Columns
Spirituality



A statue of St. Mother Theodore Guerin graces the courtyard of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Ind., seen Oct. 6, 2016. (CNS/Katie Breidenbach)



by Emily TeKolste

Contributor

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"Sisters, is your life easy?" The question came from Diego (not his real name), an acquaintance with whom we were sharing ice cream, the friend and ministry partner of our sister who had just renewed her vows. Two of her friends had joined us for a (slightly cramped) car ride to our motherhouse, and were now out for ice cream with three of our newer members.

The question was relatively easy for me to answer: "Easy? No. Good? Yes." Still, the question has stayed with me. Both of the friends who joined us that day are members of multiple marginalized communities. Their very presence in our community is threatened on a regular basis. One of them spent over a month in an immigration detention center and faced the very real possibility of immediate deportation.

I had spent a couple of hours in the car with them, watching as they gently teased each other over personality quirks, noticing their generous spirits and attention to all who were in the cramped back seat of the car, and marveling at Gabriel (not his real name) as he insisted that we turn the car around so he could gently move a recently killed baby deer from the middle of the road by our motherhouse. I felt lucky to be in their presence.

As I prepared to take first vows and transition into a new ministry this summer, I reflected a lot on life as a sister. I'm coming out of a challenging year as a first-year teacher in a context that didn't quite fit. I struggled to keep up with the workload, build appropriate classroom management techniques, and find an appropriate work-life balance while living with the assistant principal of the school where I taught. I may have doubted my ministry and the situation I found myself in at that moment, but I never doubted my presence in this congregation. Despite all the challenges I have faced so far, I know that I can wholeheartedly and passionately say, "I love being a Sister of Providence!" Easy? No. Good? Absolutely!

There's been a lot of public conversation about "the future of religious life." Many people wonder if religious life is dying. Others wonder whether it *should* die or what can replace it in this world today. Are the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience — which I professed for the first time on June 30 — still relevant in our world? Can the future of religious life be lived without vows professed in a life of celibacy? What

might the future of religious life look like? What value do our vows offer to us and to the world today?

In *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life*, Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister says, "The vows pledge us to give our lives to the things we're for, not to try to escape the things we're against." In this context, she renames the vows "generous justice, reckless love, and limitless listening." All Christians — perhaps even all humans — are called to practice these virtues. Vowed religious are called to give our entire lives in pursuit of cultivating these virtues in our lives. And if you're called to this life, this pursuit is *good*.

This pursuit, done in communion with others, is very good. As a new sister, I have been blessed by the presence of other new sisters across congregations. I see the life in my sisters through Giving Voice. I am inspired by the depth of relationship I have formed with both men and women through our inter-community novitiate program. I rely on these vibrant younger members of religious life, just as I rely on the wisdom voices from within my own community. I don't wonder about the existence of religious life into the future: I see it through its vibrancy and openness in the present. I feel blessed to be a part of it.

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As Christians, we don't escape the world. We dive ever more deeply into the world, seeking God's presence in every moment, in every person, and in every form of vocation. We seek world transformation, starting with our own personal transformation. We seek relationship with people called to other forms of life, for we can only pursue the world transformation we desire in partnership with others. We seek that kind of transformation in the mundane of making sure we've done the dishes and in the work of transforming systems for justice. Life as a sister — like any Christian life form — is certainly not *easy*. It shouldn't be. It is, however, *good* — very good.

As Diego and Gabriel talked about what a privilege it was to know some young sisters, I couldn't help but think that the privilege was really ours, we who got to know these brave men who lived their lives with laughter and joy, fought for justice, and expressed incredible generosity. Their support encourages me as I undertake my commitment to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. I hope that

something in my life can provide the same support for them as they follow their own vocations.

[Emily TeKolste is a temporary professed Sister of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana. She is the author of the blog So Long Status Quo and ministers as a grassroots mobilization specialist for Network Lobby in Washington, D.C.]