News
Q&As



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Salvatorian Sr. Suneela Polimetla (Courtesy of Suneela Polimetla)

Salvatorian Sr. Suneela Polimetla, 54, knew at a young age that she wanted to follow Jesus, but she wasn't sure of the path.

The eldest of eight children, in sixth grade she began studying at the boarding school of St. Anthony's Girls High School run by the St. Anne Sisters in her hometown of Vijayawada, in Andhra Pradesh state on the southern coast of India. In 10th grade, 10 Austrian Sisters of the Divine Savior , known as the Salvatorian Sisters, came from their convent in Kerala state to explain their vocation to the

students.

Looking back, Polimetla says she isn't sure she really understood then what religious life was, but the encounter with the Salvatorian sisters sparked a light in her.

She worked hard to convince her parents to allow her to go for three months to the sisters' convent in Kerala, some 1,000 kilometers south along the Arabian Sea. Her parents, both schoolteachers, thought she was too young, but in the end they relented.

It was from there that her religious life began, bringing her eventually to live and assist for the past nine years at the Salvatorian Sisters' Al Mukhalles School, which educates both Muslim and Christian students in Nazareth, Israel. Polimetla spoke to GSR about her early religious life and her current vocation at the school, and what it means now to be living as a religious in the Holy Land.

"I didn't go searching for anything. The invitation came and I accepted it," she said. "Today, I am happy, I have never regretted it. Our charism is very rich. The Salvatorian Sisters are into every field. And though I am trained as a psychologist, when there is a need I am trained in such a way that I can work anywhere. You do the work wherever there is need. This is our charism."

The outbreak of war after the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on some 20 Israeli agricultural towns and army bases near the Gaza border also brought tensions to their school between the students, she said, but the staff quickly brought them together in a schoolwide joint prayer of peace. They lit a peace candle that the sisters then brought to their convent, where it is continuously burning as the sisters pray for peace, she said.

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For almost three years, she went weekly to Jerusalem to meet with migrant workers, but after the attack on Oct. 7, her convent asked her not to make the trip out of fear for her safety from rocket attacks, especially in the early days of the war. Now, if needed, she uses Zoom calls to meet with migrant workers seeking her counsel.

"Not everything is always green and beautiful, but it depends on how I look at life. The difference is that I am confident that God is there to lead and guide me, to protect me," she said. "I know I am not alone and that is enough for me. I have a

very beautiful and good community and school staff, and when you have that around you to lead you and protect you, you feel you are in safe surroundings. I am very grateful being here."

***GSR*: Can you tell us about your first experience at the Sisters of the Divine Savior convent in Kerala at the age of 14?**

Polimetla: For three months, we went to see how the life of the sisters was, and if I liked it, I could continue to become religious and if not I could go home. So I went there and they had a different language, different culture and different food than I was used to. They speak Malayalam, and I speak Telugu. So it was very difficult for me when I went to stay.

In the end, I stayed for one year and then they were preparing to send candidates to Austria for formation, but one of the girls got sick and in her place they sent me.

I wasn't supposed to go but then already at the age of 15 they sent me to Austria. It was very difficult for my parents. I told them to let me try this one time. My mother was very upset but still I went. I don't know what gave me the courage.

We didn't know German; we didn't know the people. It was horrible, but there was no chance to go back. We took the first year to learn a little more German than we had in formation.

After our first profession, we returned to our countries usually after three or four years. But I ended up staying for 5.5 years. I was the only one too young to be a novitiate. You have to be 18 for novitiate and then wait two years in candidature.

I went to Austria in 1985, and in 1991, I came back to India. In those days, there was no seeing parents, not even phone calls. Maybe once or twice, I sent a letter with sisters who were going to India.

When I went back to India, I had a surprise little brother. When I had left home, it was a pretty challenging time for me with the culture shock, but I could feel God was with me. I could feel God preparing me for a special purpose.

What did you do when you got back to India?

I did my college studies in India and finished my degree in psychology. After finishing college, they asked me to take care of the young girls in 11th and 12th grade who were preparing to become sisters. For almost seven years, I was in charge of the novices in Bangalore and did my Master of Science and Master of Philosophy in psychology.

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Then I got a special invitation to teach psychology at the Jyoti Nivas College. In 2014, I was asked to come to the Holy Land to take up some responsibilities. The sisters here were growing old and they wanted some new sisters. So I came to Nazareth in 2015.

We have our own school here with 1,500 students. It was a big change for me. I was used to teaching university students, so I had to adjust to schoolchildren. First, I learned Arabic.

Can you say a few words about what it is like to live and work in Nazareth and your work there?

I feel it is a blessing for me to be able to come to Nazareth. This is the place of Jesus, not everybody has this opportunity. Like our three communities here, we are few members but we have an important apostolate as Salvatorians.

I feel more connected here because all the things I read in the Gospels about Jesus happened here, and I am here in person in these places which were maybe like a dream for me. Now I feel it is a story I am a part of. When I go to India and explain to them, they listen to me differently because I have been to this place.

Everything has meaning. I can connect my prayer life to my daily life and every morning we go to the Basilica of the Annunciation where Mary said her yes. When I go for Holy Eucharist, I say yes for today and my attitude is very different for that day.

I was chosen to come here and had to leave my job which I loved so much, but this is our own school. I am not working in someone else's institution. I feel this belongs to us and also when you see the goal of our institution — to bring education to the young people — you see it is a very important mission. As we educate the children,

we also educate the families.

If you say the Al Mukhalles School in Nazareth, everyone knows the school. It is like you are part of a network in Nazareth wherever you go. So there is a connection to many parts of Nazareth, which is very beautiful to see. It is a very rich encounter with people, if you really take it to heart, it gives so much meaning in this life. Even for my vocation, it makes a lot of difference.