

get thee to a NUNNERY

For many religious young women, joining a convent isn't an archaic last resort for old maids. It's an exciting—and habit-forming—option for the future

BY JENNIFER CHEN PHOTOS BY SHANNON TAGGART

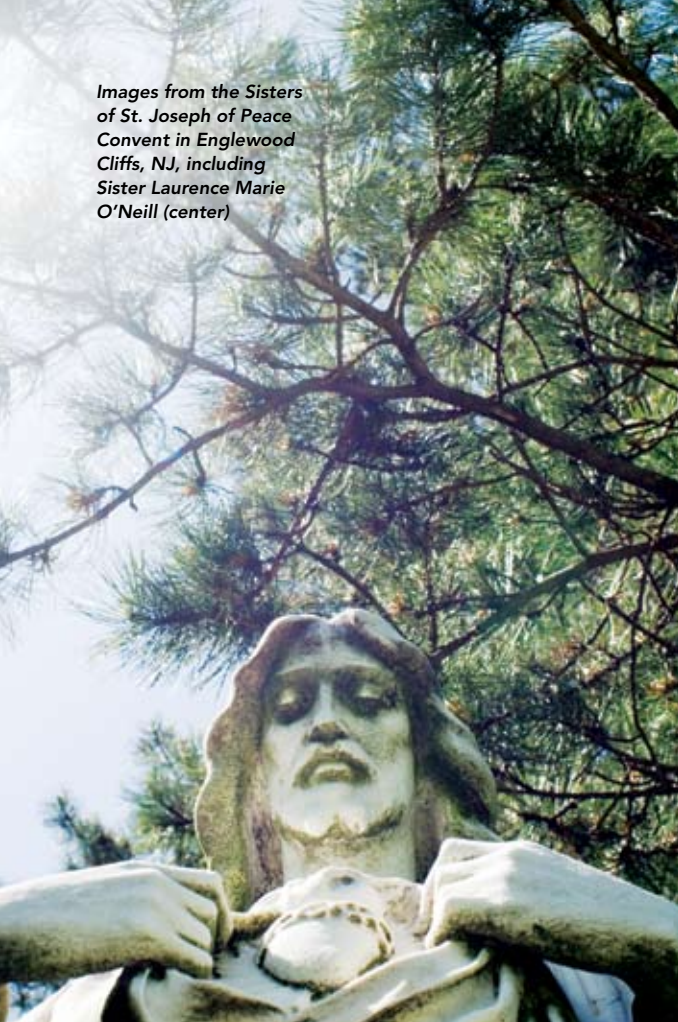
TWENTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD Katharine Johnson says the idea first hit her in college. That's when, as a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, she was introduced to a group of young nuns who were visiting her campus from Rome. Raised as an only-on-Sunday Catholic who thought of nuns as severe, knuckle-rapping older women in starched habits and flowing black robes, Johnson was surprised to find herself enjoying her time with them. "They were funny, amazing to be around, and so human. Meeting them was a huge turning point for me," she says. Rather than acting like the controlling schoolmarms she had imagined, these sisters teased each other and hosted movie nights, complete with homemade Italian pastries. For two years, the sisters joined Johnson for breakfast in the cafeteria, asking her about classes or debating the latest news stories. "Despite my faults, they wholeheartedly cared about how I was doing, and their humanity spoke to me," she says. "Meeting them helped me realize that I could be myself while being a nun." Before this experience, Johnson had been asking herself the typical questions about her future—did she want a career, a family, both? Did she want to have children someday? But now Johnson is considering putting those options aside and entering a convent—and she is not alone. Although the average age of nuns in the U.S. is 70 according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, these days convents are experiencing a fresh influx, as a new generation of young women are leaving behind paychecks, apartments, and

boyfriends, and are devoting their lives to God.

Of course, it's one thing to enjoy an active spiritual life and quite another to denounce all secular ambition and take a lifelong vow of celibacy, poverty, and obedience. But young women like Johnson don't see nunhood as a retreat from the world; to them it's just a different way to participate in society. "Society tells women that you have to get married," Johnson says. "But I'm open to the possibility of falling in love with a religious community or a man." Morgan Myers, a 23-year-old Catholic-high-school religion teacher in Pensacola, FL, and an aspiring nun says, "People act like becoming a nun is something you do if you can't get married or you don't like men, but I want to live in a community of women who are focused on learning more about their spiritual lives."

One indication of how accessible nunneries have become to young women these days is their presence on the Internet, which Catholic convents have embraced as a powerful outreach tool. There are nun-authored blogs—with names like NunKnits, Nun Bytes: Days in the Life of a Computer Nun/Nerd, and Religious Life Rocks: Adventures of One Fun Nun—and websites like Vocation-Network.org, which, like an online-dating site, uses a matching system to help prospective nuns find the right religious community. Convents even offer downloadable ringtones, such as the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity's theme song, "Peace and All Good." Johnson regularly reads Sister Julie Viera's blog, A Nun's Life, and says it helps her feel "like I am not alone in my religious

Images from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace Convent in Englewood Cliffs, NJ, including Sister Laurence Marie O'Neill (center)



feelings and there is a community out there for women like me.”

These nun blogs have opened doors into once-secluded convent life, giving interested young women and curious onlookers real-world insight into what nuns do on a daily basis while also addressing big issues, like the vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience. On *A Nun's Life*, Sister Viera, 35, writes, “There’s a lack of understanding about what it means to be religious today. I want to show there are all kinds of nuns.” Sister Viera lives in her own apartment in Monroe, MI, works at Loyola Press, a nonprofit Catholic publisher, holds a master’s degree, and enjoys going to local bars. On her blog, she explains how she can both adhere to the vow of poverty and own an iPod: “It happens that it’s a used one that I got for \$28,” she writes. “Now, if someone gave me a high-end, glitzy mp3 player that was more than I needed and over-the-top, even though it didn’t cost me a thing, I would not accept it, because it would violate my sense of simplicity.” On *Musings of a Discerning Woman*, 34-year-old Sister Susan Francois answers the question “So what’s with this poverty, celibacy, and obedience stuff, anyway?” by explaining that celibacy allows sisters “to love all God’s people equally by entering into nonpossessive and life-giving friendships rather than one committed relationship.”



Katharine Johnson chills in IL

Sister Francois has been a novice, or a nun in training, for one year. Before entering the convent, she worked as a city-elections officer in Portland, OR, and was involved with her local Catholic church advocating for those in poverty. At the start of the Iraq war, she

founded a chapter of the National Catholic Peace Movement called Pax Christi focused on Christian nonviolence. When her mother passed away from cancer, her anger at God led to grief, and through grieving she discovered that her deepest desire, long hidden, was to become a nun. Her father was supportive, but, according to Sister Francois, he thought of convent life as more like *The Sound of Music* and wanted her to join a contemplative society in which nuns spent the whole day in prayer. But Sister Francois wanted a religious community with a strong social-justice angle, and it took some effort to convince her father to support her decision to become, as he termed it, a “rabble-rouser.”

What Sister Francois’ father may not have realized is that nuns, even the ones who live in contemplative societies, have a history of rabble-rousing. As Cheryl L. Reed, author of *Unveiled: The Hid-*

den Lives of Nuns, says, Catholic orders, most of which originated in the Middle Ages, “were started by women rebels who had great devotion to Catholicism” and that, at the time, “the Catholic Church supported priests but not convents.” During the 19th and well into the 20th century, nuns, many of whom were immigrants, struggled to establish their presence in America. New School University religious-studies professor Katherine Kurs describes these women as immensely courageous. They endured anti-Catholic violence including arson, personal assault, and vigilante mobs while establishing convents, schools, hospitals, and social agencies of all kinds, often with little or no assistance from Catholic bishops and sometimes against their outright resistance.

These pioneering women blazed the trail for future nuns by ensuring that they had opportunities to develop their spiritual and intellectual lives. According to Amy L. Koehlinger, author of *The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s*, in the 1940s and ‘50s, sisters were earning more graduate degrees than secular women. Historically, nuns were put into Catholic schools before they had a chance to finish their broader educations, but in 1949, Sister Mary Madeleva, then president of St. Mary’s College at Notre Dame in Indiana, championed higher education for nuns, setting in motion the changes that have made them some of the best-educated women in the country today. Says Kurs, “The vowed, monastic life is about surrendering one’s will to God,” but for young women steeped in feminism, it is also a context within which “women’s gifts are encouraged—whether it be to play music, teach, learn languages, or write. Convents demonstrate the positive side of a gender-segregated education.” Myers, the aspiring nun, agrees: “Sisters are living in communities founded on feminist principles, where they don’t need men to survive,” she says. “Women’s religious life is a very strong feminist social construct.”

Like Johnson, Myers is still living in the secular world while looking for a religious community to join. If and when she finds the right one, she’s ready to leave behind thoughts of men and marriage. “Religious orders were founded to help communities where needs were not being met,” she says. “You can’t devote your life to a husband and family while working on a singular community need.” But rather than seeing this choice as a sacrifice, she finds it inspiring that nuns “are living out their femininity on their own.”

Joining a convent may have its feminist perks, but religious life is still a very serious commitment. The rigorous process of becoming a nun takes seven to nine years. The first stage is a discernment period, during which an inquirer applies to different convents—similar to applying to colleges. After a community selects her, she needs to demonstrate that she is debt-free, so as to not financially burden her new religious community, before she can become a novice.

Strict church law governs the first year. Time spent away to visit family and friends is restricted, and novices must commit to prayer and studying. On her blog, Sister Katy LaFond, 27, describes her experience as “a full year dedicated to really taking

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Jesus is Sister Susan Francois' homeboy

time and space to listen to God and decide if this is the life for you. It's a difficult year, but a good and important one." Each community of sisters determines the program of study for novices. For example, novices at the convent Sister Francois chose to join—the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace in Englewood Cliffs, NJ—attend classes on vows, prayer, sexuality, nutrition, and conflict resolution. They are encouraged to spend four hours a day finding their own path through prayer, meditation, and long walks, and they minister one afternoon a week. During the second year, novices minister full-time, giving services or care to their communities. At the end of the novitiate period, novices take temporary vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience for three years, after which they can take their final vows. If a sister decides she wants to leave, she must obtain permission from her community, but after she takes her final vows, she must write to the Vatican to get permission to leave.

For young nuns, it is crucial to find the right religious community to enter. Myers says, "Sisters tell me that the moment they walk into the [right] convent [for them], they feel like it is home. I really haven't felt that yet." For Sister Francois, entering Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace proved to be "exactly what I wanted. I really think I'm supposed to be part of this community." Her convent sits on the Hudson River with a perfect view of New York City and is as tranquil as it is picturesque. White marble statues of female saints line the lawns leading up to the church, a six-story tan brick building with a white cross at its top.

Inside, on the second floor, is a convalescence center, where the older, retired sisters stay, and on the top floor is a sun-filled worship room, painted baby blue with white wicker chairs and breathtaking views, which the sisters use for reflection and prayer.

It's charming enough to contemplate staying forever, until one remembers those vows. Of the three vows, celibacy is perhaps the hardest for non-nuns to understand. For Johnson, though, celibacy isn't a terribly intimidating factor as she weighs the idea of becoming a nun. "Sex is like chewing bubblegum," she says, whereas, "when you are with God, it's like you're at a huge feast." Her family has been supportive, but it has taken them time to adjust. After she took her mother to meet the young sisters who had so impressed her, her mother was on board, but it took her father three years to be at peace with the idea. "My father loves me, but he kept asking, 'What about the wedding and grandkids?'" she says. "Yes, I want to have a wedding and my own children, but there might be a more beneficial life for me, and I want to explore that possibility."

Myers hasn't completely given up thoughts of marriage either, although she stopped dating during her sophomore year of college, which she thinks has helped her grow. "I have so many more guy friends [now] because I understand who I am a lot better than I did before," she says. Now, she finds, "I think there are people I could have relationships with, but what I'm really looking for is a religious life. I can hold out for God's plan for me. God will provide." ■