

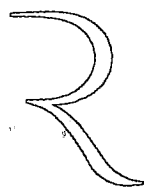
God's Irresistible Call Invites Us to Hope

“Why do you want to become a nun?”

I have been asked that question dozens of times over the past three and a half years, since I began discernment with the Religious of the Sacred Heart. From the outside it looks like a strange choice to some. After all, I had the beginnings of a successful career, one that I really love, and felt sure of finding a like-minded man with whom I could make a family. I do not doubt that I could. The comfortable house, nice car, dog, and then children following a beautiful Catholic wedding—we would live happily ever after.

So why would I choose religious life? I usually give the reasons that people on the “outside” understand. I am attracted to the life given in service to others. I am a theologian and a professor—things I certainly can be as a

Juliet Mousseau writes from 541 South Mason Road; St. Louis, Missouri 63141. <jmousseau@rscj.org>



looking
forward

laywoman. Yet, in my colleagues who are religious, I can see a greater freedom to devote themselves more completely to the task of professor and scholar. Religious seem to have more time, more energy, more compassion to give to their students, and more room for research, not to mention the other ministries they tend to take on. Maybe it is the “*magis*” of my Jesuit education that

*Choosing religious life
means making prayer
my primary commitment.*

leads me to appreciate that “more.” I know in my own life that a relationship with a particular person takes a great deal of time and energy (both lovingly and joyfully given). I can only imagine that having children would turn my energy

completely toward them, as is only right. Being a religious allows me to love a broader world, to move beyond the confines of my home in order to share Christ's love with all those around me.

Religious life also entails the benefit of living in community. Most single or married people understand the benefits of shared household responsibilities and the companionship that comes with communal life. I lived alone for nine years. I loved living alone, but, now that I have lived in community for some six months, I am not sure I ever want to live alone again. Part of my reason for choosing the Religious of the Sacred Heart in particular is that they tend to live in communities. There is great beauty in communal living, bound by a common sense of mission and of relationship with Christ. Beyond the practicalities which help with daily life (such as shared responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and finances), there are the spiritual and personal benefits of living with



people who care about your well-being and pray with and for you. I have been blessed over the past months with love and compassion beyond my expectations.

A third reason for becoming a religious is the high value placed on individual and communal prayer. If I am not steeped in prayer, I cannot give of myself as completely as I feel called to do. Many people consider prayer to be important, but how many of those same people do not take the time to pray, citing a lack of time and other pressing commitments? Choosing religious life means making prayer my primary commitment. By placing my relationship with God first in my life, I can more easily form loving relationships with those around me. Additionally, living among other women of the same mindset encourages me to be a more prayerful person.

These are great reasons to join a religious community, and there are others that I can list—such as a desire to share in the mission of bringing the love of Christ to the world, or to live by prayer and the gospel in a more profound way and thus to spread the gospel by the example of my life, or even to step away from the material world in order to focus on more important spiritual goods. All of these are important reasons for the persistence of religious life in our world, even and perhaps especially today.

In reality, though, I am here because I heard God calling me along this unexpected path. Throughout my theological studies, my peers and professors asked whether I was becoming a nun. I always said no, without thinking, and I was often a bit horrified. I knew very few nuns or sisters at that point, and so I had no role models, no examples of women religious in higher education that would have drawn me to religious life. My

perception of nuns was colored by movies and television (one of my mother's favorite movies was *The Sound of Music*), by a popular culture that often portrays religious women as subservient and sometimes silly. I never thought seriously about entering religious life until after I completed my education, in which many of my professors were religious men (Jesuits and Franciscans). I saw in those men healthy examples of religious life, lived joyfully. I began slowly to realize that the lives of women religious were (or could be) similar to their lives of community, dedication, and service.

Yet I know that, even having heard a call from God, taking the step into religious life is somewhat risky. As I was applying for entry, a month or two before the decision was to be made, the Apostolic Visitation was announced. At the time, I was working with a sister who immediately became upset about it. It certainly gave great anxiety to many who read about it, in part because so little was explained and the goals were, and perhaps remain, unclear. Many comments are those of doom and gloom—that religious life might change, that it needs to change in order for young women to find it attractive, that “the Vatican” will force women to do one thing or another. Honestly, hearing unfounded worries was more penitential for me than the initial announcement. Of course, the visitation is not the only cause of concern for a woman in the American Catholic Church today. The investigation of LCWR, the censuring of religious women catechists and theologians, and the polarization of different groups within the church are also trying issues.

Despite such turmoil, I still feel called by God, and I have not turned away. I still recognize the grace and blessing of this life, even as I only begin to live it out.



Several reasons for hope come to mind as I reflect on this decision.

My clearest sense of hope is this: the call that I feel is irresistible. Once I recognized it, I could not ignore it. I am deeply and intimately called into a relationship with God, and I would deeply regret moving on with life without at the very least trying on religious life. So much beauty can be found in this life, things that I would never have considered otherwise. The process of discernment and the beginnings of formation have been

*The process of discernment
and the beginnings of
formation have been incredibly
blessed times for me.*

incredibly blessed times for me. My hope lies in this strong sense of call. If I am being called by God to this life, I have no doubt that other women are being called too. Perhaps we need to develop our ability to hear the Voice of God in our lives. We—as Americans, as Catholics—need to open our hearts a little wider and listen a little more closely.

Second, I have hope in the recognition that choosing religious life today is not about the institutional church, but rather it is about my relationship with Jesus. The church, because it is full of human beings, has human failings and foibles. Religious life may be an integral part of the institutional church, but, in choosing to live as a religious, I am choosing to live out my life with Christ. This life is about a relationship with God and my own capacity to bring the love of Jesus to the world around me. In that sense my personal mission is in unity with the mission of the church. When that sense of mission

comes to the fore, the fears of apostolic visitations and theological investigations seem less significant—after all, I know that the Spirit of God is guiding our church, even in the trying moments, and that Jesus' love will ultimately win out (in fact, it already has won).

My third hope is in the changing face of religious life. I know that religious life has to change to continue in this world. How it will change is yet unknown. As a historical theologian, I know that the church has changed throughout the centuries, and I believe that as it changes it emerges stronger than it was before. We cannot say what religious life in the future will look like, but we are already seeing some of the trends: dialogue and collaboration among orders, intercongregational planning and formation, religious women in different types of ministry, and even different living arrangements. So many changes followed the Second Vatican Council, and those changes continue to shape and reshape the lives of women religious today.

Our rapidly changing world also means that those being called to religious life are a changing demographic. Women are making life decisions later, when careers have already been established, so it is no surprise that entrants to religious life are likewise more mature. With age come experience, careers, and the complications of family, economics, and relationships, all of which must be addressed.

Finally, I see good things coming from the Apostolic Visitation, despite our fears and the open possibilities. Our own congregation is using this time to reflect on our constitutions and renew our sense of commitment to them. The joy with which my sisters embrace this life shows in their reflections on our constitutions. Even after decades of living as religious, they continue to find



new expressions of their mission and new energy. The message, then, is enduring. I have hope that further good will come of the visitation as well: that those in church leadership will have a more complete picture of the manifold gifts religious sisters lovingly give to the people of the United States in their variety of ministries. Certainly the popular reaction to the news coverage of the visitation has been one of overwhelming support for women religious.

Our world needs women and men who give themselves in service for the love of Jesus Christ. We need those who can help us find the wholeness and the joy that comes from living according to the image of God that lies within us. I choose religious life because the image of God within me calls irresistibly to a life of prayer, service to others, and community. My hope is that other women and men will open their hearts to hear God's call.