Voices of Sisters
Ministry
Religious Life



The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary sisters enjoy accompanying and helping the poor and elderly women who visit the convent, considering it a unique mission of their community in Peru. (Courtesy of Hilda Mary Bernath)



by Sr. Hilda Mary Bernath

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"Write it in your heart that every day is the best day." This quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson encourages me and urges me to try my best every day.

When I first heard it, I realized that indeed every day is a gift and a blessing sent by God. I feel capable and willing to serve God and humanity. I am contented with what I am, happy in my religious life and feel that my vocation to religious life is a priceless gift.

I know that God always gives me the best, but it took some time for me to accept his plans for me. Luckily, he is patient with my poor understanding of how he works in my life.

Jesus' words "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5:36) challenged me to set aside all my fears and anxieties as an Indian missionary in Peru. And following the advice of St. Paul (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) to "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing and give thanks to God at every moment," I learned to boost my spirits by thanking the Lord and cultivating a grateful heart. I never go to bed without praying the rosary, and on journeys I pray "Hail Mary."

Each missionary experience has taught me to forgive, forget and surrender myself to God, and to cherish inner peace in my life. I have learned to generously give my life back to God and learn from life experiences.

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We were always told that our foundress, Blessed Hélène Marie Philippine de Chappotin de Neuville — better known as Mary of the Passion — said, "Life is entirely a search for the hidden God."

I have experienced religious life as a beautiful garden that is helping us to grow and bloom. The leaves are our growth. The flowers are our potential, the roots are strength and the stem is energy. And we learn not to waste the season of harvesting

the fruits of our growth.

Reflecting on my past life, through Gospel reading, meditation, monthly recollection, and prayer, helps me to offer myself in my daily Mass and to accept my limitations. Each experience brings a valuable lesson — a treasure to be passionate about! I believe that without passion there is no mission in religious life.

I love going to the villages for Mass and pastoral visits — listening to them and sharing with them. They need liturgical assistance, and I can offer my reading and writing skills in helping them with developing their prayers and intentions for the Mass. This helped me, too, to improve my communication skills in Spanish.



Sister Hilda helps in the parish, packing groceries for people affected by COVID-19. (Courtesy of Hilda Mary Bernath)

During this pandemic, it was difficult to meet people and to have a conversation, but I could hardly wait to visit the families again. Despite the pandemic and the distance to the villages, I had the opportunity to visit them and was determined to do that.

When I am with them, I remember that Jesus' mission was to visit such people and be with them. Following his footsteps, I love my mission of being with the people of God.

I am well acquainted with their culture and customs and this helps me to be more approachable and friendly with them despite the language barrier. Their simple lifestyle, hospitality and friendly nature attract me and remind me of the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi.

The people of these villages are poor and gravely affected by COVID-19. So, as a community, we decided to help them generously. We bought groceries and I got to help pack them, preparing the list of names and marking the grocery bags. As I packed them, I prayed especially for each of those families and offered their struggles to God.

I have a special love for the elderly nuns in the convent. They are supportive and always show concern toward me. I visit them every day and converse with them, which helped me grow and improve my Spanish in the beginning. And their motherly affection and kind words encouraged me to be happy in community life.



Sister Hilda with some elderly sisters in her community (Courtesy of Hilda Mary Bernath)

Though they are elderly, they have the strength to help in the community without any complaints — I was surprised at their sincerity and abilities, admire their love and loyalty to the institute, and learn from them the commitment to living the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary life.

In the beginning, though it was difficult to handle parlor duties because of my language impediments, now I enjoy it and picked up the language much faster by being there in the parlor — welcoming people and talking with them.

God had a purpose in sending me here to be a missionary in Peru. I am grateful how the life of the people taught me to be good to others and lead a simple religious life.

This is the lesson I have learned about being a missionary in religious life. The bitter experiences always challenge us not to repeat them with others — because the measure we give, the measure we get back. We need not expect fame, only blessings from God, whose grace is the only permanent thing in religious life.

When we empty ourselves, God will fill us with his gifts. When we humble ourselves, God will make our life shine. When we sacrifice ourselves, God will bless us abundantly, and when we have patience, God will fulfill our hearts' desires.

I am ever grateful to God, my life-giver and constant companion.