



From 1941 through 1980 I was a member of a cloistered religious community for women. After Vatican II, some monasteries began to place more emphasis on the contemplative aspect of the life, which demanded education, and less on the strictly cloistered aspect. I was blessed to have been able to further my education in scripture, theology, and philosophy during those years. Unfortunately, I was also able to get out and obtain alcohol.

In 1980, due to circumstances which may not be so prevalent now as they were years ago, when most women religious knew very little about alcoholism, I made the painful decision to leave a contemplative lifestyle for an apostolic one. However, I am convinced that whether I had entered a cloistered way of life, an apostolic community, or had married or lived a single life in the world, I'd have become an alcoholic. My lifestyle had nothing to do with it. Often when I have shared my story, I have said that I am very fond of baked potatoes but I cannot remember when I tasted my first one. However, the three times I had alcohol before I entered the convent at eighteen remain vivid. I loved the taste as well as the effect.

My first encounter with alcohol occurred when I was seven or eight. My mother asked me to wash the pantry shelves. I climbed up on a stepstool and lifted the rarely used dishes from the top shelf. Among them was an attractive glass bottle containing a dark red liquid. I removed the glass stopper and sniffed the contents. The fragrance was delicious, so I tasted it—wonderful! A few days later, I found my parents standing in the kitchen puzzling over the bottle my mother held as she told my dad that the contents were diminishing. I sailed in and settled their curiosity by saying, “I’m drinking that, Mama! I like it!” The bottle disappeared.

The second occasion occurred in 1933, the year prohibition was abolished. That summer Dad made grape wine and proudly presented it for Christmas when several of our Connelly relatives gathered for dinner. Each one received a small glass full. I downed mine in one swallow, pronounced it, “Good, Daddy! I’d like some more!” I did not receive it.

After graduation from high school in 1941, I had my third and last encounter with alcohol before I entered the convent. Two of my older cousins treated me to lunch. I have no recollection of the food, but we each had a Tom Collins beforehand—another red-letter day!



On September 15, 1941, I entered the Poor Clare Monastery in Sauk Rapids, Minnesota, and began a new way of life. We arose early and retired early. Our

days were filled with prayer and manual labor. That fall we laid a sidewalk. In the spring we built a retaining wall. Each Sister had a vegetable garden and a flower garden to care for. Our reading matter consisted of biographies of the saints and what I came to think of as “fervorino”—books which aroused our emotions. Due to our active outdoor work and the fact that we were blessed with an abbess who possessed a remarkable amount of common sense, we were spared many of the psychological problems in some cloistered monasteries. However, when I was in my early twenties, I remember being disturbed by how childish, not “childlike,” I had become. I longed for intellectual stimulation. On April 22, 1942, I became a novice, “Sister Mary Michael of the Holy Trinity.”



In 1953 our monastery had nearly reached its capacity, and we did not want to become larger. Sister Anne Condon had dreamed for several years of founding a new monastery in or near Minneapolis. On the feast of Saint Clare in 1952, she petitioned Bishop Peter Bartholome of St. Cloud for permission to explore possibilities. By the early spring of 1953, five of us had volunteered and been accepted to form the new community. Our average age was twenty-six. In St. Paul, Archbishop John Gregory Murray gave his approval to the venture. In April, Sister Anne and I made our first trip out of enclosure to view an offered site that proved to be unsuitable. In May, a parishioner of St. Richard's in Richfield, Minnesota, alerted Father Alfred Longley about our search for land suitable for a monastery in the area and he announced it at Mass. Mrs. Marie St. Martin immediately offered five acres of her large farm before she sold it to a realty company for development. The property had been an asparagus farm with sandy soil and not a tree in sight, but we saw possibilities and happily accepted it.

We made numerous train trips to the Twin Cities to confer with the Archbishop, Catholic Aid, Father Longley, benefactors, and architects. The Sisters in Sauk Rapids gave what they could to help us financially. Bishop Bartholome made a large loan with no interest. After many adventures and misadventures, our little community prepared to move permanently to the St. Paul - Minneapolis Archdiocese in November 1953. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet offered us hospitality at the Academy of the Holy Angels in Richfield, close to the site of the monastery. Other communities of Sisters hosted us for numerous meals, which forged enduring bonds among us.

The original monastery building was what we called the “basic unit.” It would house twelve nuns with a small cloister chapel, an extern chapel, a small novitiate room, kitchen, library, dining area, and two dormitories, one for the Sisters in

final vows and one for girls who had recently entered, novices, and temporary professed young women.

In late spring, our money was running out. Every morning we left Holy Angels after early Mass and breakfast to work on the interior of the monastery. We taped the joints on the sheetrock between rooms, applied the preliminary coat of white-wash, and painted the interior walls except for the chapel and bathrooms. Other Sisters came to help us. Numerous other people helped in many ways. By August 12, 1954, on the day of the feast of St. Clare, we had moved from Holy Angels to live and work at the monastery located in Bloomington. We had been in a community of twenty-six in Sauk Rapids and lived among many Sisters of St. Joseph at Holy Angels. Now we were only six and had to get used to life with each other as a community. Many curious visitors came through each day. This continued until late October when Archbishop John Gregory Murray officially enclosed the monastery.

Because we did not have enough finally professed nuns to hold an election, Archbishop Murray appointed Mother Anne as Abbess and me as her Vicaress. Mother Anne immediately named me as Novice Mistress, too. Within a week a young woman joined us and we were seven! Our numbers grew rapidly. By 1957, we had to build an addition to the monastery.



During these years in our Bloomington monastery, I was blessed with closer contact with my parents. Several years before, in 1946, Dad had begun to have unusual episodes. He acted in strange ways or fell on the floor in seizures. Most of the time he was lucid and was the strong, gentle, loving father I had always known. However, these periods, which the doctors weren't able to diagnose at the time, were the source of deep concern to him, my mother, my brothers, and me. One day he came to see me, visibly shaken after he had to commit his aunt to a mental hospital. He said, "I'd rather die than have to be in a place like that." I told him, and I firmly believed it, "Dad, God won't let that happen to you. You are so good."

In 1957, following several bizarre incidents after which Dad was confined to the psychiatric floor at Anker Hospital, a hearing was held at which Dad was present. He remembered nothing of what he had done, but he responded, "If I have done these things, I need to be committed. It's not safe for me to be at home." Mom signed the papers; otherwise the state would have committed him. She told me it would have been easier to sign his death certificate. He was taken to Hastings State Mental Hospital. I was shaken to the core. Sometime in the night, I went to chapel and sobbed dry sobs.

It was a painful maturing in faith. I began to realize that I could not set limits to faith. While God did not cause bad things to happen, the world and all of us are imperfect and evolving. I did not then, nor do I now, believe God was testing. I grew to believe that “in the end all will be well.” God is one with us in all that we go through. In the words of Beatrice Bruteau, when we have exhausted all that we can say about our “descriptive selves,” we are left with “I am.” We are one with God; God is one with each of us. I believe Jesus tried during his life to make us understand that. I believe the beautiful creation myth in Genesis tells us that truth. God breathed into the clay and the human came to life. If God withdrew His breath from us we wouldn’t be. This faith developed over the years, faintly during the years of my active alcoholism, and then deeply and firmly during my recovery.



Looking back, I believe I became an alcoholic in 1958. As Vicar I had keys and access to any wine or brandy that we received. I knew nothing about alcoholism, but I had developed a craving for liquor and would do nearly anything to obtain it.

In panic, I tried what I later learned is called a “geographical cure.” In April 1959, I returned to our founding monastery in Sauk Rapids, Minnesota. The decision to return was made without any counsel or dialogue, simply out of terrible fear and deep shame. On New Year’s Day, in inner turmoil, I wrote this poem:

The Circumcision, 1958

My soul is flat on its face, small Christ,
Beneath all incensed words, all rose-hued singing.
Past even the scalding brine of tears,
In sere vigil to the rough wood clinging.

If gift this be, small Christ,
This pain-racked peace past singing,
Breathe the spilled torrent of Your Love
Into these dry bones, to the rough wood clinging.

My soul is flat on its face, small Christ,
Blind to the plaster Babe, deaf to the caroled singing,
Locked in the first red rush of your pity,
Spiked to the Form on the rough wood clinging.

Because of my shame, I could not share my addiction with anyone. Our cloistered community in Bloomington had grown from six women to eighteen; several were still in the novitiate, but I walked out. The next couple of years were, quite simply, a nightmare in spite of the fact that our Sisters in Sauk Rapids had lovingly received me back. Almost immediately I knew I had made a terrible mistake in leaving the group I helped found. I missed the Sisters in Bloomington, especially those in the novitiate, as well as the courses in systematic and mystical theology and scripture taught mainly by our Brother Franciscans from their newly opened seminary in Chaska, Minnesota.

For several months I did not drink. Then in the fall I was appointed infirmarian. Once again I had access to the keys to the cupboard next to the Abbess' office where gifts of wine and brandy were kept.

A few months after my return, my father, who had spent two and a half years in a mental hospital, was released to go home on medication. Two months later my mother died, and Dad soon quit taking his medication. In May 1960, under very painful circumstances, he was returned to the hospital where he died one year after my mother. Since our rules were strict, I was unable to be with my parents or family. Other women religious had experienced the pain of enclosure and had gracefully accepted it, but I numbed my feelings with alcohol, and my drinking increased.

As infirmarian, I slept in the infirmary and was not obliged to get up for the Divine Office at midnight. After the Sisters had gone to chapel, I often crept upstairs to the Abbess' office, took the keys to the cupboard where wine and brandy were kept, and quietly returned to my space between the two infirmary rooms. As no one else was interested in opening that cupboard, my raids went unnoticed. Somehow, I still performed my duties as infirmarian. Both Sisters confined to the infirmary were content with my ministrations, as was our doctor. However, my conscience was not at peace. I thought drinking to excess was a sin. Each week I resolved to tell it in Confession, and each week I was unable to do so because of intense shame. Week after week I'd decide not to drink and imagine going to Confession and telling the priest "I used to drink." Of course that day never arrived.

As I look back now, I am amazed that for several years I continued to perform my duties as infirmarian. I prepared special meals for those on diets and cooked for our guests and for our chaplain who lived in a house just below the monastery. After one of our organists became crippled with rheumatoid arthritis, I was asked to play the organ. This made me very nervous, but I did it. To fortify myself, I secretly had a glass of wine before Mass each time I played.



Vatican II thrilled me. I wrote two or three articles that were published in periodicals for women religious and priests. The Bishop and our chaplain were furious with me for an article in which I expressed the possibility of a change in the rules of enclosure. However, the Abbess was supportive and allowed me to write.

It is painful to write of those years when my emotions were so raw and carefully concealed under a calm exterior and quieted with alcohol. I loved the two Sisters in the infirmary, both original members of the founding community in Sauk Rapids.

One Sister was among the most genuine characters with whom I have ever lived. She was full of love and exasperating wiles. One day she remarked to me that when she wanted something from a Sister, "I can be very 'coaxy!'" She marched to her own inner drumbeat.

When she died in December 1963, it was with deep emotion I prepared her body for the undertaker. That day I mourned the loss of an original and independent but deeply human and loving spirit from our midst.

I told Mother Teresa that we could not send the usual short notice of her death to our Sister monasteries. This was not only because of her life in the monastery, but also because of the nearly unbelievable adventures with the original group of Sisters who were out of enclosure and going about the country collecting money to build a new Poor Clare monastery in Sauk Rapids in the early 1920s. Mother Teresa agreed and told me to write it. A few years later on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of founding the monastery, I discovered that the piece I wrote had become a chapter in the Jubilee booklet created by a priest from the St. Cloud diocese. The opening paragraph stated that the article "was written by an unknown nun."

The other Sister died a few months later at the St. Cloud Hospital. During the months that followed, I spent many afternoons praying and writing in the sun-filled infirmary room with a view of our lovely grounds, lawns, and gardens.

During this time, two incidents occurred, both of which are vivid in my memory. One afternoon a young Sister in temporary profession came in, pulled up a chair in front of me, and said, "How do you stand it?" She was referring to the lack of intellectual stimulation in our community. I, too, was troubled by this, but my feelings of being unworthy, due to my secret alcoholism, made me uncomfortable being honest. I responded that I didn't have a problem with our situation. She looked at me and replied, "I don't believe you," then walked out. A short time after that, she left the monastery.

On another day, a very quiet, serious, and gentle Sister came in, began to cry and asked, "Sister Michael, aren't you drinking too much wine?" Of course, I hotly denied it and she left in tears. Years later I was blessed with the opportunity to make amends to her.

In the 1950s, Pope Pius XII called for monasteries of contemplative nuns to form federations so that the nuns could be enriched by mutual contact and assistance. By the 1960s, the Mother Bentivoglio Federation (among others) was formed. The Abbess of the New Orleans monastery was chosen as Abbess of the Federation. She had the right to visit the member monasteries and to speak with any Sister who wished to see her.

In 1967, she and Mother Anne of the Bloomington monastery arranged with the Franciscans who ran the College of St. Teresa in Winona, Minnesota, to offer a program of enrichment for Poor Clares. It was envisioned as a one- or two-year program offering classes in theology, scripture, art, and music appreciation. Permission was sought from Rome, but no response was received. Finally, with advice from a canon lawyer, the program opened in August 1967, with nuns from several other Orders, as well as Poor Clares, in attendance. They lived in a section of Assisi Hall, the home of the Franciscan second year novices and the junior professed. In the beginning, all the classes were taught there, so the Sisters could observe a form of enclosure. Mother Anne was named as Coordinator.

When Mother Francis Clare visited our monastery in Sauk Rapids, I told her of my intense desire to be a part of the program. For me it was a dream come true, an opportunity to engage in study with other like-minded women who shared a contemplative lifestyle. Certainly, somewhere in my sub-conscious was the belief that this would take care of my drinking. Strangely enough, it did not occur to me that my alcoholism had begun when I had ample opportunities to study in our Bloomington monastery.

The Abbess in Sauk Rapids and the other Sisters genuinely believed that this new venture was foreign to our form of life and were truly horrified that I wanted to be a part of it. Mother Francis Clare encouraged me to transfer to her monastery so that I could attend the program. Now, looking back after the passing of many years, I can understand the dismay of our community and the anger of the Bishop. Fourteen years earlier I had been part of the group leaving to found a new Poor Clare monastery, less than six years later, I had returned to Sauk Rapids, and now I petitioned to leave once more. I was caught up in a time of turmoil in religious life and in the world. I felt grief at the pain I was causing the Abbess who had always been my friend, but I felt I was dying inside. Unrecognized was the basic part alcohol played in it—and had for many years. Finally, in September 1967, Bishop Bartholome told Mother Teresa to let me go. I was on the move again, this time to New Orleans.



Years later someone remarked that leaving contemplative religious life for an apostolic way of life must have been a great shock. No, the shock had occurred years earlier when I moved from a strictly enclosed way of life to a monastery in the throes of experimentation. Some Sisters still wore the traditional habit, but the majority wore an attractive tent dress and veil—brown, blue, maroon or green! We went out to classes, did our own shopping, attended special events, visited our families once a year and accompanied visiting Sisters and family members to the French Quarter. I soon learned how to take city buses (which later enabled me to get out and buy wine in supermarkets and drugstores).

Sisters from other monasteries were drawn to New Orleans. Some stayed; others returned to their home monasteries. Along with two Sisters in the process of transferring from another monastery, I was immediately sent with the Novice Mistress to attend formation workshops each month. The workshops drew Sisters, Priests, and Brothers from many communities in the Archdiocese. The Sisters Council and a psychiatrist from De Paul Mental Hospital sponsored the workshops. Mainly, they comprised fresh insights from Vatican II documents and sound mental health practices. I loved them!

For two months I did not abuse alcohol. Then on Thanksgiving Day, we had wine for dinner. I felt very lonely that day. In the afternoon, I went downstairs to the kitchen and took the leftover wine to my room. In tears, I sat on my bed and finished the wine. My alcoholism was active again, but at that time I was still able to hide it.

In Sauk Rapids, each month Mother Teresa had given me the checks signed by her, which I made out and mailed to various companies from which we had purchased items. Because of that, Mother Francis Clare thought I had been the bur-sar. Nothing could have been further from the truth! I had always loved English and writing, but math was my nemesis. I remember one very amusing incident. As Poor Clares, we depended heavily on alms for our day-to-day living. Nevertheless, we received many requests for money, which were put, in my mail box. One day I opened one from Planned Parenthood signed by James Michener. I showed it to Mother Francis Clare and asked how I should respond. She replied I should tell him we could not send money but that individually, each of us was doing all she could to keep the population down!

In January 1968, when I had been in the monastery for only four months of the trial period for Sisters who had transferred from another monastery, the novice director and several novices walked out. Two novices and one postulant remained. The Abbess and her council met and named me as Novice Mistress. I could never get Mother Francis Clare to sit down with me and discuss my appointment, so I could not be sure if it was a temporary situation or not. Perhaps because of my

canonical status in the community, she didn't know. The two novices were truly beautiful young women, one black and one white, and they welcomed me warmly. A few months later, I had the painful task of dismissing the postulant. Most of the Sisters were shocked, and I felt very much alone. However, one Sister told me she had not been blind to what had been going on, and she wanted me to know she understood. I felt truly grateful for the words of support.



In light of Vatican II, I thought it would be beneficial to the novices if we could all attend theology and scripture classes at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans. Mother Francis Clare agreed and told me to call and ask if we might participate. The answer was: "No. No women could attend classes." When I shared the news with the novices, Veronica, our black Sister, strongly urged me to call Xavier University, the only black Catholic University in the United States. I thought it an excellent suggestion. The university's response was very positive; we were welcomed as students.

Since Charlene, the other novice, had attended a year of college before she entered the Poor Clares, she was in a second year theology class. In one class, I was the only white person. During the next semester, I took a sociology class with many black students and only two other white students, both from Pennsylvania. On the Louisiana Avenue bus, I was often the only white person. It was a real education for me. It was 1969. Black people were rising up and demanding their equality, but New Orleans was relatively peaceful.

One day during the summer, the novices, the postulant, and I went with another Sister to dig young trees from the property of a relative of one of the older Sisters. We planned to transplant them into our yard in New Orleans. After a couple of hours of hard work, she invited us in for a cold drink before we left for home. As we sat in her living room, she regaled us with stories of the "drunken nigger" who had once worked for her. I felt outrage and wanted to leave immediately. As we left, the woman embraced each of us or so I thought. The following morning, our postulant came to my office and told me that as I had walked out first, I had not seen what happened. Instead of embracing Veronica, she turned away from her and embraced the postulant who was white. I was horrified! "Veronica won't tell you," she said, "but I think you ought to know." I thanked her and told her we would never return to that house.

A few minutes later, when Veronica came to my office, I told her I had learned of what happened and that we were not going back. Then I held up her very refined, lovely mother as an example for her and told her that the woman who had