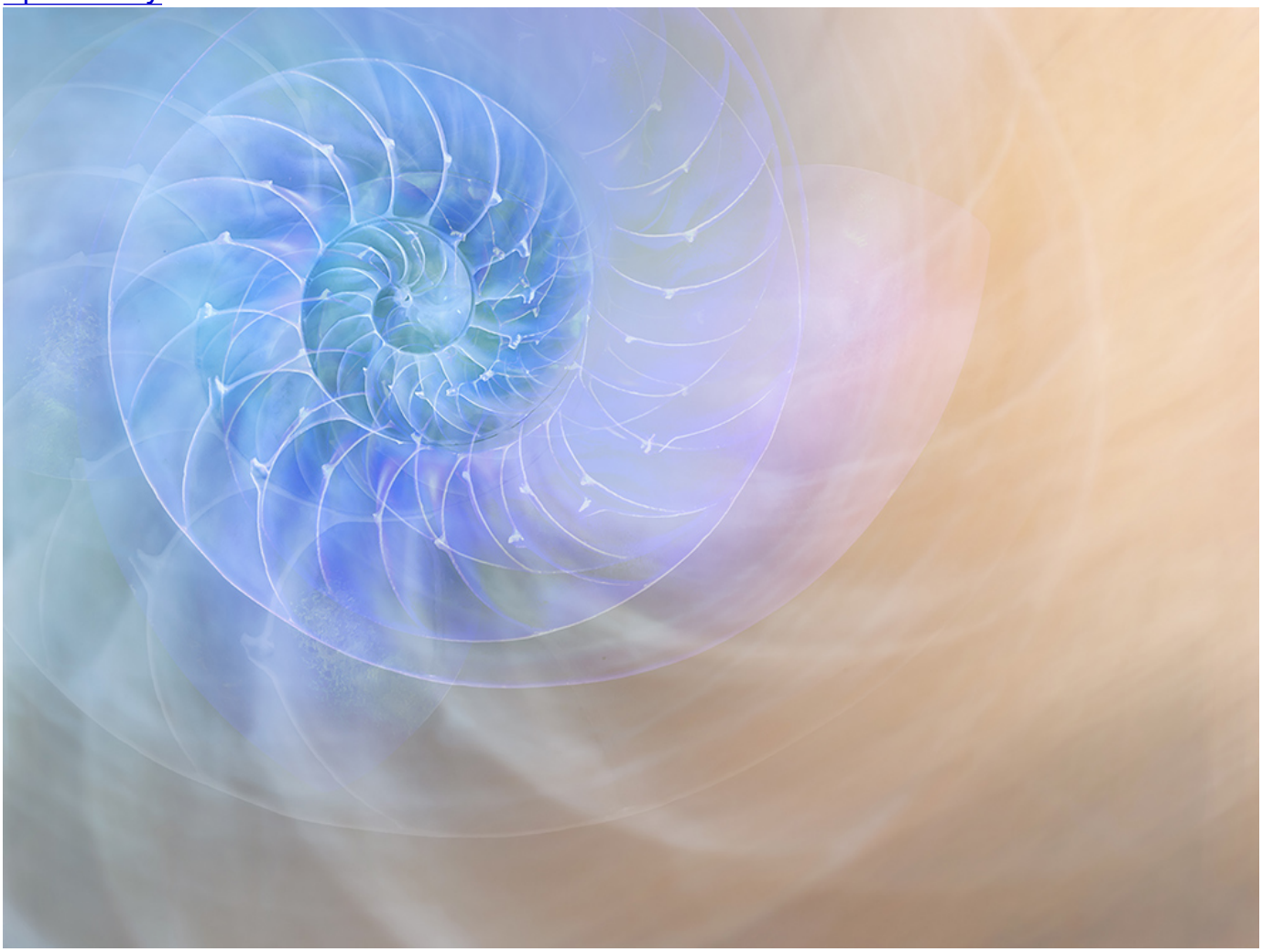
News
Spirituality



"Nautilus Sweep," digital artwork by Notre Dame de Namur Sr. Terry Davis (Courtesy of Terry Davis)

by The Life Panelists

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The Life panel delved deep this month as they pondered this question:

How has my image of God or Jesus changed throughout my spiritual life?

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Anne-Louise Nadeau is a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur from Maryland. Her academic background was in sociology/social work and pastoral counseling. She taught in high school and college, where she also served as associate dean of students. Later, she worked in My Sister's Place (a women's center), was the director of programs for Pax Christi, and served her congregation on the leadership team. Currently, she is an anti-racism trainer/consultant.

It all began with the French word *émerveiller*, which translated means "to marvel," "to be in awe," "to wonder."

As a young child, I had the thrill of accompanying my father to daily Mass. Hearing a language I did not understand (Latin), and with all the kneeling, standing and sitting, I quickly grew bored and restless.

My dad had a solution: I was allowed to bring into church one object of nature I discovered on our walk to church. During Mass, I was to do only one thing: wonder at what I was looking at. Over a two-week period, my collection included stones, leaves, a dandelion, a flower, a clover, a leaf, a blade of grass, a ladybug, a stick, and the occasional dust motes that danced in the light. I had the perfect "lab" to examine and to wonder about. Sitting on the kneeler, with the pew as my desk, I closely marveled at the objects that I accumulated.

The best part was the walk home, where my dad asked me what I had wondered about, and he, in turn, shared what he had wondered about during the Mass. God and goodness were always the theme of our conversations.

When restlessness set in again after about a month, one morning he pulled from his pocket a tiny magnifying glass with a lens the size of a quarter, and he told me to start over, examining each object in my collection. A new world of marvel opened before my eyes.

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Things seen yet unseen with the naked eye were spectacular, and all of these were of God, and all things were connected.

The lessons I learned from my dad have always stayed and grown with me and formed my image of an amazing God who provides, protects, is lavish in surprises and goodness, and is a vast mystery.

Years later, as a young adult, I was drawn to purchase the chambered nautilus shell that remains my symbol for God, the holy one.

The chambers of the shell are held together by the core, the center from which it all flows. Each chamber speaks to me of the various parts of my life where I was led to continue to marvel, sometimes in hindsight but always in awe of the promptings and goodness revealed and experienced.

On each chamber is a marking of a tube that allows for nourishment to flow to and from the core depending on the depth and temperature of the seawater.

So it has been with my life; I know that I can return to one of the channels to reclaim a missed gift or a lost opportunity. So much depends on the depth I am willing to plumb as well as the temperature of what is happening in my life and in our world.

I pray that my wonder adds a measure of wisdom to all that needs healing.

Véronique Rouquet is a member of the Ignatian congregation La Xavière, Missionnaire du Christ Jésus and lives in Créteil, near Paris. Born in Lourdes, she rediscovered the "Message of Lourdes" when she worked for the Cité Saint-Pierre (part of the Caritas network that welcomes pilgrims in need from all over the world). She made her final vows with the Xavière Sisters in 2020. She is an English teacher, working with teenagers aged 11-14. She manages the community communication office and the website.

I remember learning at school as a child about the different kinds of narrators in stories. And there is one that really strikes me now: the omniscient one. This one knows everything about the characters: what they have in their minds, what they will do in the following chapters, how they will die.

At the beginning of my spiritual journey, this image of the omniscient narrator matched my idea of God. He was the one who knew everything about me — "Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it all" (Psalms 139:4). Obviously, I was also sure he knew the way by which I would get to him.

Here, the image of the omniscient narrator went well with another one: a careful father, standing at a lookout. He was quite far from me, though, and I understood I had to make my way to him. I imagined he was waving at me and that he tried to show me where to go.

I gradually started to understand the way God was speaking to me: from the inside. (Courtesy of Véronique Rouquet)

As I tried to follow God's will — every year, I would take a few days' retreat to decide about the following year — I genuinely came to believe one day that God had forgotten about me. Despite all my efforts to listen to him, my life was going around in circles. Worse, I started to think that at one of the crossroads in my life, I had taken the wrong path and that it was the reason why I had become unable to hear God's call.

This image of God happened to be terrifying. It meant that God talked to me from the outside. Fortunately, this image of God collapsed as soon as I realized it was leading me to a dead end.

The day I decided to do an Ignatian retreat changed the orientation of my life. I gradually started to understand the way God was speaking to me: from the inside. Being accompanied was a great help, and also the discovery that God was not so far

from me. "Find God in all things" (a key component of Ignatian spirituality) — not in the skies, but close to me.

I started to pray with the Gospel in a different way and understood that God is walking by me and not waiting at the end of the road! He is not outside of my life now, as was the narrator. He is definitely a friend, and I share all my life with him, especially the joy of being alive.

Lydia Lerato Rankoti is a member of the congregation of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary from Lesotho Province. She is a second-year novice who joined right after high school in 2020. She currently works at Maryland High School as the bursar.

Growing up, I never knew about spirituality nor delved into it. However, I always talked with, praised and prayed to God because I saw my grandmother do so.

Sometimes, I would pray because I was asked to pray. Some nights before we slept, I would pray for my family, and my uncles would laugh at me. Sometimes, I would feel despondent; other times, I would just laugh with them and then continue with prayer.

I never really focused on my spirituality until the day I felt my calling for religious life. I was very young, but I knew that God was talking to me through the holy Scriptures that I had been taught both on the primary and high school levels.

Sr. Lydia Lerato Rankoti of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary at Butha Buthe, Lesotho, on Easter Monday (Euphrasia Khatite)

To set out deliberately to confront the living God is an alarming adventure; every meeting with God is, in a certain sense, a "last judgment" to me.

Every time I look to God, I do so with a sense of coming to discernment. If I come having condemned myself, if I come because I love God even though I am unfaithful,

if I come to God loving God more than I do a godless security, then I am open to God and God is open to me. There is no distance: The Lord comes close to me in an act of compassionate love.

During Holy Week this year, I opened myself to feel and encounter the empathetic love that Jesus Christ has for me. Though I was very sick, I never missed any service, and I took time to help prepare and decorate the church for Holy Week services.

At that time, I knew that I had to spread the love I have in me from Christ to my community members and to the society that my congregation has sent me to serve. In that way, I connected with God intimately and saw God in all things.

It is love that makes me one with the body of Christ, not only through the suffering but also by having Jesus' attitude toward the suffering and the executioner. Jesus was dying willingly for love of his friends. As for loving God with all my strength, I can only do that if I deliberately cast off everything that is not God's in me.

I must turn myself constantly toward God; in my ordinary actions, I am concentrated on some material achievement, and to dedicate it to God takes a special effort. Therefore, I must be ready to set aside many things in order to give God the first place in me.

Ngoc Nguyen is a member of the Congregation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross in Vietnam. Before working on degrees in English, moral theology and ethics, she organized youth liturgies, taught catechism, served as organist and choir director, and did fundraising for charity. After completing doctoral studies at Marquette University, she will teach theology for young sisters in her congregation in Vietnam.

Who is Jesus in my life? I have asked that question many times, especially when I faced difficult situations, and my image of Jesus has developed throughout my spiritual journey in religious life.

When I was a child, my concept of Jesus was limited to what my parents taught me, first as a distant and elevated figure. Jesus was a judge who would reward me if I was good or punish me when I did something wrong. I was afraid of Jesus. I did not dare to look at his picture when I was home alone because I felt he was keeping a close watch on me.

Lovers of the Holy Cross Sr. Ngoc Nguyen receives Communion at her first vows ceremony at St. Joseph's Cathedral in Hanoi, Vietnam, on Aug. 22, 2013. (Courtesy of the Lovers of the Holy Cross)

As I grew older, this image began to change. When I was in high school and discerned joining a religious community, I encountered resistance from my father. I never doubted that he loved me, but he did not want me to have a difficult life. Through this experience, I developed a deeper relationship with Jesus through prayer. I experienced Jesus as a loving father who listened and guided me on the journey to become a religious sister, giving me strength and comfort.

Through my vocational journey with the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hanoi, my image of Jesus has evolved into a closer relationship. Living in a religious community, I often see Jesus as a close and special friend with whom I can share everything: I can smile, cry, blame him and even pour my anger on him.

This was especially true as a postulant when I was not sure if I wanted to stay in the convent. Sitting on my bed and thinking about how my parents would take care of me if I were at home, I felt sick and alone. But my friend Jesus was there.

During my novitiate, Jesus' position in my spiritual life became that of a lover. In this formation period, I spent much time in prayer, adoration, meditation and the study of theology. My spiritual life with Jesus became deep and intimate. This time of discernment resulted in my decision to "get married" to Jesus through professing my vows.

Sisters of the Lovers of the Holy Cross and Dominican priests help in a soup kitchen in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2015. (Courtesy of Ngoc Nguyen)

This important aspect of my life required deep conversations with my beloved Jesus. My love for him gave me the courage to say yes to his call.

Religious life has truly deepened my relationship with Jesus. He is the model for me to imitate through spiritual activities and the one who encourages me to serve the poor, oppressed and marginalized.

The image of Jesus in my spiritual journey changed significantly. From a distant figure and a judge, I have experienced him as a father, a close friend and a lover. Jesus is someone with whom I can share everything without feeling shame. I hope and pray that our deep relationship will remain close forever.

Lynn Caton has been a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood, New York, for 16 years. While raising a son, she spent many years in the corporate world, primarily in service and finance, leaving a career as a manager of the accounting department of a Fortune 500 company to enter religious life. Later, she served in prison ministry and as director of a parish outreach program. Her current ministry is as a certified addiction counselor in a hospital, serving women seeking treatment for substance abuse disorder in an inpatient setting.

When I was very young, I had a Little Golden Book that I now know was 1 Corinthians 13. I loved that book. The cover had a picture of a beautiful child holding a baby lamb; inside, there were pictures of the child clanging cymbals and giving a flower to another child as well as beautiful baby animals throughout.

I don't recall if I was old enough to read; I do remember my mother reading the story to me. This was my first experience of Scripture and, unknowingly, my first memory

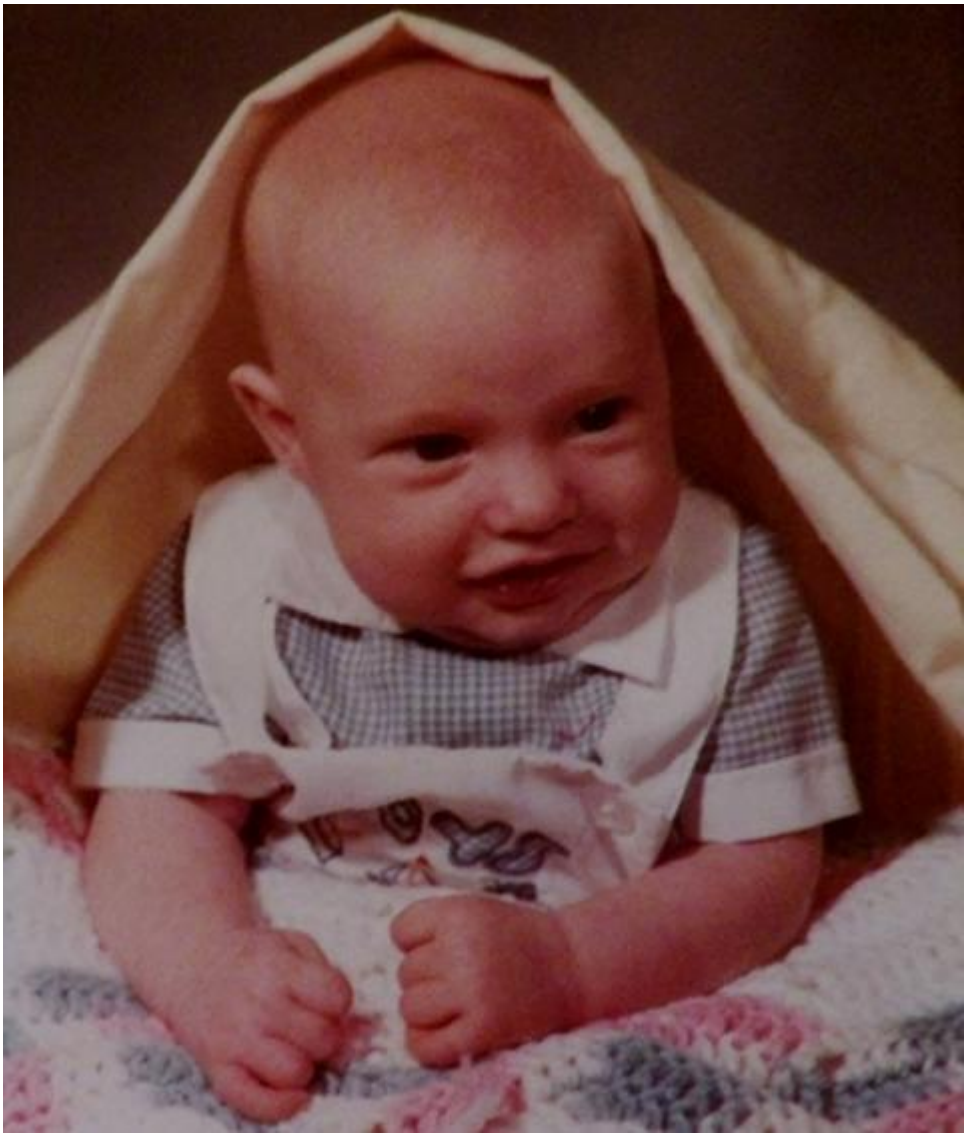
of an image of God, spoken to me on my mother's lap.

St. Joseph Sr. Lynn Caton reunited with her fifth-grade religious education teacher, St. Joseph Sr. Patricia Sullivan, formerly known as Sister Paul Miriam (Courtesy of Lynn Caton)

I was born in July 1963, nine months after the Second Vatican Council convened. I have an image of God whispering in St. John XXIII's ear to change things up because I was coming! So when I began religious instruction every other Wednesday, the lessons had drastically changed. While my older siblings had learned who God was by answering questions from the Baltimore Catechism, I learned a single answer to all questions: "Because Jesus loves me."

I have engaged in much Scripture study since that first lesson on my mother's lap; I've taken many theology courses since my first religious instruction with the Sisters

of St. Joseph. I have yet to know an image of God that serves me better than "because Jesus loves me."



Sister Lynn’s son in 1984 (Courtesy of Lynn Caton)

Since these early lessons, my image of God is, and has always been, God as love. Though my image of God has changed little, my understanding of love has evolved. As 1 Corinthians 13:11 tells us, when I was a child, I thought like a child. My early understanding of love was childlike. Love meant family, safety, protection, security ... peace. My childhood understanding of love met my childhood image of God, that of a familial love.

As I matured, I began to learn the love of friendship and romance. I grew to know Jesus as brother and friend; my image of God evolved to include a mutual longing for closeness with God.

The birth of my son brought me closest to an understanding of God as agape, unconditional love. The first seconds that perfect gift was in my arms, my heart was broken open to a love that is the closest I can know of God's love for me. The moment I looked in my son's eyes, I knew deeply God's love staring back at me.

This moment will forever stand for me as the instant I knew for sure that faith, hope and love remain — and the greatest is love. And I know for sure that God is love (1 John 4:8).

This story appears in the **The Life** feature series. View the full series.