

UNCOVERING CLEVELAND'S SECRET: THE POOR CLARES

A review by Barbara Payne

Most nights, a bunch of women stand around on their rooftop garden in Cleveland and give the skyline the once-over. The lights and noise from Jacob's Field are a favorite of one of the ladies—she loves sports but hasn't seen or heard a baseball game in 35 years. She and her companions don't go out of the house or talk on the phone—hardly ever, even to their families.

What is this—some kind of cult? Kristin Ohlson, author of "Stalking the Divine" (256 pages, Hyperion, \$23.95), thinks it's more in the category of minor miracle. She finally got these women to talk to her only after a long-drawn-out effort to convince them it would be a good thing for the world to know more about them. The women are all members of the Poor Clares, nuns who live in the monastery at St. Paul's in Cleveland and dedicate their lives 24 hours a day to praying for those who have asked for their help.

Ohlson, an ex-Catholic, was driven to attend church one Christmas when her children were off with her ex-husband and she was having a crisis of faith. She doesn't shrink from describing her skepticism upon encountering this strange group of women sitting behind a heavy screen at the Mass she decided to attend that day. But her curiosity to know more is stronger than her cynicism.

After many discussions with the local priest and repeated visits to the Sunday Mass, the author finally gets permission to write an article for the Plain Dealer. Lo and behold, the Sunday services are suddenly more crowded than they've been in years. The nuns are gratified, and as Ohlson feels herself getting planted in with the regulars at St. Paul's, the idea of writing a whole book about the nuns takes shape.

Ohlson recounts her visits with the nuns and tells their stories, one by one. It's a glimpse into another world. These nuns who live the cloistered life all came from quite different backgrounds. One was a successful artist and 30 years old when she joined the order. Another knew from the time she was a small child that she was destined to withdraw into a life of prayer. Ohlson gives substance to each personality with incisive, charming commentary like this about one nun's forceful approach: "...as if she herself might get a little bossy in her dealings with God."

The book is eloquent when it deals with the author's struggle to find faith and her astonishment at seeing these dedicated women who are willing to renounce everything for service to their God and to their fellow humans through prayer. It touches on difficult topics such as the how the nuns—so separated from the usual human ties (they don't even speak to each other except for mealtimes)—deal with loneliness and how they handle moments of doubt in their own faith.

Stalking the Divine addresses important questions about human possibilities with a light heart and a winning way. Ohlson will be reading and signing copies of her book at Joseph-Beth Booksellers on Shaker Square on Thursday, August 20 at 7 pm and on Wednesday, September 17 at Mac's Backs on Coventry.

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A ReallyGoodFreelanceWriter.com. She helps companies
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