

Peace and good!

My name is Meg van Brunt; I was born and raised in Arizona, and grew up as a happily Catholic tomboy who loved babies and had every intention of getting married and raising at least thirteen children as soon as possible. Becoming a nun didn't occur to me as an option until I met religious sisters in habit for the first time.

When I was fifteen, a cheerful group of little Peruvian nuns was assigned to my family's parish in Tempe, Arizona. I was immediately struck by their joy, and by the simple beauty of their faces. My exposure to religious sisters up to that point had been limited to images on holy cards and the stories of the lives of the saints. The immediate reality of these gentle, happy women married to Christ impressed me, and I wanted to be around them and to be like them as much as possible.

As a child, I had never known what to answer when adults had asked me, "what do you want to be when you grow up?" Now that I had discovered real, live religious sisters, my answer became more and more, "I want to become a nun!". I felt a great big happy pull towards the sisters' way of life, and an excitement when I imagined entering a convent which I had never experienced for any other reason. This profound sense of joy and longing which I felt upon imagining myself as a religious sister was the first sign of my vocation, and it grew with time.

Since the Peruvian sisters went to daily Mass at the parish, as soon as I could drive, so did I. I attended Mass every morning, and gradually began to develop a deeper devotion to the Eucharist. As time went on, I began to pray bits of the Liturgy of the Hours as well, and devotions which began (at least in part) as an excuse to spend time with different groups of sisters continued because of a desire for intimacy with Christ. The habit of staying close to the Sacraments— especially to those of Eucharist and Confession— and the habit of setting aside time to contemplate Sacred Scripture in silence (especially in the context of the Liturgy), were essential developments in my discernment. It was through the Word of God in the Liturgy that God spoke to me most concretely as I discerned, and I know that the grace which I received through regular exposure to the Sacraments was no small help to me as I tried to understand and accomplish God's will.

MY FIRST POWERFUL SIGN FOR CONSECRATED LIFE

I think it would be fair to say that by the time I was sixteen, I was certain of my desire to become a religious sister. I was less sure of God's thoughts on the matter, and by the time I was in college, God's (at least apparent, if not actual) silence on the subject of my desire to consecrate myself to Him began to really bother me. I needed to know what He thought. Unsure of how to find out, I asked an always encouraging sister from the Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary how I might discover whether or not God was planning to offer me a religious vocation. The sister suggested that, having analyzed my desires, and encouraged by the unique peace and joy that I felt every time I considered religious life, I might ask for a sign from God to make it clear to me whether or not I belonged in a convent. I was hesitant at first, but I could think of no other way to obtain the greater certainty of God's will which I very much needed, and I decided to try.

At that time, I used to go to the Catholic Church down the street from my work and pray there for half an hour every morning before a shift. I would usually spend the half hour reading from the Liturgy of the Hours of the day and meditating a bit, but for some reason there came a morning when I spent the whole time sitting quietly instead. It was on that morning that, just as it was time for me to go, I remembered what the sister had said about praying for signs as confirmations of God's will. The sister had specifically mentioned signs from Scripture opened at random or from the Liturgy of the day, and after hesitating for a moment, I decided to go ahead and give it a shot. I said a quick prayer along the lines of, "Lord, can I become a nun?", took my breviary, and opened it to that day's Morning Prayer. The canticle that day was from Isaiah 62: 1-5, and as I read through it, I was encouraged by the bridal language it uses to describe the covenant between God and the Israelites, but I was not convinced that it was an answer to my prayer. I stopped just before reading the last verse of the canticle, looked up to the tabernacle, and prayed earnestly: "Lord, this is not discouraging, but you know me. If I am really allowed to marry you, I need you to tell me so very very *very* clearly. Please". After a minute or two of letting Him see just how much my heart ached for clarity, I looked back down to read the final verse of the canticle, with which I was unfamiliar. The verse read:

*"For as a young man marries a virgin,
your Builder shall marry you;
And as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride
so shall your God rejoice in you."*

Needless to say, I was struck. What passage from Scripture could have answered my prayer more directly? What verse from either the Old or the New Testament states more clearly, “Your God is going to marry *you*.”? There are many which speak of marriage, and many use nuptial terms, but always with “Israel”, or “Jerusalem”, or “she”, or “the Church” as the subject. Not with “*You*”, as in the last verse of this canticle. What’s more, I didn’t pick it out for myself, or orchestrate the timing of my prayer in order to receive it when I did. It was supplied by the Church in the Liturgy on the morning— even at the very moment— when I prayed for certainty about my vocation. Not the day before, not the day after. It was as direct and clear and immediate an answer to my question as could be, and the first of many concrete confirmations of my vocation.

WHICH COMMUNITY?

Once I could sincerely say to myself and others, “it seems to me like God is inviting me to become a consecrated religious”, the question remained: what kind? The Church is full of so many beautiful communities of consecrated religious, and each of the ones I encountered was attractive to me in some way. I visited several communities and got to know many wonderful nuns. Each of them had something helpful and encouraging to say about discernment between charisms and different styles of religious life, but at least in my case, the most helpful data came from taking concrete steps in different directions.

Whenever I made a stride towards one community or another, there was always excitement, and usually fun as well. That said, it became clear that, in my case at least, having fun and getting excited when I was visiting a particular community was not an indication of my being called to enter there. Some really helpful indicators, on the other hand, were the various components of the fruit of the Holy Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). Whenever I made a turn in my discernment which was in accordance with the will of God, these qualities increased within me. I became more patient, kind, self-controlled, etc., and not as a result of my own efforts. When I made a step in my discernment which was in conflict with God’s will, on the other hand, my love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control all plummeted, no matter how hard I tried to maintain them within myself.

This phenomenon played a part in my discernment each time I took any step, however small, towards a religious community, but it became more obvious an indicator of God’s will as I took bigger steps and made bigger commitments. The first big

commitment I made to a community was to become an aspirant with a group of active Carmelite sisters from Mexico. About half way through university, my parish priest hired me as the receptionist at his parish. I worked full time there over the summer between my sophomore and junior year, and so spent the majority of every day around the Carmelite sisters who worked there as well. I grew to love the sisters very much, and they became fond of me as well. I spent more and more time with the sisters as the summer went on, and by the fall, I had asked for permission to begin a vocational experience with them as an aspirant.

I was motivated principally by my affection for the sisters, and even before I asked to begin the experiential period, some part of me knew that becoming an aspirant with them was not God's plan, but mine. I ignored that part of me, began the experience, and continued to ignore that part of me for the next nine months. Peace was absent in my heart from the start of the aspirancy, but almost immediately, I noticed a mysterious decrease in my joy, patience, kindness, goodness, prayer life, gentleness, and self-control as well. As I persisted in doing something which was outside of God's will, I became inexplicably irritable, envious, easily offended, lazy, and depressed. My prayer life began to suffer. I began to avoid confession and spiritual direction. In short, I was a bit of a mess. By the end of the 9-month period, I was finally willing to surrender my own will, and decided not to enter with the Carmelite sisters as a postulant. It was a very difficult decision, since I still loved the sisters very much, and somehow, despite what a surly companion I had been, they were sad to see me go. It was extremely painful to leave, but my peace was restored to me when I did.

Throughout the 9-month experience with the Carmelite sisters, I had remained in contact with two sisters from the *Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary* who I had met a couple of years before: Sr Eliora and Sr Clara. Sr Eliora had been a student and then teacher at my highschool before she left for the convent. About a year after she left, she began to advise me concerning my vocational discernment via email. It was she who advised me to ask for the sign from the Liturgy which I mentioned above. We kept up our correspondence through my highschool and college years, and it was through her that I was invited to visit the *Little Nuns* at the convent for the first time. She was stationed at the community's convent in Houma, Louisiana, and her superior (Sr Clara at the time) invited me to attend a small discernment retreat there with another girl from Houma during my sophomore year of university.

Sr Clara, like Sr Eliora, was a striking, lovely character from the start. I was immediately struck by her conviction and by her clarity of thought and expression. She said true things boldly and was always smiling. It was easy to like her. She challenged the convictions I held which kept me from living out the Gospel fully, and bore patiently with my stubbornness. I enjoyed speaking with her very much, and continued to keep up a correspondence with her after that first retreat. In particular, she helped me leave behind some of my preconceived (and not very Gospel-based) notions about how to discern my vocation, and understand two important truths as explained by Scripture and the Teachings of the Church: that in Heaven souls will exist at different levels of glory, proportionate to the extent to which they put the Gospel into practice in their lives, and that in discernment it is important to ask for concrete signs.

I was slow to accept these two things because it seemed to me that, if they were true, then I would have no excuse (except for a lack of generosity before God) not to join *the Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*. The sisters were like a happy bunch of beige-laden modern-day apostles, and their commitment to the Sacred Scripture, the Sacraments, and Church teaching was uncompromised. I could imagine no more complete way to live out the Gospel than in their company.

ENTRY INTO THE COMMUNITY OF THE LITTLE NUNS OF JESUS AND MARY

The troublesome truths which Sr Clara persistently and joyously pointed out to me took up a special place in my mind, even before I was ready to accept them. I found that often, when visiting one religious community or another, I would compare it to the community of *Little Nuns*, but it wasn't until after my experience of placing myself in direct opposition to the will of God by spending nine months with a different community that I seriously considered taking steps towards theirs. Shortly after leaving the aspirancy with the Carmelites, I began visiting the *Little Nuns* again, and after several months of prayer and discernment, I changed spiritual directors; after a few months and several important signs more, I came to the conclusion that I should begin the community's 6-month experience of aspirancy and don the beige scapular myself.

In deciding to join the *Little Nuns* for the six-month experience, I surrendered to the interior nudges which had been pushing me in that direction since I met the sisters, and which, I sincerely believe, came from the Holy Spirit. Their source has been confirmed, I think, by the marked increase of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in my soul since coming to this community: my love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness,

and self-control have not only been restored to me, but have increased. Of course I must still grow in each of these areas, and have trials to face, even within the convent, but they are the trials God wants me to experience instead of ones which I vainly set up for myself. While the trials which I make for myself outside the will of God lead to atrophy and sickness, the trials which God intends for me bear fruit, and in so far as I accept them I grow in holiness.

So! What else can I write except – that I am happy! I am more grateful than I can say for the patience of both God and the sisters, who have been gentle, firm, and relentless in helping me to discover my place and mission in the Church. I intend to continue discerning God's will, paying special attention to the manifestations of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in myself, instruction from my spiritual guide, and signs from God which seem to encourage me in one direction or another. *All for the greater glory of God and the salvation of the most souls possible. Amen!*

Meg Van Brunt

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