Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



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I recently gave a vocation discernment talk at the MAG+S Midwest Conference in Chicago. We were encouraged to choose our topic, and I knew immediately I wanted to talk about love. My call to religious life was a call to love. Responding to that love and living from my heart changed the trajectory of my life, setting me on a path to service and sacrifice for others. Once I experienced God's love through prayer and giving to my brothers and sisters in Christ, I knew I wanted to bring that love to a world in need for the rest of my life. My life in community, too, has helped me understand Christian love better, what it means and how to live it.

With the young people, I discussed the nature of Christian love, how we can love more like Jesus did. I followed the JOY approach: Jesus, Others, then Yourself. We talked about how love can guide us and help us discern God's will. I shared how every Christian is called to love like this, but that in religious life we make vows that take it a step further, following Jesus more literally so that our lives point directly to Him and the Gospel.

Love like that changes lives. After encouraging my audience to share about a time they made decisions out of Christian love, I shared about the new direction love moved me in. As an academic-minded young person, I was on an ambitious, professional path. I started to volunteer because it would look good to colleges I applied to. I was a junior volunteer at the local hospital and, at first, often tired or cranky after school. But helping the people and being with the other volunteers cheered me and made a real difference for others. Volunteering was energizing .

I went on Habitat for Humanity trips with my youth group and helped with campus ministry service projects in college. Teaching religious education classes while in college made me realize I loved teaching religion and working with children, inspiring me to become a teacher. I wanted a life of service spent with others who loved it, too, and religious life became very attractive. My love of God was also drawing me to continuous prayer and fuller participation in the Catholic Church.

I enjoyed volunteering so much that I wondered if I was doing it for the wrong reason. I was getting so much out of it and didn't know if I was there primarily to help others. I prayed to be filled with love for them and a desire to serve out of that love. The warmth and energy I felt when God granted that prayer ended my doubts.

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The Catholic Church — first the building and then the institution — became a place where I could dream. At Mass or in quiet prayer, I felt hope: for a better world, for those in need and for myself. There was no limit to what I could do with God at my side! I began to read church documents and was inspired by the vision we aspire to.

But living Christian love is more than the ideals that excited me. It means loving people as they are, going beyond the ideal to the real, being in relationship when they're not at their best and I'm not at mine. When I entered religious life, I soon saw what it was really like for the sisters to live together and share their lives. We're steeped in God's grace, but community life is grounded in the real world. It's both the hardest part of religious life and the biggest blessing! I've had wonderful experiences of sisterhood and ones I wanted to run from. Sisters in community are human beings on a journey together. Being true companions means forming deep relationships based on the love of God and others.

Christian love helped me discern the call, and it helps me discern now. Discernment doesn't stop after initial formation and final vows. We still discern about ministry and community decisions. The spiritual journey continues and we seek God's will. I'm always trying to grow in Christian love, to become the best version of myself — who God calls me to be.

Discernment through love is part of the Felician community's nature, to be both contemplative and active. Our life of service flows from prayer and living in God's presence. We bring the people and situations of ministry back to prayer, lifting them up to God. The two aren't separate; we strive to be centered and reflective in our active lives as well. We live always in God's presence and pray continually. This has been true from the beginning of our congregation and has always inspired me.

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My current ministry is another story of how love helped me discern. I'm the archivist for our province. When I started, I was looking for a ministry that would allow me to give from my strengths and interests. I'm good at organizing systems and have a passion for history in general and Felician history in particular. As archivist, I can offer something practical and personal to my community. Preserving our legacy is my way of expressing love; having that offering valued is affirming.

The role shifted later. We hired student interns who handled daily tasks, making my role more educational as I gave instructions, supervised and organized their work. When we merged those positions into one full-time archive assistant, I became her mentor. As a former teacher, being both archivist and educator allows me to give more from my strengths and passions. Working for my province connects me deeply to the life of the community. I am able to give and receive abundantly.

Experiencing and responding to God's love inspired me to change course and dive into religious life. That same love has helped me mature as a Catholic Christian and a sister, to enter wholeheartedly into my community. As I continue my journey, I hope to continue to grow in Christian love and become more and more like Jesus.