

'My sister loved to party and turned her life around' - the nun on the way to sainthood.

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By Elaine McGee and Gerry Bradley, BBC News NI

She was a self-confessed wild child who ultimately swapped partying for prayer. Clare Crockett's ambition was once for fame and fortune as a Hollywood actress. But she would end up in a totally different role - first a nun and now, 10 years to the day after her death in an earthquake, a would-be saint. Her sister, Shauna Gill, said she "belongs to the world now", as thousands attend a Catholic retreat named after the nun. Sr Clare Crockett was killed in an earthquake in Ecuador in 2016. Sister Clare Crockett was born in Northern Ireland's second city of Londonderry in 1982, a year after Bobby Sands and nine other republican prisoners died on hunger strike and a time of great political upheaval. As a young girl, she witnessed a British soldier being blown up.

A mural of Sr Clare is painted in the Brandywell area of Derry to mark the 10th anniversary of her death. The mural shows two images of the nun Sr Clare Crockett. On the left, she is wearing a light orange habit and veil, her head bowed and a cross around her neck. The words All or Nothing!! are written over it, with Dr Claire underneath. On the right she is wearing a white veil and blue and white habit and smiling. But it was a chance trip to Spain in 2000 that would change her life forever. "I thought I was going to Spain to party," she said before her death. "I thought we were going to a place called Ibiza." But partying would be replaced by prayer when she ended up at a pilgrimage in a small place called Priego, in the Cuenca region of central Spain. It was there that she described feeling God's presence for the first time - and decided to turn her back on the party scene. On Good Friday in 2000, she kissed the feet of a statue depicting the crucifixion of Jesus. "I felt it was my sins that nailed our Lord to the cross and I just started crying," she said. She entered the Servant Sisters of the Home of the Mother in 2001 at the age of 18 and took her first vows in 2006, taking the religious name of Sr Clare Maria of the Trinity and the Heart of Mary. Her life motto was "all or nothing". "I fell in love with Jesus Christ," she said. "He stole my heart." She would die 10 years later in Ecuador, after the school where she was teaching music collapsed during an earthquake in April 2016.

In 2025, she was declared a Servant of God by the Catholic Church - the first step towards sainthood. Since her death, Sr Clare's family have had to navigate their own private grief, while also watching as her profile as a nun and potential saint gains global recognition.

"I don't think that we ever grieved Clare because from the day she died, she is spoken about every day, by us as her family, but also by strangers and by people all around the world," the nun's sister Shauna Gill told BBC Radio Foyle's North West Today programme.

"She has left such a legacy. "Clare is a normal Brandywell girl who turned her life around and could now become a saint. "She truly deserves it." She said the family had accepted that they would not necessarily have the space for private reflection for her sister on her anniversary, but they drew comfort for those who will be there for the retreat. "It is our family's grave, but we are very blessed that Clare is at rest in her home city. "It's not something that would normally happen with a nun who is part of an order. "There'll be no private time, but we will have it at another time."

Will Sister Clare become a saint?

In the process of her beatification, Sr Clare is currently what is known as a Servant of God. The next step is the gathering of testimonies from witnesses. The department that makes recommendations to the Pope on saints scrutinises the evidence. If the case is approved, it is passed to the Pope who decides whether the person lived a life of "heroic virtue". If so, they can be called "venerable". Gill said around 60 witnesses will now have to be interviewed across Ireland, Spain, Ecuador and the United States. Sr Clare's anniversary Mass will be celebrated on Thursday at St Columba's Church, Long Tower, the same church where her funeral Mass was held a decade ago. All week, thousands of people have been attending the Sr Clare retreat, including members of her religious order. 'Her story is so real' "I think the reason so many young people follow her is because her story is so real, she was very honest about how she loved her teenage years and I think everybody is able to relate to that," said pilgrim Tina Duffy. "To me she's already a saint, the fact that it can maybe go down on a piece of paper will be amazing and she's local, all that, but she's already a saint in my eyes." Margaret McSwine, a former neighbour of Sr Clare, also attended the retreat. Margaret McSwine said it would be "absolutely incredible" if her old neighbour, Sr Clare, were to become a saint. "She grew up like a normal teenager, and I think the young people have really taken to her story you know and formed that connection with her," she said. "It would be just absolutely amazing if she were to be made a saint and it will happen - with the help of God - she will be a saint and it's brilliant, just brilliant." Fr. Gerard Mongan, administrator of Long Tower parish, said people from all over Ireland had come to the retreat. "There are people tuning in via the webcam from all over the world — every country you can mention, they are tuned in," he said. "Sister Clare often said, 'I want to be famous, I want to be a famous nun' and she sure got her wish."