Columns



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Consider the caterpillar, suspended in midair by a single silken thread. It is tethered to the leaf on which it was feeding before it fell off. Now, it slowly pulls itself back up toward the source of nourishment. I imagine how the caterpillar feels, floating through space, holding on to its line of silk for dear life, like a bungee jumper.

That's rather what it feels like to enter a religious congregation.

I made my first profession of vows as a Dominican Sister of Peace on July 3, 2022, three years after entering the community. A few weeks before the momentous day, I went on retreat in upstate New York. It was late spring, and gardens around the retreat house had burst into bloom. One morning, I walked out the door of my hermitage to find a monarch butterfly fluttering among the irises. Around the neighborhood, I noticed one caterpillar after another dangling from tree branches. A voice within prompted me to attend.

For me, entering religious life was less like falling and more like leaping out of the normal life I had known. I wasn't in free fall; the formation program, with its stages of candidacy and novitiate, provided a safety net. Yet I felt like I had launched myself into a new element, tethered only by a single thread: the desire for transformation.

The desire for God — the desire to be transformed into love — has led me to do some crazy things in the past three years. A month after completing my doctorate, I moved to Columbus, Ohio, where my congregation has a House of Welcome for incoming members. When COVID-19 struck in March 2020, I chose to remain there, in quarantine with four women to whom I was not related. That August, still in the midst of pandemic, I relocated to Chicago for my canonical novitiate year and formed community with four different women, whom I hardly knew. Becoming voluntarily unemployed is a crazy thing to do at any time, much less during a global economic shutdown, yet that's what novices do.



Irises bloom outside a chapel at the Dominican Retreat and Conference Center in Niskayuna, New York. (Annie Killian)

For my apostolic novitiate year, my congregation made a crazy decision. They asked two sisters to move to South Bend, Indiana, and open a new local community with me. As a second-year novice, I turned down a hard-to-come-by job offer that would have taken me away from that community. Last month, I liquidated all my assets and ceded the administration of my property in order to make profession.

It's astounding that I could behave so unconventionally. At every step I was aware of choosing a path that makes no sense in the eyes of neoliberal capitalism. The voice of worldly pragmatism within me kept shouting: "This is a crazy thing you're doing!" Whence came the courage to press on anyway?

God's love has an attractive force stronger than the gravity of norms or conventions. The desire that tethers me to the source of my life has led me into community with

sisters whose faith and witness nourishes my soul. It's affirming to look back over the past three years and see signs of transformation within myself: growing self-acceptance, authenticity, gentleness, flexibility, creative energy and wisdom. These are the first fruits of inner work and God's good grace.

What's amazing about caterpillars is that they have no idea what it's like to be a butterfly. When it's time to pupate and form their chrysalis, they know intuitively what to do. They surrender to the instinct for metamorphosis.



(Pixabay/Jerry Phons G)

I entered the process of formation not knowing how the vows would transform me — yet believing that they would. How many sisters have told me they never could have imagined, when they entered religious life, where God's call would lead them. Yet

they leapt out into the open air with a spirit of adventure. In dedicating myself to God, God's people and God's creation, I look to the mystics and prophets among our sisters as guides on the way.

I give thanks for my three years of formation, when so many self-imposed expectations and limitations have been plowed up and overturned to reveal the rich soil beneath — a ferment of passionate energy and longing for communion. Potent seeds have been planted by the sisters who served as my formation directors, mentors and companions on the journey.

On the final day of my first-profession retreat, I saw a young mother sitting in her backyard, cross-legged in the grass, holding her baby. The baby was very small, nearly newborn and wearing a bucket hat. Mom held Baby upright and pointed to some green thing growing in the grass — showing Baby the beauty and wonder of Earth. Then she turned Baby around, face to face, and kissed her tenderly. The mom was entirely at ease, unhurried, absorbed in her child.

That is how my mother gazed at me, I thought, and how God beholds me now, as if cherishing a precious gift. Although my mother passed away in 2015, years before I entered religious life, I somehow felt that my profession fulfilled her dreams for me — dreams for a life full of meaning, community and joy.

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My mother lives now in Christ. The butterfly outside my retreat hermitage represented her presence, greeting me from beyond the veil in the communion of saints. An ancient symbol of resurrection, the butterfly speaks to me also of religious life in its eschatological aspect. Vowed religious give themselves over to the transformative love of Christ so that we may be heralds of a new creation. As much as I resonate with images of falling seeds and furrowed ground, the butterfly's role as a migrating pollinator reminds me that, as a Dominican Sister, I am committing to live as an itinerant preacher. My task, like the butterfly's, is to be on the move, tending to the ecosystem wherever I land and nurturing the garden of creation so that life may be renewed.

A cento harvesting the fruits of my retreat:

My peace I give to you.

Love opened her heart

Like a tree planted by running waters.

Pay attention:

She will not be defined.

Enjoying in God,

I beheld in my understanding

The ferment we grow out of,

In whom we live and move and have our being.

All becoming has needed me.

God is ripening.

May what I do flow from me like a river —

I want to unfold.

Into the matrix of life, death enters.

Don't let yourself lose me.

Learn from the things

To fall,

To rise up rooted, like trees,

To receive the gift of life-giving water.

Ask and you will receive

Work that is real.

I would describe myself

Like my mother's face,

Like a holy face,

Precious in the eyes of God.

My vows to you I will fulfill —

My mother's dream for me:

Peace.

I give you peace.