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Convent was run like a cult

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By Sarah Meyrick

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Catherine Coldstream found joy when she joined a Carmelite order, but also abuse, she tells *Sarah Meyrick*

CATHERINE COLDSTREAM says that she is staggered by the media interest in her memoir, *Cloistered: My years as a nun*. “People used to glaze over when I said I’m writing about my time as a nun,” she says. But the book is barely out, and several of the broadsheets, as well as the *Church Times* (Books, 8 March), have run reviews and interviews. There are speaking engagements in the diary.

The bones of her story are these. She grew up in a bohemian home in north London, the daughter of Sir William Coldstream, a painter and professor of fine art, and his much younger second wife, an opera singer. The marriage was stormy, and her upbringing was dysfunctional and marred by conflict.

On the death of her father, Catherine experienced an overwhelming religious conversion. Three years later, aged 27, she joined a silent Carmelite order in Northumberland: Akenside (a pseudonym). At first, she embraced the life of a nun wholeheartedly, finding it “a kind of heaven”; over time, the dream morphed into a nightmare. A toxic power struggle — entailing emotional abuse, forced confessions, even physical violence — ensued. Twelve years after entering the monastery, she left.

Her departure took place 22 years ago: in other words, she has spent almost twice as many years out as in. “It has taken me this long to process it,” she says. “Until recently, I didn’t think I’d ever process it, because there are such deep attachments within your heart and soul to that way of life. The level of formation that you go through is so deep, you can’t just shake it off.”

Two decades on, how confident is she in the accuracy of her memory? “I did actually write an early draft, just after I left,” she says. That early “big cathartic draft” is written in Biro, in very neat handwriting — the monastery had taught her “to do everything really perfectly and slowly” — and, on re-reading, she found that it was written “in a much more pious tone [than *Cloistered*], although you can sense the anger in there as well”.

The draft stayed in a box file for many years. But, when she returned to her notebooks, and showed what she’d written to a relative who is a published writer, she was sufficiently encouraged to undertake an MA, and later a Ph.D., in creative writing. She began by writing about the story of her upbringing; later, some of the Akenside material made it into a dark novella. “So there were quite a few drafts and quite a few distillations, but those memories were caught early,” she says.

The end of her time in the monastery was acutely painful, and is poignant to read about. Yet she goes to some lengths — both in the book and in conversation — to emphasise the enormous joy that she found as a nun. It was, she says, “the great love story of my life”.

The early days were “a honeymoon”, full of bliss and rapture. “I think, probably, it was all to do with prayer. Prayer just started happening for me after my dad died.” She hadn’t been much of a churchgoer before his death, although she sometimes attended Sunday services because of her love of music. “I really only went for the singing, you know; I wasn’t even listening to the rest of it. Now, I’m amazed that people can do that. But, after my dad died, suddenly it all seemed incredibly important.”

In the memoir, she describes becoming aware of “a presence” when she saw his dead body. “I had an overwhelming and lasting sense of God’s presence; that’s been constant ever since,” she says. “So, for me, prayer started as just reaching out instinctively to this presence that I sensed was God. And then I followed that up by going to church much more seriously.”

BY NATURE, she tends to pursue things “quite energetically”, she adds (there’s a hint that this is something of an understatement). “I started praying in my room at night, and I think I was given some sort of grace or gift of prayer.”

She found herself savouring the words of the Bible, and dwelling on the words of the Lord’s Prayer: “it was a contemplative thing.” Having grown up “vaguely Anglican”, she found herself drawn to Roman Catholicism. An intensive period of exploration and instruction followed before she entered Akenside.

“All I wanted to do was pray,” she says. “All I wanted to do was give my life to God. It was totally all-consuming. And when I got to Carmel, I just fell in love with it: the silence, the space. I loved the fact that there were no distractions at all. It still moves me very deeply to think of that. It felt so right to me.”

The regime was punishingly austere. “The weird thing was, I took to it quite easily, because I think, temperamentally, I’m suited to doing things in an extreme way. Some of the other novices had difficulties with things like the food — things that I didn’t even notice.”

The early years “really nourished me”, she says. “The liturgy, getting to know the Psalms really well, the Bible study . . . it was wonderful. It meant I got to know the traditions so deeply. It’s just totally part of the fibre of my being now. And I loved the beauty of that rural environment, away from London.”

After a chaotic childhood, the monastery offered a whole new way of life. “I think I was looking for an eternal, divine, completely reliable, father and mother, and I found that in God. It was a refuge on many levels, and it gave me a sense of purpose as well. It wasn’t just an escape: it was also a vocation.”

There’s mystique around vocation, she says; a nun might leave the monastery after decades, and those left behind would conclude that the departing Sister hadn’t had a real vocation. “But she obviously had discerned a vocation at some point. So, there was this slight feeling that a real, pure vocation was something incredibly rare.”

Today, Catherine believes that writing is her vocation, alongside making music. “I find these things are absolute central to my life now, and I find God speaks through them. I can explore things deeply in my writing that I couldn’t really do in a very authoritarian community. Once you’re in that sort of community, you can’t think outside the box.”

IN HER memoir, she recounts the doubts that she experienced before taking her final vows. Was this a warning sign? She shakes her head: even Thérèse of Lisieux was in turmoil the night before her profession. “She said something like ‘There’s only one thing that was clear to me and that was that I absolutely didn’t have a vocation.’” Such doubts are no more than “pre-wedding nerves”, she insists.

“The thing is, when you had doubts [at Akenside], you were strongly exhorted to squash them, to counter any doubt, which was seen as a temptation. There was a real sense that it was a battle with the devil, which meant there wasn’t a real, free discernment process, because any thought that the life was not for you was seen as a temptation you had to fight. And I really, desperately, wanted to please God.”

She believes that Akenside was particularly crushing; there was “an emotional coldness” there. She has found that other Carmelite monasteries have a better understanding of psychology. And, at Akenside, she became increasingly aware of a disturbing power-play between the Superior — she calls her Elizabeth — and anyone who disagreed with her. “Elizabeth was magnetic and lovable, but she was also incredibly authoritarian. She had a steely core. She would brook no opposition, and you couldn’t have a discussion with her.”

The community was deeply fractured; there was no external accountability or support. Elizabeth, as described, was a classic bully, creating a coterie of the favoured while ostracising others. “It caused me acute inner pain, for many, many years. The kind of pain that can make you just want to run away,” Catherine says. “We were all slightly in love with her, probably. And she was playing people off and stirring up jealousies and antipathy. I’m sure there were all sorts of undercurrents of infantilism and something slightly erotic. It was all very toxic.”

Was she just unlucky, in choosing Akenside? She mentions a more liberal Carmelite monastery that she visits today. “They’re lovely. And, humanly speaking, I’d have fitted in there much better. I didn’t know about that community beforehand. But I wanted the hard route: I was a new convert, and I was ‘It’s the stony path, it’s the narrow gate.’ I think, unconsciously, I chose something quite punitive.”

As a young woman, she had been passionate about her music, and now she was just as passionate about her calling. She went to Akenside “blinded by my love affair with the divine”. Were her expectations simply too high? “Oh, yes,” she says. “I wasn’t realistic at all. Now I’m 60, I see everyone much more mercifully.”

She knows now that she was also vulnerable. “And I really wanted a meaningful life. I wanted something that was ultimate and absolute and all-consuming to which to dedicate myself.” This, she points out, is how cults work. Catherine wasn’t the only one to suffer: a number of Sisters suffered mental-health crises, and one never recovered. “I’m sure their breakdowns were triggered by the psychologically extreme nature of the life.”

THERE is a pivotal moment in the memoir when Catherine takes flight in the middle of the night, finding her way to her sister’s house, only to return a fortnight later. Her absence is kept secret from the community: Elizabeth puts it about that she is in the infirmary. I tell her I found it heartbreaking when she returned to a clearly abusive relationship.

“I just thought I had to go back,” she says now. “My sister couldn’t believe I wanted to. But the thing is, you’ve been formed in this, at such deep level, that it’s familiar and it’s protective. It’s home. The outside world — laughing with my sister and wearing her jeans — it just didn’t feel like it was me. I was terrified that I was displeasing God, and I’d done something terrible in running away.”

At the time, she was unable to recognise the toxicity of the community. “I still feel some conflict over that, because there was a lot that I really loved. I still miss it. And if you walk away from that, you don’t know who you are and what your purpose in life is at all. Leaving is a very big deal.”

She left feeling upset and angry. “You really feel you’ve failed,” she said. She was also thoroughly institutionalised: her entire identity was tied up with being a nun. “I think when people leave the army, they often find it very difficult to adjust, and it’s the same with cults.”

Was it a second bereavement? “It’s a horrible, horrible rupture, and part of you is torn away. I guess divorce might be the nearest analogy. There’s this awful rift, that you feel going right down the middle of you, because part of you is still in that world and always will be.”

What would she say now to someone in their twenties, considering a vocation? “That’s tricky, because I’ve got a friend who’s got a daughter of that age who is very drawn to nuns and convents . . . and I have some trepidation in saying, ‘Oh, go for it’ — partly because, whatever I went through, I’m grateful for it. I feel what I experienced in Carmel, although it was tough, it was the most precious thing.

“I think it would be great if monastic communities could start [discussing] how to adapt in a way that could keep that lifestyle going for new generations, because people are not going to go into that life unless they make some quite big changes.”

Surprisingly, perhaps, she has no regrets about becoming a nun. “It’s a beautiful, wonderful way of life, and I wish, in a way, I could have stayed there, but I would have been completely crushed by now. There must be some way of living a monastic life that doesn’t crush people completely; there must be a way of keeping the good things of monasticism. I would encourage people who are interested to explore that dedication to prayer and community, but maybe to seek new ways of incarnating that.”

On leaving Akenside, Catherine moved to Oxford to study for a theology degree; she still lives in the city today. She became a teacher of religious studies and philosophy. Through her music, she met the man who is now her husband. Six years ago, she gave up teaching to care for her dying mother. She is now concentrating on her writing.

Her relationship with God remains. “My faith in God has never left me, but I don’t have such a formal relationship with religion now,” she says. “I am not a fully signed-up weekly, churchgoing, Christian. Much more, I carry with me the faith that I developed in Carmel, and it’s with me wherever I go.”

She regularly seeks out periods of solitude. But nothing can quite replace Carmel. “I pray every morning, and I always dedicate the day to God and I love reading the Psalms, but I don’t do it formally every day according to any sort of pattern. I’m still on a pilgrimage.”

Cloistered: My years as a nun *by Catherine Coldstream is published by Chatto & Windus at £20* (Church Times Bookshop £18)*, 978-1-78474-505-9.*