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The World Is Her Cloister

FROM THE PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

"I remember a saying I once heard: 'God alone is enough. Everything else is not enough.' "

— Shelly Pennefather, in a letter to former Villanova teammate Lynn Tighe

THE DELICATE VOICE on the other end of the telephone line answered: "Monastery of the Poor Clares." While Lynn Tighe knew that the chance of seeing her old teammate, Shelly Pennefather, was slim — that the Poor Clares observed a strict vow of enclosure and seldom saw visitors — Tighe told the Sister who took the call that she just happened to be in Virginia and was wondering . . . umm, would it be possible to stop in and just see Shelly for a second? The Sister placed her on hold. When she came back on the line and said, "Yes," Tighe wondered if the Sister had sensed something dire in her voice. "Like," Tighe said, "I *had* to see her."

What the Poor Clare who answered the phone heard perhaps was just unbridled curiosity. While no one who knew her was surprised when former Villanova basketball All-America Shelly Pennefather entered the convent one and a half years ago, it came as a total shock when she announced that she was entering a Roman Catholic order of cloistered nuns. To Tighe and the other women who teamed up with Pennefather at Villanova and grew exceedingly close to her, the whole idea of a cloister conjured up a host of uncomfortable images: of dark, forbidding walls; of a stern Mother Superior with lips pursed in disapproval; of stoical nuns dressed in threadbare habits that cascaded onto cold stone floors.

None of that turned out to be so. Located deep in the Alexandria suburbs on a street where children cavorted and the trees were just beginning to show the smallest of buds, the place had a tranquil, inviting feel that Tighe found reassuring. While not sure what to expect when Shelly came out — if she had changed — Tighe stood in the visiting room with an odd apprehension when she heard a voice exclaim with laughter: “*What are you doing here?*”

Seated behind a screen and dressed in her habit, Shelly appeared to be the same old Shelly, overflowing with enthusiasm, wit and a curiosity of her own: How were her old Villanova teammates? And her old coach, Harry Perretta? How was he? The two talked and talked, and when their allotted hour was up, it occurred to Tighe how cheerful Shelly seemed. She radiated joy. When Shelly said good-bye and promised to write, Tighe drove back to Philadelphia and found herself looking forward to the letters.

The letters Shelly Pennefather writes from the placid embrace of the cloister are the only window she has on the world. She cannot leave even for an hour. Nor is she allowed to use the phone. She only can sit with a pen and a piece of paper and set down in words her account of the spiritual journey to which she has committed. While her decision to remove herself from the coarse affairs of society struck some of her old teammates as a loss (“Heck,” said one, “she would have made a wonderful teacher”), her letters speak not of a loss to our sputtering planet but of a profound gain.

Because Shelly Pennefather is praying for us.

She is praying for us every day.

Dear Friends,

Greetings from behind locked doors. I always figured that at least one of us would be incarcerated, but I never guessed it would be me!

What you are probably interested in, is what I think of it all. Obviously, most of what “goes on” in a cloister takes place in the very heart of each Sister. There are no distractions to take you away from looking at yourself . . . No music, no TV, no movies, or social outings. Just the soul alone with its Creator . . .

I have learned a great deal about myself, and found out that conquering sinfulness and laying aside self-love and pride is an overwhelming task . . . I feel so thankful that I have been called to this vocation. However, I earnestly beg your prayers for me because I am wholly unworthy

of such a calling, and often I tire of the effort that is involved in purifying and perfecting yourself . . .

Please pray for me that I may never grow tepid in my search for God . . .

Love,
Shelly

The spiritual journey that leads a person from the thrall of twentieth century culture to the door of the cloister is an immense one, and for Shelly Pennefather — who is now called Sister Rose Marie — it occurred gradually. The daughter of an Air Force colonel who did not allow either TV or radio in the house and who each evening convened his wife and seven children for the rosary, Pennefather attended Mass each day while starring in basketball at Villanova, received her “calling” during her three-year pro tenure in Japan and entered the Monastery of the Poor Clares in June 1991 at the age of twenty-five.

To someone who has grown accustomed to circulating in a democratic society — and enjoying, as Pennefather joked in one of her letters, “the pleasures of the palate” — entering the Order of Poor Clares is like stepping back into the thirteenth century. Founded in 1212 when the beautiful and wealthy Clare heard Francis of Assisi preach the splendor of evangelical poverty, the Order of Poor Clares spread out in the world with the sole objective of “praising and glorifying God.” According to Mother Mary Francis P.C.C. in her book, *A Right to be Merry*, the Poor Clare is the “spouse of Christ.” The Poor Clare is not allowed to leave the cloister except for hospital care and cannot step out from behind the screen to accept visitors.

Still four years removed from taking her final vows, Pennefather is in a one-year phase in her scholarship in which she is not allowed to see even her parents until July. However, in letters to her parents, Perretta, former teammates Tighe, Karen Daly (née Hargadon), Lisa Angelotti, Kathy Miller and Mary Beth Culp, she describes an existence that is steeped in the observance of devout contemplation. While the consensus is that Shelly has become increasingly pious in her letters — that indeed she has evolved in spirit from Shelly to Sister Rose Marie — there still is a part of her that remains a cutup. Example:

"I was given a wheat biscuit, a couple of nuts, three pieces of cheese and a grapefruit," she wrote of her culinary initiation to the Monastery of the Poor Clares. " 'Appetizers,' I thought. I kept waiting for the main meal . . . I am still waiting."

For Sister Rose Marie and the twelve other Poor Clares who share the cloister with her, each day begins not with corporeal sustenance but with penance. The chiming of the Matins bells calls the Sisters from sleep at 12:30 A.M. for prayers, during which, as Mother Mary Francis P.C.C. observed in her book, "the anguish and loneliness and fear of those who have never heard of us and whom we have never heard of" are held up in invocation. When this period of solemn adoration is over at 2 A.M., the Poor Clare pads shoeless back to her "cell," as it is called, and dozes off again until the Matins bells summon them back for prayers at 5 A.M. The Poor Clare never sleeps for more than four hours at a stretch, and, as Sister Rose Marie joked in one of her letters: *"I will not report to you my initial feelings of the bell ringer or her bell!"*

The schedule of events that commences with the dawn at the Monastery of the Poor Clares in Alexandria is observed with strict obedience. There is a public Mass in the small chapel at 7 A.M., during which the Sisters sit in the choir shielded behind iron crossbars. Scant helpings of coffee and bread are served when Mass ends, housecleaning and other chores are then done and, at 11:00 A.M., the Sisters are summoned to chant Scriptures and psalms. In a letter describing her indoctrination to the Poor Clare Program, Sister Rose Marie observed: *"There was a dozen or so prayers that needed to be memorized ASAP . . . trying to figure out when to stand or kneel . . . and most devastating to me, [enduring] life without Twix bars."*

No Twix bars and no beef or chicken are ever allowed. For dinner — which is served at noon — the Poor Clare is provided each day with soup, a vegetable, potato, fruit and what is called a "third portion," which is set out as the principal dish. Upon the conclusion of dinner, prayers are said again, the dishes are cleaned and, at 2 P.M., the Sisters convene for Vespers, the devotional exercise that ushers in the evening. When Vespers are over, there is a small snack, night prayers, and the retiring bell tolls at 8:30. The Poor Clare returns to her "cell." Still clothed in her habit, she arranges herself on her straw mattress and sleeps until, as Sister Rose Marie observed in a letter to Karen Daly:

"Life proceeds with the usual bells."

Dear Harry,

I thought you could use the help of a few angels (see reverse side of Christmas card), so I send them to you in the hopes that at least a few of them can shoot over 50 percent.

How is my beloved old coach? I do not have a single bit of news about how the team is doing, and possibly that is because I am becoming more and more removed from it all . . .

It is kind of amazing to realize that I stopped playing for you five and a half seasons ago. I wonder if I would recognize you as the same coach . . . I think of you often, and enjoy telling stories about you to all the nuns, most of whom have never seen a live basketball game . . .

Things are going well for me, and I am truly very happy . . . Maybe only in heaven will I realize what an immeasurable grace it is to be given a vocation to the religious life.

Love,
Sister Rose Marie

When Shelly Pennefather graduated from high school in upstate New York, she had basketball scholarships to well over two hundred colleges. She was that good. Through junior high in Colorado and four seasons of high school ball in both Denver and Utica, New York, Pennefather did not lose a single game. Not one. It was not until she came to Villanova that she became acquainted with losing, and Perretta still gets a kick out of that. "She was perfect until she came here," he said with a laugh in his cluttered office at Villanova. "I showed her how to lose."

A picture of Shelly from her old days at Villanova occupies a prominent place on the wall, and whenever Perretta looks up at it from his desk, it reminds him how he happened to recruit her. While the consensus seemed to be that she would attend Providence (she has a brother who played for Rick Pitino there), Pennefather came to Villanova for a visit and Perretta found himself immersed in a conversation with her on the Blessed Mother. Quite religious himself ("I pray the rosary every day," Perretta said), the Wildcats' coach remembers that Pennefather showed him the medal of the Virgin Mary that she wore.

"She told me how she believed in the power of prayer," Perretta said. "We had an unusual conversation."

Shelly Pennefather had simply a wonderful career at Villanova.

When she graduated in 1987, she ended up the school's all-time leading scorer for women *and* men with a career total of 2,408 points. She won the coveted Wade Trophy that season as the outstanding senior in America and still holds 21 individual records at Villanova. She also is part of eight team records. Grinning with pride, her father, Mike, observed that "she was the Larry Bird of her sport. She was something else."

Perretta concurred. "I remember she would come in here, sleep for an hour on the sofa, go down, get dressed and score twenty-five," he said. "Like clockwork."

When the chance presented itself in 1987 to play professionally in Japan for the Nippon Express, Pennefather accepted, and the experience there proved to be pivotal. Although she learned how to speak and write Japanese, she was living alone in a foreign culture and had a great deal of time between games to read and think. She seemed to flourish in the solitude. She continued to attend Mass each day and even had a provision included in her \$200,000 annual contract: Wherever her team traveled in Japan, special arrangements had to be made for her to observe Mass. Because Japan has only a small percentage of Catholic churches, that sometimes could be quite difficult.

"She had an apartment alone and she began doing some deep spiritual reading," her father said. "She developed a profound interest in the religious life in Japan."

Until Shelly came back from Japan in the fall of 1990 and started working in the summers for Mother Teresa Missionary of Charity in Norristown, Mike Pennefather had no inkling that his daughter planned to become a nun. However, while growing up in places as diverse as Hawaii, Germany, and Australia as her father traveled the world during his twenty-eight years in the Air Force, Shelly was reared in a home that had two passions: sports and the Bible. Forbidding a TV in the house because he considers it a "sewer," Mike Pennefather and his wife, Mary Jane, pointed each of their children to basketball and the church. Mary Jane even had entered a convent herself at one point in her life. (She would not consent to be interviewed for this article.)

"I knew when Sister Rose Marie began working for Mother Teresa that she was starting to look at this seriously," Mike Pen-

nefather said. "I know Mother Teresa had a deep effect on her. Heck, Mother Teresa has had an effect on the whole world."

Said Daly, a former roommate: "We knew when she came back from Japan that she was considering entering the convent, but when we heard the word 'cloister,' we were shocked. We wondered: Are we ever going to see her again?"

Visitors are allowed in the Monastery of the Poor Clares to see Sister Rose Marie only on rare occasions, and that includes her parents. While the Pennefathers have relocated in suburban Virginia and attend Mass in the public chapel each week, contact with their daughter is limited to three sessions each year. Mike Pennefather leaves her a letter each Saturday when he attends Mass, and while Sister Rose Marie is allowed to read her letters during a period each Sunday, she is not allowed to keep them. Nor is she allowed periodicals.

The world on the other side of the cloister door has become a foreign place to Sister Rose Marie. While she told her former teammates before entering the Order of Poor Clares that she had certain apprehensions, that she knew she had a "calling" but, as she told Angelotti, was not sure she could "follow all the rules," she appears to have become accustomed to her surroundings. The only time she has stepped out of the cloister was for a trip to the emergency room when she cut her index finger on a razor blade, and it occurred to her in one of her early letters how odd that seemed.

"Of course," she wrote, "it had been close to two months since I had seen people walking in shorts, traffic lights and all the usual scenes of a hot summer day. But what was different — and what I had forgotten — was that I would henceforth be treated as religious, not just another human being. This came to my attention as soon as I got to the hospital and the paramedic chirped: 'Hello, Sister!'"

Dear Mom and Dad Daly,

I am still trying to recover from the wounding blow that you did not name your firstborn after me — Shelisha Daly has such a melodic ring to it . . .

Somehow I immensely enjoy imagining my old roomie swamped with bottles, powder, lotions and diapers. It is so much more picturesque than envisioning you with the latest computer, and infinitely more valuable . . .

I am lost in wonder of the richness of our faith and the inexhaustible grace that God holds out for us in the ordinary comings and goings in our daily life. If only we could be made consciously aware of His presence with us at every moment, how different we would speak or act, or more closely monitor what we watch or read. To think that He is the Silent Listener to our every conversation, all our thoughts and words and deeds lay open to Him. In the silence of hidden, monastic life, His presence becomes so very real . . .

Love and Prayers,
Sister Rose Marie

When Villanova held its annual alumni basketball game for its former women players one Saturday at duPont Pavilion, everybody seemed to show up: Lisa Angelotti came from South Jersey; Karen Daly was there with her husband and baby; Mary Beth Culp dropped in and so did some others. Each had with them a dessert or some other dish, and, when the game was over, the women convened at picnic tables that had been set up and ate. Great fun was had, but something just seemed wrong . . . Shelly was not there.

"Not a single day passes that we do not think of her," said Angelotti, who is a nurse. "We miss her."

Said Daly: "We love her."

A whole group of former teammates visited Shelly back in the spring and it was just like old times, despite the habit Shelly wore and the screen that separated them. Shelly was the same old Shelly, brimming with laughter and joy. The hour passed quickly — too quickly — and when it was over, the women piled in the car and headed back to Philadelphia and Sister Rose Marie disappeared back to her quiet world, a world to which her only window is a pen and a piece of paper.