



Hidden with Christ

The Call to Enclosure

Learning to Love in Different Ways

BY MOTHER MIRIAM LEONARD, O.P.

When I was a child, few people detected signs that I would become a cloistered religious, spending my life in the silence and solitude, living in one location for sixty years, serving God and His Church in contemplative prayer.

I was born June 5, 1926, a Saturday, arriving in the world at noon, “Just in time to spoil everyone’s lunchtime,” according to Aunt Rose Neis. I was not a precocious child by any measure: but loquacious, I was. My mother often told people, “Frann spoke in complete, short sentences by the time she was 10 months old.” Grandmother Neis would say to me, “Be still, child; if you won’t walk, you shouldn’t talk too much;” to which I would reply, “Oh yes, Grandmother, I have to talk.”

My parents, Frances Neis and Edward Anthony Leonard, were loving and devoted to each other and to each of their four children. Mother was a nurse. Our home was like a clinic for our neighborhood. Cuts, fractures, burns, all had first aid before going to St. Agnes Hospital in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Mother also delivered a neighbor’s baby who arrived just a few minutes before the ambulance.

My oldest sister, Mary Louise, was a nurse too. Lorraine, the middle sister, was a medical technician. With all these health care professionals and graduates of St. Agnes School

of Nursing in the family, a career in nursing seemed natural and inevitable for me.

The Sisters of St. Agnes educated me “from crib through college.” They were the finest educators in the world. Thus tribute comes from an informed and loving student of some sixteen years. Living with my classmates at the School of Nursing was a good preparation for life in a religious community. We learned to laugh and cry together and to share our belongings with one another. We worshipped and prayed together, too.

We matured quickly under the guidance of Sister Digna and Sister Juliana. My first experience of night duty came when I was 19 years old, responsible for twenty-six patients on a surgical floor. A sister would make rounds through the night to be sure we were alert and following doctor’s orders for each patient.

Another maturing experience was caring for elderly and indigent patients who were terminally ill. Praying with these patients gave me a real awareness of the importance of caring for both body and soul. The seeds of prayer and contemplation were sown during those days of attending to the dying.

On Palm Sunday of 1948, after a tense day discussing my vocation with my parents. I told Father Herrod, C.P.P.S., my confessor, that I believed this vocation was from God



and that I wanted to pursue it. He said, “Tell your parents you are going to answer the call, TODAY!”

That night when I went on duty there was a big homemade bread sandwich on my desk. Sister Roberta made it and put it there. Inside the wrapper was a cross made from fresh palm. To me it was a sign of victory.

When I entered the Dominican Sisters of the Perpetual Rosary in Milwaukee most people were surprised. They would have put odds on marriage and a family for me. During my farewell party several people started a pool of how many months Frann would last as a cloistered, contemplative nun. Not one of them won anything, but Jesus did.

My brother Edward was out one night with friends. One of them kept asking, “How can Frann possibly be a nun? I was sure she would marry.”

Edward replied, “You know, Pat, you are right. But Frann was always pretty fussy; she married Jesus Christ.”

Pat said, "Wow."

There might have been some dark and difficult moments over the years. The darkest came within hours of my first profession. My dear mother who was against my decision to enter a cloistered community died the next day. We had been together following the ceremony and were so happy. Then suddenly she was gone. I really had it out with God for a while. As usual, His timing was right. Had mother survived the stroke, she might have "vegetated" for years, according to her physician.

A recent call from Evie Lemenes, a classmate, started me thinking about time and eternity. These sixty years as a cloistered religious have been an outgrowth of my life of faith in close association with the Sisters of St. Agnes. Several sisters in our communities have said that their vocations also began from their education and formation in faith with active religious sisters. We were well prepared to dedicate our life to God.

My early years of formation with the Dominicans were a life-altering experience. I entered in the summer of 1948, pre-Vatican II. I learned to love in totally different ways. Study of Scripture, theology and vowed spirituality opened new vistas of prayer and contemplative ministry. Interaction with women from all cultural, ethnic and educational backgrounds delivered me from self-absorption, and brought an interior freedom I have never before experienced. Daily Eucharist, the Divine Office, Rosary Hours both day and night praying for all of God's People gave a depth and purpose to each day.

Opportunities to serve people presented themselves in various forms. I remember the Advent season when



my prioress asked me to knit a baby layette for an expectant mother. That task combined creativity and helping the poor. It offered me another form of prayer and began a new apostolate for me. I have since knit hundreds of sweaters, scarves, blankets and other items for babies. Knitting is truly a contemplative activity, as one's mind is free to be present to God.

Every six years since 1970 I have been elected prioress here. To serve these monastic women who have been so generous and devoted in our shared life of prayer and sacrifice is a joy. As prioress I became responsible for decisions concerning material as well as the spiritual life of the community. I oversaw the remodeling, twice in the past forty years, of both our public and cloistered chapels, going over plans and blueprints with the architect, working with the contractor, plasterers and painters.

Implementing the decrees of the Second Vatican Council became an interior gift for all of the community. Vocations abounded, along with interior joy and peace for all of us.

The people of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee have supported our life of prayer from the time of our foundation here in 1897 to the pres-

ent day. Members of our Dominican laity, our neighbors, relatives and friends have willingly helped us by shopping for us, driving us to health care appointments and to take care of civic responsibilities.

The archbishops of Milwaukee have provided practical and spiritual guidance to the community. Timothy Cardinal Dolan became a true friend and father. We miss him now that he is Archbishop of New York, but we continue to pray for him as he requested during his farewell visit with us.

Our community has prayed the Rosary around the clock each day, each year since 1897. Prayer is our way of life. The 18-year-old Frann Leonard who entered St. Agnes School of Nursing so many years ago foresaw a future dedicated to healing and helping the sick, the injured, the poor and the disabled. More than sixty years later as Mother Miriam, a contemplative Dominican, I am still dedicated to healing, praying for God's people—the sick, the injured, the poor and suffering—for our wounded and wonderful Church. There is a need now and always for holiness and sacrifice and prayer. This is the reason for my life and the life of my cloistered community at the heart of the Church. ☪



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