

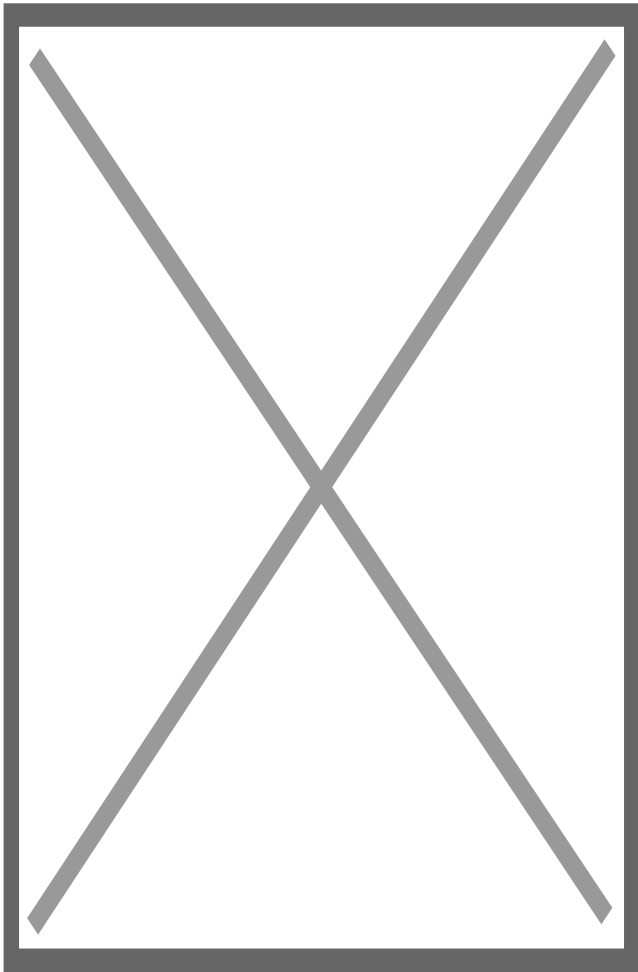
From comedy club to convent

How an insecure stand-up comic became a moderately famous Episcopal nun

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue

Published on December 23, 2025

In Review



A Change of Habit

Leaving Behind My Husband, Career, and Everything I Owned to Become a Nun

By Sister Monica Clare

Crown

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Claudette Powell was working as a live-in nanny in her early 20s when her employer, a lapsed Catholic married to a Jew, suggested that they take the kids to church. Powell, “a twice-lapsed Baptist and Mormon” who hadn’t been to church in years, cautiously agreed. They went to a Christmas Eve service at All Saints’ Episcopal Church of Beverly Hills, where “even the poinsettias were tasteful,” and when Powell saw that the priest was a woman, she “nearly fell right off the pew.” Thus began her transformation into Sister Monica Clare, an Episcopal sister who is best known these days for her TikTok channel @nunsenseforthepeople.

Her transformation, which she chronicles in *A Change of Habit*, takes two decades and involves a lot of work—including therapy and Al-Anon to process the violence of her turbulent childhood, various jobs including film editing and stand-up comedy, a painful break from her biological father, and a disastrous marriage that she knows from the start is “an exercise in feeble hope.”

Much of the memoir is dedicated to describing Powell’s insecurities and failures. Some of these failures are monumental, like the time when she inadvertently turns a \$10 flea market ring from her ambivalent boyfriend into a marriage proposal. Others are more trivial, like the time when she gets invited to a birthday party for Jimmy Fallon (who she’s never met) and there are only a handful of people there so she spends the whole evening being a wallflower, and when she tries to sneak out, Fallon (who she still hasn’t met) accosts her by the front door and embraces her in a giant, theatrical hug while making her the butt of a whispered joke.

As these failures unfold, God always seems to be lingering in the background—not a theologically rigorous or morally demanding God, but simply one who consistently beckons to Powell with the promise to provide what she craves most in life: security, safety, comfort, kindness, a sense of belonging, and enduring love.

It’s hard to pinpoint the moment when Powell becomes Sister Monica Clare, so gradual and organic is her transformation. During her first visit to the Community of St. John Baptist in New Jersey, she participates in a weekend of discernment and leaves with a strong sense that this community will be her future home. But postulants are required to be debt-free, and it takes Powell seven years to pay off her enormous college loans and credit card bills (since along the way she volunteers to pay her half sister’s college tuition). By the time she takes vows, it’s clear that God has been effecting this change in her identity for a long time—perhaps from the moment she decided to become a nun at age five while watching Audrey Hepburn play the title role in *The Nun’s Story*, or maybe from the moment a few years later when she blinked the water out of her eyes after Preacher Mathis baptizes her in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, or possibly even from the moment when God knit her together in her mother’s womb.

When Powell finally enters the convent, she goes in clear-eyed, knowing that whatever problems you leave behind will find a way to follow you to such a place. Still, it’s not as easy as she expects. She writes, “Joining the convent is the first step—thriving in monastic life is another.” It’s hard to share meals in silence when you have misophonia—an anxiety disorder in which the sound of other people chewing and clinking their silverware against their plates causes extreme discomfort. She struggles to find her place in the hymnal, forgets to put out the chalice for mass, and jokes at the wrong times. She doubts herself all the time: “Was it possible that in addition to being bad at singing and being the worst chapel sister ever, I was also bad at prayer?” Nevertheless, she persists—and with the help of her community members, she eventually becomes a novice, then a professed sister, and eventually sister superior.

The final section of the book unfolds in an increasingly pastoral tone. The comedian who uses humor “as a shield to deflect intimacy” is replaced with a wise, although still sometimes wry, person of faith who gently offers observations about God’s activity in the world and our accountability to one another. She finds herself “set free from the frantic urge to get it right.” She learns that conflict in a relationship doesn’t inevitably lead to violence or rejection. She works through some of her childhood trauma by doing ministry with unhoused men

during a three-year assignment in New York City.

Through all of this, she reflects on her growing awareness that the unconditional love she's always craved has been with her all along. Powell may have needed to become a professed sister to see it, but by the end of the book she's amply demonstrated that this gift—the love of God that draws us into community, heals our shortcomings, and equips us to face the world with braveness and compassion—is everywhere in this world.