

Mary Clare O'Brian
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1123 Good Shepherd Road
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Dear Reverend Mother,

My name is Mary Clare O'Brian. I am in sixth grade and I am writing because I want to become a Good Shepherd nun. I like the Good Shepherd nuns best because you work with unwed mothers and their babies. I love little babies.

I have lots of experience with kids. God gives my family a new baby every year even though we have more than we can handle now. Everyone says that I am very mature for my age because of how well I take care of my little brothers and sisters. Also I'm a good leader. The nuns at school can be really strict and when I'm in charge of the little kids at home, I have to be strict lots of times.

I saw *The Sound of Music* where the Mother Superior helped Julie Andrews face her problems. I could do that. Everybody tells me their problems, and I'm good at solutions.

Another reason I'm interested in being a Good Shepherd nun is because of the habits you wear. I love them. Most nuns wear all black except for the wimple and cowl, but that's like going to a funeral every day, don't you think? I love the white and cream of your habits along with the light brown. I like the veil too. It all goes together well and looks sophisticated. I think the habit will make my brown eyes look bigger. My hair is also brown, but that won't show. Just between you

and me, I'll be glad to cover up my curly hair because it's impossible. Right now, I just offer it up to God.

One problem I have is this: Sister Charlotte, my teacher, says I'd never make it in the convent unless I was the Mother Superior. I think she has a good point. As I already mentioned, I'm a leader, not a follower, which is why I have trouble with obedience.

I am president of my sixth grade class. This year I wrote and directed a play my class put on for the whole school. I also played the lead role. I used to be president of my Camp Fire Girls troop, but this year I ran for vice president to give someone else a turn. I get good grades, mostly A's. I always get A's in Religion and usually in Conduct if I get along with the teacher.

Reverend Mother, I think I should be a Mother Superior because I'm the kind of person that everyone tells their problems to. Even my own mother confides in me. She says I make her feel better.

I would like to join the convent right after eighth grade before I start liking boys too much. I'm already having problems with boys liking me. Gregory, in my class, throws spitballs at me and told my best friend that he likes me. I haven't told him that I want to be God's bride yet. Do you think I should?

Could you please write back and tell me more about your convent and how to become the Mother Superior? Do you get chosen by the Pope, or get a sign from God, or do you hold an election? If you're chosen through voting I know a lot about campaigning because my father campaigned for President Johnson. I could make signs and stuff.

Please let me know as soon as possible.

I can't wait to hear from you!

Sincerely,
Mary Clare O'Brian

P.S. I'm thinking about my nun name—I'd like Theresa Rose.
Theresa for St. Theresa the Little Flower of Jesus and Rose because
all those roses fell from heaven after she died.
P.P.S. I used to name all my dolls Theresa—except Barbie. And I just
love roses.



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Mary Clare finished her Social Studies test and turned it upside down to wait for the rest of the class. It was easy, mostly essay, and on a subject that Mary Clare had heard a lot about at home around the dinner table: civil rights. She couldn't believe that Negroes had to sit on the back of the bus in the South and even drink from different water fountains. They were fighting for basic rights, especially the right to vote. Mary Clare liked to imagine that a Negro girl entered her very class at Saint Maria Goretti School. She would show her around, become her friend, even hold the drinking fountain on for her.

Now her face scrunched into a yawn she fought to control. She was tired from being up almost all night—first listening to her parents fight, then praying for the perfect plan to make things better for her family. After she came up with the perfect plan, she couldn't sleep at all.

She was going to become a saint. She had written to Mother Superior because she figured that becoming the Mother Superior of a convent was the best way to climb the ladder toward sainthood. Saint Theresa, the Little Flower, was a nun before she became a saint, and so was Saint Claire. Mary Clare didn't want to tell Mother Superior that she wanted to become a saint, of

course, because that would make her seem conceited. Becoming a saint would be her own secret—a secret she shared with God alone.

She could see herself now—all dressed in white and a shiny gold halo crowning her head. Her body shining like the Virgin Mary statue Sister Charlotte gave her when she got an A in Conduct. If you held the little statue under a light for a few minutes you could take it into the darkest of closets and it *glowed*.

Mary Clare opened her eyes when she heard whispering in front of the classroom. Sister Charlotte nodded to Kelly from behind her desk, and Kelly left the room, her long blonde braids trailing behind her. When Mary Clare looked down at her desk, she saw that Kelly had dropped a note on her desk on her way to ask to be excused. *Chocolate Coke after school? My treat.*

She turned the note over and responded. *I'm supposed to walk my little sisters home, but what the heck, I'd much rather have a chocolate Coke with you. So—yes!* She could slip it to Kelly when she came back from the bathroom. She folded the note and waited for Kelly to return.

But sending a note in class was a sin, she realized. Mary Clare sat back hard in her seat, contemplating how difficult this whole saint thing was going to be. If she was going to become a saint, she shouldn't send notes in class or disobey her mother by going to the Counter after school, even if they were little venial sins and not a big deal. She would confess them on Saturday, of course.

She thought about the two sins. They were both venial but disobedience had to be a bigger sin than passing a note. She wondered why the Catholic Church hadn't thought of this—making more gradations of venial sins. Well, she'd hold onto that idea, maybe create a venial one category and venial two and three categories as well. She'd wait till she was Mother Superior, first.

Mary Clare lifted her desktop and slipped the note inside one of the books she had gotten that morning from the St. Maria Goretti School library: *Saint Therese Martin*, along with *St. Joan: The Girl Soldier*, *Bernadette and the Lady*, and the most important book of all, *The Baltimore Catechism*. That book taught everybody needed to know about becoming a good Catholic. Heck, studying *The Baltimore Catechism* alone would give her all she needed to become a saint.

She wondered whether or not she should be using the word “heck.”

When Kelly returned, Mary Clare smiled and nodded as she walked by the desk. Technically a smile and nod was not even a venial sin, she figured. It was neither “talking in class” nor “passing notes,” both of which counted. All right, she’d just commit the one—category two—venial sin: disobedience. She wanted a chance to tell Kelly about her mom’s pregnancy and her idea about Matthew’s band. If that was the only one she committed today, it would be okay. Sister Charlotte said even saints committed some sins. She’d reassure her sisters that they’d be just fine and tell them to look both ways before they crossed the streets, and then she’d go to the Counter for a chocolate Coke. But, after that, she’d really have to start working on becoming a saint.

Her thoughts returned to her parents last night. She’d been sound asleep when she heard her father yell “No!” and her mother burst into tears. Her own head was throbbing from the soup cans she had wound tightly around her hair. (They were supposed to take away the curls.) She’d pulled the tightest one out and rubbed her head where the throbbing was. She couldn’t catch everything they were saying. Her mom kept crying, loud belly sobs, and she could hear her dad stomping around and around the bedroom, the way he did when he was upset. “We can’t afford another baby,” he’d said.

Mary Clare had plugged her ears before she heard anything more. But she did hear Johnny whining across the room. He was standing in his crib, his chubby little arms outstretched toward her. She hurried to pick him up and laid him down in her single bed, praying he'd go right back to sleep. Then she scooped over to make room for Martha, who stood by the bed clinging to her white bear and looking terrified. That was the thing about sharing a bedroom with two of the little kids: if they were afraid because of a storm or a fight, or woke up feeling sick, they usually turned to her for comfort—especially when Dad was home. Neither parent liked to be awakened in the middle of the night. Mary Clare didn't usually mind, except when somebody threw up in her bed, like Martha that time. But last night, when Margaret and Gabriella came rushing in from their bedroom, there was no way Mary Clare could fit all of them in her bed, so she ushered the whole brood back to the room Anne, Gabriella, and Margaret shared, and they cuddled together in the girls' double bed.

"Let's say our prayers," Mary Clare suggested. She waited until the kids stopped wiggling around trying to get comfortable, and then they recited their nighttime prayer in whispers. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Then began the litany of family members from oldest to youngest: "God bless Mommy, Daddy, Matthew, Mark, Luke, Mary Clare, Anne, Gabriella, Margaret, Martha, and Johnny." In an almost inaudible whisper Gabriella added, "And God bless the baby in Mommy's tummy."

After a moment of silence Martha poked Mary Clare on the shoulder. "Tell us a story," she begged.

"Yeah," Gabriella said, "but not about saints or anything religious."

Johnny cuddled up with his head on her shoulder, his thumb and torn blankie in his mouth.

Mary Clare used her most soothing voice. “Once upon a time a little prince and four beautiful princesses lived together in a tall castle with everything they could imagine wanting. They were very happy . . .”

Johnny’s lashes stopped fluttering almost immediately, and Mary Clare watched the rhythmic rise and fall of Martha’s chest just minutes later. Gabriella yawned. “And there were tiny fairies in the courtyard,” Mary Clare added. But a minute more and they were all asleep—all except Mary Clare, who couldn’t be comforted by a fairy tale. She lay wide awake.

She hated this: money problems, too many kids, another baby on the way. *That’s why Mom doesn’t sing anymore when we do dishes and laundry*, Mary Clare thought. She missed the mother who laughed with her friends over coffee, who made fancy appetizers for cocktail parties, who sewed blue eyelet curtains for her room. She wished Matthew would come home from the Seminary so she would have someone to talk to about all this.

Lord, help my family. Please, please give us enough money so Mom and Dad can be happy again.

She stopped. She was sick of this prayer. Why wasn’t God answering? He used to answer her prayers all the time.

But that was before. She was little then. She could say “Please God, we need money for my brother’s birthday,” and God would send it. She would just find it—on the sidewalk, down by the river, in a pile of leaves. Five, ten, even twenty dollar bills. She even prayed the family into a new car when she was only four. It was right before the family moved from Minnesota to Wisconsin because her father stopped teaching and started his job selling textbooks to schools. She prayed fervently every night, and one night while she was sleeping God put a brand-new 1958 Ford

in the driveway. That was when Mary Clare knew it was her job to pray for stuff. Even when she learned that the car came from the job Dad had just started, she knew it was really from God. She had prayed that car into the driveway—even her brothers thought so.

Then it just stopped . . . when . . . when she was about seven. Mary Clare's eyes opened wide and she sat up in bed carefully so none of the kids woke up. Seven—seven was when sins started to count. That was when God stopped listening to her prayers.

When Mary Clare got up two soup cans rolled out of her hair. Now she knew the problem: God would only listen to her if her soul was pure. If she was going to make her mother happy again, she would have to be a saint right away.

She made a plan. She would study, she would practice saint-like behavior, and she would become a nun. Many of the girl saints had been nuns before being sainted, so she figured becoming a nun was the perfect stepping stone to her real goal. She'd be so darned good she wouldn't have a thing to confess on Saturdays.

Mary Clare explained the deal to God. *If you take care of my family—give them enough money, make my parents happy . . . I'll become a saint.* She repeated it several times in case it was hard for God to hear through all of her sins. By the time she'd gotten to sleep, it was almost time to get up.

Now Mary Clare was so tired she could hardly keep her eyes open. She covered her mouth to suppress a yawn just as Sister Charlotte, who sat at her desk in the front of the classroom, looked at the clock.

“My goodness!” Sister Charlotte said, standing up. “You all must have finished your tests ages ago! Pass them to the front.” She clapped her hands together twice and smiled her movie star

smile. The dimples that only showed when she smiled melted into her cheeks. Mary Clare thought she was the most cheerful nun she'd ever met.

Tommy Johnson sat in the desk behind Mary Clare. Instead of passing the papers forward he poked the back of her neck with his pencil. He was obnoxious like that. She turned to take the papers and glared at his freckled face, but immediately wished she hadn't. Saint Theresa wouldn't have given Tommy a dirty look. She would have smiled and offered Tommy's poke up to Jesus. Mary Clare was momentarily flooded with disappointment in herself, but the feeling quickly shifted to irritation at Tommy. Tommy was just the kind of bratty boy who could keep her from becoming a saint. She contemplated how Saint Theresa held onto her loving manner, even when people were mean to her, and sighed. Saint Theresa was so much like the Virgin Mary—obedient, quiet, sweet, and kind. Almost the opposite of Mary Clare. She was going to have to work hard to become a saint.

Sister collected the quizzes from each row. Students automatically started pulling open the tops of their desks to retrieve their English books for the last class of the day, but Sister held up her hand.

“No, class. No English today. I have a surprise for you instead. This year, for the first time ever, the sixth grade will be entering a diocesan essay contest,” Sister Charlotte announced, “and I'm excited for you all. The topic is ‘What a Religious Vocation Means to Me’ and . . .” Tommy groaned behind Mary Clare and Jen Fitzgerald stuck her index finger in her mouth like she was going to throw up. Several snickers followed.

“And . . . wait a minute. This contest has cash prizes! The diocese has never had prizes before, but this year an elderly couple from Madison made a donation specifically to help children start thinking about vocations as nuns or priests.”

Mary Clare raised her hand so high she was completely out of her seat. “How much are the prizes?”

Sister’s nose scrunched the way it did when she smiled. “The third prize is fifteen dollars.”

Oohs and aahs plus one whistle.

“Second prize is double that.”

“Thirty bucks!” Ron Lyons announced. “A kid could get a Schwinn for that!”

“Or Kelly could get two Barbie dolls with a whole bunch of clothes for her and Mary Clare.” It was Tommy, of course.

“You don’t care about the first prize?” Sister asked, feigning shock.

“Yes!” everyone said in unison.

“Fifty dollars, but” —Sister stopped while everyone took in noisy breaths—“you have steep competition. Remember, it’s every sixth grade class in the whole diocese.”

Mary Clare couldn’t breathe. She pictured the diocesan directory. It was way bigger than the Littleburg, Wisconsin phone book. There had to be fifty different churches in it. She looked around. There were forty-three kids in her class. She didn’t even want to think of how many essays that would be.

It didn’t matter. She had to win. Fifty dollars! Mary Clare’s parents would be so relieved. Her mom might even be okay with having another baby. *Let me win first prize, Lord, and I’ll know you’ve accepted my deal to be become a saint.* She would start being good now. Forget the chocolate Coke with Kelly; she’d obediently walk the kids home. *Please, God. Please.*

“Don’t look so glum, kids. You have the same chance of winning as everyone else. So let’s take the focus off the prizes and think about the essay itself. You will also be getting an English grade for your essay, so make it sparkle! You won’t get class time to write it but the contest deadline isn’t until Monday, May 1, so

they'll be due on Friday, April 28. That's a little over two weeks. Ask God to help you do your best work."

The squeal of the intercom made everyone cover their ears. Mary Clare looked at the clock. In three minutes the bell would ring. Sister Agnes always managed to time the afternoon messages so that the bell rang the minute she was done speaking. There was some speculation among the students that she actually rehearsed the announcements with her stopwatch.

"May I have your attention, please? Saint Maria Goretti School will begin selling World's Finest Chocolate Bars starting Monday. Each child is expected to sell a minimum of twenty chocolate bars to help pay for school supplies. So tell your parents and start thinking of people who will want to enjoy these delicious chocolate treats. Next week begins our annual campaign to collect money for pagan babies. Remember that saving a pagan baby is saving a soul. The boy or girl from each class who contributes the most money will be given a scapular blessed by the late Pope John XXIII. Remember that by wearing a scapular every day, you are protected at the time of death. So take your allowance or offer to do extra chores around the house to collect money for this worthy cause. A reminder that all children are expected to attend daily Mass. I have been advised that a few of you are congregating outside Sentry Foods instead of attending. In the future, anyone missing Mass will receive detention and parents will be notified. Also, the sixth grade Camp Fire Girls will have a bake sale on Monday after school. Finally, will Mary Clare O'Brian please report to the office."

"Mary Clare's in trou-ble," Tommy said. A few kids snickered but stopped when Gregory chimed in.

"Well, I'm sure she's not going to get spanked by Father Dwyer for breaking a window, like some people I know." Now

everybody laughed except Tommy, whose face matched his red hair. He was the first kid out of the room.

Mary Clare's heart sank. The only time she ever got called to the office was because of money. At least she wouldn't have to let Kelly know that she couldn't go out for the chocolate Coke. She shrugged at Kelly. What could she do? Nice of God to take away the temptation.

As all the other kids rushed out of the classroom, heading to their lockers to exchange books or clamoring down the two flights of stairs to the main entrance, Mary Clare walked slowly in the opposite direction. She dreaded going to the office of Sister Agnes, or, as the students called her behind her back, "Sister Agony." When she was halfway down the long, dimly lit corridor she could make out the image of Sister Agony sitting behind her desk in her office at the end of the hall. *Lord, she prayed, please help me be sweet like Mary. Please help me not show Sister how much I can't stand her.*