

Episode 2: Love, To Be Real, Has To Hurt

ERIKA LANTZ: Before we get started, I want to give a quick heads-up. In this episode we talk about what could be described as self-harm.

* * *

MARY JOHNSON: In the evening, you'd hear these, these noises and they would always be coming from the bathroom. Just like just kind of thud, thud, thud and it would go on for a while. And it did have a kind of a fleshy component to it. But I had so many other things to think about, it didn't make a big effect on me until ... until I understood what was actually happening.

So I was washing the sheets one day, and one of my fellow postulants, Sister Alberta, came in. And she says uh, "So, Sister Mary, what do you think of 'the discipline'?"

And I say, "Well, discipline is hard -- following the timetable, keeping quiet when you're reprimanded -- it just requires a lot of discipline, but it's okay. God has called us here."

And she looks at me and she says, "No, no, no, I don't mean the timetable. What do you think of 'the *discipline*'? We all have 'the discipline.' We have a little sheath of knotted cords that we beat ourselves with every evening."

When Sister Alberta told me this, it was like my stomach contracted. And I couldn't talk. It was hard to breathe. She says, "But don't you hear that noise the professed sisters make when they go in the bathroom at night? We're taking 'the discipline.' We're making up for our sins."

I didn't really know how to take it in at first. This is something I really c-- never imagined. Never imagined. And it was on an entirely different level from "fold your napkin in three, like the Trinity" or "don't talk after night prayer." This was something way different.

* * *

ERIKA: Mary Johnson was 19 years old when she learned about 'the discipline' and still getting used to her new life in Rome -- one that was spent mostly indoors working in the kitchen of a men's home run by the Missionaries of Charity. On her rare bathroom breaks, she'd stop and stare out a window in the hall.

MARY: And I would see Nero's palace. I could see the Colosseum right there from right where I was! But I never got out onto the streets of Rome in any sort of sense. And just going from the convent to the kitchen in this -- one of the most intriguing cities in the world -- and it felt like everything was getting very, very small.

ERIKA: In the kitchen, Mary's job was to wash dishes. She also helped drain large vats of hot pasta water. The vats were so big, that the sister in charge of the kitchen needed help to lift them.

MARY: One Sunday after we finished Mass, and I came back and I was headed towards the kitchen, I heard this horrible shriek.

ERIKA: Mary ran toward the sound and found her supervisor on the floor.

MARY: Just covered in boiling water, burnt from head to toe, because she'd tried to drain that pot by herself. And I ran to her, and I pulled her clothes off her and obviously in so much pain, the first thing she said was, "Sister will be so angry."

ERIKA: Mary knew who she meant.

MARY: The superior of the house, who was always angry. Her gaze and judgment permeated the mind and the heart of everyone who lived under her, lived in fear, basically.

ERIKA: The next morning at prayer, Mary's kitchen mate was covered in bandages.

MARY: I could just see she was taking these little tiny steps, and she was obviously in a great deal of pain.

ERIKA: So the next day, Mary assumed she'd be cooking by herself while the burned sister recovered.

MARY: And what did I discover but she was there. I said, "You shouldn't be here. You need to go back home and rest, I mean." And she looked at me and she said uh, "A missionary does not rest." She said it in a very small, quiet kind of voice. Um. And I told her, "Sister, this is ... this is really silly. I'm going to go back to the convent, and I'm going to tell Sister that you're here." And as I pulled my apron off, getting ready to go back, I heard this tiny voice: "Sister's the one who told me to come." And I saw there were tears in her eyes. And she said, "Sister says that when Mother had fever, she just kept working."

ERIKA: Through the window at the end of the hall, Mary watched city life pass her by. By spring, she was dying to get outside, get out of the kitchen and feel the sun on her face. She asked her mistress to please give her a new assignment. Let her work directly with the poor.

MARY: And she says, "Well, the sister in charge of the kitchen won't accept anybody else. She wants only you."

ERIKA: Mary was devastated. She didn't think she could take it anymore. Her mistress looked at her and said:

MARY: “You know, Mother always says love to be real, has to hurt.” When she said those words, to me, it felt like, like a slap. Love has to hurt.

ERIKA: From Rococo Punch and iHeart Media, this is The Turning. I’m Erika Lantz. Part Two: Love, To Be Real, Has To Hurt.

* * *

ERIKA: So tell me, um, you know, I think some people who hear the phrase “love, to be real, has to hurt” would ... not like it. Would feel, um --

SISTER KATHLEEN HUGHES: It’s a bit excessive.

ERIKA: Yeah! What do you say to that?

SISTER KATHLEEN: Real love is sacrificial.

ERIKA: This is Sister Kathleen Hughes. She was a Missionary of Charity for 29 years.

SISTER KATHLEEN: So, you think of parents taking care of children. And and people are transformed having children, because they suddenly realized they have to clothe them and feed them and take responsibility and then drive them here and do this. So it’s the same with taking care of the poor. And you’re not even a relative! (laughs) To be a missionary in the life of the Missionaries of Charity -- it’s a continual giving from the minute you get up.

And so seeing Christ, as Mother Teresa would say, “in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor.” We had to see Christ in that sister we lived with whom we didn’t like, or who rubbed us the wrong way, you know, which is natural in life, or who is our superior and she doesn’t understand us. You know, we had to see -- go deeper and to find Christ there in those people.

But love to be real -- must hurt, must cost, must empty us of self. Love to be real, must hurt.

ERIKA: There’s this story, a legend really, about Mother Teresa’s feet. Mary says it’s one the sisters repeated over and over to each other.

There are different versions, but the gist is that when Mother Teresa was a young nun, she was given shoes that were far too small. Instead of asking for a new pair, she chose to wear the shoes, even though they damaged her feet. In her mind, they’d been given by God. This was why, the sisters said, Mother Teresa’s feet looked deformed; her toes folded over each other at strange angles.

MARY: She had a saying that was always kind of important to me and she actually said to me personally at one point. She says, “Take whatever God gives, give whatever God takes with a big smile.”

ERIKA: Mary learned early on that love and sacrifice were closely linked. It started with her aspirant mistress.

MARY: She came to the refectory one day, all excited, and she said that she had a gift for us. She was giving each one of us sacrifice beads.

ERIKA: She handed out little strings with 10 plastic beads on them.

MARY: And she told us, “Pin these sacrifice beads somewhere where no one will see them -- in your pocket or inside the waistband of your skirt -- and then every day, when you make a sacrifice, you will move one bead down. And then at the end of the day, you write it down in this little notebook. And at the end of the month, you show me that notebook and how many sacrifices you have made each day.

And she says, “Oh, there are so many ways of making sacrifices! If the food's not salty, you don't put in more salt. If it's already way too salty, you add some more salt. If you want to sit in the chapel near the window, you don't go there. You find the hottest place to sit.”

And the thing to me that was most noticeable was how happy she was about it.

ERIKA: The Missionaries of Charity didn't pluck this out of thin air. This idea of sacrifice -- it starts with an important story in Christianity: the death of Jesus. Also known as The Passion, or Christ's Passion, with a capital P. “Passion” comes from the Latin word for suffering.

In the story of the Passion, Jesus experiences prolonged and intense pain in the period before his death: He's betrayed by a disciple, whipped, sentenced to death and marched through the city. Soldiers nail his hands and feet to a wooden cross -- a crucifixion. He hangs this way until he dies.

Christians believe these are the sacrifices Jesus makes for the world's salvation. And the Missionaries of Charity believe that by making daily sacrifices, they can share in Christ's Passion, help him make up for the world's sins. They believe they can save souls.

This image of Christ on the cross is *so central* to the Missionaries of Charity that the phrase “crucified spouse” is part of their vows.

This “bride of christ” concept -- it used to be fairly common among nuns and religious sisters. They'd often wear long white dresses -- like bridal gowns -- when they took their vows. Today, most religious orders have moved away from the concept; they focus more broadly on loving God and God's creations.

But the Missionaries of Charity still consider themselves married to Jesus. And Mother Teresa was very clear: She -- and all the nuns in the order -- are married to Jesus at a particular moment in his life: the crucifixion.

I have to say the first time I heard this about Mother Teresa, I was surprised. I knew Jesus's death was central to Catholicism, but the messages I heard from her growing up were so positive, so focused on compassion. With Mother Teresa's focus on the poor, I assumed she was most inspired by the Jesus who healed lepers, the Jesus who gave sight to the blind, or stood up for people who society rejected. And she was, but what Mother Teresa related to most was Jesus's darkest moment. His torture and death. She wanted to join in his suffering.

MARY: Once I was traveling with Mother Teresa and she asked me to bring her her prayer book. It just happened to be open to this place where she had a little prayer card. It was the face of Jesus on the cross and she had written on it, "Jesus, I love you so much." And I felt very, um, like "Oh my goodness, I'm not supposed to see this!" This is something very intimate. This is ... But, you know, it was like that was what Jesus on the cross was for Mother. This was her crucified spouse.

* * *

ERIKA: In Rome, Mary's work in the kitchen continued. She longed for another assignment, but pushed those thoughts aside. Instead, she thought of Mother's words: "The less we think of ourselves, the more God thinks of us." Jesus must increase. I must decrease.

She looked forward to Sundays, when she led the singing for Mass. She loved the Italian hymns, and it gave her a break from the kitchen, if only for an hour.

Mary often thought about what her hard work was leading to -- what they call First Vows: the moment in less than three years when she would become a professed sister -- a major step in her evolution as a nun.

She also wondered about those strange noises from the bathroom. The repetitive sound of ropes hitting flesh. By now, she knew it was "the discipline": The sisters beating themselves to atone for their own sins -- and for the sins of others. To save souls.

MARY: So after dinner each night, I would hear this slap, slap, slap from the bathroom stalls, and I'd cringe and feel my pulse race. It's like, almost like, like excitement.

ERIKA: Ever since that sister in the laundry room had told Mary about "the discipline," she'd been trying to make sense of it. "Why didn't anyone tell me about this?" she wondered. "Should I be taking initiative and ask for a rope? What's God's will?"

Hitting herself didn't seem logical to Mary. Even though Jesus suffered, she didn't think he sought it out. But sacrifice to save someone else's soul from eternal damnation? That was appealing.

MARY: Love, to be real, has to hurt. I wanted to learn how to love. I wanted love to be the central thing in my life. So, this is a new way to love.

ERIKA: Hm.

MARY: Well, Jesus was whipped before he was crucified, and this would be a way of being united with Jesus.

ERIKA: Finally, she found clarity. She told herself, "If this is a divine test, I'll take it. Maybe 'the discipline' is what I need to fully submit myself -- beat myself into humility and generosity."

She went and told her mistress.

MARY: "Sister, um, I've heard we're supposed to use 'the discipline,' but nobody ever gave me one." She said, "Oh, I see. I'll take care of it."

ERIKA: So then what happened? How much time passed until "the discipline" came up again?

MARY JOHNSON: So one evening we were walking to the refectory, and I heard somebody whisper my name. I turned around in the dark corridor and realized that it was our mistress, and she stuffed something scratchy into my hand and closed my fingers around it. And when it got to the light, I looked down, and I saw those knotted cords of rough rope that were dangling from my fist. I realized what it was, and I stuffed it into my my skirt pocket.

ERIKA: Another sister walked into the bathroom, and Mary realized she was supposed to follow. The sister took one stall; Mary took another. But she had no idea what to do. Exactly how was she supposed to lash herself?

MARY: At first I tried to whack at my back, but that gave like a muffled sound? So, I lifted my skirt and swung at my legs, just above my knees, and that sounded ... pretty right, but a little softer, maybe, than what I had heard. So I swung harder, and I swung at my thighs until they turned red. And as I hit harder, there were these white streaks from the rope on that red flesh. And I thought, "Well, now I figured it out. I'm doing penance. Like the saints do. This is the kind of thing saints do, isn't it?"

ERIKA: That night, like every night, Mary and the rest of the sisters knelt next to their cots. As they prayed, they extended their arms out to each side and held them there, mimicking the shape of a cross.

Almost like they were on the cross with Jesus.

MIDROLL

ERIKA: In 1979, a year into her time in Rome, Mary was finally given the assignment she'd longed for: Go out into the community. Help the poor.

She'd moved to a new convent on the outskirts of Rome in a neighborhood called Tor Fiscale. It was flanked by ancient Roman aqueducts. Many people lived in the archways of these aqueducts. They leaned planks against the arches to make walls. Old billboards, too, advertising Ferraris and Colgate toothpaste. One man who lived there was named Alvaro.

MARY: We'd call out whenever we passed by Alvaro's arch, and we'd ask him if we could come in and talk, and he would always say, 'No, no, no, next time, next time, next time.' And that went on for weeks and weeks and weeks.

ERIKA: Unexpectedly, a week before Christmas, Alvaro slid his billboard door aside. He let Mary and her partner into his home.

MARY: And when we went in, the smell was so strong that we had to hold handkerchiefs near our noses. There was just so much smell.

ERIKA: Mary and the other sister pulled everything out.

MARY: Lots and lots and lots of bottles. There was a mattress reeking of urine, and we burned it in the field behind the aqueduct.

ERIKA: They scrubbed the walls and made a bed for him from cinder blocks with a new, clean mattress. When Alvaro saw the feather pillow, he cried.

MARY: It was just beautiful.

ERIKA: They lit a candle, and the three of them sang together.

MARY: Very traditional Italian Christmas song: "*Tu scendi dalle stelle / O Re del Cielo / e vieni in una grotta / al freddo e al gelo / e vieni in una grotta / al freddo e al gelo.*"

* * *

ERIKA: Helping people like Alvaro -- *this* is what Mary wanted from her life as a Missionary of Charity. But she was lonely, too.

MARY: Nineteen-year-old Mary really wanted a friend at that point, because it was getting more and more isolated. Everything was. And all the contact with my family had been cut off. Oh, I used to get homesick a lot.

ERIKA: MC sisters were only allowed to write home once a month. The superior reviewed all of their letters. Mary says the Superiors told sisters not to write about what happened in the community. Don't mention hardship.

MARY: And we couldn't receive phone calls from our families unless it was a real emergency: if someone had died or something like that.

ERIKA: Family could visit, if they could afford to travel to wherever in the world you were stationed. But a sister was allowed to visit home only once every 10 years.

MARY: And I had no idea that that was part of becoming a Missionary of Charity.

ERIKA: Really?

MARY: I didn't know that I'd only get to write a letter home once a month. I didn't know that I'd only get to visit my family once every 10 years. I had no idea about all of that. And you see, there were all sorts of rules that were trotted out only when you had been adequately prepared, when you had already invested certain things, when you'd already come to accept so many things that didn't make a whole lot of sense, and well, this was just one more.

* * *

COLETTE LIVERMORE: It was very hard on my family, that's for sure. It was like I was dead almost.

ERIKA: Colette Livermore didn't know Mary Johnson. She started with the MCs in Australia in 1973. She still remembers her first day in the convent.

COLETTE: My friend Ruth came, and we were putting our stuff away in our dormitory, and Ruth was lying on the bed munching an apple and chatting away, and Sister Victoria came in, blew us up! You know, this is our first day. // "Sisters!" We thought, "Sisters? [laughing] Oh -- us! Yes?" You don't talk in the dormitory. You don't talk at all between meals. You definitely don't lie on the bed and munch an apple, you know? [laughs] So we quickly got the idea!

ERIKA: Colette felt some guilt about leaving her family. Her mom raised four kids on her own, and since Colette was the oldest, she helped out a lot.

COLETTE: So mum didn't want me to go, but off I went. (laughs) You know, it's sort of pretty selfish, actually.

ERIKA: Sometimes the superior held letters back for a while as a sacrifice. Colette remembers one time in particular, mail was withheld for Lent. She missed an important letter from her mother. Rodney, one of her brothers, was in the hospital. It looked like he might die. After

Colette's mother didn't get a response, she called the convent in tears. Colette's mistress let her take the call.

COLETTE: "Didn't you get my letter? Rodney's dying. He's really, really sick. Both his lungs have collapsed."

ERIKA: Colette told her mom she hadn't received her letter.

COLETTE: She said, "Now I know I've really lost you."

ERIKA: Colette says she asked her superior for permission to go home to see her brother, who was still in the hospital. Permission was denied. She couldn't leave the convent. Colette told her mother she wouldn't be coming to visit.

COLETTE: I wanted to go home, but you see, I had no money and my hair was completely shaved, not that that would have stopped me, but ... I didn't have any regular clothes, I had just a sari and everything. Yeah, it's just strange how completely cut off you are from your family and your usual way of life. I just needed to have a bit more of a spine, I think, and say, "Well, I'm going," but for some reason I didn't, and I regret that now. I can't understand why I didn't, you know. Can't understand myself. But I must have been controlled from the inside a bit.

* * *

ERIKA: In Rome, after Mary Johnson took "the discipline" for the first time, beating herself became routine.

ERIKA: Did you do this every day for 20 or so years? I mean, was this really a daily practice for all those years?

MARY: This was a daily practice every day except Sunday. Or big feasts days. It started off with very few strokes. If I remember right, it was about 15. Eventually when I became a finally professed sister, it would be 50 strokes.

ERIKA: 50 strokes? Every night?

MARY: [overlapping] 50 strokes. Every night, yeah.

ERIKA: [overlapping] That's a lot.

MARY: And that was, that was usual. And then there would be certain times we would do double penance.

ERIKA: During Lent, or any other time Mother chose, the sisters did double penance -- a hundred strokes a day, joining in the Passion of their crucified spouse.

Before I started this project, I had no idea Mother Teresa's order still did that kind of thing -- that it was an expectation of a modern-day order. I knew corporal mortification was still a thing in the Catholic church -- causing pain or discomfort to yourself, usually as some form of spiritual growth. Fasting is an example, so is kneeling in prayer. But whipping? I didn't think nuns would still be expected to whip themselves. Certainly not 50 times a night.

This type of whipping is known as self-flagellation. And what I learned is that it has a long history dating back to the 11th century. In some cases, monks whipped their naked bodies together out in the open. It really took off in the 1300s, when Europeans whipped themselves as a form of religious protest. Over time, though, it became more of a private thing, serving as penance or a way to share in Christ's suffering and be closer to God. It fell more out of favor in the 1950s and '60s, around the same time as the Second Vatican Council, known as Vatican II. If you don't know what Vatican II is, it's basically when the church updated its rules and rituals to try to match modern life.

But some people held onto corporal mortification. Pope John Paul II reportedly practiced self-flagellation. And so did the Missionaries of Charity. We asked the Missionaries of Charity to comment on this, and they refused to be interviewed. But a sister we spoke to who left the order in 2014, said it was still practiced then.

To be honest, I feel a little weird even talking about "the discipline," because I think it's more of a private thing for the sisters. But it's such a big part of daily life.

Mary Johnson thinks it has real spiritual and psychological effects.

MARY: Certainly beating yourself every day is a reminder that you're a sinner, taking away any sort of pride. You are someone who needs to beat yourself. I think that in some circumstances also, there could be a kind of a ... sadomasochistic, erotic-pleasure thing going on. I think a lot of things do get twisted or can potentially get twisted around when all the ... all sexual energy, desire has to be repressed or sublimated. Um. And I ... I wouldn't be surprised if that element was there, in some way or another.

ERIKA: For Mary, the discipline was a comfort when she felt guilty. After she confessed, she could atone.

MARY: That relief of having "the discipline" close at hand -- to help expiate whatever wrong one might have done -- could be a thing where you would feel the pleasure of the relief of "I don't have to bear that burden of guilt in the same sort of way because I'm doing something to make reparation for it."

ERIKA: The rope isn't the only form of penance. There are many. Some physical, some psychological. Like the spiked chains. For an hour a day, sisters wore chains around one arm and their waist. The spikes poked inward.

There were forms of public penance, like kissing the feet of your fellow sisters. You'd go down a row of nuns and touch your forehead to each of their feet.

MARY: Or there would be to kiss the footsteps, like you are not worthy even to put your forehead on her foot.

ERIKA: Another public penance was called “beg the meal.” At dinner, you'd go to the superior and kneel.

MARY: Kiss the floor, hold your bowl there and say, “I beg you, dear sister, please give me something to eat.” And she would put the soup, bread, whatever into your bowl, and you would take it to a corner in the room and you would eat it kneeling.

ERIKA: Mary says public penance and public apology could be a really good thing. You're trying to build a community in close quarters. And I can see how being open and vulnerable? That's powerful.

MARY: One of the things that I learned from my life with the Missionaries of Charity is the value of a sincere apology. Being honest about the fact that we all make mistakes, deliberate or not, and that the public acknowledgement of that doesn't have to make you smaller somehow. It just makes you more real, more honest.

* * *

ERIKA: February 1980. Mary's still in Rome. She's still a novice -- that means she's early in her MC life -- but she knows that might change soon. In a few weeks, she'll write her letter to Mother Teresa requesting to take vows for the first time. Of course, Mary's been living them, but this will be her first official commitment. If permission is granted, there will be an elaborate ceremony for this important moment. Then it will be too late for second thoughts.

Mary has trouble sleeping. She tosses and turns and wonders if she's meant to be a sister. The other nuns sleep around her in their cots.

MARY: So everything was close. You could always hear if somebody was snoring. But this particular night, I was fast asleep and heard this shouting and this commotion and these words, very loud: “I need a man! I need a man!”

ERIKA: Someone lights a candle, and Mary sees who called out in the dark. It's the mistress in charge -- the same sister who gave Mary the rope for taking “the discipline.”

MARY: So here's this woman set to teach us chastity, poverty, obedience and service, and she's yelling out in the middle of the night for a man. It was rather shocking to tell the truth. It's like, “Whoa, (laughs) what's going on?”

ERIKA: The sister was dreaming.

Mary cracked open the shutters to let in the moonlight. Another sister held the shoulders of their mistress, who shook under her blanket. There were tears on her face.

The next morning, the mistress slept in and sequestered herself for most of the day.

MARY: I think she was so completely embarrassed. We needed her in so many ways. She was the one who was supposed to be leading us and here she just disappeared.

ERIKA: Mary told a fellow sister about her concerns. About their mistress's dream, her seclusion and how they needed her back. Then their mistress walked into the room. She'd heard it all.

MARY: Yes, it was a little bit embarrassing, but more than that, it felt like an opportunity for me. So finally, I'm going to get a chance to say something to her because we hadn't seen her for so long and just, you know. So I'm telling her, "So, we need you, you know, please come, come back." And she was very concerned. She said, "But some of the sisters are so shocked by what I said." And I said, "Well, if they're shocked you -- what they need is for you to come out and just explain something or just talk to us, let us know that you're alright. We all have temptations. You've shown us that you're human. So why don't you come back and let us know that what you've always told us -- that Jesus is enough for us?" And she looked at me and she said, "Because Jesus isn't enough for me."

ERIKA: That night, Mary lay awake for a long time. This was the first time an authority figure had expressed this kind of vulnerability to her.

As she lay there she wondered, "What does it feel like to need a man so much that you shout in your sleep? Why wasn't Jesus enough?"

Mary was 21 years old. She'd never been on a date. Never had a relationship. Never even been to a school dance. She saw couples in Rome holding each other and kissing. It made her excited.

But she always reminded herself: "God loves me more than those two people love each other."

On her cot in the dark, she told herself, "Doubt is the devil's work." "To want more is sinful." "Sister Donata, you are nothing. You have always been nothing. You will always be nothing."

MIDROLL

ERIKA: A few weeks after the incident with her mistress, Mary wrote the letter to Mother Teresa. She was ready for her vows.

While the novices waited anxiously for Mother's reply, they spent more time praying. They doubled their strokes of "the discipline" and wore their chains for longer.

Finally Mary got the answer: Mother said yes. She could take her first vows.

June 10, 1980 was the big day: Mary's biggest day yet in the Missionaries of Charity. She wore a white sari. Her wedding dress. Mary's family traveled to Rome from Texas to be there. The Archbishop was there. So was Mother Teresa.

As part of the ceremony, Mary's father stood before the congregation and read from the Bible. He looked at Mary when he said, "For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him." He had tears in his eyes.

There were more readings, then a homily. Eventually, each novice was called to the front. When they called "Sister Donata" Mary replied, "Lord, you have called me." She then read her vows. Her hands shook:

"I, Sister Mary Donata Johnson, vow for one year chastity, poverty, obedience, and wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor according to the Constitutions of the Missionaries of Charity. I give myself with my whole heart to this religious family so that, by the grace of the Holy Spirit and with the help of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Cause of Our Joy and Queen of the World, I may be led to the perfect love of God and neighbor and make the Church fully present in the world of today."

When she finished, Mary stepped toward the Archbishop and knelt. He handed her a new crucifix. She kissed it. Mother Teresa then wedged the crucifix on Mary's left side, between the sari and the belt. Mary knew she would carry this cross every day for the rest of her life.

Jesus was Mary's spouse.

Over the better part of the next decade, she had assignments in New York, in Winnipeg, in Washington, D.C. She even became an Assistant Superior. She worked with kids in the community. Led summer camps. She loved that work, and spending time with her fellow sisters.

MARY: I enjoyed hearing their stories. You know, they'd talk about what life was like in India or Africa or Lebanon or wherever they came from. Many of them had gone through all sorts of difficult things to get there. They were, for the most part, women who came wanting to serve, wanting to give of themselves. And it just felt nice to, to be with *most* of them.

ERIKA: By the end of the '80s Mary's back in Rome. One day, the Superior of her convent, Sister Stella, calls everyone together.

MARY: She made an announcement, a rather unusual announcement. She said that there was a new sister coming to the community, and she wanted us to know that this sister had had some troubles in her community -- the community she was coming from -- so I knew that that something was up.

ERIKA: Mary says they were told not to ask what those troubles were.

MARY: That we should all be extra kind to this sister.

ERIKA: The day the new sister arrived, Mary was sitting at the table, working on MC financial accounts.

MARY: She walked in with this presence. She was tall and she's pretty and broad shouldered and sense of herself about her that was so unlike what most of the Missionaries of Charity had, and so she caught my attention.

ERIKA: The sister introduced herself. We're not using her real name. Mary calls her Sister Niobe.

She brought Niobe some lunch.

MARY: And I placed it in front of her, and she started picking up her fork, and then Sister Stella looked at her and said, "But you didn't even say grace." And this Sister Niobe, rolled her eyes a little bit in my direction where Sister Stella couldn't really see her, and then Sister Niobe said grace, but without standing up and without making the sign of the cross, all of which were very much protocol. And then she started eating. And I thought to myself, "I may actually like this sister. She has a mind of her own. Look at that."

ERIKA: One Sunday afternoon, Mary was looking for a place to write her monthly letter to her family. It was hot, so she went outside to an area between the convent and the monastery.

MARY: We called it "the garden," even though there was nothing growing there except a little grass. There was a little bench. And I walked in, and I was a little disappointed because it was already occupied. Niobe was there, and she was sitting on the bench. And so I turned around to go out, and she said, "No, no, come. Sit here with me."

ERIKA: Mary sat on the bench next to Niobe and started her letter to her parents. But Niobe started talking.

MARY: "I just wanted to thank you for being so nice to me. It's not so easy to change communities, and you've been nice."

And then she tells me this really strange thing. She says, "You know, there are some very decent sisters here, but you are the best." And that felt really weird, because by this time, I'd been in the convent more than 10 years, and nobody had ever complimented me for anything, because we don't make compliments. That would be like a temptation to pride. And so you just don't do those things.

ERIKA: Man, I can't imagine going 10 years without a single compliment.

MARY: (laughs)

ERIKA: That's... that's ... that's a lot. Wow.

MARY: And here she's saying, "You are the best," and uh, okay. What am I getting myself into here?

ERIKA: Mary was a little shocked by Niobe's forwardness and warmth.

MARY: And I said, "Oh, well, OK, thank you. And I'm gonna write my letter now."

ERIKA: But Niobe kept talking.

MARY: She started asking all sorts of questions. She said she wanted to get to know me better, and she's asking about my *family* and ...

ERIKA: Hm.

MARY: And it was kind of irresistible! (laughs) The thought that somebody was actually interested in me as a person -- even had *noticed* me as a person, not just as somebody to do things -- but I knew it was dangerous, because we'd always been told that it was dangerous, and it felt very risky and that kind of added to the allure, to tell the truth? And it, and it felt really good, just to sit with somebody, and, and so we, we sat there, and by the time the two hours for writing letters were up, mine said, uh, "*Dear Mom and Dad, how are you?*" And that was about it. (laughs)

ERIKA: For 10 years, Mary had worked so hard to be a perfect nun. It consumed her thoughts, took over her being. That included the rule about "particular friendships," as the MCs called them. No one was allowed to have a "particular friendship." But Mary found it thrilling to break the rules with Niobe.

MARY: Every now and then we'd find a little time to have some sort of little conversation. I'd find that she was often trying to sit next to me during meals, and she would sometimes sit very *close* to me at those meals.

ERIKA: She might even touch Mary's foot with hers.

MARY: And that felt very risky and forbidden and, you know, just doing this surrounded by everybody. And sometimes she'd take her hand and just put it on top of my knee under the table, and I can't tell you how that sent chills up and down, because nobody had had touched me in that way for for ever and ever. It felt so *good*.

ERIKA: Then one morning, when the nuns were still in Grand Silence, Mary was putting wet laundry on the line to dry. She had a bucket of clothes beside her and a clothespin in her hand.

MARY: And all of a sudden Niobe is next to me, and she's whispering in my ear.

ERIKA: Mary dropped her clothespin. The world turned electric.

MARY: She whispers in my ear, "Sister Donata ... I love you."

* * *

CREDITS

ERIKA: The Turning is written by Erin Lantz Lesser and me. Our producers are Elin Lantz Lesser and Emily Forman. Our editor is Rob Rosenthal. Andrea Asuaje is our digital producer. Fact-checking by Andrea López-Cruzado.

Special thanks to Amy Gaines, Sarah Olender, Kathryn Joyce, Beth Anne Macaluso, Travis Dunlap and consulting producer Mary Johnson. Her memoir, "An Unquenchable Thirst," provided inspiration for this series.

Our executive producers are Jessica Alpert and John Perotti at Rococo Punch and Katrina Norvell at iHeartMedia. Our theme music is by Matt Reed. For photos and more details on the series, follow us on Instagram @rococopunch. You can reach out via email, too: theturning@rococopunch.com. I'm Erika Lantz. Thanks for listening.