Columns
Ministry
Religious Life



A young woman looks through the books at the Pauline Books and Media Center in Goa, India. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)



by Lissy Maruthanakuzhy

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February 4, 2020

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Editor's note: *GSR is celebrating the Feb. 2 World Day for Consecrated Life — a day of prayer for men and women in consecrated life — with a week of columns that illustrate some of the varied and unique ministries and contributions that consecrated women bring to the Catholic Church and society around the world.*

"Am I taking your time, sister?" a 75-year-old gentleman said, smiling, after he had been talking to us for an hour.

When he entered our store, he was limping and looked tired.

"Not at all. We are here for you," the sister answered him with a smile.

He is among many we welcome in to our center daily — not for purchases, but to talk, share, inspire and "be at peace" for a while.

I asked what happened to his bandaged left foot.

"Oh, it is a long story. This wound persists since a year and my wife dresses it daily."

He continued, "My wife cannot travel far. So, I come to the city for various needs. My eye specialist is delayed. I came here because I know I will be welcomed."

He once worked in Dubai. Now back in the village, his wounded foot and skirmishes with his brother weigh him down. He shared his pains: "I look after my brother even when he is disturbing me. He is angry that my children are working in different countries fending for themselves. I leave my life in God's hand."

Giving his mobile phone to me, he said, "The pharmacist needs my mobile number. But I do not know it."

We deciphered his number and called his mobile. He asked, "Is that the sound of my mobile? I never heard that tune before!"

A deep sense of sadness came over me. The technology may have taken us to different levels in society but often it does not help build relationships: His children rarely contacted him on his mobile.

When he left an hour and half later with a smile of gratitude, it was a soul-searching moment for me.



Maria Barretto, a schoolteacher, buys books for free distribution among friends. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

The Pauline Books and Media Center where I serve is a source of light, inspiration and strength for me. Each day, every person brings new experiences and realizations. Youth, consecrated persons, parents, wives, husbands, street vendors — all remind me of the value of a God-centered person's availability.

My thoughts flew quickly to our founder, Blessed James Alberione. As a seminarian, he realized that many city dwellers sought someone who could listen to their stories

and empathize with them. Migrating from their cozy little villages to the growing cities in search of work, they felt lonely. He wanted to reach out to them with the Gospel message through the media of social communication — press, cinema, radio. A Books and Media Center was a place where people could meet with consecrated persons and replenish themselves with Gospel values.

Visitors to our center in this Indian little city, Goa (once a Portuguese colony), that welcomed me in January 2019 are immensely friendly. So, when a beautiful elderly woman came to collect an order for her friend, I exclaimed, "I appreciate your concern for your neighbor."

She looked at me silently; I felt awkward, thinking I had hurt her.

Her reply astounded me: "Sister, thank you for expressing who I am. We have to do some good things in life. I am doing my little share." Still unsmiling, she was thoughtful as her eyes remained locked on mine.

I stood transfixed.

Before I could recover, she added, "I am living with a sober alcoholic. He still gambles and is a chain-smoker ..." Her eyes moistened. I remained silent, feeling fear and sadness.

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"From day one of my marriage, I realized the man I was wedded to was an alcoholic. My parents and brothers were ready to help me out. But I realized this man needed my help. Sister, God has a purpose in everything," she added.

My thoughts went to my community. What were my little difficulties compared to the gigantic pain this woman faced each day?

"Where else can I go? He controlled everything, including the finance. I am glad my children did not get into his habit. They are all educated, married, firmly rooted in faith, and living well with their families. Only we two are at home now," she sadly shared.

Indeed, our center is a place for evangelization. It is like a "pulpit" in the church — as Alberione said — a place where we enter into people's lives, building

relationships; where they come seeking counsel and direction. There, every day, I renew my commitment to God and his people.

Our visitors remind me about the purpose of my consecrated life. To minister to them, I need to be a person transformed in Christ. People look for the presence of God here, not academic qualifications. What matters is our availability and concern, our own seeking for God and sharing our God experiences.



A woman who frequents the Pauline Books and Media Center in Goa, India, peruses books. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

Another gentleman walks in, looking grumpy. I smile as usual. He is a regular customer and benefactor to our center.

He tells me, "I am here because of my wife." I look at him wide-eyed. He describes how his wife prayed constantly to free him from alcoholism. "For two years, she prayed for me at night and applied holy oil on my forehead while I was asleep. She never forced me to quit my habit, never criticized but only waited with love. And God heard her. After two years of our marriage, I quit my habit and have never touched it for 20 years.

"My friends still invite me and force me to try again. But I experience the power of God that helps me resist it," he added.

Sometimes people come to share an experience of God's protection.

A young lady showed me the picture of a damaged car under a tree trunk, a statue of St. Christopher intact on the dashboard. Smiling, but with fear in her eyes, she says, "My husband of another faith had a narrow escape."

Describing the saving action of God in their lives, she had come to collect statues of St. Christopher, medallions of Jesus, and a crucifix for her husband and his four relatives. "Through my witness of life alone I can draw him to Christ," she said, smiling.

I offered to help another lady: "Do not worry, Sister, I will browse around and call you when I need your help," she said.

When she said goodbye, she shared that she came to get "Precious Blood" books for her daughter in Pondicherry, who was married but broke it off, who had been depressed but had "attended about 25 retreats, before she was freed from her sorrows." To live in an attitude of gratitude to God, her daughter has taken up one-month voluntary service of preaching the Word at the retreat center.

"We all must be ready, Sister, for God's mission," she said with a smile as she prepared to leave.



Daughters of St. Paul Sr. Nancy D'Souza listens to Rajita Rajan, a professor and lawyer. (Lissy Maruthanakuzhy)

I reflect on how I can be faithful to my founder's vision. He read the signs of his time, faced the challenges of his time creatively, met his contemporaries' needs, brought them the Gospel, and took risks traveling on "a road less traveled by." Today, he is asking us to pioneer and develop new approaches and attract new members through love and concern.

To follow him radically, I also need to move out of my traditional mindset and fixed ideas, to detach from myself to be free for God and his people.

Each day teaches me something new, as new people continue to enter my life. Like simple housewives, who never studied theology, but evangelize by telling how they experience God in their pains and in their joys.

In identifying with God's people in their daily struggles, I accomplish half of my missionary work.

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This story appears in the **World Day for Consecrated Life** feature series. View the full series.