

The way of life, the way of life more than spirituality I think, the way it was lived but when I look at it now Camillus why are they living an individual life in sheltered housing somewhere? What's that all about? So I don't know, I don't know. I eventually think that I did make the right decision to leave because I was so unhappy and I just couldn't reconcile myself to the way people were living and I know that I would have become bitter and twisted and been like the worst kind of old nun that would have been there. And also as I was finally professed, obviously the community was getting older,

there weren't so many people joining so the potential was that I was going to be, that I was going to have some role of responsibility and they'd already made me assistant superior in the house in St Albans so they were talking to me saying, oh you are going to be the next Novice Mistress or whatever else. And I thinking, oh my God and I just felt I couldn't stick with it for that. I couldn't do it. And I was thinking if I was a superior in charge in a community I would be in control of these people that I have nothing in common with, like the one who communicated with me on a post-it. What if I was ever superior of her community? I wouldn't be able to do it. It took me, in 93 I had enough. I remember going on holiday. In the early nineties there were loads of meetings and general and provincial meetings about the way of life and religious dress and all this kind of stuff; all these discussions about how we should live and are we going back to the charism of the Order? And so what they introduced was everybody could have an amount of money to use to go on holiday. So we were given I don't know how much it was, a couple of hundred quid for the first time ever, here was us living on ten pounds a month and then suddenly we were given this amount of money and at that time we could go all over the place for that. So I went on holiday with my friend Sarah from work. She wasn't in a relationship and we became really good friends and still are, amazingly good friends and she didn't have any belief in anything, yet she was the one who knew more about my life and understood it more than any of the religious sisters that I lived with in community and it began to challenge me about what am I doing then? Why am I living this life, nobody understands me and I don't understand where it's going? So we went on our holiday and I just said to her, we were on the beach and it was the first time ever that I could even go out for a meal with her and be able to pay my own way because I hadn't got any money. I didn't see any of my earnings apart from the ten pounds a month and if we went out as a group of friends from work they would always pay for my meal, for me because I didn't have the money to do it. So for the first time in my life, in my religious life I was there, we were going out for drinks or whatever, a pizza or meal at night and I was there putting as much in as she was and it kind of got me thinking and I remember we were on the beach in Turkey and I said to her, 'I've got to jump over the wall Susan, I've just got to jump over the wall, I've got to do it and now is the time before it's too late, before I get too old'.

So that was about June time and I moved out of the community in September and luckily enough my brother had got a flat in London that he was renting out and the last person who had been in it had just left so I rented the flat from my brother and re-

decorated it all for him and stayed there for two years and had to keep going back to my spiritual director in the Order, Ann, who was my spiritual director and I used to go to her and say I'm still not going to come back and they wanted me to take more time. And this is when they were saying to me, 'Why don't you come back and we'll send you to Africa and you'll work with the poor, you want to do this' and I just said 'no, it's too late now, too late' time's up. So eh they made it so hard for me to leave I couldn't believe it. So after the two years I said I'm not coming back, I've decided. I'm going to live a better life outside. So that is when they agreed for me to have this £5000 or whatever it was and I used that for a deposit to buy a flat and I moved into the flat which in Peckam in London. And I knew the Salesian priests there because they had often come to the communities to give Retreats over the twelve years that I was there and I felt that that was something quite important. And I thought this must be God working because I didn't know anything about a Salesian parish in Battersea. I just went on my bike. I started cycling and looking at places and thinking, I've got some money now I can start again. And I saw this flat for sale and I cycled around the corner and there was this Salesian church so that became my base for two years, well it was more. Then I eh, like I said earlier it took me about two years to get my head around everything and to feel that I wasn't going to go completely bonkers. Because I had spent all my adult life in a community of women and I thought, I must be odd, I must be strange and I used to say to my male colleagues at work, 'am I odd, am I weird?' And I always remember Bill going, 'what are you on about?' And I said, 'But I've lived for twelve years in a female orientated environment'. And he was just saying to me, 'you've sat opposite me for three years working with me, how can you be odd?' And I said, 'I dunno, talk to men, I don't know how to talk to men I don't know how to engage with men, I don't know how to speak to them.' He said, 'you've been talking to me for the past three years, what's wrong with you?' I was thinking if I was ever going to meet somebody how would I do it and so I em looked at soul mates in the Guardian. The Guardian had this kind of thing, soul mates and you ring a code number and you hear a kind of story about the person that you're ringing and I did this a couple of times it's just crazy really. One of them, out of eight million people in London knew my brother because he was an Irish dancer. All I knew was his name was Jim and that we met up, we went for a drink and he said, 'I do Irish dancing'. And I said, 'oh my family dancing teachers. Do you know them? My brother Tom – 'I can't see you any more if he ever finds out that I've met you like this, I can't cope.' So I just thought, oh my

word. Out of eight million people I pick this chap who knows my brother. So that kind of ended before it started really so nothing happened there and I tried again a couple of other times and a couple of other blokes. The amazing thing was in it all that I just felt completely normal. I just felt all these chaps were really odd, strange. I remember coming away from one that I had a date with and this guy was so competitive and eh I just thought, I'm fine, I've just spent two years trying to get my head around my life and now I actually think I'm dead normal, I've got a great family, I've got a bunch of really supportive friends, there's nothing wrong with me. And then I didn't do anything for a few months and then I said, I'll do it again and I answered Pete's message and then Pete and I got together and after about a year and a half we decided to get married. So it all worked out really well for us. And John his best friend who knows Tom was the one to make him do it. So he is the instigator of our marriage as well, never mind this. Yes because of John we got together and we got married in the Salesian church and then we decided that we couldn't live in a one bedroomed flat it was too small and the housing market had just boomed, incredible the prices that were going for flats and houses so we took a year to decide what to do and I said, 'would you come to Norfolk with me?' and he said, 'yea'. So after a year we decided to come up here and we bought this house. I got a job in Norfolk social services and that's where I've been ever since. So we're in Norfolk now for ten years.

Ok do you want to finish now?

Yea

Interview 2

I was going to tell you that story about the champagne. I qualified in 1989 and that summer we were having a Juniorate meeting in Dublin

So you all came together?

From England and Ireland so there would be about 16 or 18 of us. So it was great for us we saw a whole different lifestyle; there were probably about five of us altogether in England and Wales and Scotland so we went this year to Dublin and I had just qualified and I bought this bottle of champagne on my education grant and I took it with me all the way over to Dublin and I obviously wanted to share it because we had become really good friends, the young nuns and we'd be out kicking football letting off steam in the evenings when the lectures were finished or whatever else and I got this bottle of champagne out and they went mad. Well the Juniorate mistress in Dublin went mad. I'd go to Ann who was our Juniorate Mistress and I'd say, 'I can't believe it there are about

24 of us, we wouldn't even have a mouthful each of this stuff and they were terrified we were all going to turn into alcoholics'. And I couldn't believe it. So that was one cracker of an incident and another one was I was in community in Bristol and this was when I had now become assistant superior to the Bristol community and there were probably about eight of us and this was when I was still working in London so I was studying my social work in London and we all came to the table to eat and this nun was slurring and falling over and dropping everything; she was dropping her food and dropping her knives and fork and the superior looked at me and she said, 'has she had a stroke?' I said, 'are you joking, there's nothing wrong with her except she's probably drunk a bottle of the altar wine'. She was absolutely flustered on this altar wine so she went to bed for the rest of the evening. I just thought it was quite funny actually because in all the types of people they were they were still very naïve and I think about the world as well and very protective of us younger ones when we probably knew more about it all than they did actually.

And the way they would fuss over the priests when they would come into the community used drive me mad and how they would flirt with all these priests who would come in and sit at the table it just made me laugh. I remember being in the Al community and I was asked if I would be a minister, you know of communion and I said, 'I'm not really bothered, I don't really mind' and this priest said to me, 'if you are going to come and do this anyway you've got to put your veil on' and I said to him, 'I'm not doing it then' because we didn't wear veils at the time and I said no I'm not bothering then. There are loads of other people in the parish who might want to do this. I didn't want to do it, I'm not doing it because the first day I was given a veil was my first profession and half way through the party thing, you know the tea and cakes afterwards I took the veil off and hung it on the chair and I never wore it since. I don't know where it went actually. It interested me when I first did my course social work; it was a two year course at the time but we had to go on placement to various places as part of the qualification and you know I spoke about being in the North Birmingham General Hospital; another placement was in Salford and I was based in the community team in Salford in, it was basically an office in the middle of a shopping arcade so it was really, really busy and my first day of arriving at this placement the team leader looked me up and down because I was there dressed a bit like this really, jeans and I didn't know what to wear to be honest so I was in jeans and a jumper and she looked me up and down and she went 'oh, oh right, that's okay then', and I said, 'what do you

mean?’ She said, ‘ I thought you’d be in a long flowing frock and a big veil, I don’t know how the people in this area would take to it’. She’d obviously got these pre-conceived ideas anyway about what I would be like and em I think I was more of a shock to her than the team were to me to be honest.

So I just spent years, years and years and years trying to describe my life to people who, I said earlier, to those who didn’t know anything about it. On this one placement I was on this woman said to me, ‘I was taught by nuns when I was a child and I didn’t know they had feet’. I said, ‘what do you mean?’ ‘Because they had these long flowing dresses on, you never saw their feet, you just thought they floated along the ground. And I purposely wanted to dispel the whole image of what nuns were in this sense of naïve but cruel. My mother saw the image of the nuns who taught her in Ireland as being cruel and vindictive and ungodly altogether so I went out of my way to be somebody that isn’t anything like that. So I would go for drinks with my friends and they’d say to me, ‘you are having a glass of beer, you shouldn’t be doing that should you?’ And I’d say, ‘but why not? What’s wrong with that ? What’s wrong with having a glass of wine?’ Nothing wrong with it. So I, I in my own way in my job with my work friends and colleagues gave them a bit of an insight into how I lived my life. But then my life was very different from the life the others lived in the same house so it was all a bit strange really. I’m surprised I’m not a bit more cracked actually. Yes it was this kind of double life, I felt I lived a double life; that I was on the edge of two worlds all the time and that neither of them, neither life was fulfilling me at all in how I wanted to live it. I wanted to be, I wanted to live, I just felt I wanted to live a simple life in community with other like minded people but nobody really felt like that within the community. I wanted to live the life that Mary Ward wanted for her nuns; to live in companionship and to teach and to work with the poor and to teach people about the faith in whatever way that was. And I just thought, do people purposely make their religious life more complicated or have I just got a simplistic attitude about it. I didn’t quite know. I didn’t quite know what it was.

Would this be your colleagues as well, your own age group?

I didn’t have any nun colleagues. There was nobody else doing my kind of work. They were all doing teaching so my path was very different from the others

Did your companions fall into the pattern that was already there?

They chose teaching so that meant that the communities that were established, were established around the day of a teacher. The teaching day, there was prayers then there

was breakfast or there was Mass whatever, Mass was first then there would be breakfast then there would be teaching and examen at lunch time. You know the day revolved around the teacher's life. And I didn't have that and I didn't feel that anybody really understood what I was about at all. I used to feel when I came back to St Albans particularly when I was doing the child care social work, I'd be involved in a lot of difficult abuse cases or I would know of them even if I wasn't involved in them. I would come back to the community and they would be arguing about who left the bread out of the bread bin the night before or who left the butter knife in the butter. Oh God it's all the stupid things that community life is about and who is going to clean the bath, well it's not my job, who is going to do the shopping this week, oh I'm not bothered. I'll do it, I'll do the shopping. You know it's kind of- the priorities for me were very different in how I worked so it's not surprising that they didn't understand it really. But the thing, what, what I found quite upsetting really was the lay Sisters, not the Mothers, it was the Mothers and the lay Sisters and the lay Sisters were the ones that were not qualified. It was the Sisters who didn't have a teaching qualification were the ones who were in the kitchens and did the laundry and who did the cleaning.

Who didn't have a teaching qualification?

Yea they were split into Mothers and lay Sisters and I remember being at a provincial meeting and I remember one of these Sisters saying how much she hated being a lay Sister because she always felt a second class citizen within the Order because the Mothers were there teaching, being headmistresses and all the Sisters were doing was washing their underwear, you know. There was a big gap in the responsibilities that happened and I think that a lot of the older lay Sisters really felt that discrimination quite deeply and I remember being at a provincial meeting and I wrote a poem about this one who sat opposite me crying, she was in her seventies and she still hadn't got over this thing of how she was treated as a Sister within the Order. Well I just felt that part of that exclusive club of being a Mother is still there in some way and particularly this Birmingham lot who lorded it over everyone because they were quite a strong group of people, quite opinionated and could change you know, a group of like minded people like that could either stop progress or continue progress but I don't know what they were up to really. I couldn't quite work it out. I felt in some ways I just wasn't, I never thought about people's motivations. I just wanted to focus on where I was in all this and how was I going to serve God and what was I going to do and how was it going to be feasible doing what I did with the client group and the people I worked with.

So I spent my working life as a nun just dispelling all the preconceived ideas about what I should be and what I shouldn't be and who I was. So I loved it, I loved having conversations with people who knew nothing about it because I could tell them, 'well no actually nuns can be the most selfish bitches you can ever meet in your life and it's not all Julie Andrews and the Sound of Music at all in any way shape or form. I'd love to tell people about, no this is what motivates me, this is what I want to do, this is why I want to do it but never felt that anybody understood that within the community. And it was interesting the nun who left to retire, there was a bit of a do at the church just a year or two ago and when Jean, the nun came down and we sat talking all afternoon I said to her, now I never wanted to leave but I never felt as though anyone ever understood what I was about and she just said, 'we lost you, didn't we, we lost you, through our ignorance we lost you'. And I said, 'I don't know about that really but it wasn't something I ever wanted but then when Pete and I got married a few of the nuns came to the wedding which was lovely and one of them said to me, 'oh well, at least we educated you, at least you got your social work course, at least we got you through your course'. And I said to her, 'I never wanted to leave, I wanted to commit my life to this, I didn't want to ever leave it but what's the point in staying when you've got absolutely, you've got nothing in common with anyone you're living with'. She said, 'oh well at least we educated you'. And it would be interesting to know of all those who left after me, I don't think they've even got a Novice now, I don't know. This Maura I came to befriend in Norfolk, eventually went back to Scotland she left, after I did actually so I've never seen her since, never been in contact with her since. And then those after me who have left it would be interesting to see how they have used what was given to them by the Order in their work now, see how did they benefit from it all really but I couldn't bear to even meet up with them now. I was invited to a final profession and I blew it really I didn't, I said, 'oh no I'm sorry I've got other things to do'. I just didn't want to see half of them and I didn't want to be back there. So (upset)

It's quite difficult and painful, isn't it?

Yea it is at times. I often have dreams about them, being in at a conference or something and it's all the nuns, saying, 'I can't be here, I'm married, I've got Pete in my life. Why am I here? Why am I doing this? And they are saying, 'Jenny, are you going to come back to us?' This is a regular thing that comes up I think it's when I get stressed, when I get anxious about my work and stuff it comes back to this, 'oh are you going to come back?' and I say, 'yea, I'll come back and then I think ooh' and I'm shouting at myself

in my dream, 'you can't go back you're married now, it's different'. But when I left I used to write to Sheila and say to her, 'I'm not with you as part of you. But what can I do?' it's a job, give it to me as a lay person, what do you want me to do?' But then sadly she died. So *long pause*. I think in some ways I broke a kind of a mould when I was in there for the Order to make it so difficult for me to go, made me wonder what that was all about and I think, I don't know what the Provincial would think now, whether they would think they had lost me or whatever. I don't know

So when you say they made it difficult do you mean financially or

No, I would say to them, I 'm really sure I don't want to come back, 'take six more months, take six more months I want you to really be sure'. And I remember getting a phone call from the General Superior, I was in the flat and I was quite low at the time and eh I remember the Superior General rang me and she said, ' I need to see you, I want to talk to you'. And this time the Superior General was Nonie, she was Australian. I'd met her a couple of times and eh she knew about my work and she was quite, she was quite inspirational really, a charismatic figure and I remember she phoned me from Rome one evening and I just sobbed down the phone, I couldn't speak to her. She said, 'I think you're making this terrible mistake'. I said, 'I'm not, I know I'm not making a mistake'. I know I'm not making a mistake and I didn't want her to be making this decision anyway. That was the hardest thing. I remember after that I used to unplug my phone so it wouldn't ring because the nuns would be ringing me and saying, 'Jenny, we want you to come back. Are you alright? Can we see you?' and I would be going, 'no, I don't want to see you. I don't want to speak to you. I'm here now. I've got to get on with this.' I've got to get on with my life and eh the whole thing when the letter came from the Vatican and you know you sign the, what do you call this? I can't remember what it is. Jean had brought that to the flat to sign and we both sat in the kitchen and signed the paperwork

So it was exclusively a teaching Order was it?

Yes, yes. (Long pause). They gradually changed their attitude but when I began they wanted me to teach and I didn't want to do it. But since then one of the nuns who was brought up in Norfolk went to live in a flat and worked as a machinist in one of the local factories to be a low paid worker yet she never told anyone she worked with that she was a religious sister or anything about her life so I don't understand what that was about because how would she be reaching people if she were living this separate lifestyle? I don't know, I don't know Camillus it was just, there were just so many

questions and not enough answers and I just you know. My, it's interesting my friends here were in relationships were saying to me, 'you've made this incredible decision in your life' and I'd be saying, 'I don't think it's that fantastic a decision, I don't think it's that an incredible decision to have made' because they were talking in terms of 'you've lost everything' and I said, 'what about you breaking up with your boyfriend, what kind of relationship is that?' and she said, 'but that's just a single part of my life, you turned away or you decided that that whole life wasn't right for you, that's much worse than just giving up a relationship.' I didn't agree with them. They are the kind of conversations I used to have with my friends about it, who are all my dearest friends now, who I see not near enough really. They are the kind of really soul searching questions about spirituality, what is spirituality and I'd never had conversations with anyone in the Order like that

Why do you think that?

Maybe it was just assumed that spirituality was done and dusted I think. Because if you didn't know it by now what were you doing

Was it there? was there a spirituality?

I'd say not a lot of it really. If we were living as a community of spiritual people together with a bond of some kind of motivation as Mary Ward's whole aspiration for the Order and the people in it why were people so cruel to each other? Why was spirituality not the central part of their lives? Why was this nun leaving me yellow post-it notes instead of actually speaking to me? Why do we sit at a kitchen table and I saw two nuns turn their back on each other because they couldn't bear to sit at the same table eating their breakfast. None of it seemed to make sense to me. You know if we were supposed to be living the spiritual life together. What is it all about then? I couldn't work it out. I had a simple philosophy about my life and nobody seemed to grasp it and I think I have adapted a Mary Ward, Ignatius type of spirituality, adapted it for myself and I talk to Pete about it. I explain it to him. We sit here, like in the sun now, put the old CD on and listen to Gregorian chant and a bottle of wine and think, it's alright we can do it. John, my parish priest, I knew 25 years ago when he was first ordained, he and I walked around the sports ground in The convent in St Albans talking about celibacy and how we were going to manage it. I didn't have a clue then, didn't have a clue what he was talking about because it wasn't a bother on me then. It didn't bother me at all. I don't think it bothered me all the way through to be honest. It was kind of the basic day to day living that I couldn't, the way of life was just getting lost.

The whole spirituality thing was getting lost in a selfish way of life that I didn't want any part of. I don't know if that's answered the question. *Long pause filled with distressing feelings*

I do get the sense of a huge sadness about the whole thing

Yea. I've thought about. I'm beginning in my work I'm beginning to work more and more with people who have got cancer and who are terminally ill and stuff and I often wonder if I should move more into a job in the Hospice movement, a holistic approach, and working in an organisation that has a faith dimension to it that would kind of bring out that side of my life that has gone since leaving the Order in a sense, it's gone. Maybe it hasn't gone at all, maybe I just do it in a different way (crying)

Let me ask you was there any period in the life when you found some accord between or with any group?

Yea, I did. I lived in a community in Islington in one of these big houses I told you about earlier and there were six of us in this community and the oldest was in her eighties and I was the youngest and there was an age group in between and Nancy was the superior and Nancy's attitude to life was, she was a singer, a musician so gifted, I loved her to bits. For the first time I was respected as a part of the community, not just a Novice or someone in the Juniorate who is sucking off the whole institute because that was how it made you feel a lot of the time. And you did all the nasty jobs because you had to earn your living somehow so I'd be sent on all these week end Retreats with kids who didn't want to be on them who'd be hiding the Vodka in the bags and then getting so drunk that they'd fall through the ceiling and end up in hospital. And being cold, freezing cold Retreat houses, we just stood in for the other nuns because it was something we could to help I suppose. You're not really earning, you're not really contributing to the community so you do these different thing. But Bristol was different, I was respected. Nancy used to ask my opinion about, 'do you think we should do this Jenny? Do you think we should go here? Do you think it's right? Whatever decision that was done as a community I used to be included in it. I felt a part of it and I remember saying to Augusta was the oldest and she was great fun. On St. Patrick's Day she'd come down in this hat and a dress, make shamrocks for all of us and she'd be great fun. And I remember going away on Retreat to Ann in Wales and I remember saying to Sheila, 'I've got nothing in common with any of these people in this institute I've got nothing in common'. And she said, 'what do you mean?' and the whole of the week of the Retreat it was finding, finding the commonality with the other people. The Retreat

started off with being, I've got nothing in common with anybody, what am I doing here? Well actually there are only about half a dozen people I can't really stand and who can't stand me so that's fine I don't care really and I just imagined tying them all up and putting them on a desert island somewhere and leaving us all alone. And I remember Ann on the Retreat was killing herself laughing about all this. And I came back to the community and Winifred said to me, 'how was your Retreat?' I said, 'I've gone from feeling I don't belong in this thing at all to six people I could tie up in a rope and leave on a desert island' and we sat on the stairs, we just sat on the stairs chatting away about this Retreat and how it had been and laughing and giggling about who these six people were who were going to go on the desert island. And that was the best of times really but Winn's dead (crying). *A very long silence – minutes* I don't know what else to say If anything else comes into your head that's okay. It's fine I know it's quite painful so you don't have to worry. You don't have to worry at all.

Strange isn't it. Twelve years ago

It's twelve years since you left?

Yes, 95, made final vows in 93 and left in 95

It went very deep the whole thing didn't it? There is a great sense of loss. The organisation's loss and your loss as well

Yea. Strange about the dreams though isn't it? It's quite funny I worked in another surgery, it's up the road from here actually and there are two teams of district nurses and they were so funny, they were great fun to be with and they were telling me about going to see, How do you solve or I don't know what it's called and they were all going to hire nuns' outfits to go to it. And I said, 'but not many nuns wear the habits now anyway. You wouldn't even know half the nuns who would be around you'. And they said, 'how do you know so much about it?' and I said, 'actually I was a nun for twelve years and she literally fell on the floor and she burst out laughing, 'no can't believe it, can't believe it'. And I ended up having to give her a photograph. My cousin gave her a photograph of my profession and they were going to do something with that. I was so mortified with this picture that I got it back off her but they were just amazed that I was a nun. And if ever I have a conversation with people it is interesting that they don't know anything, it's still such a shrouded life, a shrouded existence really. But I think the sisters made it that way themselves. They purposely didn't want; they weren't open, welcoming, a lot of them I think

What do you think the fear about the openness was? Perhaps you can think about that for the next time.

I don't know. I don't know. I wonder if it was, because if people actually knew the opulent life that they lived they would be quite disgusted by it. Well for me, I felt it was, well the houses in London worth millions,. I think the convent in Dublin had the opportunity of either renovating the whole place or just leaving it, letting it go, I don't know if it was a listed building or what. I can't remember the history of it now but they spent millions renovating the front part of the house because it had rot and whatever else

So it was a wealthy Order obviously, do you think that money came from the teaching?

Well yes. By the time I left there weren't so many teaching. Yea, headmistresses of the Colleges and they taught in schools in London. There wasn't a school in Wales. They had the Prep school in Al. which is a private school. I remember they had a schools' meeting because they wanted to decide what direction they wanted to be moving into and I went to this schools' meeting. And I was saying to them, 'well I'm not a teacher what do you want me to be there for because I don't know anything about teaching'. And I remember saying to them, they were kind of congratulating themselves on what fantastic schools they had, that discipline wasn't a problem and I just em, it was making me madder and madder because they were just congratulating themselves on what a fantastic job they were doing with all these girls around the country you know, all these footballers in Birmingham paying top whack for private schools for their kids and I said to them. I just looked at them all and I said, and what do you do with those girls who feel like they are the shit in the gutter?' And they were mortified because I used the word shit to start with and I could hear them all going ahhh (intake of breath). Then I said, 'what do you do? What do you do with those kids who feel like they're nobody, have nothing?' And it just all went dead. And I just used to pop in those kinds of questions. And I often wondered if they'd ever do a study about, has anybody that they taught become socially aware or are they just the elite in society now? I'd love to know where they are and what they're doing. And if there is anybody who is socially aware or whatever. I think I shocked them, I used just every now and then throw in a question like that. *Long pause*

The nuns were all middle class were they?

Yes, most of them were.

We will finish, is that alright?

Third interview

First of all thank you very much for the last time.

Not at all, you are welcome

And I suppose this time it's a kind of discussion. Maybe you thought of something from the last time that you would like to say. You have been thinking about it I think

Oh yea, I've been thinking loads about it. And it's very interesting because, did I mention to you in an email to you that I found a journal that I'd been writing the week that I left and it's like a microcosm of what I was going through for that whole week before I moved into my brother's flat and it's just incredible really how low I was and I didn't realise what kind of effect it really had on me and my friends used to say to me, 'you've lost everything, you've lost your way of life, you've lost your belief system, you've lost this relationship with the community and all you have is your job'. And I used say to them, 'well, that's no worse than anybody breaking up in a relationship' and they would always say, 'no, this is much worse because it goes deeper than just a relationship, this is a whole way of life that's changed'. Yea, but going back over that reflection it was incredible the kinds of things I associated with the loss of it. I'd forgotten all about it or it had been at the back of my mind and there were three things and two of them I can remember but one of them was Body and Soul and I don't know whether it was a programme on the telly or a film or something but the other was HG's music, he was a composer who came from Auschwitz so he wrote this music about Auschwitz, the home that he was born in that became the concentration camp and there were loads of things on the telly about the murders in Auschwitz and all through this book I was thinking 'I don't want to die. I want to live' that was the kind of theme running through this whole reflection. 'I don't want to die in this way of life'. The way of life in religious life was actually killing me, 'would I die' and it brought this whole thing in of 'do I want to be dead or do I want to find life?' and I found it powerful just reading it back, you know thinking of the kinds of things that I wrote in it. And the other thing was, 'Truly, madly, deeply' did you ever see that film with Juliet Stephenson? And it was basically the ghost of her partner comes back. You know he dies of a brain tumour or something. It's a comedy about him coming back to her to let her live, to move on, to say good-bye to him and to open another chapter of her life. So that again was something really powerful at the time. And I'd forgotten, well I hadn't forgotten that I'd made the connections but I'd kind of underestimated the whole emotional strain of that week by reading back over it.

So when you were going through it, and this was one of the interesting things about what you said last time I was wondering if this was retrospective or was it as you went through it were you conscious of what was happening in the life or was it since you left that you tried to make sense of it or were you able to make sense of it as you lived it?

That was the crucial thing about it, as I was living that life I knew that, I knew that I couldn't continue living it because it wasn't the way of life that I wanted it to be and felt I'd never be able to change that because there were too many powerful people in it making that life a certain way, developing that religious life into a way that people lived on their own, people didn't live in community any more, they worked away and did very strange jobs that bore no connection to the lives that they were leading and I felt that in the work that I was doing, even though it was social work. I felt that I was more and more removed from the life of the community that I lived in and as I said before, the main source of my support came from people who didn't believe in anything. They where do I get my support from and how does this life nourish me when I don't feel it at all and so that just started the whole thing off –why shouldn't I just take some time out and think about it.were the people who understood more than the people who had faith or who lived in the institute. And so that started me thinking,

I think we'll come back to that again but there is one thing that I thought I would ask you and you don't have to answer it if you don't want to. When you went to that guy that shocked you, I don't remember his name now

Yes, DB

What kind of thing did he say to you that upset you so much

Well the thing he said, and he denied it afterwards but I know he said it. He said to me something like, 'you are a spineless jellyfish that clings on to people'.

What did he mean by that?

That I was spineless that I just didn't, that I did things to please other people

You hadn't entered then?

No

So what was he going on?

These tests, you know. You know the pictures and drawings and stuff and asking questions. So he said, he was just asking loads of questions, he said, 'what do you like most? What do you hate most? What is the best thing about your mother, what's the best thing about your father? Well he basically said, 'well you hate your mother, or you are too ambivalent towards your mother'. We don't have a very good relationship but

you know. So what. This was the thing he said, to me, 'you are a spineless jellyfish that clings on to people.' And I was just devastated at the time. You know I was in my early twenties. I was working. I've got a job, I've got loads of friends

It's a very strange thing to say to anybody. That's very upsetting and not having a basis for it except psychometric testing

Well eh. I went to see him twice. I had to drive back to Norfolk from Sheffield after it. I was crying all the way home I was so upset by what he had said and I went to the Convent and I said to the nuns, 'I don't want anything to do with this, if this is what it is, it's cruel, you know this is terrible what he did'. And one of the nuns was so upset she rang him and he said he didn't say any of that.

Oh, he's a bit suspect!

You don't make up something like this when you have no experience of psychotherapists or analysts. Why would you sit as a twenty-one year old, twenty-two year old and come back and say he said this if he didn't say it. You know he was (pause)

Did that affect you?

It did for quite a while actually. I knew that there were issues about my Mum because of her history, my birth and everything I knew that would always be something but of the four of us children I'm the only one who has tried to understand why she is the way she is. You know because she lost her Mum at the age of twelve and she lost her father the day I was born

Really?

Yea, so within 24 hours of me being born, she's lost a father and a brother. You know the two of them died. The one brother had come over to Ireland the week that I was born to organise his father's funeral and his funeral was before his father's at the age of 39. So when it comes to my birthday in September she's looking out the window going, 'oh it was raining like this the day of the funeral. She'd just go of. There was nothing good happening that time. So that's it. That's my story with her really.

Gosh yes, (pause). It was hard to be told that. You are going to do something with your life

Yea, he said I'd have difficulty with authority, with authoritarian women

Okay right – (in a sympathetic and understanding way).

I told them he damages people. And I've always said that to people when they are going into therapy. I've said 'just be very sure that that's what you want' because I just felt, I felt he knocked me to pieces and I was left putting myself back together again.

Well, that wasn't really very pleasant was it? That's not really what therapy is about, is it?

No, I've got this theory about it Camillus. He was a very attractive very handsome priest

Oh he was a priest?

Oh he was a priest, yea, and I think the nun who sent me to him, fancied him, had a crush on him and so he's the bees' knees. He's going to be great and I think he actually used his sexuality to be brutal with a lot of people I think. I'm sure I wasn't the only one he'd do something like that to.

Gosh right, yea, right (pause wondering how to respond to this) Very difficult I must say, very, very difficult altogether So these nuns you went into, I was thinking about them and there were a few things. There was your mother's experience of nuns, the way you described them I think was 'cruel, ungodly' so you had this idea of nuns because obviously your mother had spoken to you about this

Well she talked about how cruel they were and it would be common knowledge that they would be brutal in the sense that they would be beating

So this was your idea, that's Irish isn't it.

Yes, but her experience of them

So your experience of them, there were these old nuns, like the ones in A. that you really took to in a big way and then there were others that you found extremely difficult because they didn't seem to live up or their lifestyle wasn't what you expected. So can you describe that lifestyle? Opulent was one of the words you used

We went back to the original charism of the founder. I don't know when it was

That was after Vatican 2

So they developed this whole different way of life that was much more free, people could wear their own clothes and it was much more of an open lifestyle in the sense of doing a lot more, a lot more freedoms in that sense whatever you want to call it. And I think it was that middle age group, the age that I am now, the forties, fifties, sixties who I think saw people like me, in their twenties as a threat to their lifestyle, to the way they had developed their community backgrounds and life and a few of us came in saying,

‘we want to be poor’, ‘we want to live a simple lifestyle, we don’t want to be living in these great big colleges with a great big chapel and fantastic surroundings

But would you think, this is a hypothesis, that they had when they were younger, because they were the middle aged ones at that time, in the 80s they were middle aged, is that right?

Yes

So they would have been pre Vatican people

When they started, yes. And a lot of them would have been very young, 16 and 17 as well

When they entered (surprised)?

Yea

So they would have grown up in the old regime. You said that in the 80s you were going to all those meetings about the habit and things. You are the only one I interviewed who entered post Vatican

Oh yes right

And it’s really interesting. So I was just wondering if these women who had been in the old regime, a very difficult regime, and they had got rid of it and they thought they are free now and you come along and you want to live this simple lifestyle and they think, ‘where does she think she’s coming from?’

Yea

But on the other hand there are these older people that you had great respect for and got on great with and they belonged and had grown up in this awful regime

Yea, yea and who were mother superiors in the 60s when these younger women had joined and they would say to me openly, ‘we were cruel, we made such terrible decisions for these young people and now we are 80, 90 and we can sit back and let somebody else, this is the way it was at the time, the lifestyle

But they seem, there’s something about the difference isn’t there. They were honest about what they had done. They had their freedom as well, did they not fall in with the new things and the new way of life and all that?

No, not so much. But some of them did, some of them did, but to them the importance was community, their focus was community and living community life with each other in their old age

So Vatican 2 said, it said 2 things: renew yourselves and go back to the spirit of the foundress so it’s like the interpretation of this was, ‘do what you like’

Yea, that's what it seemed like. There was no kind of development, it was all kind of jumbled up. Everyone was doing; people were doing different things all over the place, like the one who was a machinist in a factory and didn't tell anybody anything about her life. So what's the good of that, she lived in a house on her own, though it was owned by a vicar. She never told anybody about her life, so she worked as a machinist and went home and to me that was a kind of double life. Where was her mission in that?

So Vatican 2 do you think it had the reverse effect?

Well I think it definitely made life more complicated because there was no direction for anybody

So in other words there was no transition period

I suppose, I don't know because I didn't experience it the way it was before. I only experienced it afterwards. I don't know how long that transition took

Still when you went in some of the pre Vatican things seemed to have been still in existence, like for example, getting £10 for the month and not getting money for holidays, that would be a pre-Vatican thing.

Yes

I'm trying to understand what's going on. When you come along to those who have had their fill of simple life from the past. Maybe these people were so fed up with what they had, and then they get this bit of freedom and then somebody new comes along and says, 'why can't we just have a simple life?' and they think, 'we couldn't be doing with this any more'.

Yea, I think you're right.

Did many of these people leave or did they all stay?

Yea, nobody left.

So they left within the order as it were?

Yea, they moved out and lived on their own

So they kind of left and stayed inside.

Yea, yea

It's only a hypothesis

Yea, none of them left except B who came back two years later. So she did actually move out completely and then came back. Actually when I left she was the Provincial. So she did take two years out to decide

As I said it's very hard to get an overall picture and you are the only one who entered post Vatican 2. Where did you get your idea of what you thought the life was going to be like?

Well, in the parish here in Norfolk was the Novitiate and so I was involved in the music group and then made friends with one of the novices and then I used to go and have a meal with them or to prayers so I had a bit of an introduction to it that way. But that was probably the only thing

But you had some idea of what it was going to be like because it didn't measure up

Well I suppose the measuring up thing was I've come from a relatively poor Irish family who had nothing and will have nothing to leave me. I'm not privileged; I'm not from a privileged family so everything that I saw around me just seemed so opulent and big and

And the people who were there? What kind of backgrounds were they, in the main?

Well, the mothers were probably quite wealthy middle-class families

So they were people who had come through the schools?

Yea

And the lay Sisters?

Well, the lay Sisters were mostly from Ireland. I suppose that's why I got on better with them because they were my family. In a sense, if I looked in terms of my uncles and aunties in Ireland who had nothing, they were the ones I was more in tune with because they lived the simple life- they peeled potatoes, they got lunches

They were still doing that?

Yes

Because one of the first changes post Vatican was that that distinction went

The title went; they weren't called mothers any more, they were all Sisters but they all had different jobs

So here it lived on

Yea

All that went was the title and the distinction stayed?

Yea

I see. Long pause

That's why I think the life was a bit of a contradiction in the sense that this was the fruit of Vatican 2. Well it didn't mean anything; it didn't mean enough

Would the mothers have had the really tough life that the lay sisters had I wonder when they were novices or would they always have been treated with a kind of deference?

I don't know but it would be interesting to know that. I can't remember because it was so long ago but I would wonder if they had a separate Novitiate because the mothers were the teachers, they were all the teachers, while the sisters were the ones who did the cleaning, the laundry, the washing.

I would remember being at a Province meeting and everybody sat around in a corner, in a circle, in the University here in N, actually and this Sister cried her heart out about the injustice of her life

In front of everybody?

Yea and I wrote a poem about it afterwards.

And how did they take that

That memory stayed with me forever because it was just heart-wrenching what anger she had and upset all her life. And this woman at the time, she was in her seventies

So you say these women were mostly Irish- they could have been educated- it's not because they weren't intelligent was it?

No, I wouldn't think so. I don't know if I told you about one – the whole family was out cutting the corn or something and one sister in the family was supposed to go and she changed her mind and the mother said, 'you go, Kate, in her place

That was common?

I wouldn't have been surprised. That was in Ireland

She was an old woman who told you that?

Yea

I wonder if there was an expectation at that time that people would go into religion?

Was there some kind of societal expectation? I know that people wanted a priest in the family

Yea

This woman didn't want to enter but just did as she was told. But she didn't enter in Ireland. Why do you think they didn't enter in Ireland?

Maybe it was considered missionary work. Our nuns frightfully middle class and the Irish used to call themselves their country cousins. And moving to England then they considered themselves the bumpkins to the actual Institute

So the social class system which is very British was alive and well in the Order

Oh yes, oh yes. I mean the attitude of us being Novices was, you are here living free, so get out and do stuff. It was kind of, we had to do it so you will do it.

Novices in general were kinds of dogsbodies but it would never be said,

Well, when Pete and I got married some of the nuns came to the wedding and one of the things said was, ‘well, we educated you didn’t we?’

You could interpret that in many ways. How did you interpret that?

They gave me the privilege of being educated. They gave me the opportunity to learn. I felt quite humiliated by that actually

Yea, that’s what I thought as well. That’s what it felt like to me

It felt like they were saying, the only reason you were in this order was that you could be educated and escape. And that wasn’t it; if they only did know that the hardest thing in my life was to leave.

It’s extremely sad, our interview together last time. It’s something that has stayed with you really. That you never really wanted that

No

And did you ever think that if you had gone to a different Order

I dunno

These were your local nuns weren’t they

Yes but it was also. It seemed to me to be a really exciting group of people in the sense of they were almost liberated. They weren’t enclosed, they were out with the community, they were working with people in the community. The opportunity of working with whoever was immense. You get really get to work with the poor in whatever way they were poor, physical, psychological, emotional whatever and that’s what I dreamed of doing because our founder was such an exciting character –the sacrifices she made in her life and how close to death she was, by having a faith, having to dress up in secret so that she wouldn’t be found and eh being beheaded because she was hiding these priests. I wish somebody would make a film about her. Her life was fantastic, amazing.

What you are saying is that the Order had moved so far away from her

I think so

So the Order had got into that middle class way of being

Definitely. But I was based in a house in Islington that was worth hundred of thousands at the time. And they would say, ‘let’s have a decorator in to paint’. And I would think, my parents never got a decorator in to paint. I was taught how to paint because we

needed it. Nobody in their right mind would get a decorator in. So I would be saying, why get a decorator in I can do that wall. Get the paint, I'll do it. No, no we're giving a poor man a job. That was the attitude, we're giving him work to do or else he wouldn't have any work would he? A kind of patronising attitude towards people actually. We'll do this for you because you are poor, you need the money.

(Very long pause) Actually one nun did leave out of that age group I remember now. Rita who was the sister of Vera who left and came back, she left and never came back. *What also struck me about your interview was how much you might have been appreciated and you don't realise it.*

Mmm

From what you said, your leaving had a big effect on people

Yea (pause)

I think it brought something to light for some people somewhere

Possibly. You know there were so many of them that I did respect. It was one group of people of that age who seemed to think this Order would not survive without them. These two sisters their mother called them the two foundation stones of the Institute because they sacrificed their lives in religious life and that was the attitude they had. They thought that they were superior to everybody else to the point of excluding people *Well of course, people did think at one particular time that religious life was the honours course to heaven, that it was above marriage and that was drummed into people*

This was a core group of about 12 people who entered around the same time in Birmingham and they were quite a strong group within themselves and they were all around the same age over a few years, a few years gap

If you think entering was a good thing to do, that there was a certain status attached to having a daughter a nun or a son a priest or whatever. The other thing is that leaving is very difficult as you know and maybe people did not see it as a possibility

One of the questions that I was thinking about was, where would I live, what would I be. I'd lose all that. But I didn't I still kept my job

Vatican 2 was to bring you back to the charism of the foundress and that's where you were and yet you didn't find that. And when I asked you about your colleagues, you said they didn't do the same work as you so you didn't have any colleagues but if the core of the life was community then that wouldn't have mattered. But then when you entered everything was geared specifically to teaching

Yea

So they hadn't adjusted to doing new things which they since have I presume

Yes a lot of people were becoming spiritual directors by the time I left and working in Loyola Hall directly with the Jesuits

So maybe the time that you were there was a time that they were trying to make a transition

Yea possibly

But not able to make it

Maybe because by the time I was going to go they wanted me to go to Africa

And why didn't you do that?

Because I thought it was too late by then

Why do you think it was too late

Because I had already become disillusioned with it by then, I had become disillusioned with England and the Province and somehow I thought, it had happened with other nuns who had gone on the missions from the Province, they never came back because England was this hostile country and I didn't. One of them she lives in Peru and she lives the life and I remember seeing her a few years later when she came back and she said, I can't believe how people are so selfish in this country. And then maybe I had always felt, the nuns in Mauritius, I remember one of them called me her tramp because, in the most pleasant way, because she knew that I worked with poor people in London. And I was working with people who were depressed and who were dying and on drugs and trying to bring up kids on drugs – the people who were most damaged in society and she wanted me to go to Mauritius and to work with those people in her country and she called me her tramp. And she would say to me, 'you know you would live in a cardboard box and it wouldn't be something that would matter to you. And even now living here it doesn't mean all that much, wealth doesn't mean all that much to me, I can live with it or without it. I'm not bothered about it. I said, playfully she would call me her tramp. That's where my heart was really and then I would go back there to the community where they were so far removed from working with people on the ground.

They were teachers

But you also said about them, the pettiness of the butterknife and the butter and that's the remnant of the institutionalisation- they have been brought up in this way

Or the labels on the cupboard doors

Yea, they have lived so long but it's really about being institutionalised and I don't know but those people are probably still worrying about the butter and the knives

Possibly.

Institutionalisation, a closing off of your mind and not being able to think except about these things. But I do wonder about their own hardship as well. When you talk about those who tell you the stories, those who have survived the difficult times

Yea

And yet being able to look beyond it. Would that have been a group – you mentioned a group

It was their age. They were wise old women who had been through it all and change wasn't fazing them. Change wasn't easy for them but they didn't question it that much. Those who were intellectuals, you know some of these were superiors and headmistresses and eh some of them had no idea of how to deal with young people and with other members of the community. Some of them had a common sense approach

Would some of the Irish ones have been superiors

Oh yea, yea

So there wasn't an Irish/English distinction

No

But a lot of the Irish were the lay Sisters as well.

Yea

And I did wonder if you were angry about the Irish being in that position

No, I don't think it was anything about being Irish. I think it was the lifestyle, the way of life

But the lifestyle being, what they ate, what they wore or was it just the outer, the buildings and that kind of stuff

I think they had just forgotten about poor people. They had become so far removed from them. I don't know if I said it but we had an education meeting and it was supposed to be about how do we develop our roles as teachers and how do we know we are being successful and how do we move on from this? And that's when I just said to them, 'you are all teachers around here, I am not a teacher but what about all those girls that feel they are like the shit in the gutter? And they all just took a deep breath because they were all just patting one another on the back

So did they just ignore those people because everyone who went through their schools could not have been okay

I just asked the question

And what do you think happened to them?

I think they could have been lost in the system, somehow but they were focusing on how fantastic they were as teachers and I was saying to them, I don't see that in what I do. I see the people who have failed, who are seeing themselves as nothing, as worthless, as tramps, as drunks, as drug addicts. I don't see any success in what I do. And I remember one of them came to me, because I wrote down about what I did, because we were having a session about sharing about our jobs. And I talked about the people who don't necessarily change their lives in a positive way. All I can do is be with them during that time. And this nun came up to me, she was young, at that time she was in her forties, one of them and she said, 'Jenny, I read that and I feel so depressed reading that what you do' and I said, 'that's just what I do, that's the reality of my work'. I don't get great results doing what I do and she was so depressed by it and yet she looked upon herself as working on the cutting edge of the poor community in Newcastle.

So the fact that they had lost touch with reality with the real, reality. They had a reality that they thought was working with the poor.

I think the thing that struck me most was the sadness about the whole thing and I couldn't figure it out. I couldn't quite figure out what the sadness that you felt and that I felt with you, what that was about and maybe it's about what we are thinking about now, about losing touch, losing touch with the real world in a way

So maybe it's about moving from institutionalisation into a fantasy world where everything can be provided- where you may not work and still have your apartment

To me I can't imagine, I spoke to Marie who left a few years after me. She is in Scotland now and working in a hospice working and she said, oh I've heard there are three of them in sheltered housing in the same convent. So they've all got a flat each, living in a sheltered housing block, makes no sense to me

That's what I mean by having left but not leaving

Yea, well yea. I suppose if I'd stayed I wonder what would I be doing? Probably be more lonely living in a community

You said that when you left you realised how lonely you had been but did you know when you were there that you were lonely?

I knew that I was isolated, I didn't know that it was loneliness. I knew I did something different and I was seen by them as doing something different. That's why when you

said, I can't remember how you said it now but what effect I had on other people, I was on the coalface in the work that I was doing on my own with a very different view with the work that I did and I don't know whether it challenged people. I can't remember what I was going to say now

About the effect it might have had when you said, okay this is not for me

Well I just remember that nun who cried and how angry she was at how she had lived her life and the disrespect she had had from the other nuns and I thought you know, I always went back to her and I thought, I'm going to end up like her if I stay because I'm going to be so angry about it

Yes, you said, 'a twisted old nun' you said it twice I think and I'm thinking why did she say she'd end up a twisted old nun, why didn't she say she'd end up like one in St. Ailbe's?

Yea, that's true actually. I don't know. I suppose it was a fear that I would and if I did then I would do nobody any good

Because in fact your reality is quite different really. Your reality is that they didn't want you to go and they tried to stop you from going. So they recognised what you were saying I think

Yea

And maybe the fact that you did leave may have had a positive effect.

Yea, it's interesting because the people who I would see as the main cause of me going never mentioned me, never mentioned me as being someone as having a positive effect. They mention other people but they never mention me.

But why, one would ask?

Well I don't know because I haven't spoken to anyone

But you could ask why? It might be for the very reason that we are saying that they couldn't bear to think it. So do you think the life is at an end?

I just think it's got to go back to basics.

Do you think it will survive?

I think some Orders won't but religious life in itself will. I think it will die a natural death and it will re-emerge as something completely radical all over again, that's what I think

Rather than the laity taking over

That's a good point actually

Another thing you said, was I can do that, I don't need to be thwarted by being in religion I can do it.

Mmm

You can do it but of course you don't have the supports, the financial support. That's what one has to do without when one decides to go it alone

Yea

That's why lots of people can't do it because economically they couldn't survive

Yea. I agree

I'm just wondering about your mother's experience of nuns, you thought somehow, no it doesn't need to be like that. Yet you were effectively crushed by it, you couldn't stay there. I wonder what that says about the life if it can't accommodate a new spirit because that's what we are talking about.

Yea

Then it will die out

I think there is a fear, I think there is definitely fear in this middle age group who saw, I think they thought they'd got it all sussed and we come in and say well, we don't want to do that. We want to live a bit differently and eh. There was talk of – why don't some of you get together and live in a community that you think you would like to live in and they were discussions about it on the outskirts but it never happened. And I would have loved that, three or four of us living in a little flat or on a council estate doing our jobs, having prayer evenings and whatever else. It was mooted but I don't think they trusted us enough. Yes I don't think they trusted us enough that we would have the responsibility to do it somehow. In a way there was a funny attitude towards us- they looked on us as children or naïve people though we had more of a life experience than they ever had when they entered at the age of sixteen.

Ok right

I was wondering last time if I was too negative

Well I think we have actually re-talked a lot of it today. No I think it was very difficult for you and I think there was a huge sadness about it. And I was trying to figure out what that sadness was about and I think we've come to it now. I think the sadness is about that there couldn't be a new spirit

Yea

I don't know if you'd agree or not. I think what we are saying is that the Institute wasn't really able to renew itself

I think you're right. I think that's it. You've hit the nail on the head

So therefore there's a huge sadness

Because it couldn't cope with difference

Very good, Well done.