

June, 2025

I'm Marsha Hahn. As I write this, I am 67 years old.

Just over 60 years ago, in 1964, my family moved to Chicago from Texas to join the Ecumenical Institute, two months before my seventh birthday. At that point, I don't think the idea had yet formed for The Order Ecumenical. It did form, though, and the Order came to be one of the most influential entities or experiences in shaping my life and who I've become. Shortly after my 30th birthday, I left.

I spent many years intensively deconstructing the Order in the process of trying to reconstruct my life. I confronted many truths in an effort to live in integrity and find peace with the past. I had a couple of difficult conversations with my parents, shared experiences with others who had come into the Order as children and teens as well as those who joined in adulthood, and I made good use of therapy. I would not have thought I would be sitting down to write a letter – to the Order? – the Order archives? – to history? – at this stage in my life. But I have learned that even when I feel I have found some truth and have put things to rest, sometimes those things come back later, often unbidden, and ask for my attention again. When this happens, it's like a spiral. I'm revisiting things, but at a different level, because there is something more asking to be discovered.

My motivation for writing is to be sure that what seems true to me is included in any accounting of the history of the Order.

It's probably clear that what I have to share is critical of the Order. But I want to say, loudly and clearly, that is not the whole picture for me. Many of the values that guided the Order are still my values. For example, "all the earth belongs to all" (and as I think most former Order members would fervently agree, not just all humans, but all living things, and all of the earth itself). Or the value of community, of people having agency at the local level, of the importance of the common good. When I encounter someone who was in the Order today, I can be pretty confident that we will care about many of the same things.

I have been on the OE listserv since it started shortly after the Order reunion in 2000. I enjoy reading what people write and am often inspired by the creativity and insights that are shared. I have a very deep fondness and affection for the people sharing this online space, some of whom I knew well and some not at all. It feels like family. Yet I'm concerned because I don't see and haven't really seen any genuine criticism of aspects of the Order that I think were concerning to say the least, and dangerous at worst. My central question, I think, is why did so many unhealthy practices that were damaging to individuals and families get incorporated into the way we lived? Why did those things occur in the midst of positive intentions and ideals? I think it's vital to be able to look at all of it, to ask these questions, and to be willing to wrestle with the aspects that were harmful, negative, unhealthy, and sometimes contrary to the Order's stated values. Not doing so is itself

unhealthy and risks leaving to history an incomplete and unreal picture of what took place. It also risks perpetuating what I think was a fundamental flaw, which was a fairly rigid inability of the Order to tolerate criticism of itself and its work through the Ecumenical Institute and Institute of Cultural Affairs.

Each person in the Order had their own experience. All I seek to do is to share my own story, knowing it cannot possibly represent the whole picture or vast array of experiences and meanings out there. It is only what is true for me. I am not seeking to write a comprehensive assessment of the Order. I'm choosing to focus mostly on the separation of families, which I see as a kind of "original sin" that the Order perpetrated on its members. I use it as a lens to explore what I view as the Order's implicit belief and understanding that it was the only viable path on which to expend one's life. There are certainly other areas where one could focus. This is simply the most accessible place for me to explore. I welcome any dialogue.

I recall first feeling my own connections and pull towards the Order during my "tween" and early teen years. When I was in fifth grade I got hepatitis. Because of my illness I had to miss the last several weeks of the school year and spent long stretches of time alone in our little half apartment at the back of the 3rd floor of 341 South Trumbull Avenue on Chicago's West Side. It was the spring of 1968 and we had experienced the riots after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. I had fresh awareness of the injustices endured by Black Americans for centuries. As I was gazing out our back window one day I saw an old woman walking down the alley rummaging through garbage cans. I didn't know what she was hoping to find, but it was clear she didn't have what she needed in life. I wanted so much to help her. I fantasized that if I could put some money in one of those garbage cans, she could find it and buy what she needed. Forty dollars seemed like the right amount to my ten-year-old mind. I didn't have anything close to forty dollars, and I probably knew that putting any amount of money into a garbage can would likely mean it would just get thrown away, so my fantasy ended there. But I mark that as my first encounter with a pull to do something "good" in my life.

Over the next few years my mind was flooded with insights and big thoughts about the outside world and my own inside world. I didn't know what it all meant, but I knew I wanted to feed this hunger for meaning, to have my life be meaning-full. The message I picked up – reinforced by imagery in songs, lectures, wall décor, structured conversations, daily office witnesses, you name it – was that the Order was the only meaningful path in life. Or certainly the *most* meaningful. We explicitly said otherwise. For example, the "People of God" were no better than "God's People." But the implication was clear. If you wanted to be where it counted, you were with the People of God. On the point of history, the tip of the wedgeblade, Those Who Care – and most definitely in the Order. There wasn't another group, another human effort, worthy of giving one's life to. That was the clear message I took in. I never even considered *not* giving my life to the Order.

The problem is that once any group comes to believe they are the *only* way, all kinds of issues arise. Arrogance sets in. "Group think" marginalizes ideas and behaviors that don't

conform to the accepted ways of thinking and acting. Most dangerous, in my experience, is that it's not okay to leave. I think the explicit message, not often repeated or stated clearly, was that you *could* leave. But it was clearly not okay in most situations. People were often shunned after they left and spoken badly of in informal settings. I remember feeling shocked and sad when a family left the Order when I was a kid. I wasn't sad just because I missed the kids; I couldn't believe the *parents* left. I thought something must be wrong with them. I didn't invent that thought – I picked it up from somewhere. It was in the air we breathed.

In my teenage years, I felt spiritually fed by the Order. For some reason, that shifted after high school. I yearned for, but no longer felt, spiritually or emotionally nourished. The Order became something I just had to do – because it was the only way. I couldn't leave. Leaving meant abandoning the only meaningful life that existed. That was intolerable. So I stayed – obedient and steadfast. Eventually, some of the Order's rigidity loosened. That, along with other factors, allowed me to leave with my husband and three-year-old son. Ultimately, that marriage did not survive.

I thought I would be fine. I thought I would get a job and go on with life. In fact, it was the most disorienting experience of my life. We got jobs and a place to live, but I quickly realized I had absolutely no idea who I was. I discovered I had no identity outside the Order. I still wanted a meaningful life and I began to search for what form that might take. That became a journey of many years. One of the early steps was going back to finish college. I had amassed almost two years of college credit when I was in the Order. I dropped out because college held no meaning or interest for me – the Order and its work were all that mattered. I was almost 32 years old when I went back to school. Returning to college was an intellectual awakening for me. I couldn't get enough. I wanted to study everything. Suddenly, the whole world of ideas was available to me and I realized how deeply confining and narrow the Order had been, for me, at an intellectual level.

Therapy helped me begin to untangle my values, my beliefs, my very being, from the Order. The Order had been dismissive of therapy, denigrating it as “navel-gazing.” For me, it was a lifesaver. It helped me begin to find my feet and made it okay to question the orthodoxy of the Order. Eventually, I would go on to get a master's degree in social work and become a therapist and clinical social worker. I still do that work today.

Only very recently I realized that part of why I stayed in the Order was to maintain the attachment ties to my parents. If we're lucky, we are born to parents who love and protect us, and who see us as individuals to be curious about and to encourage in life. I was lucky. My parents, while not perfect (none are), were “good enough” as psychologists like to say. They loved and protected my sister and me, nurtured our interests and talents, and treated us with respect and care.

I was almost seven when we joined the Order and this healthy relationship with my parents continued until I was 11, when I, like all other children in the Order at that time, was

separated from my parents at the beginning of seventh grade. I didn't question the separation; it was just what we did. And if it was what the Order did, it must be good, even if I instinctively knew that no one in the outside world would see it that way. But we in the Order were special. Of course others wouldn't be able to understand us.

Interestingly, while I did miss my parents and sister sometimes, I always felt connected to them. I knew they loved me. We still felt very much like family. I can see now that our shared life in the Order maintained my feelings of connection. Thank goodness for that. The Order kept those vital attachment feelings alive.

For most Americans, once a teenager reaches the end of high school the process of separating from family begins. In my case, I had already been separated for years, while the Order kept the critical sense of belonging to my family in place. I loved and respected my parents, and in many ways idealized them. I aspired to be like them. That can be a good thing. In my case, being like them also meant being in the Order. I realize now that in addition to the hold the Order had on me because of its being the only meaningful life choice, there was a second pull in place. To leave the Order would have been to sever the attachment to my parents, who had been taken from me long before I was ready.

What were the losses and harms from this? In my case, there were a number. I was sexually and spiritually abused by a pedophile in the house where I lived when I was in the 8th grade. I am virtually certain that if I had been with my parents, even in that same house, the abuse would not have occurred. They were appropriately protective of my sister and me when we lived with them, which probably would have discouraged the perpetrator. Even if it hadn't, I'm pretty sure they would have detected something amiss when the perpetrator began grooming me. It took me 17 years to see the abuse for what it actually was, largely because the perpetrator had twisted everything in Order language and religious symbolism, making it extremely difficult to repel him or to clearly see his behavior as abuse, even though I tried.

Two years after the abuse, I came very close to committing suicide. This was a direct result of the abuse in a tangled way, the details of which don't need to be shared. For some reason, I was strong enough and healthy enough to stop the attempt before its completion. The only person I told was the perpetrator, because I believed I had to. Amazingly, he told my parents, although I was unaware of this until my mother told me when I was 30. He also told them of the earlier sexual abuse, although I have no idea how he chose to explain that. My parents then reported these things to Joe Mathews and the perpetrator was immediately reassigned to another continent. I know of at least two other girls that he went on to abuse.

Therapy was also vital in my process of healing from the abuse I experienced. It allowed me to see how the abuser used the Order and my being "called by God," to entrap me. It gave me the lenses of pedophilia and spiritual abuse to help me reclaim myself and heal.

Another cost was the experience of not fitting in with the rest of the world. This was reinforced by Order imagery: e.g., “We are in, but not of, the world.” There was no one at school who could possibly understand my life. I didn’t live with my parents – because, why? I was in an Order where we got up before dawn to do Daily Office. I had to be home evenings and weekends because there were always assignments and structured activities. I learned to conceal who I was. I learned to lie to my friends at school. I lived with my “uncle and aunt.” I never made myself available for activities outside of school. At the end of the school year, I never knew if I would be back the next fall. After 8th grade, I never was, being assigned to a different location each year of high school. At the end of each school year, having no idea yet if I would be back, I just disappeared on people. They had no idea where I’d gone. I remember only once writing to a former friend to let her know I had moved. It has always been challenging for me to maintain friendships.

At the end of 11th grade, I learned that the house where I was assigned would be closing. This would mean starting my last year of high school in yet another city. On a lark, I met with my school guidance counselor and asked him if there was any way I could graduate a year early. He told me if I took senior English in summer school, I would have enough credits. So I went to Chicago, took the class at Senn High School, and got my diploma.

The most obvious cost is that I actually needed my family during those adolescent years. I needed their guidance and love and their physical presence. I needed to be able to rebel against them, one of the natural ways teenagers begin to find out who they are as individuals. I needed to be able to talk with them about questions, fears, and aspirations. I needed to be able to go to them when I needed help. And I needed my younger sister, to be able to share our lives and grow together.

Because I didn’t have them, one of the strengths I gained from growing up in the Order was independence and self-sufficiency. Similar to how I took initiative to graduate high school early, I worked to carve my own path after leaving the Order, not following traditional timelines, but forging ahead anyway with higher education and an evolving series of jobs that ended in a career that has felt like it fits me. It has taken the better part of a lifetime. I like that I am strong and have grit and determination. It doesn’t mean, however, that this is how I would advocate raising a child. And not all kids raised in the Order have fared as well.

How was it that parents accepted this model of separating from their children at about 12 years old? I asked my parents why it was done. My mother said that when the Order was located in its entirety on the west side of Chicago, it became too unsafe for teenagers to attend the local high school – a few white kids in an otherwise all-Black school. Initially, before the Order had houses outside of Chicago, some were sent to east coast boarding schools. Some were sent to live with colleague families. Why? There were excellent private high schools in Chicago. (My own son attended one decades later.) It would have cost less to send them there, and they could have continued living with their families. And how did this model evolve into one of universally separating families, regardless of the safety of the

school situations, and long after the Order was dispersed around the globe? What was this about?

I remember one of the Order's many social analyses that there was an "over-emphasis on the family." You can debate whether or not that is true. (I personally don't believe it.) Even if it were true, though, how does that translate to separating parents and children? How is that a remedy?

I also remember the separation being talked about as a "rite of passage" into adulthood for the kids. We were no longer kids, but adults, at about age 12. Why? Why was this important to believe? What was it accomplishing? And how could anyone believe it was true? Twelve-year-olds could not function as adults in western society in any domain of life – not financially, not socially, not educationally. It simply was not true. But we all seemed to buy it. Why?

I asked my husband, Pat Moriarty, who entered the Order right after college, what he thought. (Pat and I have shared a loving and healing journey these last 30 years.) He says Joe Mathews, founder of the Order, told him that children were a block to the mission. That if parents were too involved in caring for their kids, they would not be fully available for the Order's mission. This is the only thing I have heard that makes sense to me. Of course, it freed people of the time and psychic energy involved in parenting teenagers. If you bought into the story that your teen was now an adult, and if you trusted that the actual adults in the house where your teen was assigned would provide adequate care for them, you would feel less encumbered by family responsibilities and more able to wholly focus on the work of the Order.

What about the parents? I wasn't in their shoes, and I haven't had firsthand conversations in any depth with parents about how they were affected by the separation. I know that the topic of children being harmed while in the Order was central at the Order reunion in 2000. I can imagine these realizations would be very painful to face and to feel. I raised it with my own parents, but I could tell it was too painful to pursue deeply. I think it's vital to consider the harms to the parents of having been separated from their children. Parents missed vital, precious years of their children's lives. How many events were missed, how many conversations were not had? How many times did parents learn their kids were struggling in some way, while distance and cost made it impossible to help? I wonder how many parents have been able to consider their own pain and find ways to heal. I hope many have.

Why did otherwise intelligent, mature adults go along with the separation? Why did they buy into the dubious justifications for it? I know parenting is hard, so maybe for some there was a measure of relief in not having to walk those adolescent years with their kids. It would be understandable – why are there boarding schools, after all? But I think most parents would not have willingly separated from their children under any other circumstances. So why did they do it?

My conclusion is that those in the Order believed it was the only path for living a meaningful life. If that is true, and if the Order is telling you that being in the Order means separating from your children, then you do it. The alternative is leaving the Order, and that was not an option. Because leaving the Order was leaving the life God had claimed for you. It was saying no to God. That was unthinkable. It was easier to separate from the kids.

What about Order members who did not have children? Were they harmed by the Order? I leave that to each person to answer for themselves. But if the de facto belief was that the Order was what God called us to do, and there was no other path, and it really was not an option to leave, I think that in itself is harmful. That is my opinion, based on years of personal experience and much scrutiny and thought.

I ask myself why this is coming up again for me at this stage in my life. This is territory I have visited many times over the years. I think there is a level of grief I have not yet allowed myself to feel – grief in its many forms, including anger and sadness. Grieving was not something the Order encouraged, in my experience. “You can decide.” “The past is approved.” Just move on. I have come to learn that grief is an essential part of healing. That feeling the loss and the pain opens the door for forgiveness and acceptance, for “the future is open.”

When I did talk with my parents about these things, almost 30 years ago, I wish I had known enough to tell them that it was okay to admit they and Order were wrong. That the world would not come to an end. That we would be okay. I could forgive. I knew it was never their intention to hurt me. But they could not own their mistakes because they could not, even then, years after the Order was no longer, see that it was deeply flawed and that very destructive choices had been made. They could not break the spell and challenge the Order. We were friends for their remaining years, and I always loved them, but I can feel more keenly now that something broke back then. “I’m sorry. That was a terrible mistake.” – would have paved the way for real reconciliation. My father has died, and my mother has dementia now, so further conversation will never take place.

This has been a truth-telling for me. I hope it is useful in some way to those reading it. I would like to imagine the whole Order endeavor being wrapped in a blanket of forgiveness and healing. To see with compassion all those much younger versions of ourselves fervently working to live full and good lives in the best way we knew how at the time. But that only comes with truth-telling. To see the deep flaws clearly and unflinchingly. To make genuine amends where they are due. And then to continue on in love and humility.

Postscript:

Among other things, I am hoping this will serve as a kind of warning to present and future idealistic endeavors.

Such group or community endeavors, especially when religion or spirituality are involved, start off with great intentions but can easily veer into messianic territory. I think that's what happened to the Order. I'm using the term "messianic" because it best describes, for me, that belief we had that we were chosen by God, with the implication that our path was the only path.

We can see many examples of this kind of belief system in the world now, within every religious tradition as well as more secular groups. Many are of a more conservative nature. But the Order is a good example of how a group with progressive values can also go down this path.

My advice to anyone setting out on such a journey: Don't ignore your instincts when something feels wrong or does not make sense. Hold things lightly. Remember that God does not play favorites. There is not and never will be one path.