

Interview: From Hollywood to Holy Vows, Mother Dolores Hart on Her Book 'The Ear of the Heart'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 27, 2014 - 4:23pm

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CHICAGO – In one of the most amazing stories in film history, rising movie star Dolores Hart (“King Creole,” “Where the Boys Are”) decided at the apex of her career at age 24, to give up Hollywood and become a nun. She just released her book “The Ear of the Heart: An Actresses’ Journey From Hollywood to Holy Vows.”

Mother Dolores Hart was born Dolores Hicks, and spent most of her developmental years in Chicago, but was not raised Catholic. She went to the local Catholic School for neighborhood convenience, and converted to the faith when she was ten years old. She was raised with the help of her grandparents, and her grandfather was the projectionist at the Drake Theater in Chicago, which spurred her interest in becoming an actor.



Mother Dolores Hart, O.S.B., at Her Consecration in 1970

Photo credit: Valerie Imbleau for Ignatius Press

Her family moved to Beverly Hills, California, when she was 11 years old. She later studied drama at Marymount California University – a Catholic college – which led to a role in the Elvis Presley film, “Loving You” (1956), and a change to the stage name of Dolores Hart. Broadway and more film roles followed, including another Elvis movie, “King Creole” (1958), and the first Spring Break comedy, “Where the Boys Are” (1960). She even dabbled in religious films, portraying St. Clare of Assisi in “Francis of Assisi” (1961).

It was after a turn in a frothy sex comedy called “Come Fly With Me” (1963), that Dolores Hart sought a new direction for her life, and after breaking an engagement, joined the monastic Catholic Order of St. Benedict (O.S.B.). Her devotion was rewarded when she became the lead

"Prioress" of her Abbey in Connecticut. In 2012, the short documentary of her story, "God is the Bigger Elvis," was nominated for an Academy Award, and Mother Dolores Hart did her first red carpet in over 50 years.

Her new memoir – written with lifelong friend Richard DeNeut – is called "The Ear of the Heart: An Actress' Journey from Hollywood to Holy Vows." Mother Hart spoke to HollywoodChicago.com via phone last month about her incredible journey described in the memoir, and her life today.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you believe is the roots of the continued fascination with your unique life transition? What arouses a person's curiosity the most when they encounter you?

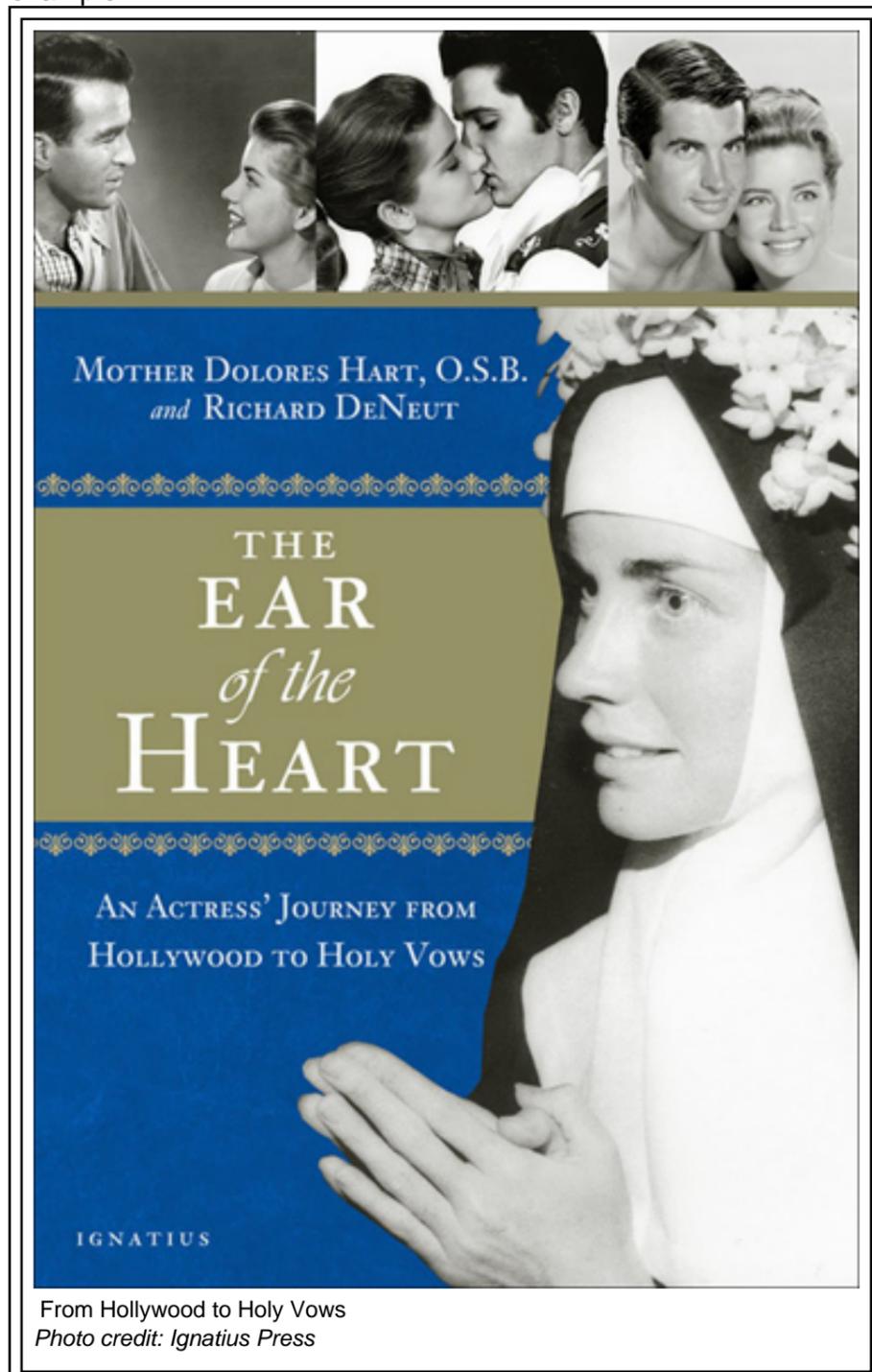
Mother Dolores Hart: I think it's the fact that I was a movie actress, and had a successful starring career for seven years, with the biggest names in Hollywood. And people cannot grasp how you can change that for what seems to be the humble, simple and less interesting life of a contemplative nun.

HollywoodChicago.com: The title of your book, 'The Ear of the Heart,' refers to listening to your own best instincts or in your case, the calling of the vows. What do you think are some of the lessons that a person can receive by the experience of your journey?

Hart: Well, 'The Ear of the Heart' is actually the first line in the rule of St. Benedict. The rule in that context is to listen to the ear in your heart of the Master. We have don't have too many people right now who think of anything as a Master, except the next paycheck or what they can get for nothing.

I think that it's very important for the time that we live in – which I think is a very dark night – and that kind of terror that we and our young people have to live in, I think it has to be met with what I call 'positive terror.' This is facing the reality of our life and who we really are, as we are born into this existence. Every single person has to have a mission of some sort.

HollywoodChicago.com: Because you had such an amazing seven years from the point of the film 'Loving You' to your entrance into religious service, what moment – besides the religious calling – keeps coming back to you, either consciously or subconsciously in dreams, for example?



Hart: It was a Book of Dreams. My grandfather was a projectionist at the Drake Theater in Chicago, and I watched films with him in the booth – but there wouldn't be any sound because he wanted to sleep – and it was my job to tell him when the reel was almost done.

When I got my first movie, the director took me aside and said, 'where did you ever learn to be a movie actress? You know how to do it so well.' I told him, I don't know it just must come naturally. Well, my grandfather then came to me in a dream and said, 'you are such a brat.'

You never gave me credit for what the projection booth taught you.' And often that relationship with him comes back to me, in many ways.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the key moments during your transition is when the actress Marilyn Monroe died, while you were filming in Paris. What do you think Marilyn keeps representing through her forever young image, versus the real orphan girl who was swallowed up by the industry?

Hart: Well, I think Marilyn represents an ideal that people think can might happen to them, though they don't take it far enough. When you really understand what happened to her, she was not given a context to really be herself – which is what happened to Elvis as well. Elvis told me he wanted a film career like James Dean. I don't think his manager ever set him up with another good film after we did 'King Creole.'

HollywoodChicago.com: We recently had the 50th Anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Since that was in the midst of your transition, what do you think that event represented to a society that you were a part of as a media star, and then as a religious servant?

Hart: As I remember, it was if society moved from one system of life – naive and beautiful, where anything was possible – and then when President Kennedy was shot, we were all shot as well. This began a culture of violence, which also killed his brother Bobby and Dr. Martin Luther King. His assassination triggered a downturn, that we're still in.

HollywoodChicago.com: So much of the Order of Saint Benedict [O.S.B.] is connected to obedience. In the time of your service, there has been quite a bit of scholarship regarding the translation of 'conversatio morum' as an interpretation of obedience within the individual Abbeys and Monasteries. Since you've been a leader in O.S.B., what has been your contribution to this conversation?

Hart: It became very clear to me very early. Because I had the freedom of my own direction before I entered the order, I felt that religious life did not have to be a one-sided submission, to something you don't know. You have to bring your own gifts into religious life, to become a servant with the gifts you have. And it's up to the people in monastic life to find a way to their context. What is the gift, and what is the mission, that comes from each woman who enters the order, and how can that mission be employed? Something has to happen to be genuinely happy, in love and in service.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've met two saints, as John the XXIII and John Paul II are about to be canonized. What is your viewpoint regarding the status of sainthood on church leaders whose indirect flaws can be as easily regarded as their achievements?

Hart: I think with our present Holy Father, that it is his whole idea that when you find out your mistakes – and look clearly at them – you can become a much better person, because you understand how to improve. It's not somebody else telling you how to improve. When you do it yourself, and you honestly look at it, you know you've been a jackass. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: As a woman who also had life experience in the more secular nature of Hollywood, and was also was used as an object of promotion in your looks and image, how did that help you or hinder you as a woman in the highly patriarchal Catholic Church structure? How has the role of women in the church evolved in your fifty years of service?

Hart: I still think there is a lot of work to be done, for the very points you just brought up. I think that the first thing that I know, that when you have men in your life – who really appreciate what you're doing, and enables you to do it – it's a relationship that can work. That's what I think Pope Francis is understanding, and praying forward. I've waited a long time for him.

And even though Pope John Paul II and Pope John XXIII were canonized, I don't think they had that insight into women. I'm sorry to say.

HollywoodChicago.com: What part of your calling was fear of your biological nature? Since you were in an industry that prized the way a woman looked, was the reaction and feedback you received regarding your beautiful looks – and what men wanted from them – part of your journey toward your calling?



Dolores Hart with Elvis Presley in 'King Creole'
Photo credit: Paramount Home Entertainment

Hart: I am not conscious of that at all, my mother was a very open woman when it came to sexuality. The first time I got in trouble in that area I was with a boy – and he had his pants down – and I was discovered by my grandmother. My grandmother expected my mother to punish me,

but all she said when I got to the room was, 'when I hit the bed with this belt, you yell.' Afterwards, she said she wanted to tell me one thing about sex. She didn't care what I did, as long as I was in love, because my body was a gift and it was beautiful.

My mother was very open when it came to her body. She had a tattoo on her left hip, and this was the early 1950s. And she would walk around the house with just a string covering her boobs and fanny, practically naked doing her housework. She always said, 'I am who I am.' I loved her for that freedom in her sexuality. I don't think I grew up afraid of it, I think I grew up wanting to go somewhere more important.

HollywoodChicago.com: So many stereotypes of nuns involve that they want nothing to do with men, yet men have had an incredible influence on your life and times. What spiritual nature of the male gender, in your opinion, best serves both our religious society and general one?

Hart: I think it's that men have a capacity to take care of people. The other day I was in a parking lot, and I was sitting in the passenger seat. My male driver came over, reached across me, and put the seatbelt on me. It was a sexual act – I could tell it in my body – and it wasn't conscious on this man's part. It was just deeply caring, and also in a primal way it was a sexual act.

Men have to trust that their sexual nature can be very powerful, but they also have to know their feminine nature. A 'male feminine' can be a very positive man. A man doesn't always have to be macho to be sexually desirable.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what blessing is your favorite, and what blessing would you like to give our world?

Hart: My blessing in the monastery is to be loved and cared for – and to be given a place to be myself. And I would want every person in the world to find a way to know who they are, to some extent. We have to know, up to the point of our mysterious end, that everything we have done has come from the center of our own truth. And I would hope that for everybody.

"The Ear of the Heart: An Actress' Journey From Hollywood to Holy Vows" by Mother Dolores Hart, O.S.B. and Richard DeNeut, is available wherever books are sold.



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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 23 2024 - 4:06am):

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