



***Unconventional Women: The Story of the Last Blessed
Sacrament Sisters in Australia, Sarah Gilbert***

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This book tells the story of a group of young Australian women who devoted themselves to the most intense spiritual practices available to them. They were only just past girlhood, in their early twenties, when then they entered the convent in Armadale, Victoria. It was to be for life.

The Servants of the Blessed Sacrament were a ‘contemplative’, rather than an ‘active’ order of nuns (such as teachers, nurses and missionary nuns). Their entire existence was

to be devoted to prayer and contemplation. Their greatest honour was the perpetual devotion to the Eucharist. At any hour of the day or night, a sister of their order could be found praying in the chapel in adoration of the host. It was the life they chose for themselves.

What did it feel like to give up the possibility of seeing one's family ever again, of even talking of one's personal life or displaying emotion? That is, to lose oneself? We learn how the nuns read the Divine Office in a peculiar monotone F sharp so as not to convey any sense of personality or interpretation. They lost contact with the outside world. Their dentist made sure to schedule appointments, if only to make sure they occasionally left the convent walls as this was their only excursion. Though many hours were spent in contemplation, they were allowed little stimulus to contemplate nor much teaching on how to do it. Literature was smuggled in by relatives in paper bags. Theological education was minimal.

That was the 1950s. But in the 1960s, with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, their world collapsed in ways not of their choosing.

Based on intimate oral histories with six of these women, Sarah Gilbert tells the story of how these women re-made themselves as the life they had planned for themselves crumbled around them. We learn the very human stories of these remarkable women as they chose to lose themselves by entering the convent but then lost and found their lives again as convent life transformed and opened to the world beyond.

Gilbert's telling is sympathetic, not voyeuristic. These young women are not objects of pity – although the power dynamics of convent life and its emotional and spiritual abuse is laid bare – they are revealed as complex, intelligent, courageous and insightful. Their deep spiritual yearning for beauty, and for the Divine, is palpable. We begin to glimpse why a young woman might make such a choice.

With the Second Vatican Council, the habits came off, the convent doors opened, and new theologies rushed in. No more young women were joining the sisters. They knew their way of life was ending. Having previously been told simply trust and obey, the women's inquiries and interests burst in all directions. Some became 'heretics'. Some

dabbled in New Age spirituality and pantheism. They travelled to India, London, America. One married a priest. Many rediscovered their truest vocation in social justice. Some relocated to Redfern and threw themselves into allyship with the Aboriginal community. Devotion to the Eucharist was no longer perpetual adoration in a darkened chapel. It now meant experiencing the whole cosmos as sacramental and of seeing the presence of God, not simply in the Eucharist, but in every person.

Grounded as this book is in personal stories and oral histories, I found myself wanting more context at times. Quite some knowledge of Catholic teaching and practice, as well as the history of the church, is assumed. It will certainly appeal to readers who lived through these times, especially those of Catholic backgrounds. This book is not a social or cultural history of the Catholic Church or of Vatican II in Australia; it remains steadily focused on the lives and experiences of these six Blessed Sacrament Sisters.

But that focus is also its great strength. For lovers of oral history, it is a fine example of how the intimacy of oral history can enliven narratives where other kinds of history fall flat. Gilbert takes us on a profound journey as we come to know these women – the sisters – as fellow travellers in a search for meaning and beauty.