

# The Prison *Angel*

Years ago, Mary Clarke was a 48-year-old, twice-divorced mother of seven children. She worked in Beverly Hills, Calif., and owned a carbon paper manufacturing company. She dealt with all the movie stars. She went to their parties. She socialized with the celebrities, the kind of people whose faces leer at us out of *People* magazine.

But suddenly, her life changed and she developed a new outlook. What caused it?



She came across a famous photograph, taken during the Holocaust. It is a picture of people lined up. A little 8- or 9-year-old boy is standing with his hands up, and a Nazi is pointing a rifle at the kid, whose little eyes show deep fear and bewilderment.

Clarke looked at that photograph and suddenly realized that life could never be the same for her. She felt an enormous compassion for all those who were victims of other people's brutality, for those who were the most marginalized.

So she went to the bishop of San Diego and said, "I'd like to dedicate myself to those people nobody wants. Who are the most deprived?"



She wound up being called Sister Antonia, and she has been living for the past 25 years in a cell at La Mesa in Tijuana, one of Mexico's most notorious women's prisons, caring for the inmates. These women are certainly among the most abject, forlorn and neglected segment of humanity. Sister Antonia has become their friend, companion, sister, mother and grandmother, all wrapped in one.

While investigating the Mexican criminal justice system, Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Washington Post* correspondents Mary Jordan and Kevin Sullivan heard stories about an Irish-American nun who lived at a prison and helped everyone. Intrigued, they set out to learn more. The result was a book entitled *The Prison Angel*. In it, the authors relate stories told them by prisoners, former prisoners, guards, and the many other people who have worked with or for Sister Antonia. After getting the blessing of the Catholic bishops in California and Mexico, she adopted the name Mother Antonia (nuns are "sisters" in the United States but "mothers" in Mexico) in honor of a priest who had supported her career decision.

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Consider the differences in the two lifestyles of Mary Clarke. She went from a career affording her interaction with celebrities, hobnobbing and partying, but realizing an emptiness that couldn't be filled, to discovering a lifetime of meaning and purpose with incalculable investment in the lives of others.

The associates in Life Care, Century Park and Life Care at Home understand Sister Antonia's personal rewards. They, too, have dedicated their lives to people who find themselves in need – men and women whom society tends to put on a shelf, who often find themselves deprived of appropriate care and compassion.



They may not be called Sister or Mother by these residents, but they are viewed as angels by the people they serve.

– Beecher Hunter