

INtro: [00:00](#) Habits are who we are and we get to choose everyday who that is. What's remarkable about these women is that their habits are changing the world. Hi and welcome to habits, the good, the bad, and the holy. I'm Molly and I'm sitting down every week with the doors of the blood of Christ religious sisters to hear their stories and learn how habits have become more than a symbol for their vocation. They become the means to which they change lives.

Molly : [00:25](#) Hello everyone and welcome back to habits A. Today we're here with sister Clara Smith. Sister Clara, thank you so much for joining me and taking time out of your day.

Clara: [00:36](#) You're welcome. I'm glad to be here.

Molly : [00:38](#) I'm really excited to talk to you. You have a ministry in something I'm very passionate about. You work in prison ministry. Can you talk about that?

Clara: [00:49](#) I always talk about it. Anybody can. If they were, if they wanted to hear something about the prison, they come to my house, but I started out as a teacher and after teaching for 44 years, then I went into the person to, to teach, but then they did a brand new person in New Mexico. And, uh, the warden met me one day out in the compound and he said, sister, you know, we had everybody in place still except a chaplain. And we decided this morning, in our meeting that we want you to to be our chaplain, and I said, oh, warden and I can't be a chaplain. I said, I am not an ordained minister. And he said he'd already cleared it with the Council of churches and they said, there wasn't any reason why you can't be because you have given your whole life, you know, to helping people.

Clara: [01:54](#) So I got to go in it. And before that I had, when I was teaching in Carlsbad, I used to go to the jail every Sunday afternoon and spend an hour at the jail with the inmates. And so many of the men knew me and I would go walk into a prison and they'd all yell, somebody would yell my name, clear off someplace because they knew me from the county jail. So anyway, I, I took the job or first of all, I said to the warden, y'all, I'll, I'll talk to my superior and see what she says about it. So idea. And, and I talked to sister, Cecilia, who was our superior at that time. And I told her that they, they wanted me to come in and take, you know, be that, do that job of chaplain. She said, well, how do you feel about it?

Clara: [02:51](#) And I said, well, you know, I've been going out there on a volunteer basis in teaching the Bible classes and you're going

out for the mass on Saturday. And, and I said, I'd like to try it. But I said, if I try it, I will tell the warden, I'm only here for, for try. If it doesn't work out right then I will go back to my teaching because I had taught for 44 years before that. And so then, uh, your sister Cecilia said, well, we will leave the decision up to you. And she said, and we will, we will, uh, anyway, walk with you. You will be there. And it was to me, it meant so much that she had get much con, you know, felt that, that good about my job. And so I went into the person. It did. I worked there for 16 years.

Clara: [04:00](#) That's a long time to be at our, I worked first at Las Cruces and I was teaching in Las Cruces at the Catholic school and we had parent teacher conferences and one of the, the, one of the young men, his mother and Dad came in for the conference. He said to me, sister, you need to come and work at the prison. And I just laughed. I thought it was a joke. But then he asked me three different times to come to the prison. So I asked permission to go out there and teach. Well, anyway, I started in a prison and I had a ball. I had. So I mean it was a different life, but there was never a time when I was frightened because I always thought to myself, if my brother was in prison, I would want somebody to every day at least greet him and give him a smile.

Clara: [05:05](#) And that's what I did for the inmates. I never, never walked by anybody without greeting them and say something to them. And, uh, and we had some three guys there from hell's angels in California. They'd gotten to Albuquerque and gotten into a row and ended up with us in, and they would always sit at a certain place every day on the compound. So I'd always make it a point, even though I didn't have to go over there, I'd make it a point to go that direction and I'd always greet them and they would look at me, you know? But one day it was raining and so they called quarters call and um, meant that all the men, you got to get to your housing units immediately for count. And about that time at a quarter's call, the, officer from segregation called and said, there's, there's someone over here who needs to talk to you.

Clara: [06:13](#) So when they went into quarters call, I started out towards the, the, the segregation unit. And, uh, here it came around the corner of the gym and there were five guys sitting out there and they'd made quarters call and I just stopped. And I said to them, hey, what are you guys doing here? You know, we're under quarter's call. Uh, he said, they'll never find us here, you know, I said, yeah, but that's going to meantime in, in segregation because you're breaking a rule. And I said, you know, if I were you, I, I'd, I go do your unit. And he said they'll never find us well

and right down the ways a little bit was the visiting area. And I knew that there was an officer sitting there and I said, look at that window over there, straight ahead. I said that the officer for the abuse team is sitting there and he's watching you seven little imps out here. And I said, you know what, that means that I'll be seeing you in segregation is on Saturday when I come over. And I went on. Then they, they, they got up and went. But anyway, before they, when I said to them at, well, the, the one said to me, sister, what are you doing out here in the rain? And I said, I just needed to prove to you guys that I could walk on water. It's so that got to be the joke out there when it was raining. Sister can walk on water,

- Molly : [08:04](#) You have a nickname with the prisoners. You are, they called you a penguin.
- Clara: [08:11](#) Oh yeah, I was, I was going through the compound one day and I'm coming from one place. True it or, and, and uh, one of the young inmates came burning over towards me and he says, sister, guess what those officers are calling you. And I said, well, it's hard to tell. And, and he said, they're calling you a penguin. And I said, good. I said, he said, whoa. How did they get that? I said, look at the way I'm dressed. I said, I look like a penguin. So ever after that, beautiful, Eh, in, in the prisons from better where I went, I was always the penguin, the penguin. So now I have some penguins up in my room, you know, let people have given me little and some of them,
- Molly : [09:12](#) Since our listeners can't see you the way I can at Clara still wears, um, a veil and a white top with a, with a black vest. So that gives the penguin appearance. Do you have a favorite story from your time there?
- Clara: [09:30](#) Oh Man, I have so many favorites. We can be here until next week. I'll tell you one story. Pope John Paul was celebrating his birthday, so they had asked all the prisoners in all institutions across the country to make cards, postcard, just postcard size, paint pictures for him. So it was up to the inmates. So we let you know, put it out for them. And a couple of by men made beautiful paintings and we've sent them on and then they, they put them all into one great big book and gave it to Pope John Paul for his birthday that year. This whole big, big book of paintings by prisoners. And so shortly after that, one of the inmates at one of the other prisons went to the warden, I mean to the chaplain and we were good friends.
- Clara: [10:38](#) And he said to the chaplain, you could you get me the heads and eight silver knives? He said, just the head, no, I don't want

the blade, just the head. Because he said, if we gave the pope a picture album to look at, he said, I want to make him a new crosier.

Molly : [11:03](#) Hi everyone. Molly here. For those of you who don't know, a Crosier is a staffer, a rod carried by the pope that serves as a symbol that he is shepherding the people of God. And now back to the interview.

Clara: [11:42](#) And the man was uh, an a Muslim in. So the warden gave permission for him to have that. And in our chapels, in both places, we chaplains had an office, but across was an edit place just like it in case a caseworker or somebody came in here and the man was staring, they could talk to them. So anyway, this, this guy would come over to the chapel every day and the chaplain was there in his office and he chiseled, he was a silver Smith from Albuquerque. He, he chiseled those now, I dunno how he did it, but he chiseled those, um, those steel heads or those knives into the Corpus of Christ Christ hanging on a cross, absolutely beautiful and dim when the pope would, would be on television. The guys she used to always watch and he was carrying that crusher or that silver Crosier with, with Christ on that this inmate had made, it got to be really kind of interesting because every time that pope goes out, he carries that Crosier and then those guys would go running. It was ours. Everybody in prison. What one did they all? And so then, uh, a weight I had been watching, you know, through the years and as a different, we're Pope John Paul died and pope Greg great used to know whatever his name was.

Clara: [13:17](#) Yeah. Used it. And now our pressure pope, is she seeing that crucial? Because to this day, yes, I watched, I watched holy Saturday services in you know, television and uh, sure enough the pope has that crusher in the men would get you. It was always our cruiser because what if, what, what did all, it's all in it. And that was one thing with me and you know, what will one did? It's co it was family because what was good for one loose good for the whole family. Yeah. That reminds me of the sisters living in community. What is good for one is good for everyone. That's an interesting parallel between a part of society. We often brush off and sisterhood. Yeah. It every year I went to meeting with the chaplains. Every year we'd have her do it a different place and I was happy because I got to do some traveling and got to see different, different cities anywhere.

Clara: [14:33](#) Our very last meeting out in them Pennsylvania. So I flew out in the, the guys in charge knew that that was going to be my last one. And so the, that priest who was in of getting the mass rate,

you know, getting people for mass came to me the day before and he said to me, sister, you know, we've decided debt we would like for you to too give the the sermon. I said, I can't give the sermon. I'm not priest and I am not a man. And he said to me, that doesn't make any difference. You're a chaplain. So we had our big meeting and sure enough, but the readings for that day one was from Jeremiah, who, you know, was kind of a cranky guy sometimes in a way. I sit down the readings for so and so and so, but I'm going to skip those readings for today.

Clara: [15:42](#) I said, don't tell the pope about of it. I'm to preach on Christ scoring to amaze the trip to mayors and how the apostles, those three apostles were walking along and they were all disheartened and, and all down because Jesus had died in the, they had not been aware of his resurrection that he had died and he was gone. And so they, you know, they were worried stiff, I guess what was going to happen to them. India, um, sin, all of a sudden a stranger came and started walking with them and they just accepted him. They didn't ask him any questions and he didn't ask them any questions. They just, they, they invited him. And so then on the way he was talking to them and he opened the scriptures of a, you know, he was, he was telling them, what does the scripture say you are?

Clara: [16:46](#) And they, they, they talked about that. And so that was the one that I used for the chaplains that day. And I said, you know, when he walked in Amais. I said, that's the gospel that I liked the most because I said, the chaplain. So I said, you know, I could, I see Jesus a chaplain come into a prison. Because I said, he came in and he started, you know, it was like their home, right? It's so we were a stranger because it says that the stranger met with him. We were just strangers. So we came into their home and then we had to find out, you know, what was going on in that home and so in, in me started asking us questions and so on and so forth. And I sit, so they asked Jesus and then he talked to them about the scriptures.

Clara: [17:50](#) You said, are you the only ones who don't know what happened in Jews? he told him his story then they, they were going to go on. Jesus acted like he was going to go on, but they, they were stopping for the night and they invited him to come and stay with him. So he went in the scripture says they recognized him when he broke the bread right at the meal. And so I said, you chaplains, that's us. I said, we come in as a stranger to the inmates, but they learned to know us and we become friends. But I said sooner or later that somebody, they will be sent out to another person or finally we will decide that we can't go on anymore. And Jesus didn't complain about it. I said, he, he got

busy and he talked to them. He opened that and that as the prison, the Bible to them.

Clara: [19:02](#) And he told them the stories, you know, and I said, and that's what we did. He worse, we come in as a, you know, as a stranger. And we walk with the men on their journey. And I said, and then, uh, and then Jesus took the bread at the table. He took the bread and he broke it and gave them communion. And I said, you know, these people who come into the prison, our, our broken bread, I said, their lives had been broken. And I said, it's up to us to help with their broken life. And so I said, uh, you know, we need to, we need to be concerned about ourselves, but we also need to be concerned about our neighbor in. And I said, and finally, I got to the end. And I said, we, we need to be that Jesus who gives them, who leads them to the bread to Christ.

Clara: [20:17](#) And then we go on our happy way. And they are better for having known us. So I turned to go sit down and all of a sudden somebody start clapping. And pretty soon everybody in the chat in that chapel was standing up and clapping and clapping and clapping. And I thought, wow, because they were priests all priests. Well you in people, but all people who worked in prison. And I was, you know, this big, tall, fat man preaching to preachers. But I mean, they, some of them said, I will never forget. I will never forget that sermon because you gave me this sermon for your after Easter when that Gospel is read. And yesterday we read that Gospel and I, I thought it brought back so many happy memories of that day that I spent the last, the last meeting with the chaplains. But it was, it was fantastic.

Clara: [21:27](#) And they did you at the end, they did award me with the, uh, with the award of the year as the outstanding chaplain. I will never forget those shares they referred tastic. You know, I can sit upstairs in my room and just think back. I think back to my years of teaching, but those years of being in the prison and working with those men, it was just different. It was deferred and, and it changed. Uh, I mean in a way it changed me because I, myself became, become, I I think much more accepting as a people, you know, sometimes you see sister shows, so are you know that I'm not like that anymore. Thank God for that. But I did get the chaplain of the year award.

Molly : [22:34](#) So you have been a sister for 72 years.

Clara: [22:40](#) Okay. I guess so. Yes. I've been here since 1940.

Molly : [22:44](#) Yes. But you, so you took your final vows in 1947 when you were 21 years old, you were a teacher for 44 years and then you did 16 years in prison ministry. That's more than people dream to accomplish in a lifetime. What has meant the most to you?

Clara: [23:08](#) That's hard to say. I hate you to think that meant the most to me was I was always interested in helping people. Even as, as a little girl at home growing up, I was going into, my mother would send me into the homes of some her older friends who needed help. And so I was out there helping and, and I guess when I came to the convent, I just do know that I just kicked it up in. So in the day to day shown, you know, that opening of the gates down there and all the people from Mexico coming to America, I said to shish one of the sisters, I said, man, if I wouldn't be where I am right now, I said I would be on an explained to down to Texas to be of service to those people are there. Yeah. I mean all they need is somebody who can take them by the hand and smile at them until the, it's going to be better. Yes. It and I, I worked with some migrants out in western Kansas for two summers. Okay. And then the next summer they didn't let us show that they wanted us. So I, I applied for a job in Chicago down in south Chicago and I worked down there in the black community.

Molly : [24:39](#) Hey everyone, Molly again, for those of you wondering what sister Claire is talking about. In 1965 the United States passed the Immigration and Naturalization Act. This abolished an earlier quota system based on national origin and established a new immigration policy based on reuniting immigrant families and attracting skilled labor to the United States. Okay. Back to the interview

Clara: [25:01](#) for eight weeks at summer, my vacation summer, many of in my vacation time, I love those bags. People, they were so gentle and, and I enjoyed their masses, their singing man. Those people knew how to sing. Everybody saying, yeah. Yeah. I had, I had such great experiences along the way and I guess one of the first experiences reed that I had was when I, when I first took that job in Las Cruces is the chaplain. Yeah. Yeah. Full Gospel Businessmen's fellowship. We're having their yearly meeting in Los Angeles and one of the guys from there had been in, in Albuquerque, I mean, yeah, in Albuquerque. So he came over [inaudible] and I had a tent revival. I thought every position head kicked the virals because I had gone to one or one of the little churches out there, a lot of Catholic church, but they were having a tent revival and they invited me.

Clara: [26:15](#) So I went out and then I thought, you know, we could do that in prison. Well, I thought everybody did an impression. So yeah, I just went ahead and made all the plans to like took them to the ward. And he said, okay, [inaudible] what are some work that like they have a tent revival. And he said, oh, how are you going to do it? So I hate every single explained. And I said, Oh, get my volunteers to come in. And I sit and I know where I can get a tench. Well. So today he came, you know, we got everything ready and the day came and, and uh, [inaudible] and my friend brought out the tent and the guy's got to put it up. And it was something though whole person just seemed to come alive, you know, because we're letting him tit remodel. And can you explain what attempt revival is?

Clara: [27:13](#) It takes Bible is, is simply the congregation's getting together under Greg big tent. Temple can't, and they invite other people to come in. You know, in a tent can hold a lot of people. We're church can't. And so I had, I had close to 200 volunteers and on buses that day. Okay. But we had a tent revival. It, it was the most glorious thing. Well, anyway, that the warden said, well, where are you going to put it? And I said, I don't know. I said, I, you know, I was going to leave that up to you guys in security. And he said, no, you go see if you can find someplace. Well, I found the place between the visiting area and the segregation area. It was a big plot theory, had fence all around and you know, they couldn't get in or out without Phil Serbia to key.

Clara: [28:16](#) And so I sit to him all right, or I've chosen the place that I think is the best. But I said, how about if you in the, in the [inaudible] keyword, go out and see if you can find a place. And they fell in the same place that I had found, which was most than most, you know, because we didn't want some of them running away that day. And, uh, and so then we had, it was glorious. The guys came, the tip was full. And I had volunteers, you know, coming from all over out there. And, um, there was one man there who just happened to be in town. So he came out with his friend with a full gospel businessmen's fellowship. And he, he came to me afterwards and she said, sister, would you come and talk at our next meeting? I didn't know that he was from Los Angeles.

Clara: [29:22](#) And I said, sure, I'll be glad to come in and talk. So I went to Los Angeles. I had said to the, yeah, bishop in Los Crucis I said, I'm going to until awesome Angeles, I thought I'd let you know. So in case a cargo call Nash, she did. The men is running around. Yeah. You're, you were this, so you should, yeah, yeah. As if you would see the, the cardinal. Well, the very first place we went, that young man took me out to one of the old old first machines that the Franciscans had head in right next door, cross the fence

was the seminary. And we were going, going into that, that whatever you call it out there. And um, all of a sudden that young man said, hey, there's a cardinal and the rector of the year. I said, you're joking? And he said, no, no.

Clara: [30:25](#) So he said, let's go over to the fence. And we went over to the fence in a mid, in a cart. Yeah. And, and, and the priest in charge of the seminary. And so when I came back, I told the wardroom, I told him, I said, I did meet the cardinal. He said, yeah. I said, I did. I said, I told him he should call you up sometime because I know you wouldn't believe me. But I got on a plane that afternoon and I thought, now I'm Co man, I'll sleep all the way back to El Paso. I got on the plane and I was sitting there reading a book and incomes, an elderly woman, she was, or two. She was a beautiful woman, just somebody's grandma, but beautiful. And she sat beside me and she said, sister, I surmise you're a teacher. And I said, yeah, I was for 44 years, or I spent 13 years in prison.

Clara: [31:30](#) I said, age. She looked at me and Carter drew back, what did you do? And I said, I was the chaplain there. While that was shocking to, you know, a woman in a prison, men's prison. So we talked. Yeah. And she was very interested. It has been such an opening for people. You know, they had these crazy ideas about prisoners [inaudible] they're people like us. They hurt just the same. We hurt, you know, and, and I made it a point. I was never, never, ever, ever claimed to pass any of those inmates, no matter who they were, no matter what I knew about them. I will give her, pass him without greeting. And I did, I, I'd meet them and I'd say, good morning or good afternoon, how are you today? Blah, blah, blah. You know, in those guys that were sitting out there, it waiting out the coal, one of them landed over in segregation for, I don't know what.

Clara: [32:36](#) Yeah, well he was there. He drew me a picture. Yeah, he painted me a picture of, of [inaudible] the first Christmas I was there, I sought you, I sure hope that everybody gets a gift for Christmas. You're all the inmates did. I thought you'd weren't. I need to do something about it. It's so I remembered what I was a little kid in school. Father Smith are our priest out there in Spearville at Christmas time. Always gave all of the kids in school a little bag with an apple and an orange in some peanuts and some candy in it. And so I do the same thing for the inmates. And then right before Christmas, a week before Christmas, I would get some of the guys to come over and they would help me bag it. And it was like a party for them to be out of the unit and no officer around.

- Clara: [33:45](#) Just me standing there while seeing them. And we beg all those things. And when you, when you're up to 400 and some inmates, it takes a lot of bags. But we had a bag for everybody and I said to them when I gave it to them, I sit down and if I find any peanut shells on the floor where I come over to your units, that'll be the last time set calls is gonna come. They never, they never had any peanut shells. I think I've benefited more than the inmates really. It gave me an altogether different idea about people and I loved every one of them.
- Molly : [34:32](#) Well I, I hate to wrap it up. Our time is up. Thank you so much for telling me your stories. I've really enjoyed listening to them. They'd been really remarkable. Thank you so much.
- Speaker 1: [34:43](#) Thanks for joining us for show notes and behind the scenes check out our website [adores.org](http://adores.org) habits is brought to you by the adores of the blood of Christ us region coproduced by Cheryl Whitton, our Laurie Benj and Molly McKinstry edited by Molly McKinstry. Thanks. We'll see you on next week.