News
Religious Life

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by The Life Panelists

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This month, the panelists took some time to reflect on the sources of wisdom that continue to sustain them on their journey of life. The sisters share their personal experiences of faith, the challenges they've faced, their moments of uncertainty, their relationship with God, and their ongoing commitment to personal and spiritual growth. We asked them the following question:

What is a piece of wisdom that you received in religious life that continues to sustain you today?

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Maco Cassetta is a member of the Congregation of Notre Dame. She is a part-time licensed psychotherapist working with religious life, formation, resiliency, grief, transition, communication skills, sexuality, inner child work, addictions, PTSD, complicated grief, and reconnection to one's soul self, all within an eco-holistic framework. She also does spiritual direction. In her parish, she is the coordinator of the care of creation team and a member of the liturgical team, planning and facilitating prayer evenings. Currently, she is novice director for her community and lives in White Plains, New York.

These days, I have been reflecting a lot on my 35 years as a vowed member of the Congregation of Notre Dame of Montreal. When I first entered the novitiate, I learned that formation would be a lifelong and ongoing process of becoming. I discovered that formation was not only about the required six to nine years of formal training that would result in perpetual vows. Rather, formation would be ongoing and continuous.

This was a piece of wisdom that was shared with me at the onset, although, honestly, in the beginning, I wasn't sure how to welcome it because I wasn't sure what it all meant.

However, from the beginning of my formation, I quickly learned to embrace it. I had great admiration for a God of love and a willingness to know God better so that I could serve God in the most authentic way possible. Part of this process of becoming led me to engage more deeply in my own inner work so that I could be free and transparent with God, with myself, my sisters in community, my spiritual mentors, and the people in my ministry.

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Over the years, I have lived in a house of formation as a junior, a community sister, and now as a novice director in support of others in initial formation. It truly has felt like I have been "in formation" throughout my religious life!

However, the given aspects of "the life" have pointed to the realization that my ongoing formation has liberated my spirit, enabling me to participate in society, hopefully as a healthy beacon of hope and bearer of Christ to others. While the journey has not been easy and never ends until our last breath, religious life has offered me the space to foster a practice of deep becoming so I can grow to reflect God's love in the world.

From the beginning, I had this great desire to know God in a deep way, and the only way to do that was to support a discipline that allowed space for growth and deep listening.

I am not the person I was when I first made profession 35 years ago. I remember the complexities of emotions, attitudes, resistances and unfreedoms that surfaced, requiring me to be deliberate in my choices for the sake of greater autonomy. Engaging in personal work with a spiritual mentor and counselor was so necessary.

Notre Dame Sr. Maco Cassetta (center), with Sisters in formation, Christa Gesztesi and Libby Osgood (Courtesy of Maco Cassetta)

In addition, fostering healing through the expressive arts and music, attending workshops and courses, journaling, praying, cultivating the practice of contemplative and mindful meditation, and reading spiritual books on mysticism, the saints and spiritual masters — all contributed to my ongoing formation and growth. Rubbing shoulders with my sisters and brothers has helped me recognize where I needed to change and engage in personal transformation.

Over the years, the passage from Ezekiel has resonated in me, where my heart of stone continues to evolve into a heart of flesh. "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19).

Today, as a novice director, spiritual mentor and psychotherapist, I am happy to walk with women and men in discernment who are desirous of becoming freer and of connecting more deeply with God. In the process of walking with them, formation

continues in me. I am deeply grateful for ongoing formation, for growth and transformation, a visitation and liberating moment that truly humbles me.

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 USA, and served her congregation on the leadership team. Currently, she is an anti-racism trainer/consultant.

It was in a community college parking lot that I received a piece of wisdom that continues to sustain me to this very day.

A sister in my community was celebrating her 80th jubilee and I invited her to the local community college where some of her former first graders were in a production of "Man of La Mancha." She was clearly delighted and touched with every word, character, song and movement of the play. She was taken by total surprise when her students honored her at the final curtain call.

Once in the parking lot, she told me not to start the car and that she needed my total and undivided attention. She began with: "That play will be the story of your life."

She proceeded to explain that I was to choose a star that I would never cease to follow even though it would seem like an impossible dream. The star was to be an orientation/vision, be it mercy, compassion, humility, goodness, etc., that I would seek to both emulate and celebrate when I encountered that star in all the places and people I would meet in my life. The star would be a teacher.

In all of the years that have followed that parking lot conversation, and as a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, my chosen star has been goodness.

(Unsplash/Calwaen Liew)

I chose to embody goodness in attitude, word, behavior and glance, and, most importantly, to learn goodness and marvel at it in the most diverse people and places. They teach me goodness in their welcome, in the places they call home, in offices, supermarkets, gas stations, on street corners, restaurants, and in their manner of praying to the God they believe in and worship.

Life has felt, at times, like an impossible dream, especially when experiencing times of profound sorrow at the illnesses and deaths of those we love, along with the inability to right the overwhelming wrongs of violence and injustice toward those marginalized and made poor by economic systems. To remain steadfast to the quest, no matter how hopeless it feels, how far out of reach it appears, or how weary it feels, is a gift from the Holy One who infuses us daily with the graces to remain steadfast to the dream.

The quest must live on and we must not allow the dream to fade, paraphrasing the final lines of the famous song "The Impossible Dream": "And the world will be better

for this, that one man [and women] scorned and covered with scars, still strove with their last ounce of courage to reach their unreachable star."

Caroline Price from New Zealand is a member of the Good Shepherd Sisters in Melbourne, Australia. Before entering the community, she served with the Royal New Zealand Air Force for 12 years in administration and flight operations. Since making final vows in 1990, she has ministered in New Zealand and in Rome at the Good Shepherd Generalate. She established the congregation's International Secretariat for Justice and Peace, which worked closely with their International NGO Office at the United Nations, and has served as area community leader for the sisters in Victoria, Australia. Currently, she is a member of the province leadership team.

When I became a novice in 1983, a priest friend who had been part of my journey gifted me with a piece of poetry he had written for me. This poem has sustained me at various times throughout my religious life. My friend had a strong connection with the Good Shepherd Sisters and their charism, mission and spirit. He introduced me to the Good Shepherd Sisters in Wellington, New Zealand.

After I left my career in the Royal New Zealand Air Force, I worked for some time with the National Catholic Communications Office in Wellington, where he was the director of communications. This experience sparked a strong interest in writing and communications, inspiring me to pursue my bachelor's degree, graduating with a degree in policy studies and communications.

In this field, I found my strength and it is from where I could best respond to mission within the Good Shepherd community.

There were times in my early years with the Good Shepherd community when I doubted and felt I might not "fit in." My background experience and expertise were in secretarial and administration roles.

From left, Good Shepherd Sr. Caroline Price; Good Shepherd province leader Sr. Monica Walsh; Stella Avramopoulos, CEO of Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand; and Good Shepherd Srs. Anne Dalton and Noelene White at a 2023 event to celebrate the congregation's 160 years of foundation in Australia. (Courtesy of Caroline Price)

However, the poem gifted to me encouraged me to see and experience shepherding in a different way. It spoke of "being ready to believe, and believing, wanting to care and caring."

With my friend's encouragement, I continued on this path, eventually making life vows, with him serving as the eucharistic presider during the ceremony.

Since then, we have kept in touch throughout my religious life. He is now retired in Wellington and is still writing and producing beautiful books.

My experiences within religious life have varied. I've worked with homeless alcoholic men and women, accompanied women in prostitution with drug dependence,

worked as a drug and alcohol counselor, and visited the women's prison for more than 20 years with a team of volunteers to offer well-being support.

Twice, I found myself in Rome, working with our congregational leadership team in secretarial and administrative roles, as well as in justice and peace ministry at the international level. In recent years, I have been a community leader for our sisters, and am currently a member of our province leadership team.

Now in my 70s, and 40 years since I received the gift, the poem still speaks to me, inviting me into a deeper relationship and conversation with my Shepherd God. Throughout this time, the call to "look after" has been strong and dynamic.

Looking After ...

To Caroline, 6 March 1983

Waking with a smile, though you live in autumn world
Is looking after
Trusting, though the leaves have reached the ground,
Is looking after.
Seeing the pain, long before the tears,
hearing the cry, well before its birth,
feeling the despair behind the anger
and the fear behind the sneer;
being ready to believe, and believing,
wanting to care and caring,
loving to forgive, and forgiving to love,
is looking after.
Giving time for hurt to heal
and for what is growing to grow,
taking time for rest and laughter,
sharing time for oneness to become real
is looking after.
Coming to the Lord your God in Eucharist,
coming to God's peace with open heart;
coming to the hands that share the burden of your care
is looking after.
And looking after is good Shepherding —

Your dream,
Your call to be,
And now, your life.

Honora Remes has been a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul for 66 years. Born in New Prague, Minnesota, she was first attracted to the Daughters of Charity because of their vow of service to the poor. Her various ministries have included ongoing spiritual direction, annual retreats, vocation ministry, serving as pastor in several Michigan parishes in the Saginaw Diocese, serving as Daughters of Charity provincial, and offering spiritual awakening classes to homeless women in St. Patrick Center, St. Louis.

I had thought that this invitation to share the piece of wisdom that has sustained me through my vowed life in Christ would be easy. Instead, I have found myself befuddled — trying to bundle 66 years of the Spirit's guidance in my life as a Daughter of Charity into this short reflection.

Yes, Spirit is "the gift that keeps on giving," and, yes, we are all "better together" in this communion of abiding love. However, I found myself struggling to describe — let alone name — the core sustaining word of wisdom that is my heart's resting place.

(Helga Leija)

So, at times, I call it an edgy, trusted remembering — remembering how God's Holy Spirit has somehow managed to draw wisdom out of all my/our successes and failures. It is wisdom when I trust that I'm being led to contribute to a holy purpose beyond knowing. It is wisdom to believe that my personal purpose is mysteriously and inextricably interwoven within God's holy design of completion, even if that design is beyond my comprehension.

All this draws me, at last, to Luke's Resurrection story, wherein two angels still invite us all to that Gospel invitation: "Remember what he said to you while you were still in Galilee? That the Son of Man must ... be crucified and rise on the third day? *And they remembered his words*" (Luke 24:6-8).

Truth to tell, these days I don't remember all that well. Most days I'm double-checking my calendar to be sure I'm ready for what's coming down the pike. Yet every single day, I'm held secure by the abiding personal presence of wisdom.

This divine companion gently and insistently calls me, and all of us, to remember and trust one overriding fact of faith: Despite, through and especially beyond all my/our half-baked plans and expectations that have persisted throughout all the years and years, God's Holy Spirit is the communal "piece of wisdom," remembering each of us for the long, eternal haul.

Judith Sheridan is a Marist Missionary Sister from Massachusetts. She has worked in nursing or pastoral counseling in the United States, Jamaica, New Zealand, Australia, Bangladesh, and Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, and lived and worked cross-culturally with sisters from all over the world. In her congregation, she designed and administered its U.S. Global Justice and Peace Office, co-directed a residence for women victims of trafficking, and served as assistant provincial and provincial superior of the U.S. province.

"Embracing the journey" has always been an important piece of wisdom guiding my life. I often say that I have been a missionary since I was 16 months old, when our family made their first move. Several moves later, I began the first of nine schools out of 12 that I would attend.

Entering the Marist Missionary Sisters at 18 years old assured me that the rest of my life would mean embracing the journey with many people in many places in our world. The idea of "embracing" is the key. The challenge is to be willing to embrace

all that I encounter along the way.

Sunset at Marist Missionary Sisters cottage, Onset, Massachusetts (Judith Sheridan)

I spent time reading some of my old journals as preparation for this article. There are recurring themes: seeking the presence of God in this place, in this face; searching for hope in the midst of so much suffering in our world, with the "why" of suffering always a searing fire in my soul.

There is also the ever-present theme of God's incredible love shedding light on the darkness encroaching each stage. God constantly calling me to embrace the journey

of life, in all its manifestations.

If I had a GPS, I could see that the journey at this time of my life is nearing its destination. I tell people that I am working on my PHD (preparation for a happy death). You may smile, but the truth is that embracing the journey at this time is not about embracing, but about letting go.

It is a profound time of unknowing, with losses on all levels — physical, emotional, relational and spiritual. Those strengths previously offering one a sense of control are weakening. I have come to realize that the natural being of which we are made is now surrendering to the supernatural being within.

Yet, the same incredible love of God bids me "Be not afraid" (Isaiah 41:10). The God of my journey will never let me go. I embrace God's love for me and I embrace my innermost center rooted in the divine as I continue to journey's end.

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