



Hidden with Christ

The Call to Enclosure

Forever Yes!

BY SR. MARY CATHARINE OF JESUS, O.P.

“When I grow up I want to be...” How often as children, we make this statement with the career being something that changes weekly!

However, some kids—and I was one of them—know from an early age what they want to be when they grow up! From the time I was about 5 I knew not only that I wanted to become a sister but that God wanted it for me! I couldn’t wait until I was 18 and would beg Saint Thérèse to intercede for me that I could enter the convent at 15 as she did!

Saint Thérèse didn’t quite agree, I guess, but I did enter an active religious community three weeks after high school graduation when I was 18. My desire to give myself totally to God in religious life didn’t mean that I didn’t do normal teenage things, although I did make the choice not to date. I felt that doing so would be like dating two guys! It wasn’t always an easy choice because I was still normal girl with normal attractions to the guys who asked me out!

After high school I entered the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, who had taught me for twelve years. I was attracted to their semi-monastic way of life and charism of teaching and person-to-person evangelization. They also ran a very busy farm so there was lots of hard work!

For two years I struggled with living in the community. I wanted so much for it to work out but it became evident that it was not to be and that God had other plans for me, although I didn’t know what they were. I still felt sure about a religious vocation and I still felt attracted to teaching. Finally, my spiritual director made it clear that I needed to make a decision. I was about six months away from first profession.

So, I left the congregation. I knew that I had a vocation but I didn’t know where. Making that decision to leave was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I felt like I was jumping into a swimming pool that I knew didn’t have any water!

Shortly before I left, I, along with four other sisters of my community, traveled to Rome to attend the ordination of one of the monks at the nearby Benedictine Priory. Because of their long association with the Dominicans, Father Xavier’s First Mass was celebrated at *Santa Sabina*, the headquarters of the Dominican Order.

My novice mistress, who had been taught by Dominicans and who had instilled in her students a love for all things Dominican, asked if we could see the places at *Santa Sabina* associ-



ated with Saint Dominic. This didn’t mean too much to me but we were given a tour of the priory and I had an “experience” when I looked at the huge framed parchment that lists all the brothers who received the habit there from Saint Dominic. I can’t really explain it. It was very simple and quiet but affected me deeply. I “met” Saint Dominic at this point. He became real to me and a father. So, I consider my Dominican vocation as beginning at *Santa Sabina*! A stone fell from the ceiling of the chapel of Saint Pius V and hit me on the shoulder. As I was leaving I slipped and fell down the main stair. All signs of a future Dominican vocation?

A visit to the Nashville Dominican Sisters convinced me that I wanted to be a Dominican. I was attracted to the Order’s motto of *Veritas* and wanted that, or rather Christ, as First Truth, to pervade my whole life.

However, as much as I loved my experience there and even asked for an application, I began to see that my vocation was not to be expressed in the apostolate of teaching but the hidden life of the cloister. The active apostolate just wasn't "enough"! I didn't dare say anything about my new-found attraction to contemplative life to my spiritual director because I was sure he would discourage me. I harbored the misconception that one needed to be quiet and retiring to enter monastic life!

A friend gave me a vocation booklet from the Monastery of Our Lady of the Rosary in Summit, New Jersey. The photos weren't very clear but the title struck me, "Do you wish to follow Christ?" Yes! Our Lord was the "heart" of my vocation, nothing else! I wrote a short cautious letter and the novice mistress responded with a very personal one.

After a weekend visit I was invited to come back to make an aspirancy which is a two to six week live-in experience inside the enclosure. I didn't immediately fall in love with the monastery but I felt very comfortable and at home with the sisters. During the aspirancy I struggled, wondering if I could adapt to what was for me a small enclosure (we have approximately seven acres of land) as I had grown up in the country



and my family home is surrounded by woods, fields and a river. I knew God wanted me there and that it meant letting go of some things that I considered "essential" but really weren't. One night while doing the supper dishes, I left the kitchen and went down to the orchard. I kicked the ground, pulled grass, and cried, "No, no, no!" After that tantrum I was at peace. "Yes, yes, yes!" I got a letter from my director who revealed that he had been praying for me for two years that I would see that I had a contemplative vocation!

After my departure, I would follow the sisters' schedule in my heart while at work. Finally after a month I decided it was time to make the next move. Who to call first? What if I called my spiritual director and he said, "No!" I called the monastery first and *then* my spiritual director, who was much relieved! I then heartlessly bounced into my parents' bedroom and announced the "good" news. My parents were supportive but hesitant. Was this another temporary phase in their daughter's life?

I entered on January 6, 1990, the Feast of the Epiphany, because it is a feast dear to me with its strong missionary overtones. While kneeling at the communion rail waiting for the enclosure door to open, I panicked and wanted to run down the aisle and out the door. Wasn't I crazy thinking

I was called to a cloistered vocation? Interiorly I cried to the Lord, "Jesus, I am making a big mistake! You aren't serious about this, are You?" Meanwhile, a friend of the monastery, whom I call my "godmother," was kneeling next to me, rubbing my back and telling how wonderful it was that I would be with Jesus all day! Once I crossed the enclosure door I NEVER had a doubt that this is where God wanted me! NEVER! I have struggled with my vocation and sometimes wanted to say, "No!," but also I knew I'd never be happy unless my life was a continual "YES!" My profession ring is engraved with "+forever yes+" as my way of reflecting my desire to live the mystery of



the Annunciation. (It is also from 2 Corinthians.) It is in the monastery that I felt the desires of my heart and my apostolic vocation expand and become as wide as the world while in the active apostolate I felt hemmed in and confined!

I have been in the monastery for twenty years. I am still just beginning, still learning how to love, how to surrender and let Jesus transform and transfigure my life into His! 🙏

For more information, contact:

**Dominican Monastery of
Our Lady of the Rosary**

Tel. 908-273-1228

www.nunsopsummit.org