



ruminatio

The Consecrated Life

by Sr Mel Dwyer





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Journeying to 2018: Year of Youth

FOREWORD

As I write this, I find myself having just returned to Australia following eight years serving as a missionary sister in Malawi, Africa. Walking alongside the people of Africa taught me a lot about gratitude, about persistence and about being joyful irrespective of what I have. For now, the journey of my vocation as a religious sister has led me back to Australia, to serve God in my own country. Yet what remains constant in me is the deep desire for 'the more'. To be always more radical, always more available, always more generous is living my life totally committed to Jesus.

Ultimately, the question everyone must face in life is, 'What is my calling?' Despite the unlimited possibilities for young people to make a difference in society, I believe that religious life still has an extremely important value in society. The world desperately needs young women and young men who are ready to answer the call of God and live their lives set apart for Him.

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As we approach the next synod of Bishops focusing on Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment, it is an opportune moment for young people to look into their hearts and take the step in faith of exploring the call to religious life.

My prayer is that young people will have the courage to 'step out from the shore' and embark on the daily journey of following Christ, conscious that with God anything is possible.

*Sr Melissa Dwyer FdCC
Canossian Daughters of Charity
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Called to a Love Beyond Measure...

At the core of every vocation lies a deep desire to love. Each one of us is called by God to love. First to love God, and then to allow that love to lead us out to serve others whether through priesthood, religious life, marriage or as a single person. The call to religious life is primarily a call to love. Conscious that we cannot give to others what we do not have within ourselves, religious women and men take up the daily challenge to sit at the feet of Jesus and allow His great love to transform their lives in radical ways. The invitation to imitate Jesus calls us to a love without measure, a love without counting the cost, a love that goes beyond human understanding and reaches out to all those who are placed before us.

Leading People to Jesus

Religious life provides women and men of radical faith the unique opportunity to make Jesus known and loved, putting ourselves with Jesus in the midst of His people. Many young people seek to make a difference in the world and in the Church.

We live in a world where violence reigns and the social gap between rich and poor continues to widen.

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People don't need religious to fix them. Religious women and men don't need to save the world. Religious need to model a passionate love for God, which will in turn be a visible sign of something transformative.

Pope Francis invites religious to “carry the crosses of our brothers and sisters, wanting to touch the wounds of a world in pain, which longs and cries out for healing.” (Homily of Pope Francis 2nd February 2017) This responsibility, to offer consolation and support to a broken world, presents religious with a sense of purpose in allowing the love they have for God to translate into actions that help others find hope and support in every moment of their lives.

If you love God, want to serve Him completely with your life, and help others to come to know Him more, then consider religious life as a meaningful way of making a difference to the world.

Radical Gospel Women and Men

When we think of prominent religious women and men our minds tend to drift towards figures like Mother Theresa, Mary McKillop, Francis of Assisi and Ignatius of Loyola. Yet thousands of religious women and men every day go about their mission of living the Gospel in simple, yet life changing ways. Choosing to become a religious is not ordinary. It's radical. It's about allowing our relationship with God to make a tangible difference. It's about surrendering everything we have and all that we are to the dream of God. Letting God use us wherever and however He desires.

The freedom of religious life provides the opportunity to be on the margins with the poor, to a voice for the voiceless, and to do it in union with other like-minded women and men on a similar mission of striving to live as Jesus did.

In his address to religious men and women at the end of the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis urged religious to make courageous and prophetic choices, to not be afraid of getting their hands dirty and of walking the geographical and existential peripheries of mankind today.

The world today needs courageous men and women more than ever. Men and women who are ready to risk everything for the sake of Christ.

A Variety of Charisms...But One Love

When one wants to decide to embark on the journey of becoming a religious, it can be challenging to discern which congregation to join. With more than 250 different religious orders, it's easy to become confused. Each congregation has a different charism, which simply means a slightly different way of living out the call to follow Christ in service of the Church. Men and women dedicate their lives to serve in Orders or movements as priests, brothers, monks, nuns, sisters and consecrated virgins. Some congregations are active in the community through a variety of apostolic works, like teaching or nursing.

Others are more contemplative and lead lives of prayer and silence in an enclosed setting. Some religious orders have a particular devotion to Mary. Others place their emphasis on other aspects of our Catholic faith and the life of Jesus.

In the Gospel of Luke (10:38-42) we read the story of Mary who sits at the feet of Jesus while Martha does the serving. This story reflects the two-fold dimension of apostolic religious life; commitment to spending quality time with Jesus in prayer every day, which then leads one out to serve those in need in the community. Contemplation in action is an important dualism for religious. Prayer leads to service. Love for God leads to love for others.

The Vows...

Religious women and men usually commit their lives to three vows, poverty, chastity and obedience. These vows become the core of the life of the religious who strive to surrender themselves completely in imitation of Jesus.

The Wealth of Poverty

It might seem strange to think that someone who seemingly has no money or possessions that belong to them can be considered 'rich'.

Yet because religious are not focused on what they possess, they have the opportunity to completely abandon themselves to God with a life of simplicity and detachment. Sharing who they are and all that they have with those in their community, religious embark on the daily journey of discovering their true treasure, ready to leave everything in order to find themselves.

Many times in life we can run the risk of seeking consolation and happiness from possessions or people. Yet the life of a religious man or woman bears witness to the reality that God alone can content the heart of humanity. In truth, whoever finds God possesses all things.

The Love of Chastity

The vow of chastity tends to have such a negative interpretation in society. There is so much more to this vow than not having sex, or not getting married and having a family. Chastity is not about what you leave behind or what you can't do. Instead, chastity is about loving in a broader sense.

Religious give up the opportunity to love one person, so as to be open to love many and to help them to love God. Chastity is about availability, about opening ourselves to love all those that God places before us.

The Freedom of Obedience

There is a great freedom that comes from living a life totally surrendered to the will of God. The vow of obedience is so much more than 'doing what you are told'. The essence of this vow is about trust. It centres around the question of whether I love God enough to trust Him with my life. It requires a complete surrender to the plan God has for one's life, conscious that God speaks to us through those who lead us. We can't expect God to call us on the mobile phone and tell us what to do. As such, one needs to believe in those whom God places before them to help them to uncover His will. A religious who pursues the invitation to align all their actions in response to the Will of God, can truly say that they belong entirely to Him.

On a Journey of Becoming

Following on from the Extraordinary Year of Mercy, one needs to appreciate the important reality that you don't need to be perfect to become a religious. Too often it is easy to think that you are not 'good enough' to make the grade of perfection required to follow Jesus as a consecrated woman or man. Let me set the record straight. There are no perfect religious! Religious life is made up of women and men who struggle, women and men who are human beings, women and men who try each day to do the very best they can, aware that with God's grace anything is possible. Each one of us needs to accept the merciful love of the Father, who calls us every day to follow Him wherever He leads. What's important for religious is that they acknowledge their mistakes, accepting the mercy and forgiveness of God who each day calls them to become something more. On the journey of following Jesus, there is always more. We can always love more. We can always be more. We can always grow more in imitation of Jesus. What remains undeniable is that once we encounter Jesus, we are never the same again.

Being More Than Doing

Catherine of Siena once said, 'If you are all that you should be, you can set the whole world on fire.' Religious life isn't about what you do to help others. It's about who you are and who you are becoming. It's important for each person to discover how they can do their very best in fulfilling the vocation God has for them. We can't set the world on fire if we aren't on fire with the love of God ourselves. Society doesn't need half hearted followers of Jesus. Instead, we need religious who are passionately in love with God, and want to tell the whole world about that love, not necessarily with words, but with a way of life that radiates the joy of the Gospel.

How Do You Decide If Religious Life is 'Right' for You?

There are many different ways that we can answer the call God has for our lives. What is most important is that you discover the right place for you, whether that is as a married person, an ordained person, a single person, or as a religious.

There is a need to pray, reflect and question how God is calling us to live out our vocation. That process of praying, reflecting and questioning is known as discernment. The discernment process is a purposeful stance which involves looking at, understanding, entering into, and experiencing a particular vocation. One cannot discern from a distance – literally one needs to jump out of the boat and walk towards Jesus with faith and hope that they are hearing the Lord call their name in a particular way. The only way to really know is to dare to bring oneself to God in prayer and honestly ask: “Where are you calling me?”

In the midst of the questions, the reflecting and prayer, we might sense God leading us towards a certain state of life.

Tips for Discernment

There are five tips to help you discover where God is calling you and if religious life is really for you:

1. Pray

Developing an intimate relationship with God in prayer is essential to discovering God’s call.

Saint Pope John Paul II wrote , “This call, this mysterious inner voice of Christ, is heard most clearly in silence and prayer. Its acceptance is an act of faith.” (Homily, February 10th 1986) We need to take time in silence to listen to the voice of God, becoming increasingly more aware of all the ways He speaks to us.

2. Seek a mentor

Having someone to share the journey with is important in vocational discernment. It’s helpful to find a trusted person with whom you can share your thoughts, feelings and prayer experiences as you strive to discover what God is calling you to do with your life. Mentors can help you to shed light on your experiences of prayer and can be a voice of wisdom in helping with the discernment process.

3. Belong to a community of faith

Being surrounded by fellow believers who support, encourage and challenge you is very important. No man or woman is an island, and we all need like-minded companions on the journey to help us grow in faith.

Whether it's a parish youth group, prayer movement or even just a group of Christian friends who gather together socially, having others who support you on the journey of discernment makes a big difference!

4. Get involved in different things

During the process of discovering God's call, it's important to participate in a variety of different activities and try new things. You never know where God is waiting to meet you! Many times when we stretch ourselves beyond our 'comfort zone' we find that God opens us up to new and exciting possibilities that we had never imagined possible.

5. Take a risk

Often it's scary to take the first step and express a concrete desire to follow a particular state of life. Yet we must be willing to take a risk, having the courage to go against the ordinary and be bold in following Christ with our lives. Beginning the journey of concretely discerning religious life isn't easy. However many young people spend too long waiting, afraid to take that first step in faith.

Have courage, dare to be different, conscious that God who calls accompanies us every step of the way. God will never abandon us in our searching to find His will.

He is faithful to His promises, and is waiting for us if we have the courage to open the doors of our hearts to His plan for our lives. If religious life is the right vocation for you, God will slowly reveal that every day of the journey. If it's not where God dreams for you to be, that's OK too. What's important is that we remain available to wherever God desires us to be, ready to jump out of the boat and follow wherever He leads.

What's important in the process of discernment is that you need to be in peace wherever you choose to live out your call to follow Christ. We can read, and research and 'shop around' a lot to try and find where we fit. Yet ultimately where we first find peace is where we will come back to. It's about finding your place in the midst of many options and different ways of being a disciple.

Put Out Into the Deep

Jesus invitation to the first disciples, "Put out into the deep" (Luke 5:4), is the same one he gives to many young women and men who want to follow Him in religious life today. In order to be an effective religious, it requires a certain degree of self sacrifice and moving out of one's comfort zone in order to go where Jesus leads. If we really want to follow Jesus, we need to step out in faith, push away from the shore of what is familiar and be ready to take up the challenge of living a life uncommon.

So You're Ready to Follow?

When one decides to become a religious, there are a number of steps in the process. These steps are important as they provide a chance for the person who believes they are called to take time to discern if religious life really is their vocation. Each congregation as a specific formation plan, however in general, someone deciding to step out in faith and become a religious will go through the following steps:

1. Come and See

Having expressed a desire to explore further the call to religious life, a young person goes to stay for a short period with a community of professed religious. This 'live-in' experience provides a taste of how life would be if they decide to join.

2. Postulancy

This is the first 'official' stage in the process of becoming a religious. Accompanied by a professed religious, the young woman or man begins a journey of deepening her/his relationship with Jesus and understanding of the charism of the congregation. During this time she/he lives in the religious community and may also be engaged in some of the ministries carried out by the community. This first stage usually takes approximately one year.

3. Novitiate

This is a special time where the young person is set apart from the world to prepare themselves intensively for life as a religious. Usually this stage takes two years, with one canonical year being exclusively for deepening the call to religious life without being involved in any ministry.

The second year often involves an apostolic experience, where the young person has the chance to participate actively in one of the ministries of the congregation.

4. First Profession

Following a successful completion of the above stages, the young woman or man expresses their desire to officially be accepted into the congregation. This leads to the first profession of vows, where one commits themselves to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience on a temporary basis. This is usually a one year commitment. Each year, the sister or brother has the chance to renew their vows if they believe they are still called to religious life.

5. Final Profession

After a specific period of time, usually between five and nine years after first profession, the young person is called upon to commit themselves forever to following Jesus as a religious. If this desire still resides in their heart, they will apply to be accepted for final profession. This is where the religious publicly commits themselves to their vows for the rest of their life.

After these first steps of initial formation, religious continue the life long journey of their daily 'yes' to follow wherever God leads.

Religious Life...Radical Love...In Imitation of Christ

“Above all these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (Colossians 3:14)

I wish to conclude these reflections on religious life where I started them...as a discourse of love. Religious are people deeply in love with God, and willing to allow that love to lead them where many fear to go.

Choosing to follow the call of God and to embark on the exciting adventure of religious life requires someone willing to take risks. Religious men and women take up the challenge of giving their lives completely to God, and allowing this personal relationship with the Lord to change them completely. Religious surrender themselves completely to go wherever and do whatever God asks of them.

If you want to lead a life of radicality, of purpose and of service, dare to be different and ask the question, “Lord, what do you want from me?” Have the courage of the saints and of all those holy men and women who have gone before you, to take a leap of faith, stepping out from the boat and taking the hand of Jesus on the radical adventure of religious life.

At the end of each day, we pray for the grace of faith like Mary, which enables us to respond to God’s call, “Let it be done unto me, according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

Amen.



Sr Mel Dwyer made her Religious Profession as a Canossian Daughter of Charity on the 23rd of April 2005 in Brisbane. Prior to entering religious life, she had a dream of representing Australia as an Olympic javelin thrower. A mission experience in Africa helped her discover god's dream for her to serve as a consecrated women, serving those who are in greatest need. Sr Mel has taught in Brisbane, and was Principal of a Canossian Secondary School in Africa for 7 years, before returning to Brisbane to be part of the leadership team of her Congregation, as well as working with the Vocation Brisbane team.

