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**The Way of the Pilgrimess**

*The Story of Catherine Magdalene Macé*

2006. (Excerpts or the whole of this e-book can be printed by any reader for personal use or to share with friends.)

# *Contents*

Preface .....	1
Childhood in Brittany.....	3
Higher Studies in Paris.....	7
Anthropological Pilgrimage to Asia.....	9
Further Adventures .....	23
Consecrated Life in the Monastery .....	27
A Pilgrim-Hermit.....	33
At Catholic Solitudes .....	43



# Preface

When you hear the word pilgrim who do you think of? If you are from the United States, probably you are thinking of the pilgrims coming over on the Mayflower. If you are a Christian, possibly what comes to mind is the Russian hero of *The Way of a Pilgrim*. If you are familiar with English Catholic history maybe you know of *Marjory of Kempe*.

Whatever your background, I am imagining that you picked up this book off a shelf or a web-site because the title intrigued you – pilgrimess? A French sounding name, *Macé*? If I tell you that she was also once a world traveling anthropologist, a nun, and presently a hermit, and iconographer, I would guess your interest will increase.

It was at a hermit village in Texas, *Catholic Solitudes*, where I am staying as a lay contemplative that I first heard about Catherine. “She’s coming to visit us for three months, Ronda, and if you like her as much as I expect you will, you’ll want to write her biography,” Father Patrick announced one day at lunch. When he mentioned that many men had asked for her hand in marriage, my curiosity became even greater.

A month afterwards, at morning Mass, an older French woman, short of stature, wearing a simple sweater and long dark skirt, and beaming with joy appeared at morning Mass in our simple hermit chapel.

The last chapter of *The Way of the Pilgrimess* will describe Catherine’s stay with us. But before delving into her fascinating story, a word about religious pilgrims from some other writers.<sup>1</sup>

“The impulse to find and inhabit an “other” world over and against the present one is perhaps the most common form the religious pilgrimage takes. God, the pilgrim suspects, is other and elsewhere. There must be another world where God is. The pilgrim yearns to see God face to face, so earthly life becomes a pilgrimage toward that other place...Its source, often enough, is the imagination of the artist, which seeks expression in religion, the only world as vivid as the starlit world within.”<sup>2</sup>

“...the pilgrim is nothing if not an independent, striving to God without obvious means of support....resisting the lures and snares of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

About Thomas Merton as hermit “Solitude, so long defended or

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (NY Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> Elie, *The Life You Save...* p. 95

<sup>3</sup> Elie, *The Life You Save...* p. 135

*The Way of the Pilgrimess*

sought after, is no longer an end in itself, but a means to know God. God is suddenly, palpably present...the contemplative life is one of prayer in the approach to death - the experience of being on the way to God, with God, and through God, who is that Truth which is the end and by which we are already fully and eternally alive.”<sup>4</sup>

“God yearns to be known’; human sadness is God’s sadness at not being known’ and the contemplative is a person who recognizes that...the desert is a place where God is to be found.”<sup>5</sup>

In the chapters to follow you will see how a charming little French girl seemingly destined for the more common life of a wife and mother, became, instead just such a pilgrim.

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<sup>4</sup> Elie, *The Life You Save...* p. 370

<sup>5</sup> Merton, *The Seven Story Mountain*, quoted in Elie, p. 403

## *Childhood in Brittany*

I was born July 2, 1939 in Brittany on the coast of France in a small village, Louvigné du Desert, in the home of my maternal grandmother. Because my grandfather and one of my uncles were doctors, I, like all my siblings, was delivered at my maternal grandparent's home. My grandmother, Marthe de Montigny, would play a great role in my life. She was of a noble ancestry and was lovingly devout and sweet-natured, welcoming priests to her home and always reaching out to the poor. My mother, also named Marthe, was like my grandmother.

In my early years, my mother and father lived in a large house in the city of Saint-Brieuc, though we moved from town to town in Brittany, since my father, Jean Macé, was a judge. Eventually he became President of the High Court of Rennes where we settled for good.

Our family was upper middle class. The eldest, Bernadette, was a year and a half older than myself. I was the second girl. Brigitte and Elizabeth were next, and the youngest, Yves, was the only boy. My father was delighted to have a son after having four girls one after another.

My father was much stricter than my mother. This was because he had been brought up by an authoritarian aunt. Although my father was known for his even-handed justice as a judge, at home in the family I thought he was discriminatory, favoring my elder sister, whom he always praised, and then my brother, Yves. We middle three girls felt we were less important. Once my father brought a nice toy for my older sister and nothing for me. I objected at getting nothing. My mother had to point out to my father that even though I was only 2 or 3 years old, I understood that he favored my sister.

We were a religious family, especially when we girls were young. Every night our parents would have us pray the Our Father and prayers of petition. My father's family tended to be what is called Jansenistic, a tendency in the Church, condemned many times, but extremely influential nonetheless. Jansenists believed that most people went to hell, and that any failure or even mistake needed to be confessed. It was better for children to be "seen and not heard," to use the American expression for this mentality. So, when we visited my father's family, we had to sit still and talk as little as possible. By contrast my mother's family was affectionate and generous. My mother played the piano very well. She especially loved me, not only because she wanted to compensate me for my father's favoritism of my older sister, but also because of an affinity between us.

## *The Way of the Pilgrimess*

Up until the time I was 15 years old, I remember our family life as happy. My father and mother loved each other and the children. Our travels together in Europe opened for me a life-long interest in other countries and their peoples. However, when I was 15, my parents, by then middle-aged, underwent a serious crisis that left them estranged and that changed our family forever. Although they came to treat each other with outward respect, my father became cold and sarcastic. My attempts to reconcile them failed. As a result there was no longer prayer together as a whole family.

What about school years? Like most little girls in that era I went to a Catholic school. Brittany was more Catholic than other parts of France. Most people practiced their faith regularly. For instance, in my family, we went to Mass several times during the week. Even when my mother didn't go because the other little girls were too small, I would go alone before school to Mass with other girlfriends. I passed the cathedral on my half hour walk to school and always went in to the Church to kneel near the beautiful statue of Mary. Once Mary smiled at me.

The school I attended was run by the Sisters of the Holy Spirit. I liked them very much. I was a good girl and the most religious in the family. Some of the Sisters thought I would some day be a religious like them, but my father wanted me to be a scientist.

At school there were lots of little statues. May devotions stand out in my memory. We went in procession singing and putting flowers on a stand in front of the statue of Mary. Many of the people of the town came to processions and showed reverence when the Blessed Sacrament was brought out through the streets. During my youth I read the Bible, Lives of Little Therese, Francis de Sales, Francis of Assisi, and other holy books.

I was a good student, especially in science, English and geography. I had many friends, who came to my house often, where treats made by my mother were always prepared for us. Maybe this is why even today I love to set up little festive meals wherever I am. In the evening we did our homework and then played games, mostly bridge. All of we sisters took ballet and then rhythmic free improvisation. We loved our dance classes and at the end of the school year we gave ballet performances in the theater of St. Briec.

I had no experience of friendship with boys since my best friends were either girls of my school or my female cousins with whom we spent holidays in my grandmother's house. We were twenty cousins and enjoyed being together, but I also liked to be alone, to pray, to contemplate nature in the garden, the woods, and the sea. We lived near the ocean and in summer we camped on a beach on the coast of Brittany, or went off to swim by day from our homes by bicycle or on foot. I remember

## *Childhood in Brittany*

watching the sunsets and sunrises and thanking God for their beauty.

My character as seen by the family was gentle, helpful, especially to my little sisters, loving and affectionate, and a bit mischievous.

At 17, I finished my examinations for the baccalaureate. At that point my life in the family ended because I became a student in Paris. Since we were a close family, it was difficult to leave to study in Paris, but still the idea of starting a new life was exciting.

Affectionate and sensitive by nature, I felt very lonely in the first month without family and friends. When I returned home for the Christmas holidays, I remember kidding and hugging my mother and sisters again and again. Because my heart was very attached to my family, I always felt a nostalgia for my youth.

By the time I left for Paris, though, I frequently disagreed with my father concerning politics. He views were traditional and right wing, and I tended to be more to the left. Moreover, I was idealistic and wanted to do everything possible for the poor. I disapproved of my father's relatively affluent lifestyle.

*The Way of the Pilgrims*

## *Higher Studies in Paris*

When I went to Paris to study, I knew nothing about “life.” I didn’t understand much of my father’s warning to avoid men, because some were “not so good.” I lived like a granddaughter in the house of an eighty-five year old professor of medicine, a friend of the family. After a year, I moved to the house of my maternal family where we had a small apartment.

The Lycee I attended specialized in math and science, my two top subjects. Chemistry was my favorite. There were 60 boys and only 8 girls, and I was very lonely. Most boys laughed at me because I was so naïve. Sometimes we had parties and I enjoyed dancing and talking with friends. When the boys who liked me would take me out, I always kept a “proper distance.”

Even though I went to Church on Sundays, I was less religious than in Brittany. By God’s providence, however, I met a very good priest who led a youth group and this sustained my faith in this difficult period of my life.

For a year my older sister came to Paris to study to be a dietician, but since she was in love I didn’t see much of her. I studied very hard and passed the entrance examination for the *École de Chimie* (Chemistry School) of Paris. This was a 3 year program, again with the boys outnumbering the girls 60:10. While I was at this school I had a full social life. Many young men I dated wanted to marry me, but I was not in love. Whenever one asked me if I liked him, I would reply, “Yes, but I also like him and him and him.” I was not interested in sex and would tell the men I dated that I loved not their bodies but their souls. Since most of them were atheists, they thought I was from another planet.

In the atheistic milieu of Paris the heroes were Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus. Philosophy classes also introduced us to Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger. As an antidote I also read religious books by such authors as Bergson, Bernanos, and Maritain. I wanted to explain to the young men who were so interested in me what the soul was.

I did believe I might marry someday, but also felt drawn to the religious life, especially the cloistered life. I talked to a priest but he said that my love for travel and meeting new people surely indicated that my calling was not to be a Carmelite. A good result of visiting the Carmel in the course of my search for my vocation was that I started reading St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Their writings who helped me to pray and meditate more.

## *The Way of the Pilgrimess*

At the age of 23 I earned a Diploma (the equivalent of a Master of Science) in chemical engineering. But even while I was finishing my studies in science, I attended classes at an anthropology institute. At my graduation celebration, I announced that I would not become an engineer, after all, because I wanted to travel the world and study anthropology. My main interest was in learning more about human beings. When I returned home, my father was disappointed at my decision. Finally he relented, and agreed that studying science was not a waste since, even if I didn't make a career in chemistry, I would at least be able to find work with my degree.

When I announced, "I am going to visit the world," my father said I could not possibly fulfill such a dream, since I had no money. However just at that time my grandmother and great aunt died and gave each of us a legacy. I sold the jewelry and furniture I inherited to have funds for travel. I was filled with excitement and a feeling of independence at the prospect of seeing other places and learning about other religions and peoples. Before setting out, I decided to study Hinduism and Buddhism as a preparation for travel to Asia. While pursuing this interest, I worked as a research assistant at an atomic energy institute and earned enough to allow me to travel, since I wanted to go as cheaply as I could.

During this time in Paris, I met professors of Hinduism and Buddhism who helped me prepare for my future research. They gave me addresses of other professors in Asian universities I could visit. I also worked in an anthropological museum in the religion department and read parts of the sacred books of Indian philosophy such as the Vedas, Upanishad, and the Gita. As well I came to know Hindu people living in Paris. This gave me confidence for my journey from France to last for two years or more. My anthropological pilgrimage was about to begin.

# *Anthropological Pilgrimage to Asia*

I set out for my first journey to Asia in 1964, at age 24. This trip took me to India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Thailand, China, and Japan with shorter stops in Aden, Naples, Yemen, Egypt, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

My mother, elder sister and I, went by car to Marseilles in Southern France where I would take a big ship going to the Middle East and Asia. I was upset at leaving my mother. When the ship left the port we were both weeping since we didn't know when we would see each other again. The ship passed by the statue of Notre Dame de la Garde and I prayed to Mary to take care of me on my travels.

To save money I traveled 3rd class, sharing a cabin of six berths with an Indian family. I carried with me only a backpack. In third class, I was the only French girl. The rest of my fellow travelers were Asians, mostly students who studied in London or Paris.

You might be wondering how I expected to get along in foreign countries without speaking all those languages. Well, even in Asia, most of the people I met spoke either English or French, and I studied some Hindi when I arrived in India. In smaller villages usually there were interpreters available because of colonization in the past.

On the voyage I made many friends, some of whom invited me to their homes for their weddings. It was customary for the parents to arrange marriages while their sons were away at school. My new found friends would show me photos of the young women they were expected to marry soon after arrival back in Asia.

The friendly captain of the ship wondered what I was doing alone among all these Asian people in 3rd class. When I told him that I was just a student and couldn't afford 2nd class he put me in second class, and then in first class. Most of the passengers in second class were missionaries. All of them gave me their addresses and invited me to visit them in the places they had missions in towns or in villages of tribal peoples.

I was so interested in all the people I met on the ship that I didn't miss France at all. There was Holy Mass on the ship. I was surprised to see that people who seemed so worldly on deck were so reverent the people were at the liturgy.

Evenings on the ship were taken up with dances. The captain

danced with me, as did other Frenchmen who assumed that a girl alone would be open to anything. When they flirted with me I refused their advances and told them I was very religious and had set out to study religions of the East.

I left the ship at Bombay where I stayed with a Hindu family who brought me to the temples where I could see the Hinduism not so much of the gurus but of the people. In all I spent 10 months in India, traveling by train and bus. I arrived first in Goa, where St. Francis Xavier conducted his missionary activities. I had been given the address of a nice Catholic family where I stayed one week before moving on to Delhi, a big city. There I stayed with a religious Hindu family who showed me around and soon decided I should marry their son, an engineer. Although I liked him as a friend, I had no romantic interest. In fact, I had never fallen in love with anyone in my life. This was the first of many proposals in India. I think these offers of marriage came not because I was unusually beautiful and certainly not because I looked rich, traveling in blue jeans with a backpack and wearing the simplest of Indian saris when visiting. Rather I believe most people loved me because I was such a joyful responsive person, and took great interest in them, male or female.

During this time I visited an ashram in Kashmir near the Ganges river. For those who do not know, an ashram is a Hindu religious site. A holy man, or swami, is the leader, teaching both celibates and visitors in prayer. He offers each one personal spiritual direction.

There are many different kinds of Hindu practice of yoga, which means union with God. Bhakti-yoga is personal and devotional, directed to such gods as Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna. Jana-yoga is more philosophical and more difficult. Karma-yoga is the practice of purity of life and good deeds and can be practiced in ordinary life in the world. Hatha-yoga involves postures and bodily exercise and control of thoughts to become one with divine energy and discover the mind of God within yourself.

In my experience in Asia, some of the gurus were genuinely holy, while others were not so holy or even seemingly had other motivations for their leadership. At that time there were many young American and European hippies, dressed like Hindus who had a great desire to find and know God by means of Indian holy men. Sometimes these gurus gained power over them. But the good leaders don't try to be powerful. In some cases the guru was simple and pure, but so many visitors came that some of the sites gradually became disedifying. In those years of travel I met 3 very deep beautiful gurus and I believe there are certainly holy women and men in India, such as Gandhi. I visited the ashram he founded and loved it. His present day disciples farm, weave, and help the poor.

*Anthropological  
Pilgrimage to Asia*

When I was Kashmir I thought the guru was very good. His interest in Catholic contemplation was helpful for my anthropological studies in comparative religions. For example, Hindus also have beads they pray to Rama similar to our Jesus beads and rosaries.

Some of the leaders of the ashrams I visited wanted to convert me to their philosophy and religion. I explained that I was participating in their prayer as a way to understand their rituals and spiritual exercises, not to convert. In one of them hypnotism was practiced. I let them do it a few times, praying to Jesus all the time. I told one of the swamis that, "my God, Jesus, is better than your gods" and that no Indian guru could not win me over; I would remain Catholic. He was impressed. One of my best meetings with a holy Hindu man was in Himalaya, north Kashmir. I went with a Hindu friend to visit a hermit in a grotto in the mountains. When I saw this old hermit with a long beard and hair and the traditional garment surrounded by light, I thought I had met God. The hermit's face and eyes were radiant and his smile was one of love and compassion. He received me as if I were a sister or mother and told me all about my life, past and future. Then he remained silent, eyes radiant, looking at my inner self. This and a few other experiences taught me that God's grace can act in Hindu mystics, when they are humble. I believe Christians can learn about certain facets of God from such holy ones, especially aspects that are not revealed to those who are too active and busy as we are in the West.

At that time I learned from such men the desire to be united with God in devotion and adoration (in the Bhakti.) And also the quest for truth and self in silence and stillness. Some Hindu mystics such as Tonkaram, Kabir, Ramakrishna, and Tagore wrote in ways that really helped me in my desire to be one with Jesus. I also met Father La Saux, a hermit in the Himalayas, and read his books about meeting God in the Hindu and Christian traditions.

The Hindu families are generally religious. They pray every morning and evening, singing to their gods, and bringing offerings to the temple. Each family has a little sanctuary with statues. I liked to pray with them in their huge temples. I had to admit that many of the Indian people are more religious than those in the West. They have confidence in their gods and their priests or holy men. Every day a religious Hindu family goes to the Temple bringing flowers and fruits - coconuts and bananas to offer to the gods. They pray with fervor. The priest then offers their sacrifices to the gods. On big festivals there are processions with statues of the gods.

Hinduism is a religion based on sacred books written by wise men - the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Gita. There are 3 great gods = Brahma - Creator of the worlds, Vishnu - who takes care of the world and is in-

carnate in the world, and Shiva – who destroys the world.

Each god is associated with a goddess. There are thousands of gods who have different functions. Hinduism is a cyclic religion with worlds following one another. When men are very bad, the world is destroyed. Then Vishnu restores the world in the name of Krishna. Religion is based on the idea of karma. If you act good, your future reincarnation will be better.

The principle of reincarnation is the basis for the system of castes. According to your karma (good or bad) you are reborn in a higher or lower caste – or even in an animal. There are 4 principal castes and each caste includes a multitude of minor castes. It is impossible to change your caste in this life. If you act in truth by good deeds, your next life will be in a better caste and if you become devoted to God in quest of unity with the divine, through one of the above mentioned forms of yoga, then you don't have to reincarnate; you become one with God by fusion. You become God.

By contrast, Christians know we are on a historical path, from alpha to omega. Jesus Christ is the incarnate unique divine Son of God and He will come back at the end of the world. Everybody from the beginning of the world will be judged by Christ and according to their love of God and others will be risen in the Kingdom of God or separated from Him. They will be free to make a final choice for God or refuse Him.

The caste system in India appears to us to be very unjust. It is. But in Indian philosophy the caste system is seen as a way to become better, to reincarnate and then to unite with God. Injustice comes because many of the Brahmin caste are not holy and oppress people of the lower caste.

In Bombay I was able to go to Mass regularly. I visited the Jesuits and Dominicans who were interested in inter-faith dialogue between Hindus and Catholics.

Part of the time I was in India I was able to study the practices of the tribal peoples. An interpreter translated what the villagers said into English. In one village in the East of India near China they had never seen a European before. Not knowing where I had come from, they surrounded me, and touched me, thinking I was an angel from heaven! I explained to them more about my life by means of a student who knew both English and their language, but even so, when I was ready to depart, they wanted me to fly back to heaven in front of them.

While in this region of India, an engineering group took me to the palace of the Maharajah. At this luxurious mansion, there were many men of his family in splendid dress who spoke English well. At dinner the Maharajah ate an omelet of forty eggs and a kilo of rice seasoned with curry. Because I was small I was given only 20 eggs and a kilo of rice, which, of course, I could not finish. After the banquet the Mahara-

*Anthropological  
Pilgrimage to Asia*

jah knelt before me and asked me to marry him. I repeated over and over again that I didn't want to marry. To change my mind, the Maharajah offered me the use of a plane to visit my family in France whenever I wanted to go, and also had displayed before me the golden sari I would wear as his wife.

"I now have 40 wives," he explained, "you will be 41." I told him that if I stayed I would start a revolution to protest the way the wives are shut up during the day and only go out at night. Then he told me that he had studied law in England and that he only wanted one wife, but his position as Maharajah required him to have all these wives. I stayed a few days and observed how all in the village bowed down to him as if to a god. I was not able to change his mind about these practices, though I tried. I did think that he, himself, was unhappy and would have changed this way of life if it would have been possible.

I visited another tribe during the time of the war between China and India. Since they had never seen a white woman they thought I must be Chinese. They put me in a closed jail-like room and stared at me through a window. I prayed and was not afraid, even though I could see they were preparing stones to kill me. Fortunately the chief decided it was better to notify the authorities in the larger town before finishing me off. Police came to investigate. When I told them I was not Chinese, they surrounded me with an escort of soldiers with guns to the town jail. The judge there realized from my passport that I was French and invited me to stay in his home. Worried about the bad impression the town had made on me, and also out of interest and compassion, he was very friendly to me.

Another adventure took place in a beautiful lakeside town in Kashmir. I was walking with my little bag near a beautiful lake when I saw some people making a movie. All Indian films of that time were about romantic princes and shepherd girls. The director noticed me watching them and asked me to be in the movie. "Let's have the prince fall in love with you as part of the plot." I was to come on the set singing a French song and dancing around. The male actors all fell in love with me and wanted to marry me. As usual, I explained that I liked them but I didn't want to marry. At first they could not understand my reluctance to get closer to them. But, then, since Hindus are so religious, they finally understood that I was looking for God, not men, and they became respectful and stopped trying to seduce me.

So amorous are Indian men that once when I was riding in a bus, a man who was looking at me from a seat in back came up and said, "I am in love with you. Even without seeing your face, I love the back of your head." The other men in the bus suggested we should go to a restaurant where I could get married to whomever I chose. I laughed and laughed

and again explained my desire to live for God and not a husband.

In another town the family of the Museum Director invited me to visit his family. He also asked me to marry him. To be safe from him, another man advised me to sleep, not in the director's house, but in the museum. So, that night, I slept between 2 huge statues of the Buddha. By then I realized that French women were especially attractive to Indian men and were considered to be promiscuous. Seeing me alone, they made their own assumptions. In India, a woman was never out alone.

At the same time that Indians are romantic, they are also respectful. For instance, in the movies if a couple is about to kiss, the embrace is not shown on the screen but instead an image of two birds cooing at each other.

After my travels in Southern India, I went to Ceylon, now called Sri Lanka. I spent 2 months doing research in this Buddhist country. Buddhism is mostly philosophical. Buddha wanted to show the way to overcome the miseries of life by interior prayer, but he did not proclaim himself to be a god. Because people are religious by nature, they made of Buddhism a religion. After all, most people don't want to just sit in meditation trying to eliminate the desire for all things! This is too hard. They practice a life of goodness and feed the monks daily, as well as helping to build temples, pagodas and monasteries.

In the Buddhist monasteries the monks meditate. The young monks start at 6 years old. In a family, one son will go to the monastery, the one who likes to pray. There are fewer nuns. The monks are supposed to avoid direct converse with women, only speaking to a woman with a fan in front of their faces. I found that most of them were quite disciplined about the fan, but some cheated. When I admonished them, reminding them of the rule, I was told, "A foreign woman is not a woman. You are more like a monkey so we can look at you!" An English speaking monk explained a lot about their life to me. In Thailand and Japan I talked more with the nuns. They arise at 4 AM to sing and pray. They beg for their food and shave their heads.

To explain a little more about Buddhism let me tell you about the Buddha. He was an Indian prince who rejected Hinduism, especially because of the caste system and the emphasis on ascetism in yoga practice which he considered excessive. Once in prayer he got an illumination about what real holiness was. Out of this experience, he started to preach his doctrine of avoiding all desire, living purely through extinction of desire. By concentrated meditation you will find the truth and then, eventually, become one with reality, vs. seeking the illusory. Through such practices, you will not have to be reincarnated.

As I explained earlier, Buddha did not speak of a separate, transcendent God, but later as his way was developed in Mahayana Bud-

*Anthropological  
Pilgrimage to Asia*

dhism, Buddha was deified. It was believed that boddisativa (men and women who have realized the state of Buddha), are those who out of compassion are willing to suffer by coming on earth to help and save people.

I believed that there were seeds of Christianity in Buddhism. I met Buddhist monks who were dedicated to seeking truth, and teaching and helping people. The system of Buddhist monasticism is similar to our Christian monastic practice. The monks cherish silence and prayer. They study the Dharma, (Buddhist law), educate children, and perform charitable deeds for poor people.

My visits to different monasteries of monks and nuns left me edified by the depth of their seeking. All received me as their sister when I shared in their prayers and their life. They did not try to convert me, but rather wanted to show me what Buddhist meditation entailed.

A few Buddhists became true spiritual friends, especially among those I met in Laos, Thailand and Japan. They prayed for my enlightenment, and they respected my religious beliefs, especially about Jesus and Mary. They read the Bible and consider Jesus as a Buddha or boddisativa who came for the West. Of course we would argue with them about certain truths such as the belief in a transcendent God and that we know faith to be a gift of God not a fruit only of reason and intellect.

While in Asia I was invited sometimes by French people from the embassy or consulate in the countries I visited. Most of them were very interested in my travels and helped me in a friendly way with my research.

After India, I traveled to Singapore where I spent only a few days. During that short period I will not forget a visit to the house of the French Ambassador. Breakfast was in his bed with 2 Chinese girls on either side. I chided him asking, "What would your wife say?" He told me that she accepted this. I was shocked. I felt drawn to the beautiful Chinese girls, just the same, and tried to explain my life and beliefs to them.

In Laos I spent a semester teaching science and French literature at a French college. I taught 17-19 year olds. I loved these students. Girls and boys invited me to visit their families. It was an occasion for me to learn how much I enjoyed teaching. In the forest not far from the college was a hermitage of 2-4 Buddhist monks. One of them taught me about Vipassana-meditation, walking slowly in concentration, and doing all other activities in a focused manner.

In Laos, I visited also some tribal people who grow poppies for opium to sell in the town. People smoked opium at the Tea House. Out of curiosity, I tried it. It did release some kind of deeper level of consciousness, making me more alert to beauty in nature. Under the influ-

ence of opium I thought I could count all the leaves on a tree in a minute. Normally it would have taken hours. I found my mind acute and about to understand in a moment complex aspects of Buddhist philosophy and other intellectual and abstract ideas. Once again I took opium and was able to ride a Japanese motorcycle through the water streaming on a little path. After this little research project with it, I realized that it could be addictive. God preserved me from taking it ever again.

An amusing incident took place at the end of the school year in June. Every class had to make a presentation with the Prince as part of the audience. My class was to do a chemical experiment with an array of colors coming from a detonation. I made a mistake in mixing the chemicals and at the presentation there was a huge explosion. As the buildings are light-weight wood, everything, including the windows, fell down! The authorities present thought I was a revolutionary and called the police. Even when I explained about my mistake, they didn't believe me. They said I should never come back to Laos again!

As it was the end of the school year, I was ready to leave. I retained a wonderful memory of the Laotian people, so gentle and hospitable. After my departure, for a few years many of my students wrote me letters and poems.

When I went to Vietnam I spent most of my time in Saigon because of the war. Religious people whether Vietnamese or foreign were persecuted by the Communists in the villages. There were lots of United States soldiers in the capital but also lots of Communists. A French Jesuit from the University helped me with my research. It was easy for me there since the people spoke French and were intelligent and hospitable. I spend some time in a Buddhist monastery and I saw how the monks were taking part in the sufferings of the people. They were compassionate and merciful.

Hong Kong was a contrast. The city was awake day and night. Because of the huge population, one half the people live by day and the other half at night. The houses have shutters on their windows because when there are typhoons everyone shuts up the houses and stays in silence. During one of these I went out to see the damage. There were boats sitting on the roofs and floating down the city streets.

I stayed for a while with missionaries, but then with a Buddhist family. Chinese Buddhist families in Hong King practice a mixture of Taoism and Confucianism including ancestor veneration with prayer and incense. The man of the family I stayed with was rich and so had four wives, one wife in each country he traveled to. He spent 2 months with each wife! Still he was very religious and prayed every morning in his sanctuary in front of the statue of Buddha with all his family. While there I helped poor people who came to his house for work and food.

*Anthropological  
Pilgrimage to Asia*

At Macao I visited the tomb and cathedral of St. Francis Xavier but it was too dangerous because of gangs and drugs to stay there. It took me six months to get a visa to visit Mainland China because the famous cultural revolution was going on. While waiting I made a boat trip to Japan with a ship of the same company with which I sailed originally from Marseilles to Bombay. The offers were interested to hear of my experiences in Asia and asked questions about the cultural and religious life of the people I met.

I arrived in Yokohama, in spring in time to see the beautiful cherry trees in bloom. It was a relief to find it not as hot as Hong Kong. A highlight was a visit to Kyoto. I had the address of a community of French and Italian Dominicans, specialists in Buddhism and Shintoism. They received me as a sister and explained their work to me. They also introduced me to Japanese families. I lived with a Japanese girl for a few days. She studied philosophy at the University of Kyoto and was a nice guide for me in this culture of Japan, so new to me.

Together we went to visit the old temples and venerable monks who offered us tea in a ceremony which took one hour of contemplation, silence and imbibing of the tea and cakes made of various beans.

The monks asked about my life and my religion and explained to me the Dharma, the Buddhist law. They told me of their desire to become one with Buddha after a life of meditation and also compassion in the helping of poor people. Buddhism in East Asia – Ceylon, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia is mostly based on “hinayana”. The monk works to reach Nirvana by meditation and emptiness of his mind without connection with his people. Each one makes his own realization – trying to escape the law of reincarnation by means of strict discipline and asceticism.

In Vietnam, Japan and China, the Buddhist “manayana” is the way for all and Buddhist monks work also to help everyone by love and compassion, sharing the suffering of people and wishing to save everybody. The “boddhisativa” is a realized monk who came back on earth to save people. This way is near Christianity in its love for everyone, taking on the pain and distress of people. There are many branches of Buddhism. Shintoism is the religion of the emperor. There are also various religious sects, which attract young Japanese. Christianity is well considered and the young often convert to Christ.

The temples and gardens are very appreciated and I saw groups of Japanese spending time in these temples listening to the monks and admiring the beautiful gardens around the temples – gardens that the monks cultivate with love and respect.

The Japanese have a great love of nature. In Kyoto you see the famous stone gardens with miniature trees. Although I loved all the colors in these gardens I found them too contrived and unnatural for my taste.

Geishas, who are not all prostitutes, sang and danced in their lovely kimonos and served tea.

There were very few Christians but there are surprising influences. For example, although the people practice Buddhist rites for burial, they like to marry in the Catholic Church. I found the Japanese to be pluralistic, like the Hindus, but not as deep.

I visited a Zen monastery with monks and nuns. There was a French Jesuit who was a "Zen-Christian." He explained to me much about Zen Buddhist philosophy and introduced me to very deep and holy Zen monks.

A Zen monk invited me to stay a month at a monastery in Fugiyama. They were strict about discipline, and in their rules, monks are not allowed to look at women. When the Roshi saw a monk looking at me, he beat him for 20 strokes with a bamboo stick. The Roshi spoke English so he taught me about Zen meditation as well as Japanese calligraphy, flower arrangements and tea services.

One day they were supposed to meditate looking at the moon. They were to come up with a koan. A koan is a sentence given by the Roshi or an ancient Master of Zen on which you meditate and try to give a solution or explanation. I suggested, "Try to make the moon laugh." After a few weeks the Roshi said that I had to leave because he was falling in love with me. I thought it was good that he realized he needed to be detached as Buddhists teach. It showed humility on his part. I had beautiful memories of this month spent with him and his monks.

Visiting a monastery of Buddhist nuns I could observe how hard their life was. They had less guests, but they received me with great love and explained their life to me, hoping maybe that I would remain and become their sister.

My time in Japan ended with a month spent visiting fishing and farming villages in the North. These people worked very hard. Women were picking the rice in the fields covered with water. Early in the morning they were at work. Men were fishing, then selling the fish to the cooperative or drying fish near the beach. I tried to work with the women picking rice, but after 1 or 2 hours my back was hurting too badly to continue.

I was invited to go to Sendai, a town in the north of Japan, which is a sister town to Rennes, the Brittany city where my parents live. The mayor of Sendai knew from the mayor of Rennes that I was in Japan and he was very pleased with my visit. I was asked to give a few talks and conferences to the people of Sendai and invited also to visit several families. It was a delight to attend a festival of art including paintings, art-volant and puppets made of paper. This beautiful festival attracted thousands of people. The officials of the town offered to give me paintings and

*Anthropological  
Pilgrimage to Asia*

puppets. They treated me as if I were an important French citizen of Rennes and were happy for my visit.

I have good memories of my stay in Japan, especially about the stay in Zen monasteries and in the villages where the people were so simple and friendly. What I did not like was the big cities where life is stressful with people running from one place to the other and in the night playing money-game machines that made a lot of noise. Compared to the other Asiatic countries I visited, Japan was very expensive. I made it financially by giving some French lessons. I would long remember the families who received me, and two special friends who spoke French well - one an architect Kumio and one a writer Otani. They introduced me to many features of Japanese customs and culture. Without their help I could not have entered into Japanese society and family life.

Of course, during this time I was accumulating notes enough for a book. When I returned to France, even though I wrote the book I didn't have the patience to make all the corrections, so it was never published. However I did give conferences based on my tours and also published notes about particular subjects in comparative religion.

Finally my visa for China was granted, and I could continue my anthropological pilgrimage to Mainland China to study their way of combining Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. On a 3 day trip by train to Canton, I was the only foreigner. The Chinese at that time all wore plain Maoist garb and carried the Red Book of Mao's sayings. The young people in general were enthusiastic about their new life. They rose at 6 AM to exercise and then read the sentences of Mao the way we might read the Bible. Whenever the train stopped all the men had to get up and clean the cars, even to brushing the inside of the windows. My conversations with people were limited because they were forbidden to speak foreign languages even if they knew them. A man on the train who spoke English and French spoke to me only when no one was looking. He told me about his difficult life in this Maoist regime where so much was forbidden.

As a foreigner, I had to stay in a special hostel. I explained to the Chinese officer who took care of me when I arrived in Peking that I was a student and I could not afford the price of a tourist hotel. He tried to find a cheap place for me in an inn which accommodated Chinese people coming from different places in Asia to visit their families. They came also to see the great celebration on October 1st where Mao was to be presented with the accomplishments of Communist Party officials.

I was to be taken for a Chinese girl from Hong Kong visiting her parents in Peking. A taxi took me to a poor quarter of Peking where there was a Chinese inn. The people were very surprised to see a European-Chinese who did not know their language. When I explained that I

*The Way of the Pilgrimess*

was French everybody came to see me because they had never seen a French person. They laughed at everything I did.

All the rooms opened out into a courtyard where the hostess put down a table to serve a meal. When I sat down to eat, everybody came and circled around me making comments about my gestures and way of eating. They had only sticks for eating rice and I was not used to sticks, so most of the rice fell down and everybody laughed and I did too as each one tried to teach me how to do it right.

I shared a room with a family from Hong Kong and most of the night the played cards and mahjong, a game with sticks. The beds were only panels of wood, so I didn't sleep well and in the morning I asked where I could wash. There was no shower. I had to wash in the middle of the courtyard surrounded by many people looking at me with interest and curiosity as if I was an animal in the zoo.

I could not stay longer in this inn, but it was a learning experience to share the life of these simple Chinese and to walk in this quarter of Peking with house all build around a square where children played and a huge door in the gate. I was surprised by the large number of young children. The Communist Party forbids big families - only one child is allowed, but in poor areas, at least in that time, I think that families had many children and did not have abortions.

After that, I stayed with the Swiss Consul who was a woman. She told me a lot about Chinese life and introduced me to a professor of religion at the university. I wanted to know how religion had survived Communist rule. There was little Buddhism left. Young people beat older people and ridiculed the old traditions. The only tradition still flourishing was the theatre where old operas and dancing were performed.

An interpreter went with me to my sessions with the professor of religion. The interpreter spoke English, but he changed everything, always ending his translations by saying Maoism was better than religion. The professor knew his words were being translated falsely. He was very sad. I could see on his face how he suffered because he could say so little. When the interpreter went out for a few minutes he would talk to me in French. I left the University since I could see that the suspiciousness about me made it impossible to learn the truth about anything.

There was a tiny chapel at the embassy where I could attend Holy Mass with other foreigners only. The Christian Chinese people could not go to Mass freely - only in underground and private places.

I rode around on a bicycle hoping to visit old parts of Peking and villages. One day I realized someone was following me. He was a spy. I was trying to get away from him and went right through a red light on a big road.

*Anthropological  
Pilgrimage to Asia*

French people took me sight-seeing so I got to see the Great Wall and other archeological places. There was lots of poverty to be seen but also some things were cheap for an interesting reason. Everyone who had jewelry, statues and silk or fur clothing had to sell them or they would be thrown in the fire by cultural revolutionaries as signs of former decadence. In that way I got a fur coat cheaply for the winter and I bought old art objects for my family, even pearls for my mother. The market was full of beautiful things sold for nothing.

I left China because it was impossible to travel alone. Always you needed a guide who showed only Communist progress.

A trip on the Trans-Siberian railroad from Peking to Moscow enabled me to spend 12 days in the famous Russian city. I was in a train that for the first 4 days was still crossing China with me, the only European woman and rich Chinese businessmen in our car. We crossed industrialized but very poor Manchuria with a view of miserable mud huts, then very old-fashioned Mongolia where we could see caravans of camels moving along with goods for trade such as food and furs.

When we reached the border of Siberia I was searched thoroughly since my goals seemed suspicious. From Siberia to Moscow I was traveling with Russian officers. They spoke a little French and invited me to the restaurant (in the train?). In the train all the talk was communist propaganda. They were so atheistic it was not possible to evangelize them. Later families came on the train and I could speak some English. Russian women sold vegetables, cabbage and meat. They were very sweet to me. For 8 days it was freezing.

At the stations where we sometimes stopped for 2-3 hours I could see the barbed wire of the gulags, the forced labor camps. At that time I didn't know why the people behind the fences were weeping. They called out to me and tried to grab my hands through with wire. I gave them cigarettes. Afterwards we saw the big waves on the famous Lake Baikal, largest in the world(?). Then taiga tundra desert with no trees and very cold. Later we saw big forests with izbas (huts) in the snow, people on sleds.

In Moscow I was told to go to the special hotel for foreigners. When I explained that I could not pay there was lots of discussion, and they finally put me up in the African dormitory for students who had come to learn communism. I tried to meet Russian students but it was dangerous to speak in French. The Russians were very interested in talking about Sartre and Camus. But as soon as a guard would appear the students dispersed.

There were some Churches open, though government controlled. I could go to the monastery. (which monastery?) There were still religious people in spite of the persecution. A few priests who were underground

*The Way of the Pilgrimess*

took me once to a little chapel. There I found youth looking for faith and intellectuals looking for something meaningful. They had little hidden meetings. One of the students took me to Leningrad, formerly St. Petersburg. Since she had no papers allowing her to go there, the students claimed she was his wife and pretended she was crazy so that the police wouldn't bother me. He and I could both have been put in jail for such a dangerous risk.

In Leningrad I visited a museum where there were icons. There I met a cosmonaut. He spoke English but we had to stop talking when the museum guard came by. The man said to meet hi in the garden. There he invited her to the restaurant but warned her not to talk to him on the way. On the way they saw a KGB guard and the man ran away. I felt so sad that I had endangered his life.

Being in Russia was hard. I prayed a lot for the people there and stayed only a few weeks. This was the last lap of my studies. From Moscow I took a train to Prague, Poland, Germany and Paris.

When I arrived at Customs in Strasbourg with 20 little trinkets as gifts for the family, they thought I was a poor immigrant having so many notations on my passport.

## *Further Adventures in Europe, America, Israel, and India*

**O**f course, my family was very happy to see me. Because I wrote many letters home, they had not been worried about me, but many changes had taken place in my absence. My little brother was now 15 years old and I didn't recognize him when they came to the station in Rennes. Two sisters were married. Even my father was delighted to see me. Many evenings were spent together with me telling stories of my journey. My grandmother told me she had followed my trip by putting little flags on a map of the world and always praying for me.

"What next?" my parents wanted to know. I told them I would go to Paris to give lectures and finish the two years I had left of anthropological studies. Once back in Paris, to support myself I worked part time in the chemistry laboratory. I would live again with my sister.

Life in Paris was sad. The people were so materialistic. Even my scientific friends had lost their humanistic ideas and seemed to be interested only in work and money.

It was good for me to visit the priest who had helped me during my previous time in Paris. Naturally, I had become a little dislocated by my so long travels in non-Catholic countries. My priest helped me try to sort out the question of my vocation. On the one hand I didn't want to marry, but single people were mostly sinful. I always asked God to help me. There was a small Catholic group that met twice a week and that was a big help. We visited the poor and the old, helped students, and had discussions with atheists.

Soon the contemplative side of my nature began to grow. I used to go to a Church just to sit there for an hour or more. I asked God why I met so many people I liked but didn't feel like marrying anyone. There were other questions on my mind. Why were there so many missionaries to Asia but so few converts. A Jesuit explained that in the 17th century when the holy priests went to the East there was more acculturation, adaptation of the Western Church to the old ways of those being catechized. But the Church did not accept this Jesuit way and the Portuguese Franciscans were more narrow. They thought everything Asian was from the Devil. Only just before Vatican II were missionaries again willing to be part of the culture, some living in Christian ashrams, wearing the

same kind of garb as the contemplatives, eating on the ground as they did. This corresponded to my experience of seeing how deeply some of the gurus searched for God, the way Gandhi did, a contrast to the superficial religiosity, not of all, but of so many Christians.

In 1968 there was a big revolution among students. It started in my University among the anthropology and sociology students who wanted a new form of learning with more discussion between professors and students. As compared to the lecture system that favored distance. The fact of so much unemployment after graduation was another important issue for the strikers. In the beginning this movement seemed good and Catholics and communists found common ground on social justice platforms. But the revolution degenerated into a political movement with violent people such as Maoists more and more active. There were barricades in the street and fights with police. The University closed down and we students had lots of time to get to know one another, but this was accompanied with a lot of sexual sin.

My sister, a cousin, and myself, went back to Rennes to the family. But we were radicals. I told my father he should, "Sell everything and give it to the poor." Soon my father gave me an ultimatum. Stay and be quiet or leave, but don't keep lecturing me. I went back to Paris full of utopian ideals. My grandmother eventually effected a reconciliation between my father and we young people during the baptism of the first grandchild.

By this time I finished my exams and started writing a thesis comparing meditation in Asia and Mexico. This required a trip to the Americas. In the United States I stayed at the University of Pennsylvania (studying what?) and then, on the way to Mexico in New Orleans where I felt a deep rapport with Black Gospel musicians with whom I stayed. Their sad, beautiful music, was a different experience of God for me.

In Mexico I did research on the Aztecs and also in southern Mexico I studied the tribal Mexicans whose spirituality was enhanced by peyote. A prophetess told me my whole life. I tried the mushrooms. In a hallucination I saw Shiva, Buddha and then saw Christ. This experience lasted 10 hours. It was frightening to find out that a friend who tried the mushrooms saw himself as a snake! I concluded that these drug experiences tap into your own inner consciousness. If you are close to God then you beautiful visions. When I tried this in day time I saw myself inside trees and butterflies. After four times I stopped because I could see it was dangerous. So many young people around these places were ruined. I realized that God had protected me by keeping me from any harm.

When I returned to France I wrote my thesis. I was now 28 years old and had a burning desire to visit the Holy Land. Money from my

previous work in the chemistry laboratory would be sufficient. So, in 1969, I went with my mother and sister Elisabeth on a Jewish ship from Marseilles observing their Sabbath day on the sea.

This was a true pilgrimage. Even though my mother was 54 and asthmatic, as I was, she liked to walk. It was a close time for us as we went by foot and sometimes bus around the country with our Bibles in the footsteps of Jesus. My mother is more traditional and inward about her relationship to God, but my sister and I talked all the time about religion as we went from church to church.

After my mother and sister left, I stayed for 3 or 4 months more to live in and observe kibbutz (explain) life. I had the idea of transporting this way of life to India for the untouchables. I stayed in 3 different kibbutzim. The young people were idealistic but not religion or moral. I found them hard and militant. Compassion led me down a sinful path. The young men were so desperate. I felt sorry for them.

Some of them did not want to fight but were forced to by military law. They did not want to carry a gun. I saw that they loved my body more than my soul whereas I loved their souls more, but since they wanted love so much and seemed in such despair, I let myself be led into sexual affairs for the first time in my life, imagining that this was the only way to help them.

Later I went to a priest for confession who showed me that these men didn't really love me. I think of this only time of sexual sin in my life as my Magdalene period and have done much penance for it. Since my period was delayed, I thought I might be pregnant from these affairs. It seemed romantic to me to bear an Israeli child. I had fantasies about how my parents would throw me out, but how much I would love that child and how I would educate him or her.

After Israel I came back to Paris and then took a job working for the FAO (Food Agricultural Organization of the UN) in Rome as an anthropologist specializing in nutrition. The work concerning food needs in the Sahara was interesting enough but I disliked the worldly atmosphere of dinner parties that went on in this big organization. Rich Italians would host parties where people got drunk and took their clothing off.

After a year of desk work I could have continued by going to the Sahara itself, but I felt God wanted something else for me, not the "dolce vita." When I told the directors of my division of FAO that I would leave this good post because of "love of Christ," they could not understand. Neither did my family who were hoping I would find a good husband at this international job.



## *Consecrated Life in the Monastery*

**B**ack in France after so many journeys I really wanted to find out what God wanted for me in life. In Rome I had visited the Little Sisters of Jesus, but they thought I was too independent and contemplative for their active and communal life. A priest suggested I visit a holy hermit living near the Pyrennes. So, for 2 or 3 months I stayed in the forest with the hermits, some from Benedictine monasteries and some from the Trappists. Prophetically, as I now realize, they told me that I would not fit into a classical monastery because I had too artistic a temperament, but that maybe one day I would be a hermit.

In 1971, now 32 years old, I visited a little community of a more contemporary type. There were a few priests and brothers and some sisters living in apartments. I found this group too psychology-minded for my contemplative bent.

Then in Paris I met two French Sisters who were disciples of the priest in India I had found so wise and holy and also a priest who was a disciple of Charles de Foucauld. This group had been living in the Sahara and now wanted to start a Christian ashram in India in the jungle! They were looking for young French women to come to help the Indian people through prayer and better ways of doing farming. I wanted to try, so I went to a University where I could take courses in tropical agriculture. Early in July I said goodbye to my family and set out for Coorg in the state of Mysore in Southern India, where we were joined by 2 Indian Sisters.

The Bishop, who was a friend of one of the sisters, gave us some money. We began building our own ashram of bricks and soil. The people from the village carried the bricks we needed on their heads. I liked the superior, Mother Miriam, very much, but just the same I felt it was not exactly what I was looking for. The superior did not seem to understand the Indian people very well. And then hippies began to come out of curiosity.

For one year I stayed in the mountains, since the village was too hot, helping grow pinapples and coconuts. The people were very helpful. Two times a week a priest came and celebrated the Mass. One of the sisters took me to interfaith conferences in Bangalore. It was interesting to meet in that group a Sufi, Rajathan. Sufis are Muslims but much more mystical and most, closer to Hindus in some way. Another Sufi man fell

in love with me. He loved Christ. It took me awhile to find out that he was married. I explained to him that I wanted mystical love not physical love. During our spiritual friendship we sometimes experienced at the same time a supernatural light and the perfume of God. Of course, spiritual love is very difficult between men and women. It is easier if people are older and less attractive. Priests explained to me that for men, who usually have more intense physical desire, it is even harder to be close to a woman and remain celibate. Possibly I was too affectionate though always in a sisterly way. I think that women being maternal have a more balanced way of loving in a spiritual way. From my side I was never too attached because I felt I belonged to Christ, it took me some time to understand that a man who made me be more distant was not rejecting me.

During this time it was even clearer to me that I was not called to marry but to be the spouse of Jesus. In these inter-faith circles, I met an Indian theologian who could help me discern my future. Visiting the ashram of Fr. Bede Griffiths, the famous Catholic monk, then 80 years old, was a great help. He was a spiritual master and a good spiritual friend, very compassionate. He taught me that prudence demanded a greater realization on my part that not everyone is a saint. Even those striving for holiness have their defects. A man is always a man!

Many Hindus came to Fr. Bede's ashram. There were also charismatic gifts used, especially with Jesuits. We prayed in tongues and sang out of pure joy in the Lord.

At Fr. Bede's ashram there were men and women and little wooden hermitages in the forest. The chant was contemplative and there was a beautiful Mass. We would bath in the river, walk in the garden, and have evening teachings. Usually there were from 10 to 30 people around, fifteen living there and others as guests. Fr. Bede explained Hindu Scriptures in relationship to the Bible. This was very good for Indian priests and sisters who were too Europeanized and sometimes too worldly as well. Here they had to do as the Indian monks and nuns did, taking off their shoes and eating with their hands.

I visited Mother Teresa. I liked very much how she strove to blend with the culture in her poverty and wearing of saris but the way of life was very strict and much too active for me.

Since my visa was due to expire, and since the Indian government didn't like having religious there, Fr. Bede suggested that I got back to France to look into the renewal of contemplative life, visiting and studying groups already formed.

Once again, in 1974, now 35 years old, I was on the road seeking my place in the Church. I realized that I needed more formation in faith having such an eclectic background by now. First I became a godmother

to the child of my little sister, Babette who was very happy in married life. One month later my young brother married.

At that time I wore a sari to symbolize my search for contemplative life. After my family visit, I went to Paris to see the priest I had been so close to in Paris. There I tried the Beatitudes. I loved their joyful, beautiful way of praying but found they were too young, and too noisy. I was craving silence.

It was then that I met the Sisters of Bethlehem with whom I would stay as a nun for 10 years. This order was 4 centuries old with monasteries in various places.

At a retreat in Cannes with them I felt much peace and joy. To try my vocation I was sent to the Ile de Lerins, a little island in the Mediterranean Sea, called St. Honore after a hermit in Egypt living in 370. Originally all the members of this community were hermits, but then they became Benedictines. Their life was interrupted by the French revolution. Now they are Cistercians.

Near our monastery for women was a male community of 40 monks. There were 20 Sisters in the novitiate. The life was contemplative but open and simple. With Benedictine type of chanting starting at 4 AM. The nuns wore a blue habit with a long dress, a scapular and a blue veil.

After only one month of my visit the Superior General asked if I wanted to stay. "If you want to stay, take the habit. If not, go!" I said yes. On February 2, 1974 I was clothed. There was a beautiful Mass and then the nuns and monks processed to the seashore where each one embraced me. I felt great joy from the grace of that commitment. Looking back I see it was not an end but a step.

At clothing I wanted the name Eve-Marie, but they humbled me and called me Magalena "because you gave your perfume to Jesus after a turbulent life."

In the Sisters of Bethlehem there is a 4-5 year novitiate, then 2-3 years professed and then permanent vows after 10 years. The novitiate was a bit difficult for me since the other 15-20 novices were a lot younger. Only one was older like me. For the first year I felt great happiness and peace and a miraculous holy scent in the chapel, in winter when there were no flowers. Sisterly love was beautiful. This monastery had the deepest love between the nuns. Whenever there was a conflict, they would ask pardon and, in chapel, kiss the feet of the sister who had been offended. This was done at the chapter of faults each week where every sister had to say what she had done wrong. I always had a long list.

The liturgy was Byzantine Rite adapted into French and song in polyphony. I loved this Rite with its solemn sublime music. So joyful did it make me that the prioress used to say, "Sister Magdalena is ineffable."

## *The Way of the Pilgrimess*

In spite of my independent character, I got the grace to obey even when something seemed stupid such as being ordered to set the table a way different from the customary way.

Here was our schedule:

4 AM 2 hours of prayer in the oratory of our cells; Matins and Lauds followed by breakfast (no coffee or strong tea only herbal tea, bread, cereal and fruit taken alone in our cells. This was followed by study or a conference given by the superior. At noon there was Mass with the monks. Lunch was together but in silence and consisted in fish or eggs, no meat except on feast days, rice, salad and cheese. After that we had a ½ hour walk in silence followed by 3 hours of work – in my case gardening or laundry. At 6 PM we chanted Vespers and then had a dinner of soup, cheese, vegetable and dessert in our cells. In the evening we meditated in our cells and prayed Compline alone.

On Sundays we were together, walking and talking. This got me into trouble because the young girls were fascinated by the story of my life. I would tell of some episode and they would urge me on “and then, and then and then?” The superior ordered me not to tell them too much. Since I am so spontaneous, repressing my thoughts was hard. Since I also loved to dance on the spur of the moment in prayer some seemed jealous.

Another difficulty was that we were not allowed to swim. I was used to swimming in the ocean in Brittany. At the shore line of the monastery we could only wade in up to the ankles. I cheated 1 or 2 times. I swam late at night between 9-midnight. Then I admitted this misdeameanor at the chapter of faults. The superior decided she would solve this problem by “bringing the sea to the monastery.” She bought a little pool and put water in but it was so small each sister could only swim a few yards.

After a year’s time, the superior sent me to a convent (the Charreusse) of the same Sisters of Bethlehem in the Alps near Grenoble. The reason was that she thought I had too much influence on the younger sisters, too much magnetism. Especially I made them laugh too much. Probably I reminded quite a few people of Maria in *The Sound of Music*. Of course I also had real faults, especially harsh judgment.

Living in the monastery in the Alps was hard for me. It was very cold and this is especially bad for asthmatics such as myself. There was little sun coming through the surrounding forest. The rule was applied in a more severe fashion. I began to have doubts but two things helped me. One was a long string of beads for saying the Jesus prayer (Lord, Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me a poor sinner), which I always wore and still do to this day around my wrist. I prayed this all day long and also in the night when I was wakeful (?) Another was that it was here that I started learning how to paint icons from a visiting Russian artist. My first

icon was of Mary of Tenderness. After a year 3 Brothers of Bethlehem came to stay with us in another part of the property. I became close to a Benedictine monk hermit who was forming the brothers. By the time I left there were 30 sisters and 10 brothers as well as the General Superior. The Chartreuse became the Mother House of the community. It was hard for me to have so many people around. I prefer a small group and lots of solitude.

After 3 years I was sent to Chartreuse in Southern France near Montpellier. It was sunny and near a river. I was happier. Meanwhile my father died in 1978 suddenly at the age of 66. (Were you ever much reconciled with him?) I made my first profession in Brittany so that the rest of the family could come. It was such a grace to be the bride of Jesus, one with Him and Mary, with my mother and sisters, brother and friends all around me. The 8 days that followed in hermitage was like a honeymoon. The Blessed Sacrament was in my oratory.

After this I returned to Southern France to my monastery. In 1980 the Rule of St. Bruno was instituted for the Sisters of Bethlehem. Before our life was more open and free-spirited. Now it became more ascetical. Liturgy was monochord and no longer Byzantine. When it came time for permanent profession the General Prioress thought I needed a sabbatical. She sent me and a few other sisters to study with Pere Marie Dominique, the famous Dominican theologian who founded The Community of St. John. For a year and a half I studied with him.



## *A Pilgrim-Hermit*

**I**n 1983, now 44 years old, I got permission from my Bishop (did the monastery consider you to be on leave still?) to make a pilgrimage on foot. (Had this been an old dream of yours?) To do so I had to take off the habit. I wore a pilgrim dress with a blue cap on my head and a sack on my back. Before starting out I visited my mother. She understood. She never thought I belonged in a convent.

On my pilgrimage of one year, I carried a small amount of money and stopped in convents, families, and twice slept on the grass. I never went to a hotel. How free I felt walking along praying the Jesus beads. Sometimes I met people I could see had bad intentions just from looking in their eyes, but St. Raphael and my guardian angel seemed to be protecting me all the way. No one ever attacked me.

I began my pilgrimage by visiting the basilica of Paray-Monial where St. Margaret Mary received her visions of the Sacred Heart, and then went on to La Salette, site of the Marian apparition (19th century?). The pilgrim hotel was too expensive so they gave me the choice of a stable or an attic. This was a good choice because from the window of that attic I saw the statue of the Blessed Mother based on the vision the children had seen so many years ago. And I, too, saw her tears in a visible exterior vision. These tears of Mary seemed to match my own sorrow that poor people who came on pilgrimage were not welcome in the hotel. It felt as if Mary gave me the grace to see her tears so that I would start my pilgrimage in solidarity with the poor and be happy to be treated as a poor person.

I then walked to the Isle of Lerins to make a short retreat at my old monastery of the Sisters of Bethlehem. There I prayed and asked the grace of pardon for my own many faults. Through the charity expressed by the Abbot I experience Christ confirming my pilgrimage.

On the way to Italy I walked on small roads about 25 kilometers a day, beginning at 7 A.M. Often people would give me a sandwich or a piece of fruit or I would buy bread and cheese myself, or eat grapes from the fields I crossed. Then I took a siesta and walked another 2-3 hours more to find a place for the night and go to an evening Mass. Typically I would knock on the door of the rectory of the Church and the priest would take me in or recommend a good family where I could stay.

In Italy I often had to hitch rides on trucks because of the tunnels that blocked the roads. Everywhere I was offered food. Small difficulties came from the way Italian men follow any woman. It was hard to stay in

### *The Way of the Pilgrimess*

convents because the nuns were more reserved than the French. I had a letter from my Bishop explaining that I was a pilgrim-sister in good standing, but the Sisters were still afraid of me. So I usually stayed in youth hostels in Italy. In Siena I spend a day praying with Dominican brothers and in Assisi and Roma I was able to stay with Cistercian monks.

The ten days I was in Rome I made the famous pilgrimage to the 7 large basilicas and then made my way to the Shrine of Loreto, then from Ancona to Trieste and Yugoslavia. At that time Tito was still alive. Even though he was a Communist he was less hard on religion. I found the Yugoslavians even when they were not religious were happy to show me the churches of their towns and cities. Even though the priests and sisters were very poor they were generous to a pilgrim, willing to share whatever they had with me.

When I arrived at Medjugorje the apparitions had been going on for 2-3 years already. I talked to the visionaries and I was invited into the chapel where Mary allegedly reveals herself to the visionaries. I felt the presence of Mary there very clearly and also smelled the scent of perfume. I stayed a week in this marvelous place of miracles asking Mary to help me on the rest of my pilgrimage.

In Bosnia and Kosovo. I was very kindly received by Muslim people as well as by the Orthodox. It was a joy to me to see the beautiful icons of Kosovo.

In Greece it was not possible to talk with Orthodox monks who are very anti-Catholic. They called me a heretic but the simple people helped me. The sisters in the monastery of Meteore were friendly. I was able to see the hermitages made in caverns in the rocks dating back to the 13th century. The hermits wanted me to stay with them. It was a special grace to visit a saintly hermit there who was radiant with spiritual light.

In Athens and Salonika I visited other monasteries. In one they wanted to baptize me afresh since they didn't think Roman Catholic baptism was valid. I refused, of course. When I left they wept, they wanted so much to keep me with them.

It was necessary to take a train to Turkey since it was winter by now and very cold. I had a bad case of bronchitis. Dominican sisters who sheltered me took me to a French hospital run by the Sisters of Charity. When I was better they sent me to a kind of retirement house for recuperation. This was a droll experience, because the residents were English and French ladies who were spending their last years in Turkey in this place. They were curious about my life and wanted to show their caring by giving me quite inappropriate gifts such as a heavy telescope "to see the star of Bethlehem with!" One of them gave with a genuine Van

Gogh painting to sell. I refused to take it with me, not wanting to be robbed on the road. Since it was so cold another gave me a violet colored woolen dress and an old fashioned hat, and another new shoes to replace me worn out ones. I certainly looked like a very strange pilgrim wearing this outfit on my way out of the residence. Of course, I quickly changed afterwards into my usual pilgrim outfit.

At Izmir the Bishop was a good friend of my French Bishop. He took me to Ephesus to visit Mary's house. There I again felt a strong sense of the Blessed Mother's presence. I was surprised and pleased to see how many Moslems come to Mary's house to pray for favors.

I could go on foot along the coast of Turkey following the old pilgrim route of the Franciscan missionaries. ON the way Muslim families received me as if I was an angel, because they respect pilgrims more than Italians and Greeks do! Sometimes they would ask me through an interpreter to give them advice about family problems.

Because of the war I could not visit Syria or Lebanon. I prayed to St. Raphael and went to the port and asked to speak to one of the captains of the cargo boats that ply the islands. One of them put me in the boat for free that went to Samos and Patmos. I was able to be in Patmos for Christmas at the convent of Orthodox sisters. What a grace to be able to stay in the grotto of St. John the Evangelist at the place where he wrote the Apocalypse. The liturgy was beautiful. A donkey, who I fed, went along with me on walks on the island.

After a week I found another ship to Rhodes where Bishop Pierre invited me to his home. On the last day of the year he invited 12 poor people for a banquet with me as the 13th. In his generosity he bought me a ticket for a ship from Rhodes via Cyprus to Haifa.

By now it was 1985. Unlike the other passengers with their many bags, when I arrived in Haifa I didn't have to go through customs. I rushed through the gate and kissed the ground of the Holy Land singing for joy. The other passengers were quite amazed.

The first thing I did was to take the bus to Bethlehem. On the way I prayed the Jesus prayer and told Him, "I am the little queen of Brittany coming to visit you and be with you and I offer you all the people I met who helped me along the way, and I offer you my life during the many months I will be here in your country."

In Bethlehem I stayed with the contemplative sisters of Emmanuel - Byzantine and Melkite. Two of these were French and some were Palestinian. I was 1 month there working in their garden. They wanted me to join their community but I thought I should not decide anything during my pilgrimage. I did not stay in the town but most of the day was out in nature and then back in the convent by night when it was too dangerous to be in the fields. I was able to visit the grottos in Bethlehem where

there are still shepherds living much as they did in the time of Jesus. I must say that the Israeli soldiers who patrolled the roads in Bethlehem and Jerusalem where I went next were hard and cruel in the way they treated anyone who just wanted to visit people across security borders.

There is much controversy about the situation in Israel. Here is what I think - there are good Jews and bad Jews and good Muslims and bad Muslims and also bad governments. We have to pray for all of them. Edifying, in this regard, was a group I met in a place called The House of Abraham, led by a Pere Bruno. 50-100 people of the three faiths lived there together to pray.

In Jerusalem I stayed with a little community of French Dominicans where I helped with cooking. For 2 months, when the others went back to France for a visit, I stayed in their convent. This period spanned Lent and Easter. Every day I went to the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre to go to the many Masses in different languages of the pilgrims from so many countries. That year Easter came on the same day for the Orthodox and the Catholics and the Copts. What a sight on Good Friday to see the Copts, Ethiopian, in their white robes singing in procession and weeping. With them as a beautiful woman called the "Queen of Saba", probably a princess, followed by her weeping servants. I thought how stiff we Anglos are compared to the passionate Africans. Then, during the Triduum, came the services of the Greek Orthodox, many of them old monks with deeply lined faces. The Franciscan Bishop spent all night praying and in the Church.

By Easter day itself I was so happy from all these sublime rites that I climbed up the walls of Jerusalem and danced my joy. The Jews in the square were quite amazed to see me do this.

Of course I was eager to make a pilgrimage to all the places where Jesus was, especially Galilee. There was a hermit village of Benedictines between Nazareth and Tiberius, where there was a Dutch monk and an American one who had known Thomas Merton. They were between 70-80 years old. Some Melkite fathers had guests for retreat and showed me the grotto chapel where it was thought Jesus had come himself so many years ago. There they had liturgy in Hebrew and sometimes Byzantine. There I cooked for 3 young novices and painted icons. Many Jewish and Muslim young people came for visits!

Because of visa problems I had to leave. I would like to have stayed. But I still had time for a visit to the desert. The Dominicans I had stayed with in Jerusalem wanted to make a 2 week retreat into the desert staying in the sand at night and in caves during the broiling day time sun. We had Mass in the desert.

Since I still had a little money, I decided to take the plane back to France. When I talked to the Bishop about returning to the Sisters of

Bethlehem, he advised that I take a longer leave and try for 3-6 months living as a hermit in Southern France. I was to stay in a hut on a large property near a little village. I loved the solitude but it was not good because the people in the town didn't accept me.

After this experience, the Bishop thought I should try going back to the Sisters. He would speak to the Superior about me. My family was against this plan, thinking I was not happy with them before, and why would it be good now? I was ambivalent. I wanted to obey my Bishop, and I was intrigued by a plan I was told about involving Korean sisters, so I decided to try again.

When I got to the convent in the Alps the superior told me I would have to begin again at 46 years of age as if I was a fresh novice. I agreed but spent 3 very hard years suffering physically with the asthma and rheumatism and from the lack of sun. It was decided I was too old to go to Korea. Inside I felt that it was not what I wanted. Looking back I think Jesus wanted for me the purification of this time of suffering. It was a kind of dark night where I had hope and faith but little joy.

The Bishop I knew so well died at this time. The new Bishop, also very friendly to me, thought that since I had no peace there I should not be professed. The Prioress agreed with that judgment.

It was now 1993. Under the Bishop of Le Puy I made a private promise of celibacy and simplicity. I had a desire to go to Bosnia during the terrible war going on there to help the refugees. No longer a Sister, I wore a plain dress with my corded beads around my wrist.

A group of medical helpers was bringing supplies to Bosnia. They took me along and since most of them were not religious, I was a fruitful witness for them. For one month we were in Split. On the way to Sarajevo our convoy was attacked. I prayed for safety for us and we did arrive to have to see the terrible pain of wartime with no electricity or heat and houses with windows missing because of the bombs.

Our convoy was housed at the seminary, where studies were suspended because of the war. Our Bishop had asked them to house me there in exchange for helping the people with compassion and prayer. I spoke English and French and studied Croatian. The priests at the Franciscan seminary introduced me to the journalists who were among the 100 people living in the seminary, including French UN soldier. Franciscan sisters cooked for all of us often with rations from the UN. I slept with many layers of clothing on because of the cold.

I stayed at this seminary 6 months. Young people came and prayed. They had become more religious because of the war and lived a charismatic spirituality. These young people took me on their visits to the poor and the abandoned old people. Interesting for me was contact with dancers, poets, actors, and artists who organized a theatrical troop. Anna,

a sculptor, who was destitute, visited our seminary and we became like sisters.

Again because of visa problems, I had to leave, but not without spending time in a camp on the border between Serbia and Croatia where I stayed in the same conditions as the refugees. I was the only Catholic among Muslims and Orthodox. They were so happy to have a sister with them. They could not understand how anyone from another country would want to come voluntarily to what was really a prison camp. I tried to explain how the Holy Spirit had inspired me to want to share their sufferings. The UN relief gave us some shelter and a little food but they could not leave the camp.

Before returning to France, I also made a drip to Albania. Life there was like in Bosnia with terrible poverty. There I worked with the Sisters of Charity of Mother Teresa who took in poor people. I was, by now, really poor myself, since my icons and papers had been stolen. During this time I was able to meet the holy Catholic bishop who had been tortured by the Communists. There was a lay Catholic community sharing everything I was also able to visit. Eventually the French ambassador gave me money and a passport.

An unusual meeting was with Muslims in Southern Albania who restore icons that he been hidden during the Communist time.

This time I was able to visit Syria taking a bus from Turkey. In a place where St. Peter ministered, I found a Catholic community were Aramaic is still spoken. A monastery of sisters and monks sing and pray in the desert there. At Damascus I could venerate a relic of St. John the Baptist where Muslims as well as Christians reverence him. I stayed with the Little Sisters of Jesus.

In 1995 I made my third pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was lovely to be reunited with the Sisters of Bethlehem, the Dominicans, and the hermits of Galilee.

Back in France I went to visit the Bishop of Le Puy under whom I had made my private promises. Since I was very thin, arthritic, and suffering with sciatic nerve pain in the back, he suggested I rest in Brittany with the family. I had to have a hip operation because of the arthritis.

After convalescing, the Bishop of Le Puy invited me to live in his diocese as a hermit in the city, painting icons and selling them. I was to live with a lady who had a hermitage on her property and help her take care of her husband suffering from Alzheimer's. I stayed there a few months helping this dear man and going to Mass at the cathedral.

The next mission the Bishop sent me on was to a Dominican Sister in Le Puy who was a homeopathic doctor. She started a house for depressed women. I was in charge of the women during the day when the sister was doing her regular medical practice. I was able to coax these

sad women into dancing, painting, walking and cooking! It was a good experience to see how my joy helped them.

6 months later the Bishop asked me to take care of a non-alcoholic coffee bar for the students. It had a chapel attached to it. I liked it in some ways, especially because I could paint icons on the side, but after 3 months I couldn't stand all the noise. I realized, once again, how much I was longing for the solitary contemplative life.

Accordingly, the Bishop sent me to a little hermitage in the South, a hut that some Benedictine sisters had available. I had Mass with the Sisters who also gave me food. Even though hikers stopped from time to time at my hut where I could invite them to pray with me in my chapel, it was too isolated. One day I felt the devil pushing me down the stone stairs that led from my hut to the road. I could not move and my ribs were broken. As I lay there for 6 hours I saw my whole life running through my mind. A fireman who used to bring water up the hut found me and took me to the doctor.

After resting with friends the Bishop told me about a Protestant community who wanted to have a Catholic sister visit them for 2 or 3 months for ecumenical sharing. These sisters were good at chanting, but only shared bread at their liturgy, not the real Body and Blood of Jesus as Catholics have. I went to their services, not taking their "communion," and went to Mass at a Catholic Church. The young women in this group came to love me. I was told not to talk to them about Mary or the Pope but since they had to see Mary in my icons they wanted to know more. Afraid I would influence them too much, the leader told me to leave.

My next spiritual adventure was at a Benedictine monastery exclusively for handicapped monks. They wanted a sister to cook for them. There were 12 monks with problems from mental incapacity with minds like those of children to those in wheel chairs. Still they could all read and chant. Only their superior was not handicapped in some fashion.

Many guests came to visit this fervent community where there was so much love and fun. Part of the humor came from the odd notions of the monks. For example, once the superior sent 2 monks out to get wood for the fireplace. They brought back a whole tree, singing as they walked in like the elves from Snow White!

Two monks were assigned to help me with the cooking, but they loved the vegetables too much it took 3 hours to peel them since between cutting they would stroke each one making comments such as "look at this split carrot, it has two legs like I do."

I was able to teach some of them to make beautiful icons. What a joy for me! Just the same the lack of solitude got to me.

So, my so open and understanding bishop made an agreement with the Bishop of Toulon to let me stay at Ste. Baume, the place where St.

*The Way of the Pilgrimess*

Mary Magdalene lived out her life after the Ascension, to run a solitary retreat place and live in semi-hermitage with the help of another private promise consecrated woman.

I came to Ste. Baume in 1997 and stayed almost 3 years at that beautiful grotto of the Magdalene. A Dominican hermit priest lived at the highest level of the mountain, we lived in our huts (two huts?) below, and celebrated Mass each day in the chapel of the lower grotto in the forest where there was a hostel for pilgrims staffed by two old Dominican priests between the ages of 80-86. These were theologians and spiritual masters who helped me very much in my discernment of hermit life.

As can be seen from reading of my former ways of life, there was in me a certain tension between desiring solitude and wanting some time of encounter with others. Even though I meanly need solitude I also need to see people every few days. At the grotto the other woman was a professor and only there a few days a week. Since a new Bishop came to Toulon and wanted our house for something, I had to leave Ste. Baume in any case. But in six months another hermitage North of Marseilles might be ready. In the meantime a close friend of mine working in India with lepers invited me to teach them how to paint write icons and the children of the lepers how to pain. This was in Pondicherry in Southern India.

So, from December of 1999- June 2000 I was in India teaching lepers and their children how to pain. Mostly they worked on silk and cotton. Then for 3 months I visited the ashram of Fr. Bede Griffiths where I had been in the 70's.

Again I felt drawn back to France and contemplation, hoping for a way I could live a semi-eremitical life with lots of solitude but able to receive a few people for retreat. This was possible for one year at the hermitage near Marseilles. I went to Mass in the village and prayed in an old chapel. Pilgrims came and a few women came in the evenings for adoration and a conference about contemplative prayer.

Unfortunately, the people in the village couldn't understand me. They had been hoping for an old monk with a beard who would never see anyone. They thought I was too young and talking to too many people.

Another hermit sister happened to know of a place called La Penne. An Association of lay people had a retreat center used in the summer for workshops but empty in the winter because it did not yet have heat. Fr. Patrick, the founder of Catholic Solitudes in Texas, thought that it would be good to have a hermit help in the summer and stay all year round. Brigitte and Xavier Le Pichon, the leaders of the Association, met me in the summer of 2001 at La Penne where I spent 2 months and found it a very good place to be. I had a good rapport with the Le Pichons who are

*A Pilgrim-Hermit*

very understanding helpful people. When I met Fr. Patrick on a trip of his to Europe, he thought a hermit witness would be very good for this big usually empty center.

In fact, lots of people come in the summer. After that I am alone in the hermitage. There is a one hour walk through the mountains to the Mass of the Brothers and Sisters of St. John. When the weather is not so good I can drive a jeep. I spend the rest of my day praying, walking, gardening, and making icons. On the weekend people come for a day or two to pray. They stay at the main house and I in my hermitage.

The first January and February I went to visits friends since the hermitage was too cold. This year there is a gas heater but no electricity. In the summer I helped organize the retreats and the cooking. We have about 10-12 people at each session. Some of the retreats include sacred dance and icon writing.

January-part of April of 2004 I have been visiting Catholic Solitudes in Texas. Ronda, to whom I am telling my story, would like to write her own description of my visit.

As of this time I am planning to take the habit of Catholic Solitudes as a pilgrim-hermit-sister. I will wear the tan dress of this community with the scapular on which is sewn a sacred heart with the rays of blood and water shown in the Mercy image of Jesus as given to St. Faustina. As a contemplative sister I will wear a very simple bandanna on my head.



# *At Catholic Solitudes*

*by Ronda Chervin*

Here I am at our large ranch-style hermit-village in Texas wanting to describe Sister Catherine's visit to us, myself, since I fear she would be too modest to tell it as it really was.

"Refreshment in the noonday heat," are the liturgical words that come to my mind. All of the regular residents at Catholic Solitudes, Oblates, and many of our frequent guests had been primed by Fr. Patrick for the arrival of this pilgrim-hermit. We were hoping that she would offer us classes in icon-writing. We were told she was unusually spontaneous with a fascinating life-story, but nothing could prepare us for the delight of her real presence.

Holy joy is the first quality we noticed when she appeared one morning at Mass after a long fatiguing trip from France. We keep strict silence before, during, and after Mass, but most of us managed to catch a glimpse of her radiant face, framed by short straight hair in a circle around her head - black at the crown, then gray toward the sides with patches of pure white. She is very small, slight but not thin, dressed in a simple light-blue sweater and a plain skirt, barefoot whenever it is not too cold on the floor of the chapel.

Lightness of body and spirit is another trait of Sister Catherine. Even when deep in recollected prayer or walking slowly around the property, there is something so animated about her personality that one thinks at any moment she will start dancing or singing - and she does! A blithe spirit emanates from her person not based on any kind of facile optimism but a deep supernatural hope that is sure of the victory of God over every calamity, large or small.

Warm affection is another part of Sister Catherine's character. No sooner did she emerge from her prayer after Mass that first day than she had given each one a hug. On parting after a sweet conversation she will usually lean forward to plant a kiss on one's cheek.

Absolutely central to Sister's personality is creativity - not only in art and music and dance but also in daily life. A fine cook in the French tradition, she will top off some little cakes she has made for us with sprigs of wild flowers. Having brought only winter clothing with her and then encountering our early Texas spring, she willingly donned a rag-like extra tan sack dress I made, and then hastily sewed by hand a medium weight tan garment to wear as well.

## *The Way of the Pilgrimess*

Our first acquaintance with her talents as singer and dancer took place after Holy Communion at Mass. Moved in the Holy Spirit by a special feast day, we heard this soft but strong voice entoning a spontaneous hymn in French to the saint of the day. Then, with permission, at the anniversary of her clothing as a Sister so many years ago in France, she led those who were willing in a procession, and did her own very solemn sacred dance after the Mass before the altar.

Fr. Patrick loves the icons of Sister Catherine and so we had seen many of those adorning our chapel, he had brought back from La Penne before she came. The surprise was to learn that Fr. Patrick had asked her to draw large frescoes in the nave of our white Sunday chapel. Within a month Sister Catherine drew and painted life-size images of angels and saints, as can be seen in the photograph in this book. Some of us shared that on first sight of these frescoes, hidden for awhile behind a room divider while in process, we felt as if the living presence of each figure was with us, so strong and animated were these images.

Our classes in iconography were fruitful even for those, like myself, who discovered that we had no talent for this art form. Each of us was asked to pick out an image from an already painted icon or other picture to copy and adapt. Several of us had sufficient success to want to continue in the future.

I want to end this small story of the life of Sister Catherine to date, however, with new reflections about the Way of the Pilgrimess coming out of my acquaintance with this remarkable woman.

Let me begin by saying that I am not a pilgrimess myself. Even though I have traveled widely with my family and alone, I love nothing better than sitting in one place. I wish I could sleep in my coffin and never leave anyone or any place ever. I also love being secure. Now a semi-retired writer and speaker on social security and a pension living in this hermit village, I have no reason to fear unless the entire US economy collapses. So I was in awe of a pilgrim setting forth ready to sleep wherever and eat whatever. When I asked Sister Catherine how she could stand to be so vulnerable in her pilgrimages having to be dependent on charity, she explained that her family was secure financially and would always help her if necessary. She does not consider herself to be poor, at all, even though she has few possessions. She just likes to live in simplicity as recommended by Jesus in the Gospels.

What about a life so full of change of abode and living arrangements and so solitary? Listening to the way of this pilgrim-hermit I began to understand. Life itself is essentially a pilgrimage. It is always changing and we are always changing, even if not as visibly as her life has. In the depth of our hearts each of us is alone - that is to say, alone with God. How beautiful that some have the grace to be, as it were, living icons of

*At Catholic Solitudes*

these truths! A favorite quotation comes to mind from a saint whose name I have lost:

*“Blessed is one who has a home!  
Still more blessed is one for whom every place is home!  
Most blessed is one for whom only heaven is home!”*