Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



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I said yes to life forever as a Sister of Providence on Aug. 20, 2022. My conversations with friends and acquaintances before and after this joyous celebration made it clear that many people do not know what to make of such a commitment. With marriage, there might be the standard questions about the honeymoon, the where and how of building a home and a family together, and perhaps advice from sage couples about married life and how to navigate the first few years.

Well-meaning inquirers, on the other hand, asked me things like, "Do you get to pick a new name?" or "Does this mean you will wear a habit now?" or "Where will they station you after your vows?" as if I were in the military. Of course, they all meant well, and in some congregations, there might be more concrete changes like these. For me, though, I would continue at the same ministry, I would keep the same name, and I would wear the same clothes. “So what changes?” one person asked. It's a valid question.

One concrete symbol for us is the ring that we wear on our left ring finger. For me, this is not so much a new, physical change. I had been wearing a ring on that finger for years as a sign of my commitment to discerning religious life. (And, as I sometimes joked, to keep people from hitting on me!)

My ring has a providential beginning. The year before I entered the congregation, I lived down the street from the House of the Little Flower, the Indianapolis Catholic Worker community, where I regularly attended meals and found kindred spirits and support. Little Flower community members knew I was discerning religious life that year (which brought on skepticism for some), and as the date approached for me to move out of the neighborhood and to the motherhouse, one community member asked, "Is there anything you need?" I asked what she meant. "You know, for nun camp?"

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She may not have said it exactly like that, but her point was that she wanted to give me something that I might need for this transition. I thought for a minute, and then said that I had always wanted a nice ring that I could wear on my left hand as I wade into this commitment. It need not be new, but a sturdy hand-me-down band that would not turn my hand a different shade would be nice.

Her face lit up, and she began to tell me about a ring she recently found in her jewelry box that her grandmother had given her. It was silver and had a cross on it, but it did not fit her finger. She never had the heart to get rid of it, but wasn't sure what else she would do with it. When she brought it over to the house, we were both in awe that not only did it fit my ring finger perfectly, but the translucent stone in the middle was green, the birthstone color for August. My birthday is August 1.

I have been wearing that silver ring since fall 2014. So what has changed? Now that ring has been christened and placed with intention on my finger with hundreds of people witnessing my forever "yes." It carries the meaning of that day, the years of prayer and formation leading up to it, and all the little yeses that continue to flow from it and will into the future.

The day of my final vows, I had a profound realization as I said these words aloud:

> I, Sister Tracey Horan, take forever the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience according to the Constitutions approved by the Holy See for this Congregation of the Sisters of Providence. Grant me, O my God, the grace to be faithful to them until death. Amen.

As I heard the words coming out of my own mouth, it occurred to me that I had no idea what it would look like for me to live these vows into the future. I could not predict where poverty, chastity and obedience would take me 10, 20 or 30 years from now. In the way that a couple vows faithfulness in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, embracing this sense of uncertainty suddenly emerged for me as the heart of my yes. I was totally aware that my yes would have both beautiful and painful implications beyond my imagining. And as I recited the vows, there was a deep peace and longing in me to live that out. I wanted it all.

With a glance at my hand, no one would know the difference, but I know and I live the difference. The difference is a deeper yes that has been settling into my spirit

over time. It is a yes that on any given day might say, "I'm sorry," or "I'm here for you," or "I need help," or "I'm so happy for you!" or "Can we compromise?" It is a yes that sometimes means changing plans or doing hard things or celebrating or making space for rest. Sometimes it pinches, and sometimes it feels like a deep peace. And I want it all.