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COLUMN ONE; 'I Want to Become a Nun'; Ann Magovern has made a rare decision that has led her on a sometimes painful, sometimes exhilarating journey. At 27, she is joining a world that seems a generation away from her own.

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At a friend's home two years ago, Ann Magovern announced that she had big news. The friend silently wondered, "Is she pregnant?"

No, this was about a secret ambition, one that Magovern, usually frank and open, had nursed for years.

"I want to become a nun," blurted the 25-year-old teacher, the youngest daughter of a prominent surgeon whose five other children had become doctors, lawyers and computer programmers.

Friends and family members were stunned. Why, they wondered, would a vibrant woman of privilege who listens to edgy rock groups such as R.E.M. and gracefully tolerates the nickname "MaGoover" choose a path they could scarcely fathom? There were no nuns or priests in her family, and no spiritual saviors in her crowd of friends, who by now had launched fledgling careers, were attending grad school or were married.

But today, pushed by the vague feeling that God is leading her, here she is, training to become a nun, living in a house at Mount St. Mary's College west of Downtown with five nuns, the youngest of whom is almost twice her age.

A generation ago, groups of more than 50 women like Magovern enrolled every fall as "candidates" at the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, the largest order in the Los Angeles area. Today, Magovern is the only one--The Candidate, the sisters call her, a blue-eyed, athletic woman with a ready smile who puts styling gel in her short copper-colored curls.

She is entering the third of five years of preparation before she takes her vows of chastity, obedience and poverty and joins a dwindling tradition. In the last three decades, the number of nuns in America has been halved to 94,000. Few young women have taken the places of those who have left; the median age is 65.

Magovern's journey to sisterhood is a complicated, sometimes emotionally painful rite of passage, a gantlet of heady exhilaration and grave doubts that involves straddling two worlds and different generations. At times she feels like she no longer quite belongs to either world, as though her in-between status sets her apart from friends, family and the sisters. God may be leading her, but she is uncertain exactly where he will take her. It is a time when looking into the future can be terrifying, when finding words for this internal mystery can be wrenching.

"I know I want to be here; I know I don't want to leave," said Magovern, now 27. "What I feel today--is that what I will want tomorrow? It's when I look down the line--what about 10 years from now? Can I live without a family? Can I live without having my own children?"
A Shock for Her Family

Magovern comes and goes freely in the austere world of the nuns. They have no personal credit cards or bank accounts. As a candidate, she browses at the Gap and drives her blue Ford Bronco, a present from her father when she was a college senior. She can dine out, quaff beer, fly across the country. Most evenings, she prays with her housemates who, having taken the vow of poverty, live frugally on an allowance. ("I shop at Target for underwear," confides one.) She teaches at a Catholic school, meets regularly with a spiritual adviser and attends religious retreats. Next year she will move into the novitiate and study religion full time. Two years later she will take her vows.

Growing up in Pittsburgh, Magovern attended church every week. Her mother, a housewife, attended Mass every day and the rest of the family gave a respectful nod to religion. "We did what good Catholics are supposed to do," Magovern said. No more, no less. "My family is upper-class; you get married, you have kids, you succeed."

Following her brothers and sisters, Magovern went to Catholic school until eighth grade, when she switched to a co-ed prep school. At Boston College, which is run by Jesuits, her feelings about her spirituality began to crystallize. Prayer became a source of comfort. She prayed in her own meditative fashion, sometimes gazing out a window or watching a candle and listening to George Winston's New Age piano music, locked in a free-fall of her own thoughts.

During her senior year, the English and education major sat on a bunk with her roommate and discussed becoming a nun. It was a fleeting thought--after all, the roommate reminded her, she had always said she wanted to rear a big family.

After college, she lived in Washington, D.C. Bored with her waitress job, Magovern applied to the Teach for America program, which dispatches recent graduates to public schools as paid instructors. Landing a spot

teaching reading at Centennial High School in Compton, she figured she would probably meet her future husband on the West Coast.

It was a dizzying new world. In her classes of 50 students, she periodically summoned security officers to quell fights. Every day she returned home exhausted, with only enough energy to eat dinner. More and more, she turned to prayer for solace.

“I struggled a lot with who I was,” she said. “When every button is pushed, when your patience, your generosity, everything is pushed--I turned to God, I guess. That’s where I was finding strength.

“Out of all this misery, this chaos, the thought of religious life resurfaced. I was away from college friends, family and I was ready. I thought: ‘This is enough. Are you going to talk about it or do it?’ “

During her second year in Compton she sought out priests and nuns, quizzing them about their lives. She expected them to be soft-spoken, almost saint-like, but their values and goals seemed very similar to her own.

It seemed to Magovern that the nuns had fun: Super Bowl parties, ice cream and gin fizzes at Thanksgiving dinner. It also seemed like they supported each other; they were not out on their own as they struggled to change the world. And they were changing it, whether working as teachers or running homeless shelters. It was a sense of impact that Magovern felt slipping away the longer she battled for order in her classroom.

Now she would resist no more. She would follow this insuppressible notion. She would become a nun.

First she told her friends. Then she flew home to Pittsburgh to tell her parents.

After dinner, Magovern announced she wanted to discuss something. Was she quitting teaching? her mother asked. No. Her parents looked at her expectantly. “I think they thought I’d say I was engaged,” Magovern recalled.

“You would never guess what I’m going to tell you,” said Magovern, drawing a deep breath. “I’m thinking of becoming a nun.”

Her mother’s mouth dropped open. She and her father sat silently for what seemed like an eternity.

“Are you sure?” her father finally asked. “We never heard you talk about this. What about marriage?” They ticked off the names of old boyfriends.

By the time she flew back to Los Angeles a few days later, her parents, who declined to be interviewed for this story, agreed to think it over. When she returned for Christmas, her father had reached a conclusion. "I don't think you should do this," he said.

Magovern felt crushed.

"When you fall in love, do people pick you apart and ask you why you love this person?" she thought.

Her older sister Mary cautioned her, "Don't do this or not do this because of Mom and Dad. They are not going to be around in 30 years and you have got to live with this."

Magovern agonized, then decided to take the plunge. She could, after all, always change her mind.

She passed a battery of psychological tests, went through interviews, moved to Mount St. Mary's campus last August and began teaching in the fall at the all-girls St. Mary's Academy.

'The Candidate' Arrives

On the day Magovern arrived, Sister James Marien Dyer saw a young man and woman walking around a light blue Volkswagen bug. She suddenly realized this must be her new housemate, The Candidate.

"I had heard that her roommate Patrick [who shared a house with Magovern and another friend] was helping her move. I thought, 'Oh?' " said Sister James, 50, raising an eyebrow. "OK. It's a different world."

Very different.

Sisters James, Maria Angela Mesa and Janet Duffy had joined the convent at the end of high school in the early 1960s. "Nuns were a given; they were part of our lives," said Sister Janet. "You saw them on the street, you saw them on the buses."

Despite the strict rules, they flocked to the convents, eager to serve God and community. Sister James had 50 in her group. They packed trunks with black clothing and heavy black shoes.

Her mother took her to buy footwear at a shop that catered to elderly women. As the clerk pulled out sturdy shoes that no fashionable woman would ever don, he beamed at the young girl who was gritting her teeth: "You're so smart to be wearing these."

As Sister James' bus was about to pull up to the convent, several young women leaned out the window, drawing heavily on their last cigarettes. Many cried, knowing they would scarcely see friends and

family, who could visit for two hours one Sunday each month. Days, which began at 5 a.m., were punctuated by periods of Grand Silence, which could be broken only in an emergency, and General Silence, when individuals spoke only when addressed.

After swearing their vows, the women donned the full black habit. “It was so uncomfortable,” recalled Sister Angela, 51, a frail, bird-like woman with jet-black hair. “Put your hands over your ears and talk--that’s what it was like.”

With the liberalization ushered in by the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s, the Sisters of St. Joseph opted first for modified habits, then street clothing. Rid of the heavy robe that once tented her body, Sister Angela suddenly realized that opening the refrigerator chilled her legs. For those who had become accustomed to lengthy silences, handouts offered suggestions on how to start conversations.

Sister Angela and the others watch over Magovern carefully, realizing again and again how distinct her experience is from theirs.

“Now she’s doing it on her own, totally,” said Sister Angela.

At first, when friends came to visit Magovern in her house with the five nuns, artificial formality reigned. She would scurry about, serving beverages to peers who normally would have raided the refrigerator. She laughed at everyone’s jokes. In front of the nuns, certain words--for instance, “butt”--were carefully omitted. It was like introducing a new boyfriend to your parents.

It was just as awkward for her pals. “It was like when I spend time with some of my mom’s friends; you put on your polite self,” said Nora Simpson, 26, one of Magovern’s Teach for America colleagues.

Last fall, when the novelty of her adventure wore off, Magovern felt as though she had lost her footing in her old world and hadn’t gained it in her new one. Her housemates were friendly, but they had become nuns before she was born.

“This was really hard. I didn’t know who I was,” she said. “No one knew me. I didn’t know them. I felt like I was being torn in two; I couldn’t go anywhere where anybody knew me. People knew of me as ‘The Candidate.’”

Magovern padded into the kitchen one Friday night last October and Sister Janet, 51, asked her how she was doing. Magovern automatically replied: “Fine.” The next thing she knew, she was weeping on Sister Janet’s shoulder, spilling with anxieties--concerns she had tucked away lest her housemates think she had doubts about her calling.

“I hadn’t shared anything with anyone and I wasn’t sure I could,” she

said. "It was this lonely feeling--like, 'Can I cry here?'"

The ice was broken. Magovern began to accept her new identity. She could joke about being caught between two identities without feeling remorse.

"My friends are all getting married and I'm sharing a bathroom with Angela--that's about as much intimacy as I'm getting," she said wryly.

"You're right about that, sweetheart," replied Sister Angela.

Age differences became less important. At the conclusion of prayers one evening, Sister Mary Williams, 65, put on a Paul Simon tape and played the song "Graceland." Instantly, Magovern began bobbing her chin with exaggerated vigor to the pulsing beat.

Sister James was impressed. "Show me how to do that," she begged.

Sister Kieran Vaughan, 54, was incredulous. "Do you really like that music?"

Doubts, Fears and Faith

In January, Magovern's parents visited her for the first time. Her father quizzed the sisters about health care and how his daughter would be provided for. By the end, he seemed comfortable with the answers. He conceded that he never would have chosen this for her but that it was her decision. And, for the first time, she felt her parents supported what she was doing.

She drove through Downtown Los Angeles feeling ecstatic, more certain than ever that she was on the right track. But soon afterward the doubts returned and the fear set in. Another long internal dialogue ensued before she was able to clinch a bargain with herself. God had led her here and she had followed, she decided. If he chose to lead her somewhere else, she would oblige. It was a mantra she could remember, and she felt calmer. She began to realize that the more she expressed her doubts, the easier they were to exorcise. She felt more certain than ever that God was with her and that she was doing the right thing.

"For me, that's how God works--ups and downs," she said. "There's strength that comes from that."

Her out-of-state friends noticed a change. "She's getting that 'nun voice,' a really serene voice," said Mollie Blackburn, a sixth-grade teacher in Georgia.

She felt at home with God, with the sisters. There were simple moments, such as standing in the shower, when she felt overjoyed to devote her life to God. In the fall, she had bought a candle for prayers and it had sputtered, the wick refusing to burn. But recently the candle

burned smoothly and she prayed by its glow with no distraction. It seemed to symbolize her journey, full of problems that were now--at least temporarily--solved.

She had become the kind of person who not only knew God was with her when hymnal voices surrounded her at Mass but also sensed him, sometimes belatedly, in everyday life.

In a race, for example. Magovern, a runner since high school, threw herself into readying a group of her students for the Los Angeles Marathon in March. She ran three times a week after school with 15 girls. At first, some had wheezed after half a mile. Getting them in shape was a constant battle. When the kids, despite their promises, did not run during a vacation, Magovern felt despair. Why was she pursuing this? Was she imposing her own ambition on them? Wasn't this a detour from her religious journey?

When she prayed, Magovern found herself wandering, her thoughts straying to training. This worried her. How could she be a nun if she couldn't pray without fretting over whether the kids had the right kind of sneakers?

It rained relentlessly the March night before the marathon. Magovern cried. She had been defeated. All this work for nothing. Would any of them show up?

All 12 did, with their parents in tow. Magovern ran with two freshmen, who finished in 6 1/2 hours. They wept and cursed her for the final two miles. She told them, "Yell all you want, just keep moving." By 6 p.m., nine were done and two had quit. Only Gina--short, asthmatic, overweight--remained on the course.

Magovern anxiously waited. When she had last seen Gina, the girl's glasses were completely fogged and she was soaked by the rain. Magovern was ready to fetch her in a van but the girl's mother would not budge. "I know my Gina," she told Magovern. "She'll be here." Gina's mother maintained her vigil, huddled beneath an umbrella in a beach chair. As the minutes ticked by, Magovern began to pray. Suddenly, Gina's mother leaped up and there, in the distance, was the last runner, hobbling in the downpour.

Magovern felt a powerful rush of emotion. Once again, she wept, but for completely different reasons. It was seeing a mother's unfailing love for her child. It was the victory of achieving her own goal of getting the kids to run. It was sensing a higher presence. These were tears of jubilation.

"When I looked back," The Candidate said later, "I could see that God was there all along."

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