News
Spirituality



Sr. Siobhan O'Keeffe walks through a wheat field on her sister's farm in Ireland. (Courtesy of Siobhan O’Keeffe)

by The Life Panelists

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We are approaching Holy Week, a time of darkness and light, despair and hope. Therefore, this month, we asked our panelists for The Life the following question:

What do you rely on most as your source of support in difficult moments? How do you stay grounded and provide an anchor for others in the midst of chaos?

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Siobhan O'Keeffe, a native of County Cork, Ireland, is a Sister of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (Chigwell Sisters) living in Liverpool, England. A registered nurse, she has graduate work in theology, justice, peace and mission studies. She offers spirituality and dementia-care training to religious communities and other groups and has served in nursing-home management. She is active in social outreach projects and is a member of the Catholic Sisters Cognitive Impairment/Alzheimer's Global Initiative, a project of the International Union of Superiors General and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. She is a contributor to Global Sisters Report.

My joy lies in being close to God, I have taken shelter in the Lord, continually to proclaim what you have done (Psalm 73:28).

The words of the psalmist echo deep in my spirit, never more so than when life is challenging for me or when I attempt to accompany others through the trials of life. The Gospel of St. John speaks to us of God's dream for each one of us: "I have come that you may have life in all its fullness" (John 10:10).

Inspired by this Gospel message, I believe that all people and creation are created for happiness. This state of being is rich of soul and possesses the spirit at a far more profound level than any transient sense of well-being associated with instant

gratification or passing pleasure.

Occasionally, experiences that touch my life leave me feeling insecure, frightened, anxious. I may feel overwhelmed by bad news or shocked to the core of my being. These events may leave me feeling lonely or isolated, not sure which way to turn. In these moments, I try to discern what is really happening. Is this a significant event that demands my full, immediate attention or a less serious one that can await a response?



Sr. Siobhan O'Keeffe's niece, Caoimhe feeds a baby calf on her parents' farm in Ireland in 2011. (Courtesy of Siobhan O’Keeffe)

I may feel unable to pray, or any sense of God's presence may seem like a distant memory, leaving me hanging on for dear life to the smidgen of faith that I have. Fortunately, the gift of sound faith formation has helped me to deepen my appreciation that God is a God of infinite love and faithfulness. Time and time again,

he has been my rock and my anchor, his fidelity carrying me through many turbulent waters. I throw out my rope to him so that he can rescue me (Deuteronomy 31:8-9). I pray for an ever-greater trust in his goodness.

As I accompany others through their dark night, I offer them words of comfort that have helped me so that they too may be comforted.

I am blessed with good friendships, people with whom I can share the innermost thoughts of my heart, knowing that what is shared is sacred. I turn to them for friendship, love, understanding and wisdom, knowing that I will be supported in an honest and truthful manner. They mirror to me the sort of person I want to be: a sure shelter for others, especially when life is rough. This response requires practical action to support others and to express my faith in God.

The beauty of nature restores my soul, and I invite others to look on the glory of God and to be renewed in spirit. As our Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary vision statement says: We are called to be "joyful co-creators sharing God's unconditional love in our wounded world."



Sr. Judith Dohner helps a Haitian immigrant woman with paperwork. (Courtesy of Judith Dohner)



Judith Dohner is a Sister of the Humility of Mary from Villa Maria, Pennsylvania. She has worked with migrants and immigrants for the past 30 years. She returned to the United States in 2018 after ministering in Haiti for 16 years and currently works with Haitian immigrants and refugees in Immokalee, Florida. She has written for Global Sisters Report and the National Catholic Reporter.

I entered my religious community at the time of the Second Vatican Council. Religious life was changing dramatically. I was blessed in the novitiate to have many good role models. So, as religious life focused more and more on ministry, I was grounded in prayer. Annual retreats, especially directed retreats, gave me focus and a personal relationship with God that has only grown deeper over time.

However, I believe it has been the resilience of the people I have been blessed to accompany in ministry that has taught me faith and trust, especially in difficult times. As a nurse in my early ministry, it was working with people experiencing cancer. Then, working in hospice care taught me the value of companionship, trust and letting go. Later, as I traveled to migrant clinics along the East Coast to provide health care to immigrant farmworkers, I learned from them that very little is needed for the journey and that God always provides. Simple trust!

However, it was during the 16 years I spent as a missionary and health care worker in Haiti that I met Jesus every day in the lives of those living in poverty and people who suffer. The Gospel was alive: the good Samaritan, touching the lepers, raising the dead, living the Beatitudes. It was in my face and could not be unseen.



Immigrant women select items from the clothing room at the Catholic Charities office in Immokalee, Florida. (Courtesy of Judith Dohner)

I am back in America now, walking with and offering love and care to new Haitian immigrants. I realize I do not really know any difficulties. I meet Haitians who have walked most of a 7,000-plus-mile journey from South America to find more abundant life in America. I hear stories about death of family members along the way and having to wait months in Mexico while living on the kindness of strangers. And now, in America, many are not able to work, get housing, apply for benefits. Yet they are always hopeful and resilient. And, yes, so grateful to find people and places that are welcoming and helpful.

Their lives are filled with drama and chaos, yet it all seems "normal" to them. I, too, have lived much of my life in drama and chaos. I do not handle it as well as they do. They anchor me because their faith is strong. They do not let fear control their lives. They live in hope. As I share their stories, I gain wisdom and clarity about what really matters. Prayer and quiet reflection on the Gospels also ground me and give

direction to my life. God is always with us. As Thomas Merton prayed in Thoughts in Solitude, "I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."



Sisters of Notre Dame, Tanke Community, Ilorin, Nigeria, at evening prayer (Monica Umeh Uchechukwu)



Monica Umeh Uchechukwu from Anambra State, Nigeria, is a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame. She joined the community in 1991 and began her nurse's training and later studied midwifery. She has served as novice director and is currently on the leadership team for her community.

Prayer in all forms is my greatest source of support in difficult moments. I believe that whatever happens in life has God's mark on it. I obviously live out my native

name, "Uchechukwu," which means "God's will." My confidence in God became stronger when I joined my religious congregation, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, founded by a French woman, St. Julie Billiart, who saw the good God in everything. She encouraged her daughters to do the same.

One of my favorites among her sayings is: "See the good God in everything and all will turn to your advantage." My experiences — the difficult times I have realized I only got through with divine help — have also helped me to remain rooted in the good God.

Whenever I encounter difficulties, which are not in short supply these days, I reflect on some Scripture passages on God's promises, like: "I will never forget you, my people; I have carved you on the palm of my hands" (Isaiah 49:15-16); "Do not be afraid, I will be with you" (Isaiah 43:1-3); "Take courage! It is I" (Matthew 14:27).

Some spiritual books, stories shared by other people, and songs also come handy — any that remind me that God is bigger than any difficulty I face. These help to shift my attention from the difficulties to God, thereby restoring my inner peace. I believe there is always light at the end of every tunnel. I also share what is going on in my life with significant others: people who listen to me and gain strength and insight to face their own struggles.



Tanke Convent in Ilorin, Nigeria, is under renovation. (Jacinta Ojilimmobe)

Recently, at the end of the rainy season, we started renovating our convent. The day the old roofing sheets came down, it threatened to rain. You can imagine the fear that hovered over the sisters and the engineer and his team. We could have become homeless that day, with most of our property destroyed.

I silently challenged God in prayer and refused to take "no" for an answer. I told God that if he wanted us to become homeless, it was going to be his shame. After all, he promised that whatever we ask in his name, we receive it. I confidently told those panicking that the rain might fall, but it was not going to fall around our part of the city.

The miracle took place: Other parts of the city had heavy rainfall that evening. My confidence in God became a source of strength for those around me. As I find strength in God's promises in the Scriptures and inspirational songs, I also introduce other people to them. Our God never abandons those who strive daily to remain connected to him.



(Unsplash/Chelsea Bock)



Dorothy Maxwell has been writing reflections on the Sunday readings for the website of the Sisters of St. Dominic of Blauvelt, New York, for years and believes that Dominicans are to preach wherever and whenever possible. She is now in her fourth year of ministry at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison with a population of more than 500.

I have been granted the gift of life into the eighth decade and realize all things are passing. I use the eternal love and support of the triune God as my inner source of

strength. I cling to that rock imaged in the old hymn, "How Can I Keep From Singing? " As I sing, I look out at my world, a world of chaos: The invention of radio, television and the internet impacts our collective psyche, instantly informing us of atrocities anywhere in the world.

How do we keep a sense of humor and avoid depression when graphic scenes of horror flash before us constantly? We spend hours watching action movies and television shows on crime and medical emergencies; video games keep the user focused for hours as their two thumbs destroy whatever comes on the screen. Beachgoers on vacation tote novels of page-turning murder and mayhem. Struggling newspapers live on to reveal how bad the latest bad news really is. Why are we hungry for more violence than real life offers each day?

But nature offers healthier choices, with hiking and bike trails, and documentaries and podcasts that educate rather than entertain. Church attendance is down, but spirituality thrives in a variety of forms. Groups gather to repair the environment and practice centering prayer, and some TV series like "The Chosen" hint that society seeks wholeness.

Changing our leisure activities can save the mind and spirit but requires setting aside time, especially vital for those who have survived an adult life of employment. Retirement's life-giving days must be lived out in a new rhythm, from chaos to peace.

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Knowing that we are created in the image and likeness of God grounds us. What is your image of God? God is Spirit, and that is difficult to imagine. But the Incarnation is the visual aid that erases false images and gives us direction on how we are to relate to others.

The self I project is sometimes beneficial and sometimes destructive, but I want to mirror the life of Jesus and the saints. The life of Jesus was much like our own, with the same loving God who provides for us in trials, tribulations and joys. We are not perfect like Jesus, but we are all "made in the image" and need self-love, a loving family's support, and a nurturing faith group to keep us on track.

To me, God is a spiritual, unseen force that continues to create in a chaotic world. The nature of God is evident in crimson sunsets and violent storms, beaches and beasts, prophets and peasants.

March 19 is National Let's Laugh Day, a 24-hour jokefest that unites us; May 7 is World Laughter Day. Have a chuckle with the people around you, as a balanced life is lived out between laughter and tears.

This story appears in the **The Life** and **Lent** feature series.