

An Act of Contrition

*For all those among us who have given their blind allegiance to an institution in pursuit of the greater good
but unwittingly betrayed their good intentions by abdicating their duty to think*

On the day I entered, my hair was a flaming halo of unruly curls.

For thirty years it did not see the light of day and now,
like my life it emerges, long, grey and limp.

Then I could plead innocence, the love of God a wish to serve the poor.

Now my defence is ignorance, obedience and fidelity to my church

We were proud of our humility, proud of our poverty:

chastity was our watchword and obedience our badge.

We would plant cabbages upside down if the abbess decreed it.

We rejected the world and became more worldly,
denied the self and drove out love.

We fed the poor at the back door but the Pharisees dined in the parlour.

We thought you were safe left alone in your gilded prison
while we studied the ways of the evil one in order to defeat him.

But you grew tired of our Taj Mahal and slipped out into the night;
seeking the company of the lost and lonely.

We loved you, prayed to you, sang for you,
made sacrifice and gave our lives up for you.

No lover's plea, no mother's tears,
or baby's laugh or father's parting sigh,
could turn us from our task, for we felt chosen.

We spread the message of your infinite love;
complacent in the confidence of your mercy,
but the children we taught to fear you and obey,
Look to the lilies of the field we cried,
while we hoarded our spiritual and temporal goods.

We forgot that you were born in a stable not a palace,
the son of a woman not married to your father.
That all you asked was that we love one another and forgive.
You came back to us but we did not recognise you,
for the blind eye does not see or the deaf ear hear.

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You slipped in among the fallen women, lost children and delinquents.
We forgot the poet's warning about making a stone of the heart.
Our duty was not to flinch but to lay the rod across your back.
We prayed to our empty tabernacles, filling them with incense,
while we shaped your cross in laundry and in orphanage

And now like the Grand Inquisitor I wait in the dark for your knock.
Maybe I will be denounced in the market place.
Some long forgotten child's pointing adult finger,
a few terse lines on some tribunal's headed paper,
or a story in the news: the cameras outside the convent door.

I could wash my hands in the waters of Lethe, dry them on Pilates napkin,
I never knew, I did not see, I can't recall – there is no evidence.
My defence could be ignorance, obedience and fidelity –
I followed orders and only did what I was told.
But there is no redemption there.

Lord, I crave your forgiveness more than life itself,
but acts of contrition require a full confession of fault.
That silent tongue speaks to open ear and blind eyes see;
the rocky path of truth – the public pillory in all its shame,
the long walk through the jeering crowds to the place of stones.

Not to gather at the foot of your cross with the sorrowing and the righteous,
nor to hang beside you with the thieves.
But to stand among the soldiery as the nails are driven home.
To hear the question “whither goest thou” and know how lost we are,
before we can ask you to lead us home.

I don't despair but as yet I cannot hope.