

## Will You Give Me Your Heart?



Falling in love is a reality that evokes a sense of wonder and mystery hard to express and especially so when the Beloved is none other than Jesus Christ, Himself! To experience His uniquely loving gaze and personal call is the beginning of a life-changing adventure marked by many precious moments.

In my case, that adventure commenced when a second grade class assignment had me pouring over a booklet of pictures showing different vocational choices. We were to decide “what we wanted to be when we grew up” and to share that decision with the class the next day. Coming upon a picture of a Sister, with the simple description, “A Sister is a Bride of Christ”, the first of those many “precious moments” happened—something I will never forget. Somehow deep within my heart or consciousness, I “heard” Jesus ask me: “Would you like to be my Bride one day? Will you give Me your heart?” With the unquestioning simplicity of a child, I responded with a ready, “Yes,” running quickly to share this good news with my Mom. Surrounded as she was at the time by the noisy, happy, mayhem of my other eight siblings (eventually there were eleven of us), I can still see her big smile of approval as she replied, “That’s nice!” I sadly realized though, that I would have to wait a whole TEN years before entering a convent which to a child’s perspective is nothing less than an eternity! However, living in a big family provides many distractions and the years began to slip away almost unnoticed. At last, when twelve years old, I decided it was time to seriously search for the Community I would join. This was the early 1970’s and internet, cell phones and the like, did not yet exist. The “old-fashioned” letter was the only way to obtain information, especially as I was too shy to ask a priest or teacher for any help in

discerning my vocation. So I diligently searched for vocation ads in Catholic magazines and periodicals and actually came up with quite a variety. I still thank the Lord for the goodness and patience of so many dear Sisters who took the time to respond to the inquiry of a young one like me and did not discourage my attempts at discernment. Strangely though, I never really considered cloistered Communities, for I had heard that these Nuns after entering never went home and I was certain my parents would find this too difficult. Actually, loving my family as I did, the thought of never coming home again was beyond what I could imagine or endure.

The years passed, and as my collection of information grew, a big problem surfaced. I instinctively knew that if the Lord was calling me, He had a specific place in mind. But how exactly does one discern that choice correctly when besides the important points for me of having a distinctive Habit and being faithful to prayer and Communal living, a true family spirit, so many Orders had the same type of ministries or apostolate? After a while, the realization came to me that I could narrow my choices by looking at what was most dear to me. All my life I had been devoted to Our Lady, and had worn the Brown Scapular, since being invested in it at my First Communion. So I began to look only at those Orders especially named in honor of or devoted to her. And there were many!

It was natural that my final choice went with Carmel. At this time I was still not inclined to the cloister, so I found a Community of Carmelite Sisters with an active apostolate that appealed to me and was planning to eventually give them a try after graduating from High School.

It was towards the end of my sophomore year in High School that another of those very “precious moments” occurred in this journey of falling in love with Christ. While my family faithfully attended Mass each Sunday, it was rare that we were able to attend any special parish activities or services. At sixteen years of age, I had never been to a Holy Thursday Mass, nor was I aware of anything like Benediction or Eucharistic processions. By God’s providence it happened that an uncle who had recently joined the Franciscan Order unexpectedly came over to our house, asking if anyone wanted to come with him that evening to their Holy Thursday Mass. I was delighted at the opportunity for everything in their beautiful gothic-style church spoke to me of God and of His special Presence there. Without a doubt, receiving the Precious Body and Blood of Christ is the highlight and supreme grace of every Mass, but on this occasion the Lord desired to add another “precious” grace, all the more so as it was meant at that moment directly for me. At the end of the Mass, as the Priest held up the small monstrance they used for the Procession to their Chapel of Repose, and my gaze focused on the large white Host exposed there, in the quiet of my heart I spontaneously found myself promising the Lord to take no other Spouse but Him and to give myself to no one other than Him. In that simple, but profound moment, my “engagement” to Christ became a deep conviction for me.

Towards the end of my senior year, I was already communicating with the Carmelite Sisters mentioned earlier and was pretty sure that I would enter there. However, there was a certain persisting uneasiness about this decision. As I was still too shy to seek Spiritual Direction, it was again in God’s providence and no doubt through Our Lady’s intervention, that during the summer after my graduation, I happened to read the autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux. Immediately the realization hit me very clearly and strongly, that THIS was the Order and way of life I was being called to. For me there was now no doubt and the peace within confirmed it. But how could I locate a Carmelite Monastery? The Carmelite Community I was writing to graciously gave me addresses to a few Carmelite Monasteries and I eventually began corresponding with the one here in Iron Mountain. For the sake of further discernment though, I took one course at a community college to help in finding a job and worked for awhile before applying to enter. When it came time to visit the Community as part of the application process, believe it or not, my whole family, except for my oldest brother, came along with me. It happened to be the year of my parent’s twenty-fifth wedding anniversary and this “need” for my interview turned out to be a good opportunity for a first-time ever family vacation as they all wanted to meet the Sisters I would be living with. It made me a bit nervous though, to have nine of my siblings ranging in age from 3-23, filling the small grateroom of the Carmel and sometimes answering the Sisters questions for me, or to hear my dear Dad, who was not happy about my entering, stating emphatically

that I did not really want to enter but just liked to visit different Communities. By the time the interview was over, I was sure I would not be accepted! Happily however, the Sisters thoroughly enjoyed meeting everyone and I passed the test, receiving the longed-for letter a few months later, stating that my entrance day was set for October 15<sup>th</sup>, the Solemnity of Our Holy Mother St. Teresa. The Lord knows my family was the only “treasure” I possessed on earth and it cost me dearly to leave them at 19 years of age, knowing I would not return home. But I felt Jesus was worth just such a sacrifice and I have never regretted it. In fact, the bonds of love I have with my family have only grown stronger and deeper despite all the challenges and sufferings that come along the way. This was impressed on me very powerfully when many years later, my dear mother nearly died after heart surgery. Because of complications I was unable to speak with her for several weeks. When I was finally able to call and express how much I would have liked to be with her in her time of great suffering, she said with a loving, faith-filled conviction: “It would have been great to have you here and to be able to hug you again, but really, what could you have done for me? It actually meant more to me knowing you were there praying for me than to have you right here beside me.” These comforting words made me realize anew that the gift of a religious vocation is not meant for oneself alone but for the good of many others—especially one’s family. As the Lord is never outdone in generosity, I am confident He will restore my “treasure” to me in Heaven (with no exceptions!) as part of that “hundredfold” promised to those who give up “all” for Him.

Entering Carmel is like entering a whole new world with much to learn and adjust to, but always imbued somehow with many simple joys and a peace deep within—despite the inevitable disturbances and growing pains on the surface! The humble, hidden life of prayer and sacrifice, such as Our Lady lived at Nazareth, offered to God through love, for the good of the Church, for all souls and especially for priests, greatly attracted me and still does! Receiving the Holy Habit and especially my new name in Carmel were moments of special grace. In fact, the name and title “received”—for the final choice belongs to the Prioress—is more than just another name. It somehow mysteriously carries within it one’s uniquely personal vocation with Christ in Carmel which gradually unfolds and deepens in the ensuing years. Words cannot express my joy when after six years of formation and preparation, the long awaited day of my Solemn Profession finally arrived and I became in truth, the “Bride of Christ”—forever!

Achieving this goal, by God’s grace and mercy, was really only a new beginning in this ongoing spiritual adventure of allowing Christ to gradually transform my heart into the likeness of His—somehow making my heart capable of carrying within it and bringing to Him, the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears of the entire world—of all those whom He has entrusted to my love and prayers. For each day, in various ways, Jesus still renews His request of old, “Will you give Me your heart?” And even now, after forty-two years in Carmel, receiving more from Him than I could ever hope to give, the freshness of that request still attracts and moves me to do my best to respond with that same simple but sincere, “Yes!” of long ago, in a spirit of childlike wonder and unbounded gratitude for the precious vocation He has given me.