Columns
Religious Life



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That evening, our novice mistress was going out for a golden jubilee celebration and said, "Celine, can you show a motivational film to our novices?" I agreed, and reading from a list of the films we had, asked them which they wanted. They unanimously said, "Mother Teresa," and seemed to enjoy it. Next day, we did a film review and I asked, "What touched you most in the film?"

It was not easy for the first-year novices, coming from different states of India, to understand the English movies, but all were deeply touched by Mother Teresa's simplicity and compassion. Imagining the voice of Jesus on the Cross, one of them said, "A man said 'I thirst,' and Mother Teresa went on taking care of the sick."

When my turn came, I shared that I was touched by her saying, "I am a pencil in the hand of God." If we look at the life of any one of us, it is so true: We are pencils in God's hand, and he draws beautiful pictures through our lives.

A religious may have to live various roles in her lifetime — in her own country or foreign countries — to fulfil God's plan. But if we take the credit, we miss the point that God is the author of our lives. "Not to us, oh Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness" (Psalm 115:1).

In the past few years, the Indian state of Kerala — once a breeding ground for good religious vocations — is challenged with the media spotlight on a few individuals who were once religious but for various reasons had to leave their congregations. They are giving misinformation based on their bitter experiences, to take revenge on the convents where they were once members.

Some people believe what they say, and recently I was shocked to see a video on YouTube where an educated person said, "Parents, better kill your daughters instead of sending them to convents!" The accusations are: There is no freedom, it's a place of torture, sexual abuse, and the like.

This has had a negative impact among the Catholic families in Kerala; parents are not willing to take the risk, and young girls are losing their interest — though a few still dare to join.

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Little do they know that it is the Holy Spirit who calls one to religious life, or to married life, or to the single state, according to God's plan. Being true to our individual call is more important than which state we are in, because in the end everything is for the glory of God.

When I reflect, the ways God has led me is amazing. It resonates with each one of us — the mysterious ways God led us in the past and is now leading us for the purpose for which he called us.

It does not mean that religious life is without challenges and difficulties. We are called to unknown territories, demanding a leap in faith into the mysteries of God. Our journey into life is our journey into God. On this sacred journey, we experience God as mystery. The mystery of God becomes our story: history/herstory!

Mother Teresa had no clue about how to proceed once she left the Loreto convent in Kolkata. She had a burning desire to do something for the poorest and sickest people, in whom she saw the face of Jesus. She had no money, no training to care for the sick, but she had her determination and courage to follow the One she loved and in whom she placed her total trust.

She took basic medical training from the Medical Mission Sisters in Patna, though it was not easy as she faced challenges among the majority Hindus accusing her of "religious conversion." They even tested to see if she was doing conversions.

But witnessing her loving and compassionate care to the destitute, the government official charged with evicting her told the Hindus, "Will your wives and daughters take care of the sick and poor? If so, I shall evict her right now." They hung their heads in shame and disappeared.



La Madre Teresa en 1992 (Foto: CNS/Michael Collopy)

In the movie, she asks, "Lord what do you want me to do? Why can't I live like other nuns?" There are moments when faced with challenges we too ask, "Why me?" without knowing what God is doing in our lives. As clay in the hands of the potter, we must go through the pains before being shaped into something beautiful. As the saying goes, "No pain, no gain!"

Community life is not easy with people of different personalities, and shaped by different childhood experiences, living together. Some are authoritarian, some are egoistic, as in any group. The beauty of it is that we have a God who is ever available to us, gives strength and takes us forward.

We only need to be patient, wait for God's time to unfold his plan. We must constantly ask, *Who am I? Why am I here?* A religious who takes responsibility for

her call will not blame the authorities or her companions and leave her vocation. One needs to build resilience through prayer, meditation, and faith in God.

A true religious — like Jesus — gains strength from within and looks outward, not focusing on self/ego as the center of their lives but always looking for ways to serve others, to make this world a better place.

One of my friends who left the congregation years ago told her daughters, "Who I am today is because of the training in the convent." She is not the only one to be grateful, of those who realized it was not their vocation.

Life has taught me many lessons and yet I make blunders; thank God, pencils have erasers too! Erasers are reminders that to err is human, but we can correct our mistakes with honesty and humility. Mother Teresa is quoted as saying, "We are not called to be successful but to be faithful." God looks at the intentions of our hearts more than the actions of our hands.

Our mother church is inviting us to join the synodal process by listening to each other and — as a family — to ask if we are following the values of Jesus, our model and leader. Religious life is a gift to the church. Let us use this opportunity to improve our relationships with one another for the total health and well-being of our mother church.

With profound gratitude for the gift of life and the call to religious life, I place my heart together with Mother Mary in thanking and glorifying God for the great things God is doing in our lives. And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (Luke 1:46-48).