Columns
Religious Life



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Some thoughts below have been preoccupying me. Do these puzzle you, too?

I was editing a centennial book for our priory, *My Chosen Path*, and when I read the part where our sisters shared how they found their way to the convent, I was impressed at the tremendous zeal, the sacrifices that many of us made to follow our vocation — some even having to "elope" because of their parents' objections.

Some sisters had to postpone their entrance because they had to support their families financially. A novice struggling with poor health had to leave at least two times, but persisted in reentering when she finally passed the health test. Someone else had to break up with her boyfriend. It is incredible and yet edifying to recall all these sacrifices and persistence in following one's vocation.

I think it was from that that my puzzlements arose. After decades of spiritual nourishment: intensive initial formation, ongoing formation with reflection Sundays, retreats, recollections, spiritual renewals, spiritual companioning, and so many more aids to personal and spiritual development …

How is it possible that in our mature years, there are still sisters — living in the same community — who do not speak to each other? Even when they just received Communion beside each other that morning! Then they write notes to each other, or use an intermediary to communicate with each other.

How does it happen that in the Priory Council, we hesitate to assign a sister to this or that community because she cannot live with this or that sister in that community? I was thinking our community could be a great witness if we succeed in living harmoniously together, in spite of our differences; but if we cannot, our community could be a real scandal to the secular world that is already full of conflicts, racism, hatred, wars and violence. I have also seen how people are scandalized when they see sisters shouting at and scolding employees in public, instead of asking them to come to their office to talk with them.

And can we honestly say that as sisters we are beyond racism, classism and ageism when we deal with others? I remember, for example, one of our formators casually informing me about a postulant, "The Chinese went with the others to the slum area." (In our dialect "*Intsik*" — "Chinese" — is derogatory when used in that way.) So I said, "She has a name: 'Lisa'. Can you please refer to her as 'Lisa,' not 'the Chinese?' " ("Lisa" is not her real name.)

How can some of us — having been given countless instances of feedback by superiors, and friendly or unfriendly peers — be so amazingly lacking in self-knowledge and insight into ourselves? This is even if everyone around us in our community is aware of and suffering from our disturbing attitudes and actions.

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Even some of us who seem to have good self-knowledge and give excellent retreats, lectures and recollections; or have good discipline in their classrooms; or are excellent administrators — even these are unable to make concrete changes in themselves! It is true we all have our quirks, but there are tolerable quirks and intolerable quirks!

I know of another sister who has held administrative offices, and has been invited all over the country as a spiritual resource person — but in her community, she actually bullies sisters and even lay staff, scolding them, berating them. When she comes to the computer room, or any office room, everybody leaves the room, because soon she will be ordering them around.

Positively and in contrast, I cannot forget Sister Angelica, my schoolmate and companion in the novitiate who became later on prioress and general councilor. She had the natural grace to treat everyone with the same respect whether she was talking to a visiting dignitary or to her driver.

How can we be such micromanagers that we have to look into everything we have delegated someone else to be in charge of? How does it happen that what we perhaps learned as "striving for perfection" in our formation days, has become perfectionism — not only for ourselves but for others? This causes so much irritation, resentment and unhappiness! These perfectionists also act as virtual "novice mistresses," correcting everyone, including those they are not in charge of. Why this pedantic attitude towards everyone? One cannot help but recall the gospel admonition to first cast out the beam out of our own eye so as to see clearly to cast out the mote out of our neighbor's eye (Matthew 7:3).

Have you experienced some of these less desirable qualities in yourself?

My question is: If I am not better than the person I was when I entered the convent — indeed if I have even become worse — what does that say about religious life?

What does that say about our seriousness of purpose?

I hope you don't mind that my reflection may be disturbing for you. But as I grow older, I realize that life is so short; we should not waste a single moment of it in negative thoughts and actions, but should celebrate each moment and give joy to everyone God brings into our life. If we are focused on that, we won't have *time* to take care of everyone else's business!

My wake-up prayer every day now is:

Loving God, thank you for this beautiful day. Thank you that I am still alive and healthy. Help me to live this day with mindfulness, compassion and joy!

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