

Sister Rose and Sea Wife

by G. Murphy Donovan (October 2014)

“No one ever looks at a nun’s face.” – JM Scott

Nuns are a curiosity today. In another time, girls for whatever reasons were given over to convents for a life of prayer or good works. If the candidates were young enough, notions of choice were probably very elastic. Vocations are few in the modern cloister – and few orders of good sisters would tolerate or encourage any coercion by families or sponsors anyway.

Nonetheless, the values in convents appeal to cynics and altruists alike; free labor in God’s name. Indeed, the idea that women had purpose beyond mate and mother was always progressive, if not subversive, in the best sense of those words. Changing the world by example, genuine selflessness, are rare if not revolutionary ideas.



A novice

Those who supervise the novitiate today take great pains to be brutally honest about the rigors of a religious vocation: vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Unlike diocesan priests, nuns are not salaried as a rule. So what moves a girl to choose a life of altruism – and often thankless drudgery?

Over the years, I gave this question a lot of thought. Nuns played a large role in my childhood. I came to the Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. School and Home for Children in my 11th year shortly after my nuclear family imploded. Before that I attended Our Lady of Solace grade school on Morris Park Avenue in the East Bronx – as a charity student. Nuns ran both institutions. Most of my memories of these ladies are salutary. A veteran sister could be tough, but seldom abusive.

Before scholarship, they always insisted on discipline, attendance, good manners, good hygiene, and good penmanship. Poor penmanship and dirty nails were thought to be the marks of backsliders. Punctuality, behavior, and a good hand could compensate for many an academic deficit. Most sisters argued that any success began with showing up.

For nuns, caring and teaching were vocations, not government or union sinecures. That difference made all the difference in the blue-collar Bronx.

A neat hand or script was thought to be a path to an orderly life. Science may some day establish such a correlation. Like no other group of teachers, nuns set the standard in many a blackboard jungle. Sisters often had little more than a high school diploma yet; most would be the equal of any credentialed pedagogue today.

Motivating potential scholars in the east Bronx wasn't the challenge it might have been had it not been for the alternative – public schools. A parochial school might make a child repeat a grade or expel the incorrigibles but, the real muscle lay with deterrence. The threat of expulsion to a public Dewey was usually more than enough to sober the most indulgent parent. There was no greater indignity among upwardly mobile Irish, Italian, or Jewish parents than having a child bounced by the nuns.

One prominent expulsion could set the tone for generations. George Carlin was an example in the south Bronx. He was expelled from Cardinal Hayes by the legendary Dean of Discipline, Father Stanislaus [Jablonski](#)