

Nun, Sailor, Teacher, Priest: The Improbable Career of Moni McIntyre

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Introduction

Moni McIntyre, born in 1948 and raised in Detroit, Michigan, is the product of a close-knit working-class family. “We were Catholic but not hyper-Catholic,” she asserted, but her education in Catholic schools nevertheless determined her religiously oriented career. “As a girl, I was limited in what I could do. I couldn’t be an altar boy or a choir boy, and I certainly couldn’t be a priest. That other stuff didn’t appeal to me but being a priest certainly did.”

After high school graduation in 1966, Moni opted for what the Catholic Church deemed at that time the highest calling for women: becoming a nun. “I didn’t feel I wanted to be married and have children like my sister, but I felt God was calling me so I went. And it wasn’t a bad second choice,” she emphasized. “In fact, it was the finest choice I could make at the time.”

In 1966, she joined the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) Congregation in Monroe, Michigan, a community of religious women whom Moni found both understanding and welcoming. Indeed, her fellow nuns, most being older and more mature, “were kind, generous, intelligent, highly educated, and wonderful role models. Every one of them had at least a master’s and some had PhDs.” The Congregation’s main function was being a source of teachers for Catholic schools.

Moni’s transition from high school graduate to nun occurred right after the Second Vatican Council, better known as Vatican II (1962-1965). Although many Church reforms and promises of reform came out of Vatican II, the cosmetic changes were what drew everyone’s attention. Nuns were no longer obligated to wear the traditional habits or cover their hair. During her first year as a sister, Moni wore her own clothes but then transitioned to a modified habit.



Sr. Moni McIntyre, IHM, with Family, 1967

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The novice nun quickly noted that Vatican II had left many more waves than ripples in its wake. The relaxed dress code was the least of those transformational waves. The highly rigid system, which had governed many religious orders for centuries, suddenly became more liberal and decentralized with an emphasis on individual freedom and initiative. For some, change was coming much too fast. Even for Moni, still a rookie, everything suddenly seemed to have become unhinged and confusing. “It went from ordered and disciplined to something resembling chaos. I didn’t know where we were going,” she pointed out, “so I had to leave my community, even though I had a feeling I would be back.”

No longer an active sister, Moni plunged into higher education preparing for a career in teaching. She attended Mercy College in Detroit to major in English and theology. She earned a master’s degree in English at Eastern Michigan University, becoming certified as a secondary education teacher.

Even with those qualifications, jobs were limited at that time. “Being a baby boomer, I realized that there were way more of us than jobs, and very few as English teachers.” She immediately got a position teaching religion and English in several Detroit Catholic high schools, the first being Rosary High School.

As a teacher in Rosary High, Moni was exposed to an ugly dose of racism. During the early decade of the 1970s, many African-Americans were moving to Detroit and the White working-class students showed little tolerance for Black classmates in their surroundings. “The horrible manifestations of racism were evident throughout the city,” she vividly recollected, “and the school actually closed.” Moni then moved to Benedictine, another Catholic high school, but found she hadn’t left the race issue behind. The situation at Benedictine became intolerable until that school eventually shut down. Nevertheless, while teaching at Benedictine as a half-time student, she earned a second master’s degree in religious studies from the University of Windsor, just across the Detroit River in Windsor, Ontario.

In 1974, Moni returned to the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. She then got a job at Marian High School in Birmingham, Michigan, where she taught for 11 years. During her tenure at Marian, Moni’s continuing thirst for higher learning seemed insatiable. She began taking classes at SS. Cyril & Methodius Seminary and earned a third master’s degree in divinity, graduating in 1983. Two years later, as a full-time student at St. Michael’s College at the University of Toronto, she began a PhD program in theology, receiving that degree in 1990. Her subjects of interest were moral theology and Christian ethics, with an emphasis on ecological spirituality. Her dissertation eventually became a book in 1992 entitled *Social Ethics and the Return to Cosmology: A Study of Gibson Winter*. This book explored the major writings of Gibson Winter, a renowned social ethicist.

Nun-Sailor

Even as Moni McIntyre taught school as a nun while advancing her own education, another opportunity presented itself, one that at first seemed curious and completely incongruous. The year was 1979. While at the home of a friend, she saw a recruiting flyer for the U.S. Navy Reserve. As she recalled, the military was under attack at that time with protestors questioning what President Dwight Eisenhower had once called the “Military-Industrial Complex.” Her fellow nuns were pacifists and frequently protested war and the U.S. military’s role in it. “I

thought to myself, ‘What do these people know? Wouldn’t it be cool if someone from the outside could see what was going on from the inside?’”

The recruiting literature indicated that the enlistment was for two years, and the commitment required duty one weekend a month and two weeks a year. “I figured I could handle that so I sought permission from my provincial--my superior. I pointed out to her that ‘we criticize the Church but we stay in it. We criticize the military but no one knows what it’s like from the inside. What if I do this?’ She had heard a lot of crazy things from me before but had never heard that one.”

As with every endeavor, Moni persisted and finally received permission from religious superiors to join the Navy Reserve. Moni McIntyre became the only enlisted nun in any of the armed services at the time. Her rank was second class yeoman (YN2), a rating equivalent to a civilian clerical position.

One of her first military duties was attending the Navy’s career counseling school. She thought about what happened when an undersecretary of the Navy showed up one day and addressed her and her fellow sailors. During a follow-up question-and-answer session, the outspoken YN2 McIntyre didn’t ask a question but instead raised a few military eyebrows when she declared, “I don’t understand the underutilization of talent in this organization.” The undersecretary seemed puzzled. Moni persevered. “I have several master’s degrees. My commanding officer will hand me a sheet of paper with his signature at the bottom of the page and say, ‘Write a letter to say this or that.’ How long could I be expected to last with that kind of challenge?”

Fortunately, the new sailor didn’t suffer any repercussions for her outspokenness. It seems she wasn’t the only enlisted member asked to work well below his or her potential. She knew another sailor, a trained physicist, who had published in several scientific journals. He, too, was assigned to do lowly tasks. In Moni’s case, however, the U.S. Navy Reserve, unfortunately, had neglected to inform her before she enlisted that she qualified to be an officer. Shortly thereafter, she was commissioned a reserve officer in October 1981.

Being a part-time naval officer now while still maintaining her status as a nun became a tricky situation. The feeling among her fellow sisters was mostly positive, but some felt that being in the military was neither consistent with her religious duties nor in keeping with her vows. Why, they asked, would the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary allow a “warmonger” in their midst? “There were those who didn’t understand my motivation or care to understand it,” Moni called to mind. “My original purpose hadn’t changed. Let’s see what the military is like from the inside first before we condemn it.” In time, the novelty of the nun-sailor waned, and Moni remained in the Navy Reserve, enjoyed serving both her country and her religious community.



CAPT Moni McIntyre, USNR, on deployment to Bahrain, 1997

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In 1990, in her civilian role, Moni began teaching ethics and moral theology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. Her students ranged from undergraduates to master's and PhD candidates. In time, she found that the Catholic Church was no longer addressing her needs. "The sexism, classism, racism--all of that--was making me crazy." In an exploratory mood, she began attending services at a nearby Episcopal church. Besides speaking in Catholic venues, she also spoke to various Protestant and Jewish audiences. After one such talk, a senior member of the diocese informed Moni, "If you were a member of the Episcopal Church, we would ordain you."

"I let that one go as long as I could, then spoke to an Episcopal priest, a very wise man named Arthur McNulty. He was the rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh. I told him about my conflict and how I was having trouble dealing with it. He advised me to 'fight it off for a year and then give in.' The conflict he saw in me was that I would have to leave my church and community to become a priest. And being a priest had been on my mind since fourth grade."

Moni weighed her decision for three years. Her community of nuns was "very supportive and wonderful. They didn't want to lose me but knew this decision was very important. 'You have to do what you have to do, what God calls you to do,' they insisted. These were extremely wise women who wanted the best for me."

Moni agonized some more before deciding to leave her beloved community--and Catholicism. "But the call to the priesthood was quite genuine, and I needed to pursue it. Those women were near and dear to me. They were the foundation of my life in so many ways. The most painful thing I ever did was signing the papers releasing me from my vows and leaving my community/congregation because they were the most supportive group I've ever known. That was the closest I ever came to courage. I had no idea if I would have a job because I figured Duquesne would toss me out. But if I have to work at McDonald's, I am going to do this."

How did her family weigh in on her becoming an Episcopal priest? Her father had passed away some years before, but before he died, however, he had said to his wife, "That kid wants to be a priest." When Moni asked her mother how she would feel if she left the "community" and became a priest, her mom replied that she had been waiting for this. "My parents loved me for who I am, not what they wanted me to be."

Rebel Nun

In June 2000, Moni McIntyre was ordained a deacon in the Episcopal Church, which was a step on the path to priesthood. "I said nothing and kept it very quiet. I asked everybody I knew to keep it quiet." Moni by now had her prerequisites for the priesthood in order. "Because I already had a master's in divinity, I really didn't have to add anything to my education. And I was already teaching Catholic priests and Episcopal priests for their PhD work." Six months later, she was ordained a priest at age 52. She then served the Church of the Holy Cross in Homewood, the only African-American church in the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh from 2000 to 2016.

Keeping the news of her new status could not easily be contained. Suddenly Moni's life became quite complicated. Duquesne had hired her as Sister Moni McIntyre. What would her future entail once one of the nation's leading Catholic universities learned that she had

left the Catholic sisterhood? After consulting with an attorney, the lawyer advised Moni not to say anything. She told her to inform only the university officials that she was leaving her order, but not to mention that she had become a priest. “Duquesne had several professors and instructors who were not Catholic,” Moni pointed out. “We had a tenured male rabbi and a female Episcopal priest teaching the same courses I taught. So what’s the big deal?” Nevertheless, it turned out to be a very big deal. The story of Duquesne’s rebel nun made it all the way to the Vatican and elsewhere around the world.

Retribution came swiftly. In January 2001, Moni was ousted from her position as a professor in the university’s theology department. Duquesne’s president, John Murray, Jr., defended his decision. “She is now a publicly proclaimed, official teacher of Anglican doctrine, which differs from Roman Catholic doctrine in very important areas. To present her as a teacher of Roman Catholic theology under these circumstances is a contradiction which is not in keeping with the mission of the department of theology, the university or the Roman Catholic Church.” Moni can still remember how ugly the entire dispute became. At that time, she received no backing from the faculty and was considered a traitor by many of her colleagues.

A hard-fought legal battle ensued. The president of Duquesne asked for her resignation but Moni refused to give it. “There were other members of the faculty who might have been seen as equally controversial, such as ex-priests who had married. But they were men.” Moni saw her situation as blatantly sexist. “Men can break some rules; women can’t.” Ousting her, now a tenured professor, from the theology department was one thing, but dismissing her from Duquesne’s faculty altogether was another. Grounds for total dismissal didn’t exist. “I hadn’t committed moral turpitude. I wasn’t incompetent and my lawyer knew that. President Murray, a lawyer himself, had taught my lawyer contract law in law school and she learned his lessons well.”

Moni’s attorney did indeed learn contract law very well, as it turned out for Moni’s case. She and Duquesne finally reached a compromise. While she was reassigned to the Graduate Center for Social and Public Policy, from time to time, she was called upon to teach theology. “No one ever asked me if I knew anything about Social and Public Policy. Nevertheless, my mentors--my community of nuns--had been brilliant teachers. I felt I could teach anything to anybody. I wasn’t going to fail.” Even though the Social and Public Policy Center closed in 2015, Moni was invited to teach in Duquesne’s sociology department until she retired in 2019.

Ethics Consultant

Even as Moni pursued her once turbulent academic career at Duquesne, she was also performing her military duty as a U.S. Navy Reserve officer. During her second tour as a commanding officer, she was in charge of a mine warfare unit for two years, but was careful to keep that fact from her fellow nuns. As she advanced through the ranks, Moni became known for her teaching skills and expertise in ethics. Due to her PhD in ethics, and having taught health care ethics for 10 years, she was selected as the Navy Surgeon General’s ethics consultant in 2000. She was also asked to teach health care ethics at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, for her annual two-week active duty.

As a member of a health care ethics team, Moni went to military bases all over the country teaching that subject to physicians, dentists, nurses, and other medical personnel. “That changed my Navy life,” she said. “I was teaching everyone.” Some of this travel was during the

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summer, some during the school year. Meanwhile, she was still teaching full-time at Duquesne, and, as a priest, ministering to her parish. “I was a little busy,” she quipped with a semblance of understatement.

Captain Moni McIntyre retired from the Navy Reserve in 2008 after 28 years of service. Despite her retirement from Duquesne in 2019, her affiliation with the military has continued. She still teaches medical ethics nine times a year at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (formerly the National Naval Medical Center) in Bethesda.

Even though she had already witnessed three retirements, the Rev. Dr. Moni McIntyre acted as interim pastor of St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh. Her “Tuesdays with Moni” became a popular feature on the church’s website. In September, the indefatigable and outspoken priest began serving yet again to become pastor of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

For 54 years, Moni McIntyre always focused on her lifelong ambition, becoming a priest and assuming the sacred duties of the priesthood. With spunk and an irrepressible spirit, she achieved that goal, notably skipping altar boy and choir boy along the way. Nun, sailor, teacher, priest: An improbable life for Moni McIntyre.



Special Notation

All of the photographs in this article were provided by Rev. Dr. Moni McIntyre from her own personal collection. They are used here with her permission.