

RESOURCE KIT

Breaking the Habit

Life in a New Zealand Convent
1955–67

Judith Graham

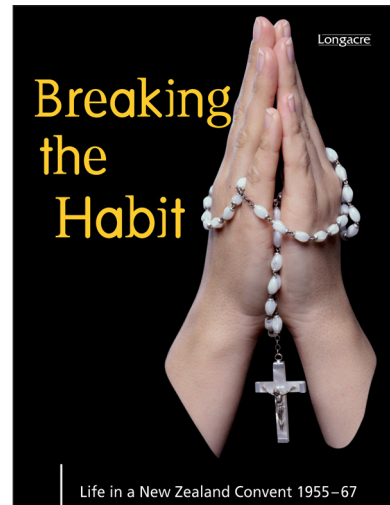
'You have made the most important decision of your life and the greatest sacrifice a human being can make. Well done, Judith.'

In 1955, at seventeen years of age, Judith Graham entered the Dominican Order and began her life as Sister Stephen. In this compassionate yet frank account she recalls her years as a Dominican nun during the repressive pre-Vatican II era.

The vows of a nun – those of poverty, chastity and obedience – encapsulated in the commitment of 'death to self', proved too much for Sister Stephen. Her battle for acceptance and spiritual fulfilment was stifled by the rules and regulations of the Church. Yet leaving the Order was even more difficult. After a twelve-year struggle she escaped from the convent 'feeling like a battered wife'.

Breaking the Habit, first published in 1992, is a warm, personal story of increasing doubt and subsequent growth, and of freedom of spirit – 'a freedom I will never take for granted'. It also captures a way of life that no longer exists, and one woman's struggle to regain her sense of self.

'The story is riveting. But it is the writing that delivers the story, after all.' Jane Tolerton, *The Waikato Times*



Judith Graham

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RESOURCE KIT FOR USE IN SCHOOLS

Contains:

- Comprehension questions
- Author statement
- Discussion topics
- Research topics

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COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 1 – *Papanui Childhood*

- What is the difference between a mortal sin and a venial sin?
- How does trying to be a saint affect the way Judith fits in?

Chapter 2 – *Genetic Connections*

- Why is Emmet confused about his father's return?

Chapter 3 – *'The Dominicans are Ladies'*

- What, in this chapter, do the nuns generally seem most concerned with, regarding the girls' behaviour?

Chapter 4 – *The Perils of Education*

- What happens to those who are unbaptised?
- What was seen to be the most important subject?
- What is meant by a 'tableaux'?

Chapter 5 – *Initiation*

- How do the Carmelites differ to other orders of nuns?

Chapter 6 – *Elected Silence*

- What is meant by 'edifying'?
- Why couldn't Judith attend university in person?

Chapter 7 – *'God Loves You Specially'*

- What, in herself, does Judith see the reasoning she is offered appealing to?
- What symbolism can you see in the receiving of the habit ceremony?

Chapter 8 – *A White Novice*

- Why does Sister Stephen admire Saint Thomas More? What about him relates to her own experience?
- How does Sister Stephen view the vow of chastity? What seems at odds to her in its explanation?

Chapter 10 – *The Expense of Spirit*

- What are the faults Sister Stephen is told she has that are supposedly causing her doubt?
- What is Sister Stephen seeking in this chapter?

Chapter 11 – *Cameron House*

- What is the difference, as Sister Stephen sees it, between her own and her friend Jocelyn's academic styles?
- What exactly is it that finally prompts Sister Stephen to run away from the convent?

Chapter 12 – *Repercussions*

- Why does Sister Stephen wish she had been a Protestant?
- What is the significance of the psalm Sister Stephen must silently recite as penance?

Chapter 14 – *The Order of the Day*

- Where does the description of the anniversaries of profession as silver or golden have a secular parallel? Why is this description used?
- By what was a doctor judged suitable?

Chapter 15 – *Holidays*

- What do the antiphons on p.107 represent?
- What are the bulls?

Chapter 16 – *The Deep South*

- How is Sister Stephen received when she confesses her doubts to the visiting Father?

Chapter 17 – *The Day of Reckoning*

- What is it that seems to validate Sister Stephen's doubts about her Religious life and the possibilities she can imagine? (p.122)
- What seems to be a catalyst for Sister Stephen to resolve again to leave the convent?
- p.125 – Why does Sister Stephen see the title of the film as appropriate to the situation?

Chapter 18 – *Debriefing*

- What differences can you see in the way Judith/Sister Stephen's family reacts and treats her, and the way her Religious/convent 'family' does?

Chapter 19 – *'Georgie Girl'*

- Why does Judith's father prescribe going to the movies?
- Why is Judith more comfortable teaching at the boys' school than at Girl's High?

Chapter 20 – *Rearrangements*

- How does Mother Labouré's reaction differ from those of others in the church?



Reg Graham. 1992

PERSONAL STATEMENT FROM JUDITH GRAHAM
FROM A SPEECH GIVEN AT A GIRLS' SECONDARY SCHOOL IN 2005

You do not see many nuns around these days. While the Muslim world seems to be growing more influential, the once solid Christian faiths are losing their hold. Nuns were once a very strong sign of Christianity and showed the powerful role of women in a male-dominated environment. The order of nuns that I joined in 1955 were the nuns who had taught me at secondary school at St Dominic's in Dunedin.

When I entered, there were about 160 nuns in the New Zealand branch of the Dominican Order. Today there are about 50, and most of them are in their 60s and 70s. They no longer live in big convents but in suburban houses, three or four sisters together or, if they prefer, on their own. They no longer need to wear the distinctive habit, a long cream, serge gown with a black leather belt and rosary beads and a strange-looking head-dress. It was a completely medieval outfit and the only part of the body visible to the outside world was the face. I can see the resemblance to the burkha worn by women in strict Muslim countries. But we also had our hair shaved for reasons of hygiene and even at night we wore a little cap as a cover. But not everything has changed. The sisters still live by solemn vows taken after five years of training, of Poverty (which means they own nothing personally), of Chastity (which means they have no sexual commitment to anyone, no marriage, no children, in order to love everyone), and Obedience (which means that they have to do what they are told). From 5.30

in the morning when we were woken by the bell, the whole order of the day was structured till lights-out at 10pm. You may think this is rather like boarding school because I had to be at certain places at certain times, but there was *no* free time. I had to do what I was instructed to do:

- Teach music
- Clean toilets
- Teach in any classroom, standard 3, form 5 (year 11) or J1
- Look after the elderly or sick sisters in the convent infirmary
- Be sent to any Dominican convent in New Zealand (about 25) if it was deemed important – that was what obedience meant.

I couldn't wake up and say 'Oh, what a beautiful morning. I think I'll go to the beach.'

Why would anyone want to become a nun? First, all Catholic children were taught in Catholic schools by nuns, or if they were boys by priests or brothers. These teachers taught us in our daily religious classes that God had a plan for all of us and that we must pray every day to know what our calling or vocation was – the nuns were all careers advisors or counsellors in their own right. Every Catholic family regarded it as the highest honour of all, a sign of God's special favour, if one or more of their children were 'called' to be nuns or priests.

I had a very strong sense of conscience and I wanted to do what God wanted me to do. We were

told that if we ignored God's call we would never be happy and that's quite a frightening thought. But I didn't particularly want to be a nun. I had several crushes on boys next door, at Christian Brothers, now Kavanagh College, but the sisters said that if the idea of becoming a nun persisted in our minds whether we liked it or not, that was a sure sign God was calling us to serve Him as a nun and He would give us the strength to do it.

So, in February 1955, two months after I had left 6A, or year 13, I entered the novitiate or training school of the Dominican sisters. I cried and cried as I left my home and my parents in Christchurch. I thought that I would never see my home again, as the rules said that we were never allowed back – this was to be part of the sacrifice.

Now I had been a boarder for five years at St Dominic's College, and Head Boarder in my last year, and I thought that community living and discipline would be second nature to me, but this was totally different. I felt that all my life was being squeezed out of me, that I couldn't be myself, but that I had to become somebody I couldn't even recognise. One's personality and wants were to be completely put aside in the service of God.

Three months after I entered I went to the novice mistress and said I wanted to go home; she was very kind. They were always very kind. I never ever experienced any of the cruelty you sometimes read of now about nuns. The novice mistress told me I was probably homesick (a boarder for five years being homesick?), that God was asking more of me than he was asking others, that I had the generosity to continue if only I trusted in God and not myself. And I was persuaded to stay. That went on for 12 years. Looking back at it now, I can almost see why I stayed on. This was indeed a very beautiful way of life that appealed to young people with their idealism. I don't want you to go away from here thinking that it was a totally negative experience. I learnt so very much:

- About prayer; that it wasn't a Father Christmas approach to God ('Please may I have this, and this and this...' but rather an awareness of His presence.
- About meditation; prolonged periods of thinking about Christ's life and his values.

- About the dignity of ordinary life, so that every job you did during the day had value in God's eyes.
- And the intrinsic value of the individual.

And I will always love and respect the women I met there for their generosity and warmth. But it was not my life.

Every year I allowed myself to be persuaded to stay on, to take the three vows, to be a good nun. You will think this very strange I know, but consider this: if you believe in God, could you turn Him down? It was a terrifying decision to make and I really hoped the reverend mothers would make it for me – that *they* would decide I wasn't suitable and send me home. The responsibility for such an awful decision would not then be mine.

In May 1967 I had reached crisis point and I ran away. I am not proud of that. I wish now that I had left legally, like Maria in *The Sound of Music*. I think I gradually saw that the life that I was trying to lead was, for me, a kind of death; that I had tried to talk my way out of the convent and had failed and that running away was the only option. I remember praying that I would always love God and even after it had all been cleaned up within the Church laws, it took a long, long time for me to accept that I was not one of God's failures and that that beautiful, idealistic way of life might well not suit everyone; that one could serve God just as well anywhere. I have never regretted leaving the convent; only the way I did it. But I think that I learnt at 29 that I had to be honest with myself and responsible for my life.

You people will probably face your future without the enormous pressure I faced. What I hope is that you will not just drift through life, that you will make responsible decisions for your own life choices, that you will live lives that are as rich and rewarding as mine has been. Don't ever believe those people who tell you, in the name of religion, that the world is an evil place full of wickedness. Remember God made this world for us to enjoy and not to run away from. May you always remember what Christ said: 'I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly.'

Judith Graham

DISCUSSION TOPICS

Relate your answers both to Judith's personal statement and to the text as a whole.

- How does taking a vow of silence relate to the 'death of self'? Discuss.
- In what ways was Judith silenced, both in her time in the convent, and once she had left?
- Judith has a 'marriage' to Christ and a marriage to Reg; how does Judith write about the two, and what does the writing reveal?
- There is an emphasis on Rules in convent life; what kind of rules are these? How do you see them relating to religious life or spirituality?
- How does the way Judith describes life in the convent reveal her doubts? When reading her descriptions, are you reminded of anything else?
- Convent life in the 50s and 60s is shown to be strictly hierarchical, with the lay sisters especially treated differently from others. What does this say about the convent system? Discuss.
- What different symbolism can you find in the nuns' rituals? Are there consistent themes? What do these mean? What is their purpose?
- 'Nuns were once a very strong sign of Christianity and showed the powerful role of women in a male-dominated environment.'
– Judith Graham

The world, and the religious world, is endlessly changing. While many faiths seem to be growing, the once-dominant Christian faiths are losing their hold. Why are nuns an important symbol of faith to the Christian churches? Do they, as Judith says, show the 'powerful role of women'? Does their symbolic importance, and their dwindling numbers, herald change for Christianity? What, in the contemporary religious world, could take their place?

- 'Looking back at it now, I can almost see why I stayed on. This was indeed a very beautiful way of life that appealed to young people with their idealism.' – Judith Graham
How does the beauty of religious life appeal to youthful idealism? How do faith and idealism work together in our contemporary world? In any negative results of this, where do you think the problem lies, with faith, or with idealism?
- The last young woman to enter the Dominican Order in New Zealand entered in 1982. Why is this way of life less appealing to women today? Can you imagine yourself or any of your contemporaries entering a convent?
- 'The sisters said that if the idea of becoming a nun persisted in our minds whether we liked it or not that was a sure sign God was calling us to serve Him as a nun and He would give us the strength to do it.' – Judith Graham
Does this seem like a logical argument to you? Does faith involve logic?
- 'It wasn't long before I began to feel the contradictions inherent in the life of a nun – we were to live a life of love, of God first and above all else, and then of love for all those we worked with. Love to me implied warmth, spontaneity and generosity, but these qualities were often suppressed. For our training involved "death to self" – a disciplined self-control of all such feelings.' *Breaking the Habit*, p.46
Are there examples in a nun's life and training where this contradiction is not present? Discuss.
- On entering the convent, Judith has said: 'I felt that all my life was being squeezed out of me, that I couldn't be myself, but that I had to become somebody I couldn't even recognise.' If Judith felt like this, even in the earliest stage of her career as a nun, how could she be convinced to continue? Isn't the feeling she is describing similar to the ideal of 'death of self'? How does this feeling serve God?

- Judith has said that life in the convent taught her valuable lessons: ‘about the dignity of ordinary life, so that every job you did during the day had value in God’s eyes.’ How does this differ to the views of wider society?
- ‘I remember praying that I would always love God and even after it had all been cleaned up within the Church laws, it took a long, long time for me to accept that I was not one of God’s failures and that that beautiful, idealistic way of life might not suit everyone; that one could serve God just as well anywhere.’ – *Judith Graham*

What did Vatican II do to change the way Catholics saw their service to God? Why does Judith pray that *she would always love God* and not the other way around? Do you think she felt that by leaving the convent she was not *proving* her love to God through her actions? How can you account for this concern?

- In her statement Judith gives this advice: ‘Don’t ever believe those people who tell you, in the name of religion, that the world is an evil place full of wickedness. Remember God made this world for us to enjoy and not to run away from. May you always remember what Christ said: “I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly.”’
How do cloistered religious communities experience abundant life? What might it mean beyond the cloistered community to ‘have life more abundantly’?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How does a nun’s life now differ from a nun’s life in the 50s/60s? If possible, arrange to interview a nun and report to the class/write an article.
- What are the different orders of nuns (in New Zealand)? Research and explain the differences between orders.
- How does a Catholic education differ from a non-catholic/state education?
- Research women’s autobiography as a literary genre. How does Judith Graham’s book fit into – or differ from – tradition?
- Find out about the rules and culture of another religious order. What are the similarities and the differences between Catholic nuns and the order you have chosen to study?
- Research important women in religion. You could focus on one, or compare and contrast two or more women from different religions. Some women you could research are:
Hildegarde of Bingen;
Teresa of Avila;
Catherine of Siena;
Joan of Arc;
Rabia al-Adawiyya (an early Sufi);
Mirabai (Hinduism);
Prajapati (Buddhism).