

**Submission  
No 236**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF  
CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS**

**Name:** Mary Hughes

**Date Received:** 31 July 2025

# Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups

Submission to the Parliament of Victoria Inquiry: Mary P Hughes

I am very grateful to the Victorian State Parliament for establishing the Inquiry and your timely invitation to share my story. It gave me courage.

I appreciate the assistance of the Inquiry Secretariat. I look forward to active involvement and hope that the Inquiry outcomes lead to greater openness and equity.

## My Story – Summary

I entered the ‘Carmelite’ Monastery at █████, (now known as OCDM, see below) in May, 1964, 24 days into my 17<sup>th</sup> year. I was a vulnerable, naïve, devoutly religious, insecure and headstrong teenager wanting to do something great with my life.

At about thirteen I read the autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux, a Carmelite nun. She captured my heart and mind immediately. The way of kindness, gentleness and love which she lived so generously as a Carmelite spoke to everything noble and good that I wanted to become. Another key attraction for me was that the Carmelite Order is dedicated to Mary.

I hoped to live in a supportive community of prayer, and like Therese, to mature and flourish with wisdom. She found vitality, joy, creativity and trust, enabling her to be her unique self. She graced and embraced the world she loved, and everyone in it. I wanted to grow into someone like her. I believed that to live in her way I needed to become a Carmelite nun.

In 1955, I attended the *Catholic Life Exhibition* Melbourne which promoted vocations to priesthood and religious life, sponsored by the Catholic Church in Melbourne. The exhibition promoted the ‘Carmelite’ Monastery at █████, which to me, gave OCDM unquestioned credibility by association. When I chose to join OCDM I had absolutely no reason not to trust the Archdiocese of Melbourne and what it promoted as a credible Carmelite community.

Having entered OCDM without making an informed decision (see below), and before I matured as an adult, I was quickly deconstructed into an obedient clone serving the Prioress. I became disconnected from reality, from freedom of thought, emotion and choice.

On confirmation into the OCDM, I was named, formed and defined as Sister Maria of Jesus. They taught me, and I believed, that Mary Hughes was dead to the world, de-personalized and irrelevant. I progressively became dead to myself as a human being. But I believed them when they taught me I had launched on a supernatural highway to heaven with eternal rewards of consummate love and mystery.

I believed I was living an authentic Carmelite religious life as a Carmelite like St Therese. When, after many years, I was in a position to become informed about the true nature of the Order, I found, tragically, that I was not.

Instead, I awakened to the reality of OCDM as a fringe group displaying all the behaviours described in this Inquiry's guidelines.

My whole life of dedication was used and abused by the Prioresses and their followers over time to serve their own purpose and intentions, without effective accountability or oversight.

I was deprived for 60 years of growth into my self, maturity and self-responsibility; my relationships with family and friends, my fertility and my contribution to society.

Over time I became increasingly aware that the behaviour of OCDM was a culture of intimidation, suppression, coercive control and abuse. When I first discovered some examples of this conduct and expressed my concerns, the abuse intensified to the point that it was untenable for me to remain.

Because of my vows to God and the Prioress I did not believe I could leave of my own volition. Prioress initially refused my formal request to leave. When I insisted the Prioress referred my request to the Archbishop who gave me exemption from my vows, which enabled me to leave.

I believed that under Canon law I could not leave without their permission. As such I did not know or believe I had the rights of freedom available to every Australian.

**I would now describe my life of surrender to OCDM from beginning to end as extreme, secretive personal deconstruction sanctified by the Prioresses and their followers.**

## Background

The Order of Carmelite Discalced (OCD) is a world-wide religious order established hundreds of years ago, united under a governance structure based in Rome, known as the 'Carmelites'.

The community I joined, now known as OCDM (Order of Carmelite Discalced **Melbourne**) effectively separated themselves from the governance of the world-wide OCD in the 1950s (before I joined), though this was not publicised or, to the best of my knowledge, communicated to members at the time. This separation was formalised with a new constitution and name in the early 1970s in which OCDM became a Diocesan Order with ecclesiastic oversight by the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne.

While the OCDM appears to be a 'Carmelite' community it is not part of the global Order, nor is it subject to the Order's governance.

I was denied the objectivity and expertise of regular governance reviews and counsel by the OCDs. I could not share in or benefit from the substantive development of evolving responsible leadership and governance of the world-wide OCD in the last 70 years.

In my opinion, the culture, operation and practices of the OCDM are that of a fringe group due to their lack of oversight and engagement with the Carmelite Order (OCD) and the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne.

OCDM can be called a fringe group because the leader (the Prioress) has been, in practice, accountable to no one. As a result of the above, I experienced all of the damaging behaviours of a fringe group described in the guidelines of this parliamentary inquiry.

Below I describe as examples, some of the many ways in which the OCDM Prioress and followers behave, which I consider to be unacceptable.

## 1 Recruitment methods

There was no assessment, evaluation or counselling process for those interested in joining the OCDM.

I wrote in 1963 to OCDM to enquire about joining. When, as instructed, I visited the monastery, Prioress and her assistant asked what school I attended, was my family Catholic, what did my father do? My attraction to St Therese was the extent of discussion about my motivation.

I was asked to sing a hymn. I later learned that they needed singers to improve the choir.

Prioress recommended that I learn about the life by living it – questions and answers weren't much help.

Before entering I had no sighting of the living conditions; the timetable, work, or understanding of the penances. I only saw the inside of the church. The sisters were hidden behind a walled grille. The life was a hugely unsighted, uninterrogated, unknown, submerged beneath the idealistic and privileged call to personal union with God, of saving souls from hell and supporting the Church by a life of dedication to prayer, penance and praise of God.

I was not informed that since the 1950s the OCDM had effectively separated from the Carmelite Order (OCD) and was developing its own distinctive mission and identity. I did not know that from the early 1950s OCDM was actively seeking to formally sever religious, legal and organisational ties with the OCDs.

I was not provided with any documentation relating to the governing rules and constitution or financial documents. I was not informed that the entire liturgy and language of the practice was in Latin, a language I had no knowledge of and was not taught in a meaningful way.

Once recruited I was immediately isolated from family and friends (see below).

Novices were only gradually subjected to the harsher disciplines and penances practised by the Order, after newcomers were entrenched in the conditioning program.

Years later I discovered that recruits' entry was timed for after Easter. This timing was to avoid us experiencing the rigours and deprivations of Lenten penances and practices, and the debilitating effects they had on the sisters.

About 10 months after entering, at my first Lenten period, I was issued with a whip, hair waist band and chain wire armband to perform self-flagellation and penances, which were ongoing disciplines up until the mid-1970s. If we expressed discomfort, we were told we lacked virtue and willingness to submit.

## 2 Behaviours and methods of control

The following describes my experience from my entry into the Order in 1964 onwards.

Following the Second Vatican Council in 1964, some of these practice were progressively removed. However, while some practices eased, the control of the Prioress never diminished.

In 2009 I was appointed as Superior to the [REDACTED] filial house. While this, and other appointments, gave me the appearance of greater freedom – such as having my passport and a credit card – the effect was no different as all activities required the permission of the Prioress.

### 2.1 Controlling leadership

The governing documents give the Prioress absolute authority as God's representative on earth. Prioress was held in reverential esteem and was treated and served as royalty. As the human representative of God she was beyond reproach.

- When you were corrected for mistakes, you kissed the floor or made a grand prostration and remained until she indicated to rise.
- If Prioress addressed you anywhere, you had to kneel and kiss her scapular (the habit). She was addressed as 'Mother' and we were her children – infantilised.

There was an inner group of Sisters who were loyal and obedient followers of the Prioress, and who implemented her authority without question. Only those in the inner group were given access to information about the decision-making and operations of the community. That inner group did not necessarily comprise directors or officeholders.

Succeeding Prioresses have consistently controlled the Order's relationships with all external parties, including the Catholic Church, to maintain an illusion of the OCDM being a respectable part of the mainstream Church. This often took priority over welfare of the Sisters.

For example, a priest who reported a sister's need for professional mental health care was dismissed, and no further action taken to care for the sister.

In my view the Prioress and her followers created fear and distrust of the Carmelite Order (OCDs) within the OCDM community. The Carmelite OCDs were demonised for trying to

exercise their legitimate governance responsibilities. The OCDM Prioress and her followers resisted their governance in disobedience of their own vows.

When I eventually met several OCDS I was impressed by their welcome, generosity and progress as a religious entity. With great sadness, I realised that they were living a rich and evolving Carmelite life – and I was not.

## 2.2 Isolation

There was a controlling culture of silence at all times during the day, and a greater silence overnight. In my experience the expectation that we remain in silence gave their Prioresses and their followers more control over me.

Every aspect of our behaviour was monitored for compliance and conformity: deportment, posture, silence in walking and movement, modulated voice. This extended even to ‘custody of the eyes’, to suppress curiosity or to dare to form a question or a critique.

To sit with crossed legs was considered to be in defiance of the Prioress’s directives.

If one needed to speak, voices were to be subdued so that the silence would not be disturbed.

- When I entered, I was immediately isolated and separated behind a wrought iron grille, deprived from contact alone with my family and friends, and any contact with the world. I had contact with one fellow postulant and three supervising sisters. We could not talk amongst ourselves unsupervised, nor with the 5-6 novices ahead of us in training.
- During up to seven years of training novices had contact for one hour weekly with the avowed sisters at formal ‘recreation’ under supervision.
- There was no freedom to access information from daily papers, the radio or TV, or listen to music of choice. All information was filtered.
- All personal correspondence incoming and outgoing was read by one of the leadership team. This resulted in us self-censoring letters to make them insubstantial.
- There was an appointed ‘phone listener’ who noted all phone calls. Calls were permitted by the Prioress only in extraordinary circumstances.
- In monthly one hour visits by immediate family (only) I attended behind a grille in an adjoining room. The visits were supervised by a senior sister selected by the Prioress. Her presence stifled meaningful communication with my family.
- I was not allowed to have social visits from my extended relatives or friends.
- I had no contact with ‘outsiders’, visitors or service people.

- I was denied visiting my dying Father in St Vincents Hospital, Melbourne. And I had no chance to comfort my sick and grieving Mother.
- The monastery environment had the effect of profound sensory deprivation.

## 2.3 Loss of personal autonomy

Every minute of the day was structured and supervised. Everyone was required to be present for liturgy, prayer, church, devotions, meals, recreation, garden or other works as the Prioress required. Permission was required to be late or absent from activities.

- Until 2009 my Driver's Licence, Passport and money was held in the Prioress's office.
- Until the 1980s I was not allowed any personal belongings.
- The Prioress had the right to enter my room at any time without my knowledge or agreement throughout my time in the OCDM.
- The heavily controlled program did not enable personal reflection, thought or self-care.
- Personal work or achievements of sisters was attributed to the Prioress (Mother) and sisters were seldom given any recognition of their accomplishments or self-worth.

For example, one GP was appointed by the Prioress to attend all sisters. The Infirmarian determined which medical practitioners we would see. We were unable to provide informed consent. For my consultations the GP was briefed by the Infirmarian, who was afterwards briefed by the Doctor on my health, for her to report the Doctor's findings to the Prioress.

## 2.4 Secrecy and deception

OCDM's separation from governance of the Carmelite Order has been described above. This fundamental deception deprived me of the opportunity for an authentic Carmelite vocation and isolated me from the fellowship and shared wisdom of the Carmelite Order.

All aspects of OCDM activities and organisation were compartmentalised, with secrecy being the normative culture and practice. There was a consistent pattern of deception in presenting an illusion of the OCDM in many aspects, such as:

- Internal and public representation of OCDM following Carmelite mission and practices.
- Public representation of OCDM as a well-governed, trustworthy charitable organisation stewarding donations with integrity and receiving benefits from government, such as the pension for sisters, and relief from taxes and rates.
- Non-disclosure of the affairs and decision-making of OCDM.
- I was posted to Italy but not informed when I would leave or how long I would stay. I was not allowed to inform my family of my move until permitted by the Prioress.
- I was registered as a Company Director of the community without my knowledge or consent.

I received no training in the roles and responsibilities. Relevant information was not given to me.

- When I discovered, to my horror, the legal responsibilities of directorship, the leadership ignored my attempt to draw this to their attention and verbally abused me.
- I was appointed Bursar unilaterally by the Prioress but was not allowed to sight financials despite my request. The recently appointed accountant told me I had no need to know the figures.
- Between 2009–2022 meeting minutes falsely recorded my attendances.
- Despite being variously a First Councillor and Bursar I was not included in decision-making.

For example, elderly donors were asked to run annual fundraising campaigns, such as to replace the church roof. Donors and sisters had no knowledge of the finances to inform themselves whether the request was reasonable.

I remain distraught that I was complicit in seeking donations in funds or in kind when there was no need. I remain profoundly wounded that my integrity was abused because of my trust.

## 2.5 Exploitation

As noted throughout this submission, the Prioress and her followers perversely exploited my religious vows to justify their decisions and actions. Their extreme control over all aspects of my life resulted in many forms of exploitation.

- On entering, the leadership took control of all my money and possessions.
- My memory is that I was presented with a prepared Will to sign, in which the OCDM was the sole beneficiary. I could not consider or discuss my Will with my family or the lawyer.
- Permission for, and timing of, any expenditure on my personal needs, such as sandals, was at the discretion of the Prioress and her followers.

A more respectful approach would be for sisters to have a reasonable allocation for personal expenses over which to exercise autonomy.

- I received two financial legacies (late 1970s and 2000s) totalling \$11,582.00. When I left in 2023 OCDM paid me a sum of \$6,530.45 without verification.
- Throughout my time I worked as instructed with no payment other than providing for my accommodation and keep. There was no way for me to build a savings/superannuation fund that would have given me security and the choice to leave.
- The work I was required to fulfill was assigned with no regard to my personal interests, skills or talents. No formal work-related training was provided, apart from music.

## 2.6 Emotional and psychological manipulation

In my 60 years as an OCDM I did not experience genuine care or relationships without these being defined by duty and obedience to the vows. What limited care I received was as a duty instructed by the Prioress.

- All relationships were constrained to be superficial and positional, with deeper engagement not being allowed or tolerated. For the first ten years I did not know the birth names or any aspect of other sisters' personal lives.
- We were not allowed to discuss with sisters or 'outsiders' any personal issues or concerns or to 'process' our experiences.
- Special (particular) friendships were not and are not permitted.
- The community life placed no value upon any personal well-being, physical fitness, exercise and self-directed recreation.
- When I had my 'monthlies' I had to request the sanitary pads that I had been instructed to make as part of my entry 'trousseau', which was humiliating and undignified.
- During the 'monthlies' we were allowed minor concessions to the daily program in ways that publicised to the whole community our 'condition', which was belittling.
- We were told that any pain and discomfort, including the 'monthlies', should be endured as an offering to God. Any pain relief was at the discretion of the Infirmarian.
- The heavily structured program was repetitive and unrelenting, resulting in mental and physical exhaustion. To express feeling exhausted was treated as lacking in virtue. If I fell asleep during 'recreation' I was criticised for not participating.
- I was a servant of the OCDM, rather than treated or developed as a whole person.

### 3 Impacts of the behaviours on me – conclusion

I have now realised that in my OCDM time I surrendered my life and my humanity was deconstructed. I did not experience, nor was I able to express, the kindness, gentleness or love that I had hoped for.

Having lived in the filial communities of [REDACTED], ACT and Italy, and as Superior of [REDACTED] [REDACTED] trying to relate to the OCDM leadership, I believe with great sadness that the sisters, like I, were a convenience to be used by the successive Prioresses as they wished. She used us to provide hospitality, and the friends of the community as tools for her power, success and status. My experience of being used was part of the ongoing leadership pattern.

- In 2022, at the age of 75, for the first time I had a hair cut over which I had control. It was traumatic to experience the care and concern of the hairdresser who asked me how I wanted to look. Seeing myself in the mirror I was shocked. I did not know myself.
- I matured as a Carmelite in the habit. I was so identified with the illusion of myself as a Carmelite nun, that when caring people responded to me simply as a person, I was overwhelmed that they even cared for me and they could see something of value and beauty in me that I could not see.

Through the help of medical professionals and psychologists, my greatest joy, consolation and support now is being reunited with humanity and treated as a whole person.

Within the love of grounded relationships with family and many friends I can choose to grow into my best self, in this one beautiful engaging world.

