Columns



Friends from camp attend Sr. Kathryn Press' final vows party in August 2018. (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)



by Kathryn Press

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No one told me about convent culture shock. Despite having attending numerous "Come and See" retreats and spending weekends with the sisters, the postulate was a big change for me. I was a foreigner in a foreign land. God's grace was certainly at work — and I felt it.

The community welcomed me. My directress had endless patience. And of course, I'm thankful for my upbringing and family of origin who truly nurtured my vocation, raised me in the faith, sent me to Catholic school, supported me through a liberal arts degree (What does a Bachelor of Arts in religious studies give you in today's job market?) and even a Master of Divinity. But even they couldn't have adequately prepared me for convent living.

In the early 1990s my family started spending a week every summer at a camp on the shore of Lake Michigan. This gave us a way to connect with old friends when we moved from Ohio to Georgia. Our trips became such a family tradition that I spent at least a week at camp every year from 1991 to 2010, spending four of those summers working three months on the staff. These summers hold some of my fondest memories that I continue to treasure to this very day.

Four summers working at Lutheran Church camp were the best preparation I had for convent life. Coincidentally, that summer camp — Camp Arcadia — is celebrating its centenary this year. And because a piece of my heart will always be on the shore of Lake Michigan, this piece is my gesture of gratitude in thanksgiving to God for all the gifts and graces that have come into my life because of this place.

Sometimes on a resume or a CV we list "other skills" — for example, computer programming or coding, special driver's license, or professional affiliations. For me, I'd have to include a rather unique list because of my time at summer camp: square dance calling, industrial dishwasher operation, mastery in making beds with hospital

corners. Here are some of the many lessons and skills that came in handy in the convent:

How to clean: In the convent, cleanliness is next to godliness. And at summer camp we cleaned every single Saturday. We cleaned the German way: to perfection! The entire camp was transformed from top to bottom to welcome in new guests by that evening. Camp taught me how to pull my weight and have fun in the process. I could take pride in my work and care for the goods entrusted to me. Fast-forward a few years to cleaning the chapel at our provincial house and I was ready for the challenge of dusting every kneeler in the place in record time!

How to pray: Surrounded by lifelong Lutherans, I quickly realized how little of the Bible I knew. My friends had verses memorized! So we gathered together to read Scripture. And we sang. I mean really sang, in parts! This was praise and worship music long before those words were ever spoken in the Catholic circles I frequented. At my first profession Mass, I used the setting of Psalm 42 ("As the Deer") I first sang at summer camp.

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How to be open: Working an ecumenical environment challenged me to be comfortable explaining and pondering my faith. It exposed me to a preaching and proclamation of the word that truly fed my soul. In my current ministry, I collaborate with Alpha. We are Catholics and Protestants coming together to boldly proclaim the Christian faith to those who have not yet heard the good news. I firmly believe that I find myself "at home" in these Christian communities because of the welcome I first received from the Lutherans at camp so many years ago.

How to live and love: In the convent, we live with people we may have never chosen to live with. My first roommates at summer camp could echo those same words when they saw what a messy roommate I was. Summer camp taught me how to mentor and be mentored — something I would relive in the convent as a student-teacher. Camp taught me how to tolerate the musical taste of others — and love them for who they are instead of changing them. Mostly, my coworkers helped my

20-something self to be me. To accept who I was, and in turn love and accept others.

How to give my heart: As a vowed religious, my mission is to something much bigger than myself. The first taste I ever had of this was working at summer camp. There was a quiet, hidden work of service to our guests. It wasn't just about busing tables. There is something powerful and prayerful about sweeping under a chair and clearing someone's dishes all because of Jesus. I believe that working at summer camp opened my heart for mission that I later discovered echoes of in the charism of my community.

There are other practical skills I learned at summer camp that reappeared in convent life: how to wake up early, how to date food when putting away leftovers, how to cook for a crowd, how to play a mean game of pingpong. There are so many memories for me to treasure. As far as I know I'm the only vocation to religious life with this unique experience. This doesn't make me special, but I do think it makes me all the more grateful for how it's shaped my life.

What helped prepare you for your vocation? Who were the unlikely sources of wisdom and knowledge? How might you be able to thank them?