Columns
Ministry
Religious Life



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December 15, 2020

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The rule and constitution of my community is titled "Response in Faith." My copy is well-worn. Wax spilled on it when I received it — along with a candle — at my reception into community. My copy is very much a living document, filled with highlights and scribbles in the margins and little notes tucked inside. I tease that upon my death it gets destroyed so as not to cause scandal.

As I'm sure happens in all congregations, from time to time our elected leadership teams ask us to pray and study the rule anew. And while I pray with and study our rule on a regular basis, this time was very different! Without realizing it, I changed the title from "Response in Faith" to "*Respond* in Faith."

For the first time, "response" seemed past tense to me, whereas "respond" is present. The world seems to be way more complicated than it has ever been. The longer I live, the broader my perspective becomes, the more I live into community, and as I continue to minister to and with a diverse group of teenagers, the more I know I need to consciously and consistently *respond* in faith.

I'm not talking about "big stuff" or life-changing decisions — those seem obvious for responding out of faith and prayer and discernment. I'm talking about the everyday stuff, the routine, the automatic. You know, the stuff we do without thinking.

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And so, an ever-growing litany (developed in half an hour's time) began, "How do I *respond* in faith?" It is the question I keep before me and bring to prayer.

- When I reach out and people don't reciprocate — how do I respond in faith?
- When someone I'd rather not "deal with" reaches out to me — how do I respond in faith?
- When responsibilities change after I've committed to them — how do I respond in faith?
- When I'm forgotten or ignored — how do I respond in faith?
- When my feelings are hurt, or when I hurt others — how do I respond in faith?
- When promises are broken — how do I respond in faith?
- When misunderstandings happen — how do I respond in faith?
- When I offer my gifts and have them rejected — how do I respond in faith?
- When I face the unfamiliar — how do I respond in faith?

- When I'm stretched further than I want to be — how do I respond in faith?
- When (fill in the blank) — how do I respond in faith?

It's been nearly a year and the longer I pray with my litany, the more I realize just how hard it is to respond in faith *all the time*. Responding in faith takes a lot of effort.



Sr. Jane Marie Bradish at her reception into the School Sisters of St. Francis community (Provided photo)

If I'm completely honest, I don't respond in faith as consistently as I would like. I have to admit I've rarely gotten through a complete day responding in faith to everything. Responding in faith means I'm conscious and attentive to what's going on, that I don't simply react. Like all of humanity, I want my own way, I want to be recognized, I want what's comfortable and reliable, I lose patience.

Rather than giving up, I keep working at it. I keep coming back to my litany, focusing on one or two pieces at a time. The 2020-21 school year is offering good practice. We have a plan for "hybrid" teaching and learning. We meet with half the students at a time and are seeing them one quarter of what we usually would.

We have got a plan for total virtual teaching and learning, because the chances of having to move to that model are high, given that our school is large and, at the time of this writing, in an area with surging COVID-19 numbers. We also have a plan for school the way we are used to, face-to-face, one we doubt we will use this school year.

Hybrid and virtual school are unfamiliar and they stretch me. I know how to teach in my classroom, when I can read the reaction of my students. It's very different to do that when I can't see them.

With the school year underway, I pray I can respond in faith when the technology fails. I pray I can respond in faith when the lessons I worked so hard to prepare don't go as planned. I pray I can respond in faith when someone inevitably skips the videos and sample work and jumps right to a terse email complaining they don't understand and I'm not teaching. I pray I can respond in faith when my "gut reaction" is to give up.

A sticky note on my classroom computer says RIF (respond in faith). I have another near the alarm clock in my room and another at the makeshift home office in the corner of the living room. Constant reminders. I don't know if my community's three foundresses could have foreseen me changing the name of our rule, but I'm almost positive they would approve.

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