

# Life With Mother

## Mary Johnson's spiritual journey and unquenchable thirst

A new book with definite Beaumont and Lamar University connections is making a splash in American letters this fall. Hailed as an unforgettable spiritual autobiography about a search for meaning that begins alongside one of the great religious icons of our time and ends with a return to the secular world, "An Unquenchable Thirst: Following Mother Teresa in Search of Love, Service, and an Authentic Life" is a gripping, deeply-felt work. Provocative, profound and emotionally charged, the book presents a rare, up-close view of Mother Teresa. At the same time, it is a unique and magnificent memoir of self-discovery.

Mary Johnson moved to Beaumont with her family when she was 12. At the age of 17, she saw Mother Teresa's face on the cover of Time and experienced her calling. Eighteen months later, she entered a convent in the South Bronx to begin her religious training with the Missionaries of Charity, the group commonly known as the Sisters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. For 15 of Mary Johnson's 20 years as Sister Donata, she was stationed in Rome and often lived with Mother Teresa for weeks at a time.

Not without difficulty, this bright, independent-minded Texas teenager eventually adapted to the sisters' austere life of poverty and devotion, and in time became close to Mother Teresa herself.

After leaving the order, she returned to Beaumont and began writing essays about Mother Teresa and her life as a nun while she was a Lamar University student studying with Jim Sanderson and R.S. "Sam" Gwynn in the English department.

In September of this year, a Random House imprint released Johnson's book to enthusiastic notices.

A starred review in Booklist said, "Johnson brings readers close to her story, showing her triumphs and temptations, limning characters as compelling as those in any novel. ... Her

mesmerizing account of trying to orbit the sun that was Mother Teresa vividly captures a life in turmoil."

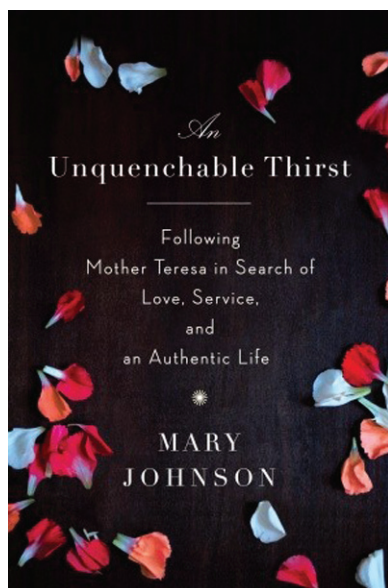
Johnson returned to Lamar in late October for a reading and book signing at the Dishman Art Gallery. The next morning, she spoke for an hour to a Sociology of Religion class taught by Stuart A. Wright, professor of sociology — a class she took over a decade before after leaving the order.

The unflinching honesty of her presentation and willingness to answer all questions posed to her mirror the style and substance of her book. In a conversation after the Lamar session, the Business Journal spoke with Johnson then prepared a list of questions for her consideration.

—James Shannon

**One central premise of a religious order is to be "in the world" but not "of the world" — which seems to be a fundamental contradiction of the human condition. Reading your book, it appears that contradiction ultimately caused you to leave the order. Is that too simplistic an assessment?**

Jesus' commandment that his apostles live "in the world but not of it" is often interpreted to mean that Christians should oppose the dominant culture when it's at odds with Christian values. As humans, I think we should all question consumerism, the overvaluation of celebrity, working to exhaustion, systems that facilitate the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The Missionaries of Charity didn't just question the culture, but cut themselves off from it. We were denied access to friends, fam-



Mary Johnson



Mary Johnson (Sister Donata), Sister Elena (regional superior for Italy), Mother Teresa, Sister Nirmala (Mother Teresa's successor), May 1995, in the convent of the Missionaries of Charity on the Via, Rome



The Johnson family in Beaumont, 1971. Mary is at far left, top row. Photo by John Johnson

ily, newspapers, radio, television, books and magazines — all of these were considered enemies of the spiritual life to which we were called. In the end, I didn't think it was good to cut myself off that radically from the human community.

**Your analogy comparing religious orders to the military seems particularly apt. The purpose of basic training in a time of war is to brainwash new recruits to march into combat even knowing they could be killed.**

**Did you feel the rigors of the novitiate were designed to have you march into spiritual combat — or simply embrace the authoritarian nature of this order?**

The rigorous training of a Missionary of Charity resembled boot camp: We got up at 4:40 every morning, with every minute of the day scheduled until we were in bed at 10. Every mo-

ment was monitored by the sister in charge, who immediately let us know if she thought we were failing in any way, like a drill sergeant might. Many sisters considered obedience the most important element of a spiritual life, but to me love was more important, and often in conflict with obedience. Obedience made us docile members of our religious community, and forced us to learn to put our own thoughts and desires aside, but I'm not sure that it brought us closer to the ideals of love.

**When you spoke to the Sociology of Religion class at Lamar in October, one questioner asked you about the move to fast-track sainthood for Mother Teresa. Your answer was almost Clinton-esque, recalling his memorable "it depends on what your definition of 'is' is." Mother Teresa a saint? It depends on what your definition of 'saint' is. Can you share your thoughts on that?**

According to Catholic usage, a canonized saint is someone who is surely in heaven. Since I no longer believe in heaven, it's pretty difficult for me to say whether anyone is there or not. The Church's affirmation that Mother Teresa practiced heroic virtue led to her beatification by the Church, so that she is now more properly called "Blessed Teresa of Calcutta." The next step, Mother Teresa's canonization as a saint, requires that she perform a miracle from heaven. With modern advances in science, miracles are increasingly harder to prove, and there was a great deal of controversy about the miracle

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