

LADIES' HOME

THE MAGAZINE WOMEN BELIEVE IN

APRIL 1967

JOURNAL

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last year...and
what happened
to them



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The Nuns that Quit

Robert Blair Kaiser

Ladies Home Journal

April 1967

A rebellion—quiet but significant—is raging in America’s convents. Nuns are leaving in record numbers, 3,600 last year alone. In this unprecedented report, these women speak frankly about why they left, and what has happened to them since then.

“I knew that I wanted to be a wife and mother,” says Mary McElroy, “and I saw that God had given me these feelings.” Now she’s married and has two baby daughters.

She is a trim, small woman with a vibrant face and expressive dark eyes. She does an imaginative job of running Webster College, one of the nation’s leading liberal arts schools for women. She helped organize the poverty program’s Operation Headstart, and took part in the civil-rights march on Selma, Ala. Meeting her, it is impossible to guess that she has just passed through one of the most overwhelming personal and spiritual crises that a woman can undergo.

Early this year, however, after nearly 20 years in the Sisters of Loretto, 40-year-old nun Jacqueline Grennan relinquished her canonical vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience and left the Roman Catholic order. The press erroneously termed her departure a “defection,” a word properly applied only to those nuns who literally run away. But Jacqueline Grennan did not run. She made the decision with the blessings of everyone from Pope Paul IV to her own parents—and she retained her post as president of Webster College. But even so, forsaking her religious vows! That caused a mighty stir. Good sisters just don’t do this.

Don’t they? Last year, thousands of other sisters did exactly the same thing. According to reliable estimates, at least 3,600 professed sisters left their convents for good. These were not uncertain novices or postulants, but mature women who had taken their vows and served the Church for years. Most importantly, they did not leave because they did not want to be “religious” any longer—but because they did.

For the *Journal*, I have talked to dozens of former sisters from coast to coast. Reluctantly at first, then ardently, they unburdened their innermost thoughts—many of them speaking for the first time of their personal ordeal and the bright promise ahead. These frank conversations are the most provocative I have ever had. They gave me the opportunity to record for the first time the words and emotions of devout women reborn

and revitalized, energetic women burning with a renewed sense of purpose, buoyant women whose faith remains unshaken despite what they have been through; intelligent women who now see their lives in a way they had never dreamed possible. Here are some of the things they told me:

- “I just thought I’d be more of a Christian if I left. Instead of saying that I want what Christ wants, I began to feel that the good things I want might be the same as what Christ wants.”
- “I left to be free, to be able to live my own rhythm. Now life is new. It’s like being a newborn baby in a fifty-year-old body. Before, I didn’t know what I meant to be a citizen of the United States.”
- “I had to leave the convent to do what I entered it to do—live for others.”
- “Being a sister is great when you are young. But once you start observing older sisters, you begin to see where it all leads. I started to wonder how long it would take me to become as bitter as some of them.”

The alarming rise in the number of nuns leaving their orders is a little-known and poorly understood aspect of the revolution now sweeping world Catholicism, for only recently have the winds of change begun to drift through American convents. Then, too, nuns have been shrouded in seemingly impenetrable mystique for centuries. “We are,” says one American sister, with exasperation, “the last symbol of the everlastingness of things.” A rebellion by these patient, dedicated, selfless women once seemed impossible. Yet that is precisely what is happening.

It began in the winter of 1962-63, when the spark of the Second Vatican Council caught fire around the world, when, in his memorable encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII preached a modern revolution of truth, justice, freedom and love. That same winter, a remarkable book appeared, called *The Nun in the World*. Written by Belgium’s Cardinal Suenens, considered one of the Church’s leading progressives, it called upon nuns everywhere to emerge from their convents and play a more active role in easing the tensions and problems not only of the Roman Catholic Church, but of all mankind.

“A community of nuns often gives the impression of being a fortress whose drawbridge is only furtively and fearfully lowered,” wrote Cardinal Suenens. “Her world shrinks, and, if she is not careful, will end up no more than a few square yards in size...The religious of today appears to the faithful to be out of touch with the world as it is, an anachronism.”

Cardinal Suenens’ book swiftly became, according to scholars Edward Wakin and Father Joseph F. Scheuer, “a manifesto for progressive-thinking nuns in America.” More

and more, these sisters had grown restive struggling to lower the drawbridges of their nunnery-fortresses. They began to ask sharp questions. Sister Charles Borromeo Muckenhirn, a leader in the fight for reform, wondered whether nuns' lives could be made "as human as marriage, as relevant as civil rights and as mobile as jet travel," or if they would turn out to be "a wasted shelving of human energy, talent and a capacity for love."

"At first I was afraid to walk the streets alone," says Nancy Miller.

"I just thought I'd be more of a Christian if I left," explains blond Nancy Hiatt, 25. "And it wasn't a question of turning my back on Christ. I simply had to have the freedom to make mistakes."

When satisfactory answers to their questions were not forthcoming from ecclesiastical authorities, discontented nuns experienced a crisis of conscience.

They wanted to attack the problems of the urban poor, to work for integration, to reorganize the Church's system of higher education for women. But many concluded that they could not do so under the archaic restriction of Mother Church; they could not wait for the necessary reforms to seep down. In growing numbers, they submitted their resignations.

Many former nuns are highly individualistic and independent women. Their greatest sense of release comes from abandoning what they consider the false asceticism of the religious life. In many orders, for example, a sister taught "the custody of the eyes"—that is, not to look at or take pleasure in anything that might interrupt her concentration on God. Joan Carswell, a former nun who now teaches in a large Eastern university, says it took her a while to be able to walk downtown and look around her without a sense of guilt. "Just to be able to look in a store window!" she exclaims. "Exhilaration takes hold of me when I realize I am free to enjoy the world. Under the convent discipline, I couldn't heed my own senses. I couldn't allow myself to appreciate color, odors, textures."

At first, fresh out of the convent, Joan Carswell found it hard even to begin to express her emotions. "I had difficulty being human enough to get angry," she says. Then, last summer, she attended a meeting in Chicago of university people, none of whom knew that she had once been a nun. At the conference, several psychologists conducted a public experiment in psychodrama, with individuals acting out real life problems.

In a moment of abandon, Joan offered herself as a "patient." She told the psychologist that she had trouble expressing anger. He promptly set up a

psychodramatic situation right on the stage of the auditorium. First, he introduced Joan to a man who would be her father-figure and attempted to goad her to anger. Joan was encouraged to fight back. As the psychodrama proceeded, three other psychologists imitated Joan's reactions so that she could in a sense "see herself." They exaggerated her posture, her facial expressions, her voice. "Louder!" demanded one psychologist when Joan responded timidly. "Shout! Scream!"

Somehow, Joan began to respond—slowly then fully. Her anger came through so clearly that onlookers applauded her emotional freedom. Unbidden, Joan walked to the apron of the stage and bowed like an actress.

"How do you feel?" asked the psychologist.

"Wonderful," said Joan. "I feel like dancing."

"Fine," said the psychologist, "go ahead."

Joan turned to the audience. "I feel like dancing," she said. "I want you all to sing for me." People began to hum and sing and clap, and Joan began to dance. For a breathless three minutes, she was a Spanish flamenco dancer, whirling and tapping her feet gaily. Afterward, people stopped to congratulate her. "I'll bet you were a professional dancer once," a middle-aged woman said enviously. Joan Carswell, former nun, could only smile. She'd never danced in her life.

Rediscovering her own identity has meant a great deal to Miss Carswell, who is one of those classically ageless women. At 50, she has a fine figure, a face almost without wrinkles, a sparkling smile and magnificent blue eyes. "In the convent I had no driver's license, no Social Security number, not even my own name. Afterward, when people began to call me Joan, I felt it really meant affection. A first name is personal. It was like being a newborn baby in the body of an adult." (During our interview, Miss Carswell reached out to pour me a cup of coffee. Even such a simple act brought back a poignant memory of convent life. "It would have been difficult to offer you a cup of coffee without having secured prior permission," she explained. "Or, if I hadn't gotten the permission, without feeling guilty about transgressing.")

When she was in the order, Miss Carswell was given the job of fashioning a "spiritual renewal" program for the younger sisters. She tried to encourage the young women to mature, to substitute self-direction for blind obedience. Although her superiors had encouraged the program and even sat in on her sessions with the young sisters, they reacted negatively whenever the "spiritually renewed" sisters began to change the old ways of doing things.

"My superiors thought they wanted to support me," says Miss Carswell, "but they were not politically free to do so. And it ended up that I was helping to create autonomous persons for a society that could not take them. It was frustrating—for me, the young sisters, and the superiors, too. The Mother General ended up taking tranquilizers."

Miss Carswell feels that the superiors do not really understand what is involved in the changes called for by the Vatican Council. "They want tidiness and predictability," she says, "while the new spirit will bring a certain amount of confusion along with the creativity."

From the start, nuns are taught that a life of prayer, contemplation and devotion to God is intended to foster deep spiritual strength. But some former sisters feel that women in convents often fail to attain the acceptance and serenity that are promised to the young postulant. Nancy Hiatt, who is now studying for her California teaching certificate, left her order because she felt that essentially there was something unreal about convent life.

"The sisters would spend an hour praying together in the chapel and then come out and go their own ways," she recalls. The sisters taught in a parochial school in a highly conservative Los Angeles suburb. Nancy found that they did not have the courage to withstand the pressure of parents who wanted to control the curriculum. Some parents objected when Nancy read *Winnie-the-Pooh* to her charges, and her superiors would not support her when Nancy insisted that Pooh Bear is not subversive. It was Nancy who told me that she enjoyed being a sister at first, but that she had second thoughts when she saw how bitter many of the older sisters had grown. Nancy saw too many who had been waiting year after year for change and found themselves still waiting at the age of 35. "That was a chilling prospect," she says, "thinking of Christian women without hope."

So Nancy asked to be released from her vows. "I just thought I'd be more of a Christian if I left. I simply had to have the freedom to make mistakes. And it wasn't a question of turning my back on Christ. Instead of saying that I want what Christ wants, I began to feel that the good things I want might be the same as what Christ wants.

"I talked to some other sisters. Some said, 'Stay!' Others said, 'Go!' Others said, 'I wish I'd gone before it was too late.' So I decided to go and take the consequences."

Leaving the religious life can be a terribly traumatic experience. One former nun, Judy Christopher, spoke of the pressures that were put on her to stay.

"So you want to divorce Christ?" the Mother General asked. "What draws you out? The world, the flesh, or the devil?"

Judy mumbled her apologies and said that she would put aside the "temptation" to leave the order. Yet afterward she realized with even more certainty that she had not found a vocation. She talked it over with a realistic Jesuit priest, who assured her that under the circumstances it was better to leave than to stay. Another sister also advised her to quit, no matter what the Mother General said. "Mother has intimidated at least ten other sisters into staying," she told Judy. "She will call you ungrateful and selfish and mean."

So Judy went back to see the Mother General and told her that this time she was certain that she wanted a dispensation from her vows. The Reverend Mother said she was indeed “ungrateful and selfish and mean,” but Judy held her ground. Now she says that it was the first grown-up action of her life.

A decision to leave is sometimes interpreted as a rebuke by the sisters who elect to stay. It is not hard for them to equate a departure with giving in to the temptation of the evil spirit. And convent gossip is full of stories about sisters who left and are supposedly spending their lives in lonely and frustrated repentance or, worse yet, in squalor and degradation. Some orders even direct sisters to have no communication whatsoever with those who have chosen to leave.

When they do leave, the former sisters often do discover that they have to make major personal and professional adjustments. Nancy Miller left her order to “help the Negroes,” and even enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., a predominantly Negro school. Now she realizes her attitudes were patronizing and has shifted her sights to the problems of rural poverty in Appalachia. Nancy recalls she was afraid to walk alone in the city when she was in the convent. Then, when she got over her period of awkward adjustment, she plunged into a dating whirl. For six weeks, she went out with a different man every night. Now she marvels at her naïveté.

“I had a tendency to get too involved too fast,” she says. “A man would say he loved me, and I’d say to myself, ‘Gee, what am I going to do? He loves me and I don’t want to hurt his feelings.’ But soon I learned to pick up the clues so I’d know when he was giving me a ‘line.’ Now I find it easy to say ‘no.’”

Some sources estimate that a third of nuns who leave eventually get married. Jane O’Leary of Minneapolis is an example. She left her order seven years ago, at age 25. Jane admits that she probably should never have gone into the religious life. “I wish that the sisters who taught me in elementary school and high school had given marriage its due,” she says. “I grew up believing that virginity and perfection were synonymous. I’ll always be grateful to the first young man who asked me for a date after I left the convent. I felt so awkward. My hair was too short, and I felt undressed. The wind was blowing on my legs and I kept looking around, thinking, ‘What has happened to my skirt?’”

Soon Jane was seeing other young men, and eventually she met the man she married. Now she candidly admits that she enjoys the physical side of marriage. “I look upon marriage as a vocation. This is really what God wants me to be doing. It may not be glamorous, being a housewife, but it gives me more chance to do for others than I had as a nun. You can’t be selfish if you have a husband and three children, but it’s easy to be selfish as a sister. It isn’t hard to go into a chapel and meditate for an hour. It shows a lot more love to get up at night with two sick babies and walk the floor with them.”

In *The Nun in the World*, Cardinal Suenens criticized how some orders of nuns detach themselves from the world, physically and psychologically. This detachment causes delicate “re-entry” problems for former nuns who suddenly are expected to act like women when for so long they have been treated as neuters.

“In religious communities,” says Sister Judith Tate of the Benedictines, “a negative celibacy has claimed first attention for centuries. The premise seemed to be that if a sister could eradicate her sexuality she could stand a better chance of being ‘holy.’” Sister Judith explains that this concept arose from the assumption that “sexuality, especially feminine sexuality, was a necessary but obscene invention...It was fairly simple to establish shame about the fact of womanhood...In some extreme cases, it became part of a virtue to make oneself unattractive, for attractiveness was sexual lure. Hence mirrors were banned, heads were shaved, curves were flattened—all in the name of virtue.”

Such a denial of sexuality can lead to physical complications. Joan Carswell says that while she was a nun, she and many other sisters suffered from fierce headaches and other menstrual distress, but that since she has left the order she has not experienced these symptoms. “Doctors really ought to do a study of this phenomenon,” she says. At least one doctor has. Writing in *Review for Religious*, Dr. John Wain, a Catholic physician who has treated nuns for many years, agrees that menstrual and menopause problems are particularly widespread among nuns. Dr. Wain also notes that some overly modest sisters go so far as to conceal serious gynecological complaints, occasionally until it is too late.

It is precisely this unreal stance of the traditional convent towards sexuality that drives many sisters out. Mary McElroy of Antioch, Calif., now a pretty, vivacious mother of two baby girls, found that the “sexlessness” of convent life made her face up to her own conditioned Puritanism. “When I did that,” she says, “I knew that I wanted to be a wife and mother, and I saw that it was God who had given me those feelings.” In her case this realization proved to be the key to a happy marriage. She left her teaching order in Chicago, and two and a half years later married a man who teaches handicapped children. “Larry couldn’t get over the fact that I had no inhibitions,” she says.

The reasons nuns leave are as complex as the women themselves, but the case of Jacqueline Grennan at Webster College, near St. Louis, is of particular interest.

In leaving her order, Sister Jacqueline was scarcely recoiling from Spartan, oldline convent life. At her college the Sisters of Loretto enjoy “the responsibility of freedom.” The nuns are not restricted to a convent; instead they reside in snug cottages around the campus, in groups of two, four or six. They are not under the close watch of superiors; they rise and retire when they wish, and say their prayers when it is the most convenient within their professional schedules. They are permitted to wear “civilian” clothes instead of the habit. Even before she left the order, Sister Jacqueline would work in simple

shirtwaist dress or a forest-green, knee-length wool skirt with a matching, short-sleeved jersey top.

The day the *Journal* visited Webster Groves, eight nuns consented to be interviewed in a cottage at 10 P.M.—an hour at which many sisters elsewhere are getting ready for bed. Casually, Sister Mary Rhodes Buckler offered a Scotch and water, and then talked at length about nuns in the modern world, the true meaning of the religious life, and the three vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. After a while, Sister Anita Schader, a philosophy professor, came in from a meeting. She wore a black-and-beige checked suit. “I like the way your hair is styled, Anita,” said Sister Mary. “Where did you get it done?”

Yet even this liberal, modern order became too restrictive for Sister Jacqueline Grennan. And so she left it—not because of any lessening of dedication, but because of her hunger for freedom to “lead an intense Christian life in the modern world. I have come to believe that the notion of cloister—in physical enclosure or in social regulations or in dress—is not valid for some of us who must live our lives as dedicated women in the public forum.” She believes that the *aggiornamento*, or modernization of the Church, really calls for a dedicated Christian to work out *in* the secular world, rather than out of it.

One of Sister Jacqueline’s widely discussed national appearances came on a David Susskind television program, in which four nuns discussed their changing role. Perhaps significantly, two of those four sisters have since left their orders—Sister Jacqueline and Sister Kristin Morrison, a Harvard-trained Ph.D. who had been teaching at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles. On the television show, Sister Kristin said: “I would like to be as honest a Christian as I can, in whatever way I can, doing whatever that demands of me, and I’m not sure I know what the future demands of me.”

That same night Sister Jacqueline revealed her own doubts. When moderator Susskind asked her if she had any misgivings, if she ever questioned whether she had chosen the right vocation, she replied: “Sure. I think every good nun in the world today is reassessing her position. We could not be in the state of ferment we’re in if people were not asking that question over and over again. Every time you ask it and stay, you are there more profoundly, but it doesn’t mean you’re not going to ask it again tomorrow or next year or next decade.”

The “new nuns” realize that they are in the vanguard, that many Catholics are simply not ready for them. Before she left the order, Jacqueline Grennan reported receiving letters from conservative Catholics in California and Kentucky calling her “a daughter of Beelzebub.” She reported, “Each day they pray for my excommunication before nightfall so I won’t cause any more trouble.” But the world keeps calling out to

the liberal sisters, and some of them cannot understand any longer why people should be scandalized to see a nun at a performance of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or why a nun should not be permitted to take a Martini without reproving glances.

"We are," says Sister Charles Borromeo, "a sort of sociological Linus blanket for insecure Catholics of all kinds."

Not all nuns agree with this new spirit of ferment; many believe that it has gone too far. In a recent issue of *Thought*, a quarterly magazine published by Fordham University, Sister Bertrande Meyers of the Daughters of Charity wrote disapprovingly of "the present whirlwind of discontent among sisters: the confusion of liberty with license, the continuous self-seeking...the free dabbling in the 'new theology.'" Sister Bertrande suggested that nuns who cannot accept "logical limits of discipline" have no place in religious life.

What of the charge, frequently raised, that many former nuns are "problem women" who cannot abide authority and discipline, that they are the kind of chronic malcontents who can be found in any large group of people, however dedicated? Recently, a nun studying sociology at a major university completed a doctoral dissertation in which she surveyed dropouts and non-dropouts in a large order. To her surprise she discovered that the sisters who left were far *less* critical of their orders than the sisters who remained.

Of course, most nuns do not leave—either because they are satisfied with their lives or because they choose to fight for reforms from within. But it is hardly a secret that many were shaken and discouraged by the recent experience of the Glenmary Sisters.

The Glenmarys, with headquarters in Cincinnati, are a liberal order, far more modern than most. They have long worked with the poor of Appalachia, and are now following them in their search for jobs in cities such as Detroit and Chicago. The sisters live in slum apartments in these cities, in close contact with the neighborhood and all its troubles. In their practical gray suits and short gray veils, they are a familiar sight at all hours in so-called bad streets.

This degree of freedom did not go unchallenged. Last year, Cardinal Antoniutti, the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Religious in Rome, went out of his way to countermand locally given permissions and order a Glenmary sister off a college stage at the University of Detroit. Some time later, Archbishop Karl J. Alter of Cincinnati forbade the Glenmary Sisters to start new houses or to accept new members. He also required them to submit reading matter to his office for censorship and to secure his permission before sending a sister to register in any college or university course. And—the final

indignity for women who work around the clock with the family crises of the poor—he suggested that all Glenmarys should be in bed by 10 P.M.

Some orders have more independence than others. Yet all are subject to regulation by the Sacred Congregation of Religious in Rome, and all have to defer, more or less, to the local hierarchy where they live and work. So the pace at which they modernize is not necessarily on they set themselves.

For example, the Sisters of Notre Dame sent representatives to Rome to meet in solemn convocation and discuss breathing some of the spirit of Pope John's Ecumenical Council into their way of life. Some of the order's sisters in Cleveland had been bringing middle-class white college students into the slums to tutor Negro children, an action that had caused some consternation in Cleveland. They hoped that the meeting in Rome would provide a sanction for this and other kinds of work in the everyday world. But the actual "reforms" that were permitted by the Sacred Congregation were that henceforth sisters could drive cars, wear wristwatches (under their sleeves), stand rather than kneel at the Angelus prayer at noon, and remove the buttons from their outdoor capes.

Reform at such a pace is too slow for some nuns. Thirteen sisters of Notre Dame asked for a dispensation from their vows last year and left the Cleveland convent. Ten of them stayed together to found what they call the Community of Christian Service. They went to Pueblo, Colo., and are living communally under private vows of poverty and chastity. Several are teaching at Southern Colorado State College, several in public high schools, one is a laboratory technician, one is a county welfare worker.

The members of the group still consider themselves sisters, although their private vows are taken for only a year at a time. One, who is teaching in the college, has a persistent male admirer on the faculty. She finally had to tell him, "I don't date, I'm a sister."

Within the self-imposed restrictions of their vows, the Pueblo sisters have a great sense of freedom. As Mary Terese Moynihan puts it: "Now I am available. I can be of service wherever the opportunity presents itself. In the convent it was all so abstract. Love was a forbidden word. Literally. We signed our letters 'charity.'"

Sally Watkins, another member of the group, works in her free time in a Mexican-American slum, just as she had tried to work in Cleveland. "The difference is that now I can stay with a situation where I am needed. In Cleveland I always had to hurry back to the convent."

The work these former nuns are doing is not specifically with or for Catholics. They feel that their dedication is to something more than the institutional church. But they have not renounced their faith. They have a sense of Christian community, and feel

that, while they could carry on in their secular work alone and scattered, it would not be as fruitful; they need one another.

Some nuns who drop out are lonely. Elsie Heiligers, for example, is no longer a Sister of Mercy, but she is doing what she wants to do—social work among the Negroes of Oklahoma City. She says that her only regret is the loneliness, the lack of close friends who can share the life with her. Sometimes old friends from the convent visit her. They talk a bit, and the sisters complain about the same attitudes in the convent that drove Elsie Heiligers away. But, essentially, her work is done alone, her only companions the poverty-stricken people who still call her Sister Nativity.

As a Sister of Mercy, she had tried for 17 years to make the social teaching of the Church more relevant to the world around her. In Oklahoma City, she and five other sisters wanted to live in a nearby slum and help the people there. Their superiors split them up and reassigned them to six different cities.

Sister Nativity was sent to New Orleans, where she tried to integrate the sodalities (clubs) of a white and a Negro high school. After a bomb threat, she was transferred to Little Rock, where she protested against the segregation of her order's boarding school. She proposed bringing in some Negro girls, but her superiors would not hear of it.

“Why take the vows if they can't free us enough to undertake unpopular causes?” Sister Nativity asked.

She was sent back to Oklahoma City, where she had begun, and here came the climax of her struggle. The Negro Church of Blessed Martin was closed, and the congregation integrated with that of a white parish—a change that Sister Nativity applauded. But she saw that the Negroes in the area felt somewhat bereft and abandoned.

She asked the bishop if she and three other sisters could take over the recovery at Blessed Martin's and begin social work among the Negroes. He gave his professional approval and went to consult with the Mother General of the Mercy Sisters in New Orleans. She said the sisters could certainly do the work—if they wanted to leave the order. She gave each of the four their option to leave, and forbade them to discuss the matter among themselves. The other three nuns decided to stay in the order, but Sister Nativity chose to leave.

The story of Lupe Anguiano is similar to Sister Nativity's. She joined Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters and struggled for 17 years to find a way to work with Mexican-Americans. I talked to her when she had been out of the order for a year and had a worthwhile job in the Federal antipoverty program. We sat in her modest but modern apartment in Los Angeles. She looked out the window and waved her hand in the general direction of the racially troubled Watts and Boyle Heights. “That is where the Church

should be," she said. "But the Church is caught up with the status quo. Those in charge believe in the institution rather than in the people it should try to serve."

During her last five years in the order, Lupe says, she tried to find a way of agreeing with her superiors. She tried to believe that God spoke to her through the mouths of her superiors, and if they said, "no," God, in effect, was saying "no." When she began to suffer extremely painful headaches, her superiors assumed that they were part of God's plan, that she was to "suffer with Christ."

Lupe plunged back into her labors with Mexican-Americans, felt the tension ease and the headaches diminish, and then she was again reprimanded for her work. She was told to obey or to leave the order. So she hired a lawyer to help her draft a letter of resignation and, trembling with her audacity, walked to the corner, and posted the letter by U.S. mail (because she felt the convent mailbox was censored). Shortly afterward, she was released from her vows.

Like Joan Carswell, Lupe recalls vividly her first bewildering experience with the outside world. The day before she left the convent for good, she went to a department store to buy clothes with the \$200 she had received from her order for 17 years of service. Confused and embarrassed, she pretended that she was shopping for a friend. "What size is she?" asked the salesgirl. "Oh, about my size I guess," Lupe replied.

"I didn't even know my own sizes," she says now. "You should see the slip I got. It's way too big. I still have it in my drawer."

Lupe looks back at her life as a nun more in sorrow than in anger. "When you think of the tremendous talent going to waste in the convents" she says, "and of how much that talent is needed in the world! I haven't even gone back to visit my best friend, Sister Rosanita, because I knew I would ask her to leave."

There are 180,000 sisters in the U.S., and the dropout rate—a mere trickle just a few years ago—seems to be swelling. Few of the mothers general and provincial superiors are willing to open their personnel files. Still, through a careful though unofficial survey, the *Journal* was able to determine that 3, 4, 5, 6, even 7 percent were reported leaving provinces from California to Massachusetts, and that new vocations were down by as much as 50 percent. Many experts believe that the same accelerated dropout rate will continue for some time, and that many potential sisters will join organizations such as the Peace Corps until the orders are more fully modernized.

The dropouts may well be speeding up this modernization. Sister Charles Borromeo believes that sisters who get college degrees today and then go back to their convents have an abiding wish to help the communities modernize. And Sister Mary Audrey Kopp, a sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, envisions a major change in

the work of the orders—one that is distinctly foreshadowed by the work that the rebelling nuns so often have chosen.

Historically, the religious orders founded and staffed schools and hospitals because, when America was young and growing, these institutions were desperately needed. Now founding a school or hospital is no longer pioneering. Sisters ought to be on the new frontiers, Sister Audrey says—for example, working with the poor.

If she is right, the convents may soon be following the examples of those who have left. And the era of the rebellious nun would be over.