



## *Hidden with Christ*

The Call to Enclosure

# Entering the Palace of the Great King—Debt Free!

BY SR. MARY CHRISTIANA COLEMAN, O.S.C.

Ten summers ago, I entered through the enclosure door of Saint Clare's Monastery in Sauk Rapids, Minnesota. As I lay in bed in the darkness of that first night of May 13, 2003, there was enough light to enable me to see the crucifix on the wall. I said with awe, "I am in the Palace of the Great King."

Before entering, the one thing holding me back from fulfilling my vocation was educational loan. It is more truthful to say that my life was quite confused, yet the speed with which my financial needs were met helped me to see the working of Divine Providence. I have always had some understanding that God loved me and that the Catholic Church was true religion, yet I was overly concerned about being approved, was friendly but guarded, seeking peace but running from the Lord.

At the age of 2, I was among the crowd blessed by Pope John Paul II as he visited Chicago in 1979. While I was yet small, Mom would take me to a shrine run by Carmelite friars, as well as to other nearby Blessed Sacrament chapels. I remember being gently redirected by Dad to make the Sign of the Cross with my right hand instead of my dominant left, as well as bouncing on his knee during Sunday Mass, attentive to the action of the priest. My parents made great sacrifices for my older sister and me to attend Catholic schools. I cannot

overestimate the positive influence of the four Franciscan sisters at St. John Bosco School in Hammond, Indiana, as well as that of a devout lay teacher. Throughout primary school, the Most Blessed Sacrament was my refuge in all hardships.

My swim coach at Bishop Noll Institute was a Jesuit priest who encouraged teamwork and achieving one's personal best. During my junior year, I began participating in Mass before the beginning of each school day. In God's good plan, we had one car, so I needed to continue to come early to school before Mom drove Dad to work. Although I enjoyed daily Mass, I told our chaplain that I didn't know if I believed in transubstantiation. He recommended that I go on retreat. During Eucharistic Adoration, I asked, "Are You there?" Jesus answered with the peacefulness of His Presence, and I realized that I didn't need to get tangled up in the theological term for the reality. In the same month as the Lenten retreat, my beloved pastor succumbed to cancer. He was a Hungarian who encouraged me to appreciate my Croatian heritage, even paying for the parish secretary, Mom, Dad and me to attend a music and dance performance by the Duquesne University Tamburitzans with him. I suspect he was aware of God's plans for me. While still in high school, I abruptly ceased



my second summer of daily Mass following a contention with priests. Through it all I continued to fulfill the Sunday obligation at my home parish.

My young and fervent religion teacher inspired me to declare that I wanted to attend a Catholic college, and I began studies at the Order of Friars Minor's Quincy University. The school had a strongly familial and welcoming atmosphere. A friend and I would occasionally "chalk the friary" sidewalk, leaving well-intended messages and images of all creatures of Our God and King in the wee hours of the night. As a freshman, a different classmate, her sister and I independently chose to go on retreat with Benedictine Sisters, at which I learned about *lectio divina*. I enjoyed our *labora*, gathering walnuts

for pies which the sisters were making. Two more retreats were made there during my college years.

Sophomore year, I was a resident assistant in a former seminary building. It was a quiet environment, literally hallowed ground. I visited Jesus often during the week. Scripture spoke to me personally. I was always a good student, except in mathematics, yet had the highest grades that year. There was a balance within myself, and I could tell when it was time to visit, listen to and encourage fellow residents. I became a theology major and philosophy minor. An article about Poor Clares in *Vision* magazine intrigued me. I said to myself that if I stayed in that building for another year I was going to end up in the convent. As a resident assistant in a different dorm the following year, I kept saying, "I'll be *happy enough* if I ... teach theology ... have a boyfriend ... work for the Church ... help other people." I thrust myself away from doing God's will although I attended Mass every Sunday and holy day and continued to study theology and philosophy. I did have an awareness of the responsibility of the student loans which I was accumulating. As part of senior year research, I read *Peace Is Every Step* by Thomas Merton's Buddhist friend Thich Nhat Hanh, and sat in frustration with the desire to live in the present moment though my mind was like barbed wire. I became increasingly tired during junior and senior years.

The physical lethargy continued as I began graduate study at the Benedictine-run St. John's School of Theology-Seminary. After having done so well as a college sophomore, I was telling myself that I did not have the intelligence to be



in graduate school. The more I participated in liturgical prayer and was in solitude, the more I wanted to be with God, yet I continued to tell myself, "I'll be happy enough if..." Throughout college and graduate school, I had summer and school break work, aside from resident assistant and work-study jobs. When my parents would send me some money, I would immediately go to the business office and put almost all of it toward tuition.

I worked in youth ministry and Confirmation preparation at a parish for a year. At the beginning of this employment, a test revealed that I had an extremely high white blood cell count. My doctor said that she didn't know how I was up and walking. The situation was brought under control by medication. After the parish, I worked at a department store for a year. I had consolidated student loans and begun repayment.

Darkness loomed over me. I caused a pricey fender-bender, completed course work toward a master's degree in systematic theology with a minor in liturgy yet had not done comprehensive exams, went from one relationship into a second, was away from the Catholic Church for four months and felt inadequate and

overwhelmed. Though in turmoil, I often prayed St. Thomas Aquinas' prayer for a rightly-ordered life. I finally thought that there was nothing more to lose, so I might as well do God's will.

A great deal of money had been invested in my intellectual formation. The Labouré Society provided me the assistance I needed to help pay off my educational loan. My department store co-workers, Catholic and non-Catholic, took up a collection among themselves and sent it to The Labouré Society. An elderly priest, whom I never met, sent a sizable gift. The elimination of my student-loan debt is a beautiful example of God working through the goodness of other people.

Although I feebly crossed the monastery threshold, my experience here has been the best education in my life. After I entered the community, Cy Laurent of The Labouré Society phoned me to ask how I was settling into my vocation. Once physically inside, my mind and emotions were haggard. I wondered what I was doing here, yet opened my heart to my novice mistress. The most useful statement she said to me was, "Don't turn your ship around in a storm." Some people thought I was running from the world, but cloistered contemplative life has helped me to find peace, even amid misunderstandings and conflicts. Through the Sacraments, this Poor Clare community, and spiritual direction, I came to truly forgive, accept and love others and myself. Now I seek to support the ministry of Jesus, primarily through union with Him. Still in awe to be dwelling in the palace of the Great King, I am so thankful for the help of The Labouré Society! ❀

**For more information contact:  
St. Clare's Monastery  
320-251-3556**