Voices of Sisters
Spirituality
Religious Life



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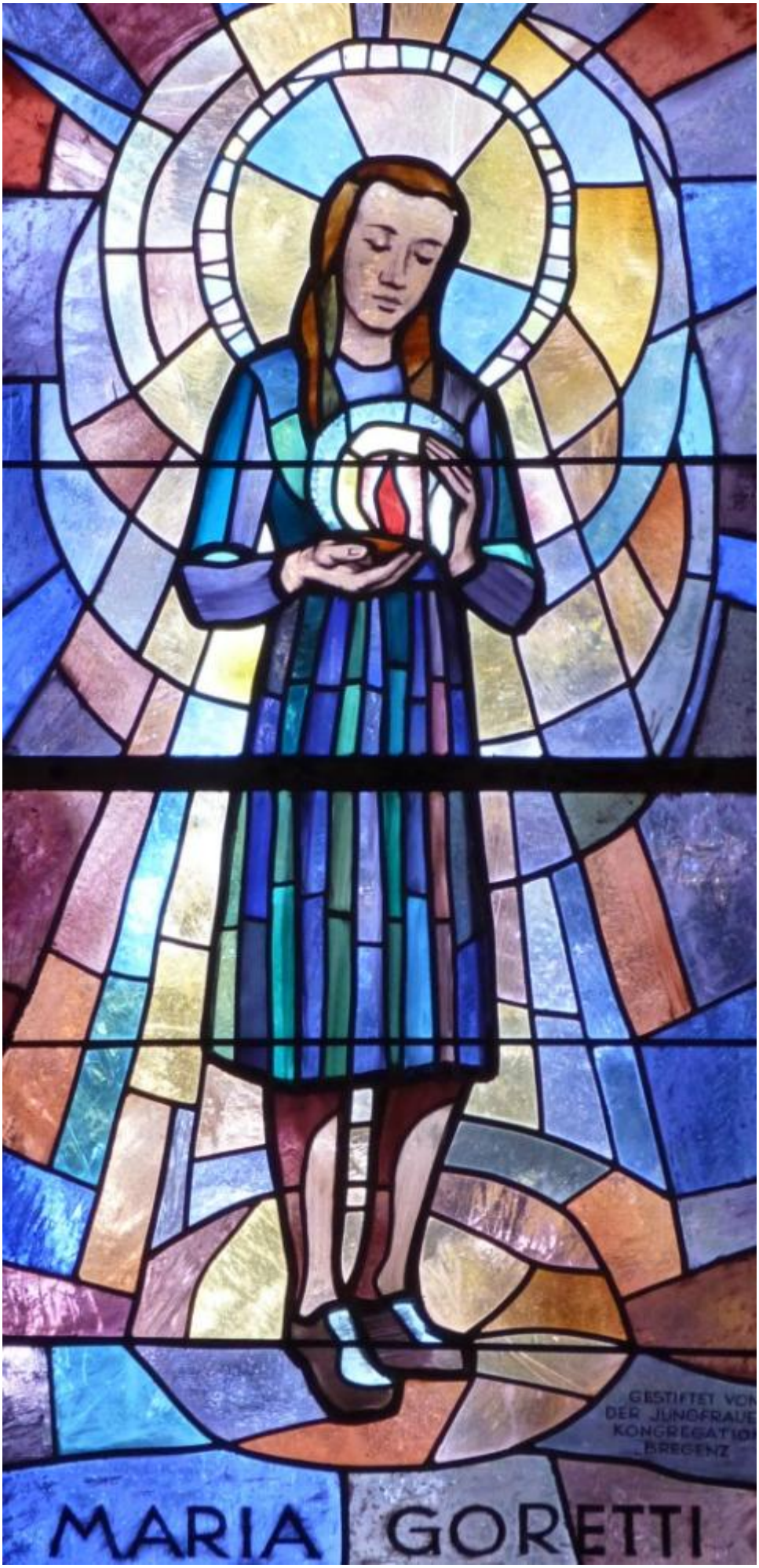
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The stream flows, not worried about hurdles and tussles, not knowing its direction or who plans its course and destination. The two secrets of its strength are "never stop" and "let go."

Living in my small house and my little village at the foothills of the Western Ghats of India and yet being rich in knowledge and wisdom was a marvelous gift from God.

The middle room of our house was a dark room used for storage. Among the rarely used items on a shelf in the corner were a few worn literary works. Though they were moth-eaten, they were life-giving stories of the saints. During annual vacations they were dusted, used, read and cherished along with our mother's stories of her favorite saints.


GESTIFTET VON
DER JUNGFRAUE
KONGREGATION
BREGENZ
MARIA GORETTI

(Wikimedia Commons/Reinhard Müller)

I loved and honored many of the saints, but two of them especially inspired me with their poverty and holiness: St. Hilary of Arles and St. Maria Goretti.

St. Hilary of Arles was only 29 when he became the bishop of Arles. He did not forget his simplicity and humility; he did manual labor to earn money for the poor. He sold sacred vessels in order to ransom captives. He traveled everywhere on foot, always wearing simple clothing.

And St. Maria Goretti, who died from 14 knife wounds to save her purity, yet wanted to see her killer — the self-indulgent Alessandro — in heaven. When she found that Alessandro remained unrepentant for his actions, she visited him in a dream, which changed his life.

The examples of these saints had a great influence on my life.

In 1987, a group of nuns along with their college students visited my village of Arva in the Belthangady township, Karnataka, India. They had come to do a project as a part of their college curriculum. Though the project was required, it was interesting to see how enthusiastic they were about their task.

They had 15 days to construct a residence for the animators of the summer camps offered to the parish children. For all of them, it was an adventure just to handle the tools used in the construction.

As a young girl, I was overwhelmed that I got to help them and take part in a small way in their works of mercy. I was surprised and captivated by their encouraging smiles to each other when one would be injured or thirsty.

After I watched them closely, interacted with them, and evaluated my experience, a common word — "can't" — disappeared from the dictionary of my life.

It is wonderful to count the happy days of our lives, as well as the sad days. If someone asks about our sad moments of life, we might think they will outnumber the happy moments. But we prefer not to think about them, not realizing that the challenges are the stepping stones of success.

Sometimes we choose to flow like the little river and fail to pause and reflect upon the experiences of life. Sometimes it's better to take a U-turn and reflect over every experience in life, asking whether they helped us reach our goal or achieve something in life.

Acknowledging God's omnipotence is the other way of surrendering to the plan of God. Though life is a bundle of disappointments and discouragements, God ultimately heals and helps us. In these situations, we realize that the true worth is in being and not in doing.

Cardinal Joseph Cardijn of Belgium, the founder of the Young Christian Workers, said, "We are setting out to conquer the world."

His dream was to inspire the young workers to create the most powerful, strongest, most united organization in which they feel the solidarity of their interests.

We learned that he said, "You don't give tonic to the fish that is suffering from the effects of polluted water; you have got to change that water ... the environment."

We religious frequently move from city to city or even to other countries. Despite those changes, the only thing that we carry from place to place is our mission — to look lovingly, listen carefully, discern prudently and accept respectfully.

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I often turn to the Lord, and ask him to show me the way. At one point in my life, a group of young village boys and girls would gather with me three times a week to talk, listen, and act — and that was the foundation of Jesus' mission entrusted to me and my love relationship with him. It continued for five years until I was transferred to another place.

In the words of Cardijn, "We are still at the beginning, we are always at the beginning, we are just beginning." And humility teaches us that our contribution is like a single grain of sand on the seashore.

In the 2018 youth synod, Pope Francis listened to youthful voices from all over the world, and he seems convinced that youth will have a great impact. In his apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, he challenges them to be their best.

Looking back on 14 years of my own youth ministry, I cherish every moment — ups and downs, challenges and complications.

A 28-year-old man — whom I had met when he was 12 years old — reminded me:

> You forced me to go to church. You have punished me. Maybe that time I was not obeying you. But now I realize that all things you have done with me were to bring me to the right path. Thank you, sister, for all the things you have done for me and sorry for not obeying you. I have never seen anyone like you who walked a long distance and came to my home, pulled and pushed me to the church. Miss you.

Francis exhorts each one of us acting as animators to accompany youth in a time of new technology and transformative social changes. He affirms the sacred time of youth as a time of dreams and decision, of maturity, courage, discernment and valiant commitment.

Therefore, we are to challenge them to take the path of generous sacrifice and faithful companionship with peers, family, neighbors and elders.

All my encounters with youth have convinced me that with their commitment and bold initiatives, young adults can change the world. The Spirit awakens each one to be a God-seeking and not a self-seeking person.

If I allow the river of my life to flow in the direction God has planned, then God, creation and others will have a place in my life and I will be a God-seeking person. Treasuring the treasures of life will give meaning to my existence.

The river supports a large population of many animals and several hundred species — big and small. So, too, each of us has a place in the world and a reason to live, and we have the resilience to face any adversity, to withstand any storm. We can see light at the end of a dark tunnel. We can look beyond the struggles of life.

[Sr. Lidwin Fernandes belongs to the North Province of Ursuline Franciscan Sisters in India. She is the former national coordinator at Young Christian Students and Young Students Movement of India. Currently, she serves as the executive secretary of the Women's Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India.]