It wasn't just men who wanted to devote their lives to God, women did too. They became nuns and lived in nunneries, mostly followed the rules of Saint Benedict, and lived lives fairly similar to monks. There were not as many nuns as monks though and they hardly ever worked with books or manuscripts. So what did they do instead? How and why did women become nuns? And how did they help the rest of society?

3: Was it fun to be a nun?

MISSION OBJECTIVES

- To understand why some women became nuns and what their lives involved.
- To understand how they helped the rest of society.

My name is Sister Emily and I'm 16 years old. When I was born, my mother and I nearly died. My father prayed to God and promised Him that I would spend my life doing His work if I lived. I did, so when I was a very young girl, my father kept his promise and handed me over to the Sisters with a dowry.

My name is Sister Ursula and I'm 22 years old. When it became time for me to marry, I told my father that I didn't want a husband – I wanted to become a nun. That way, my education would continue and I would have responsibilities and jobs that are far more interesting than being a wife and mother. My father gave a dowry to the nunnery and I donated my silver necklace that belonged to my grandfather.

My name is Sister Winifred and I am 55 years old. I became a nun when my husband died two years ago. I decided to dedicate the rest of my life to God and gave all of my money and belongings, including my house, to the nunnery. Now I have nothing to worry about other than pleasing God and doing His work.

FACT

Not every young woman was thrilled at the prospect of a life devoted to God. In 1318, a nun called Joanna from Clementhorpe Nunnery, faked her own death and staged her own funeral in an attempt to escape becoming consecrated!

Women became nuns for a number of different reasons and at various different ages. Look at the stories of the three nuns above.

The Brides of Christ

After living by the rules of Saint Benedict for five years, nuns were **consecrated**. This involved a ceremony that was very similar to a wedding. The nun would have a ring placed on her finger and she wore a wedding crown as she took her vows. From then on, she would be seen as being married to God.

The daily life of a nun was very similar to that of a monk – based around prayer and chores. But rather than working in the scriptorium, nuns saw it as their duty to look after the sick (see Source B). The Church built 160 new hospitals between 1205 and 1300, many of which were attached to nunneries.

SOURCE A: *A picture of nuns looking after the sick in their nunnery. Nuns or sisters often attended to the sick – that's why senior nurses in hospitals today are known as 'sisters'.* ↘

The word hospital comes from the Latin word hospitalis, which means 'a place for guests'. Originally, they were just intended as places where visitors could sleep for the night but people soon began to take their sick relatives to the nunneries. It was the nun's duty to care for the unwell and the hospitals soon grew in number and size.

WISE-UP Words

consecrated
dowry

" Care for the sick stands before everything. You must help them as Christ would, whom you really help by helping them. Also, you must be patient with them and you will gain quarter merit with God. The sick should not be neglected at any single point. "

↰ **SOURCE B:** *The rules for Benedictine monks, AD534.*

Work

1 Give at least two different reasons why some women became nuns.

2 Explain why nuns were sometimes called the 'Brides of Christ'.

3 Imagine you are a young nun. Write a letter to your parents that explains how you are serving God and helping people. Your teacher will show you how to set it out.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

- Can you give somebody at least two reasons why women became nuns in medieval England?
- Could you explain why you would be glad that there were nuns, if you were alive in the Middle Ages?