News
Religious Life

(Helga Leija)

by The Life Panelists

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***Editor's note**: Next month's installment of The Life will be the last for this set of panelists. We are now accepting applications for our 2023-24 The Life panel. Here is how to apply. The deadline is Sept. 29.*

For the September issue of The Life, we asked our panelists the question: *How did you feel the night before your perpetual vows, and how did you cope with those feelings?*

The panelists reflect on the struggles, doubts and experiences that shaped the certainty of their calling. Religious life is, as one sister writes, a journey where one's heart learns to feel God's footsteps in the darkness.

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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.

I honestly don't remember the night before my final vows. My mind goes back to my first vow preparation. I take comfort in this, knowing my years in temporary profession prepared me well for my final profession.

I entered religious life on Sept. 1, 2006, professed first vows on Aug. 1, 2009, and made my final profession on Sept. 8, 2012. And so, on these days, I have a lot of memories popping up on my Facebook page. Through these memories, I see a gradual movement from a self-centered relationship with God to a relationship with

God through a life within a community.

Josephite Sr. Lynn Caton celebrates final vows Sept. 8, 2012 with her son and daughter-in-law. (Courtesy of Lynn Caton)

As a novice, I struggled to write my letter asking for permission to take vows. I wondered if I was ready for a lifetime commitment. I was the first in my novitiate class to profess vows. Other novices suggested I was overthinking it, saying, "It's just temporary" (probably not what they actually said, but that's how I heard it). Though it was in my head, I knew it was not yet a life commitment, I didn't want to make this decision lightly. I prayed for a surety that I truly intended to be a Sister of St. Joseph for all my days. Upon reflection, I realized this discernment was all about me, not me and my congregation.

Prayer card from Sr. Lynn Caton's final vows, designed and created by Sr Patricia Manning (Courtesy of Lynn Caton)

Facebook reminded me that my preparation for final vows looked very different. I had a week's worth of posts entitled "vow prep," including things like visiting sisters who had served as mentors, spending days in nature, going fishing, and of course, getting a mani/pedi with Mom.

Please don't interpret from this that my discernment was not serious; quite the opposite. The relaxed tone of my days of preparation affirms the comfort I had reached through years of formation and discernment. I had a lifetime of spiritual preparation, including a 30-day retreat after years of spiritual direction and annual retreats. I had the gift of initial formation (there's a reason it's called finally professed). All of these experiences brought me to recognize that my life as a Sister of St. Joseph, Brentwood, is the fulfillment of my baptismal call.

I recently listened to Abba's "I Have a Dream," which helped me put words to paper. My final profession is the fulfillment of the dream God has for me. The lyrics say, "I believe in angels … When I know the time is right for me, I'll cross the stream. I have a dream." With the recognition that I am fulfilling God's dream, I had no choice but to be joyful in my preparation.

As a whimsical play on Genesis, the prayer card from my profession claimed this dream as my truth: "Let us make this one a Sister of St. Joseph … and we will delight on the day she recognizes it."

Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk is a Ukrainian sister of the Order of St. Basil the Great (Province of St. Michael the Archangel, Croatia). Her academic background is in Ukrainian and English language and in religious pedagogy and catechetics. After final vows in 2018, she worked in parish ministry in Eastern Catholic parishes in Prniavor, Bosnia, and Kyiv, Ukraine. Currently, she is doing her licentiate studies in church history and teaching religious education in secondary school in Osijek, Croatia, and has contributed several columns to Global Sisters Report.

It is difficult for me to remember exactly how I felt on the night of April 28, 2018, the eve of my final vows. I may have double-checked the ironed clothes and the souvenirs for the guests, repeated the formula of the vows and prayed in the chapel for blessings for the next day. Instead, I would like to share with you the memories of another night, one that accompanied me from my entry into the monastery until my final vows.

I entered the monastery in 2008. Coming from a crowded city with an intense pace of life, I had to make a conscious effort to adapt to the measured schedule of the monastery. I had to go through many adjustments: the daily schedule, the way of prayer and communication, and accepting the traditions and culture of others. Sometimes, it also meant dealing with complex human relationships in the

community, strange forms of devotion and learning endless daily routines.

Sr. Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk makes her final profession as a Sister of the Order of St. Basil the Great (Province of St. Michael the Archangel, Croatia), placing her hand on the Gospel on April 29, 2018, in Osijek, Croatia. (Courtesy of Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk)

I think my mistake, which caused my spiritual dark night, was the perception that God wanted me to give up my dreams, desires, knowledge, analytical thinking, artistic and scientific pursuits, and spiritual preferences. I thought I had to renounce communication with my friends outside. When you start believing in a God who restricts your life, you begin to die slowly, and then the dark night descends. During the novitiate, I wrote a poem with these words: "In the darkness, my heart feels God's footsteps."

In a Byzantine Rite tradition, Sr. Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk is covered with a black cloth as a symbol of her death to the world as she makes her final profession as a Sister of the Order of St. Basil the Great (Province of St. Michael the Archangel, Croatia), placing her hand on the Gospel on April 29, 2018, in Osijek, Croatia. (Courtesy of Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk)

My resurrection journey began in December 2016 at an Ignatian retreat. It was there, when I found myself in complete silence, with my phone turned off and all my usual distractions put aside, in the midst of the beautiful winter nature, meditating on the words of the Holy Scriptures, that I deeply experienced that God is still very much alive, beautiful and majestic and that He has his own plans. I knew he wanted me to live and breathe fully within the monastery. This began my coming out of the dark night.

Within the next two years, I wholeheartedly professed my lifelong vows, knowing that the Lord also promises to always be with me. When the foundation of your life is a loving and living God, the difficulties and even moments of falling become an

opportunity for experiencing His mercy and closeness. Perhaps, sometimes, it may seem to you that He is dead or absent, but look for Him — and you will find Him Risen in the garden of your life.

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.

My solemn profession of perpetual vows was a significant milestone in my religious life. I experienced many emotions the night before I made my perpetual vows, including exhilaration and anxiety. Part of me was excited to fulfill my dream of professing the vows, but the other half of me was almost reluctant as if I did not dare to take this final step. The reason for my hesitation, as I stood on the threshold of making this lifelong holy commitment, was that I somehow felt unworthy.

Sr. Ngoc Nguyen (left) made her perpetual vows with the Congregation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross in Vietnam at St. Joseph Cathedral in the Diocese of Hanoi on Aug. 1, 2019. At right is Sr. Yen Le. (Courtesy of Ngoc Nguyen)

I still recall the feeling of excitement when I was called and chosen to make my perpetual vows. Taking my final vows gave me the opportunity to devote my entire life to God and to serve God's people more actively. Additionally, professing my perpetual vows was an indicator of my spiritual growth and that the congregation saw potential in me to carry out our ministry. Professing perpetual vows allowed me to become an official member of the congregation with full rights and obligations. Such things brought excitement and eagerness to me on the night before I made my vows.

However, alongside the excitement, I felt anxiety and nervousness. I remember that I could not sleep well the night before we celebrated our final vows. That was the longest night of my life because I stayed awake for most of the night as I discerned whether I should make vows. I struggled with doubts about whether I could be faithful to the promises I would be making to God and the congregation.

Acknowledging that as a human being, I am weak, sinful and could easily succumb to temptation was a source of great concern in committing to this life. Another source of consternation during that night was that making perpetual vows would lead me into an unknown future with no guarantees for my life. The permanence of the commitment and an unpredictable future made me nervous about taking this significant step.

> 'I chose a joyful life and found the right path for me to walk with God, to follow God's example and to become God's hands here on earth.'
> —Sr. Ngoc Nguyen
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To overcome these mixed emotions, I turned to God for a conversation throughout the night. We talked about how I was excited to closely follow God into religious life, but I also confided my anxieties and nervousness about making perpetual vows. I asked what I should do: Come forward, stay behind or withdraw? In the silence of the night and in the depths of my heart, the words: "You are chosen," "Do not be afraid," "Come and follow me," "Do not worry about tomorrow," and "I am with you" resounded within me and calmed me from the anxieties that I had carried with me to bed. After those words came to me, I felt peace and was ready to make vows the next morning. I believed that God would remain with me to protect me and lead me on the right path. In making the decision to profess my perpetual vows, I was convinced that God called and chose me to live the consecrated life.

The night before my perpetual vows was a night of final decisions and a wide spectrum of emotions. The night was filled with excitement, anxiety and nervousness, but ultimately, I found peace. Thankfully, because of God's voice, I was able to make the right choice. I chose a joyful life and found the right path for me to walk with God, to follow God's example and to become God's hands here on earth to serve God's people, especially the most vulnerable on the fringes of society.

Maria Cecilia Sierra Salcido is from Mexico and has been a member of the Comboni Missionary Sisters for 32 years. She has lived in the United States, Italy, Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan and Guatemala. With a background in communications, theology and nonprofit management, she has contributed to the establishment of sustainable organizations in communities affected by poverty, social conflict and cultural diversity. Presently, she works at Our Lady of Lourdes parish in Richmond, Virginia, and in February 2023 hopes to continue missionary life in the eastern Arab world.

The night before my final vows in the congregation of the Comboni Missionary Sisters was filled with great anticipation, intuition, dreams and gratitude. The celebration took place in a Coptic parish in a predominantly Muslim area on the outskirts of Cairo, Egypt.

I could hardly contain my deep sense of gratitude. "All is grace," I wrote in a letter to Pope John Paul II and my bishop in Mexico. I was overjoyed to receive a card from the Vatican with the papal blessing. It made me feel that what was about to be celebrated was indeed an ecclesial event and that God's Spirit was indeed hovering over me.

Sr. Maria Cecilia Sierra Salcido is from Mexico and made her final vows as a member of the Comboni Missionary Sisters in Cairo, Egypt. Here she walks in the Nile River. (Courtesy of Maria Cecilia Sierra Salcido)

"This is my body, which shall be given up for you." This phrase was written in Arabic and English on the invitation and the liturgy program. "You should not write that. It's too strong," said one of my Arabic teachers, a Muslim, who helped me review the booklet for the ceremony. He said the phrase sounded too graphic, expressing a desire to give oneself entirely. "This is what perpetual vows in the Catholic Church are all about," I said earnestly. Even after I tried to explain the context in which these words were spoken, connected to Jesus' fragrant offering and sacrifice to God, or from the perspective of the Good Shepherd, who gave his life for his sheep, it was hard for him to grasp the meaning.

Sr. Maria Cecilia Sierra Salcido, right, at her final vows in Cairo, Egypt (Courtesy of Maria Cecilia Sierra Salcido)

On the eve of my vows, a roadmap marked with God's mercy and fidelity, as well as my resistances and hindrances, emerged. I celebrated my first vows in Mexico, lived with elderly sisters in Italy, completed university studies in the United States, and spent a year studying Arabic and Islamic studies in Egypt. It had not always been easy. The concept of surrender, a word that defines Islam or the Muslim person (one

who surrenders to God), resonated in my soul: "Since God has not given up on me, I give in." That night, I felt a deep desire to surrender to God, who was extremely patient and merciful.

I was also overwhelmed by the preparation for the vows: retreat days, proofreading the Arabic liturgy booklet with the Muslim and Coptic teachers, rehearsing the ceremony and songs, and studying for Arabic language exams. An Egyptian Comboni Sister and I spent hours practicing the formula of consecration in Arabic, repeating each word, especially the most significant and difficult ones: "You called me, you consecrated me, chastity, poverty, obedience and immense grace."

I felt God was taking my hand and showering on me divine graces. A community of Capuchin nuns sent me a spiritual bouquet, assuring me that they would keep me in their prayers. I was also grateful that one of my sisters was in Egypt on her honeymoon and accompanied me in the celebration on behalf of my family. My best friend, a Comboni sister, also prepared the songs. (She tragically died of cancer a couple of years later at age 36). She skillfully played the guitar, and the pastor's wife played the piano. (In some Eastern Rite churches, married men are allowed to be ordained as priests.) Together, they rehearsed the songs in Arabic with the parish's young people every evening. A Coptic bishop would preside over the celebration, and the choir of elders was ready to sing the ancient Coptic chants. Two Coptic priests, Comboni fathers and sisters and my Arabic school classmates were expected to participate. During the five-hour liturgy, with its prayers, rituals, and chants in Arabic, English and Coptic. I was filled with happiness.

Back then, I was far from imagining just how much grace and mercy still awaited me. That night was not the most significant event in my life, but it was a hallmark. It traced the first lines on the canvas where God's face has continued to emerge in the many faces, realities, cultures and religions I have encountered in my missionary life. Saying yes, that night, the following day, and for 33 years has led me to Palestine/Israel. Here I am today, walking alongside Bedouin communities in the Judean desert. The memory of that night when I found grace always makes me smile. God is not finished with me. In fidelity to that covenant, God continues to provide opportunities to surrender and show mercy, crossing borders and broadening horizons, guided by grace, as on that very night.

Mudita Menona Sodder of Mumbai belongs to the Indian Province of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Presently the JPIC coordinator of the Indian Province for her congregation, for the past 10 years, she has been an active member of the Justice Coalition of Religious, president of Fellowship of Indian Missiologists, and has been engaged in full-time eco-spirituality work: retreats, conferences, seminars and similar activities. Her academic background was in history, sociology and anthropology, and she worked 50 years as a teacher, social worker, guide, principal, manager and adviser, with much experience in faith-based justice work and religious life.

On July 3, 1983, the feast of St Thomas, the apostle of India, I made my first profession. Oh! It was a happy mistake, with a mix-up of arrangements falling somewhere between the novice mistress and the nun in charge. We had a caterer, photographer, decorations galore, a large crowd, 18 priest friends and a bishop as the main celebrant. No one told me that first profession is typically a small, quiet affair!

Despite the unexpected turnout and even a flood on that day, I was ecstatic and overcome with excitement as I made my profession in the presence of all, with documents signed and countersigned! As soon as the liturgy concluded, people rushed to congratulate me. However, I was suddenly grabbed by a Sister of the Sacred Heart of Jesus who asked me, "Who gave you permission to make perpetual vows?" Taking it as a joke, I retorted, "Rome!"

Goodbyes were said, and I was exhausted but euphoric, experiencing deep inner bliss as I retired to my room. Like a curious little child, I eagerly unwrapped the gifts and hastily read the many messages and cards received. Finally, after midnight, I reread the vows I had professed. It was then that I nearly jumped out of my skin when I saw the words "Perpetual Vows in the Society of the Sacred Heart." Was I hallucinating? Was this a dream or just my imagination? I pinched myself several times and even went and washed my face. The signed document affirmed that it was real.

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Uncontrolled tears of joy gushed down my cheeks, drenching me from top to toe. My knees gave way, and I found myself on the floor in Panchang Pranam (prostration with five parts of the body touching the ground), muttering, "This is no mistake or coincidence, but pure Lila or Divine Play/Creative Play by the Divine Absolute, for me Jesus Christ, my Spouse, my friend, my God and my All." Sleep eluded me as I reveled in this intimate conversation with my lover.

When I revealed this happy mistake to my provincial in the morning, she initially thought I was joking. However, as she became aware of the grave error, she realized its implications. The calligraphed document had been printed by a young sister who had just returned from her final profession, and she goofed up. It had to be taken to the bishop and redone.

On my part, I remained convinced that I had made my final profession that day. Consequently, I kept giving excuses every year until I was forced to go for an international experience and probation in Rome. I chose to return to India to make my final profession on July 18, 1993, and to celebrate my tin jubilee (10 years) with my earthly father in heaven. He crossed over to the other side while I was in Rome, but his wish to celebrate the occasion was fulfilled.

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