

[News](#)

[Religious Life](#)



(Pixabay/wokandapix)



by The Life Panelists

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

July 27, 2026

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)



Religious life often leads us to friendships we never anticipated. Across cultures, generations and life experiences, these relationships can reveal new ways of seeing God, ourselves and one another. This month, our panelists share the unexpected friendships that have marked their journeys and the people who have left a lasting imprint on their hearts.



Sr. Agnes Rungsung, a member of the Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, hails from a remote village in Manipur, northeastern India, where Catholics are a minority. Despite facing humiliation from peers and teachers for her faith, these trials deepened her love for the Catholic Church and led her to seek its truth more fervently. Now holding a licentiate in Biblical theology, she teaches in formation houses and preaches retreats to laypeople, clergy and religious. An emerging writer and theologian, she is currently preparing for her doctoral studies abroad, continuing her mission to evangelize through intellect and faith.

Reflecting on the most unexpected friend I have made in religious life, I remember Sister Angel from the Ujjain Province. She remains unforgettable because she was unique among many. We studied together for our Bachelor of Theology at Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of our classes were conducted online, but our real learning often began after

the lectures ended. We would sit together, discuss the lessons, and explain difficult concepts to one another. Looking back, I realize that I learned as much from those conversations as I did from the classroom itself.

Yet our friendship extended far beyond academics. It was beautifully balanced with prayer, recreation, heartfelt conversations and moments of joyful laughter. We prayed together, shared our experiences, and reflected on the beauty, joys and challenges of religious life. We also dreamed about how we could contribute more faithfully to our congregation. Sister Angel was a professed sister while I was still a junior sister. However, she never related to me from a position of superiority. She became a true friend — someone before whom I could speak openly and honestly.

One of her most beautiful qualities was her commitment to prayer, especially for those who entrusted their intentions to her. She never treated a promise of prayer as a polite expression. For her, it was a sacred responsibility. One experience remains deeply engraved in my heart. It was Aug. 10, 2021, the day of our comprehensive examination. At around 3 o'clock in the morning, I heard a gentle knock at my door. I immediately guessed it was Sister Angel. She often came early to have a cup of coffee, so I expected the same that morning. When I opened the door, she was standing there. But instead of asking for coffee, she whispered, "Let us go for an hour of adoration." I responded instinctively, "We have our examination today. We can go after the exam."



Sr. Angel Anthony, left, and Sr. Agnes Rungsung reunite after four years on June 29, 2025, in Yarandahalli, Bangalore, India. (Courtesy of Agnes Rungsung)

Calmly, she replied, "Someone asked me to pray because they are undergoing an operation at 9 o'clock this morning." At that moment, I remembered that the same person had also asked me for prayers. I had not given the request the attention it deserved, but she had faithfully remembered the promise she had made. Her sense of responsibility before God moved me deeply. Without another word, I accompanied her to the chapel. Together we spent one hour before the eucharistic Lord entrusting that person to God's loving care. It became one of the most peaceful and grace-filled mornings of my life. Later that day, our examination went very well, but the greatest gift was not our success in the exam.

That morning, I encountered a true Sister of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament — a woman profoundly devoted to the eucharistic Lord. Through her actions, Sister Angel taught me what faithful devotion looks like. Her friendship

became an important part of my formation in fidelity, responsibility, humility and prayer. Indeed, "There is nothing so precious as a faithful friend, and no scale can measure his excellence" (Sirach 6:15). In God's providence, I found such a friend in the most unexpected way. Her faithful companionship has become one of the most precious gifts of my religious vocation.



Sr. Grace Akunna John-Emezi is a member of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, an international congregation. She grew up in a Catholic and Anglican house in Nigeria. She works as a hospital administrator. She is a healthcare leader in public health advocacy, particularly breast cancer awareness by encouraging early detection, educating communities and building referral networks. She is passionate about women's health and leadership development among religious women, empowering others through education and compassion.

One of the most unusual and unexpected friendships I have made as a religious was with an elderly woman named Mama Eliza, a widow from a rural community where I worked in our hospital years ago. When I first met her, I never imagined she would become one of the most important friends in my life.

She was in her late 70s. Mama wasn't educated and lived a very simple life. We were from two different worlds. She was a farmer. Looking at us, we didn't have much in common.

Our friendship began when she started coming to our hospital regularly for treatment for a chronic illness. During each visit, she would spend a few extra minutes talking with me. At first, our conversations focused on her health, but gradually we started talking about faith, family, suffering and hope. She spoke with remarkable wisdom and sincerity. Despite facing poverty, the loss of her husband and many hardships, she was at peace and grateful.

What made our friendship unusual was hard to explain. I was expected to be the one offering encouragement and support, yet I often found myself learning from her. Whenever I faced challenges at my workplace or felt discouraged, Mama would remind me that God works through small acts of love, hope and charity. Mama's words carried rich meaning. She taught me that true service is not measured by how much we accomplish but by the love with which we serve and reach out.

There was a time when I was overwhelmed with work, experiencing constant burnout, and was almost losing it. Mama Eliza arrived at the hospital carrying a small basket of vegetables from her farm. She insisted on giving them to me as a sign of appreciation (Mark 12:41-44). I was surprised; it showed great sacrifice from someone with very little, yet she could still share what she had. Her generosity and kindness deeply moved me.

Over the years, our friendship grew into a relationship of mutual respect and affection. She became the grandmother I never had. I became her confidant. Through her example, I learned valuable lessons about resilience, humility, gratitude and faith.

As we celebrate the International Day of Friendship (July 30), I want to honor the memory of Mama Eliza and the gift of her friendship. She taught me that friendship often appears in unexpected places and through unexpected people. Through her, I learned that the most meaningful friendships are not defined by age, education, class or background. Friendships are built on genuine care, shared humanity and the ability to bring out the best in one another. Mama's friendship remains one of the sweetest memories in my heart.

Advertisement



Sr. Kathleen Geaney is a member of the Missionary Sisters of St. Columban, an international congregation with missionary presence in

China, Pakistan, Myanmar, the Philippines, Korea, Ireland, Britain and the U.S. Geaney was missioned in the Philippines, England and Myanmar. Her ministry centered on interfaith dialogue and working with women from different faith communities. She was enriched by 18 years of presence in Myanmar and returned to Ireland in 2024. Having had sabbatical time she continues to have an attentive ear and open heart as she strives to respond to the next stage of her missionary journey.

My most unexpected friendship in religious life was both a personal and communal friendship. It was a friendship between our community of the Missionary Sisters of St. Columban and a community of Buddhist nuns. It began when our small community moved into Mandalay, Myanmar. Our hope was to be involved in interfaith dialogue — listening and learning from the other faith communities in the area and sharing our own lives of faith, hope and love. Our desire, in fact, was for friendship across divides.

The predominant faith in the area is Buddhism, so when we talked about our interest with a Catholic friend, she bundled us into an open-backed van and off we went to Sagaing — a town full of Buddhist monasteries, universities and pagodas. Our first stop was a monastery of Buddhist nuns. Again, our desire to listen, learn and share was expressed. Quickly, there were gestures of touching the heart, communicating to us that this was a desire they understood and shared.

Another climb into the back of the truck ensued, and off we went over rough terrain to visit their *sayadaw* (abbot) to ask if we could visit and sometimes stay for a while with the nuns. The request was granted, and so began a beautiful and mutually enriching friendship that continues to this day.

Quickly, we discovered how much we had in common. Our lives of communal living, prayer and service to others were very similar. As time went by, the Buddhist nuns would come and stay in our community, sharing our lives. Often, at evening prayer, we would pray the psalms and they would continue with their chanting. Then we would all sit in silent meditation, united in a place beyond words. We would have a similar experience when staying with them in their houses.



From left, Columban Sisters Cristeta De Leon, Theresa Kim and Kathleen Geaney pose with Buddhist nun friends at a Buddhist nuns monastery in Shwe Taung Oo, Sagaing, near Mandalay, Myanmar, in February 2024. (Courtesy of Anne Carbon)

We met together for various feasts and celebrations, and as time went on, our circle widened to include friends from other faiths: Muslims, Hindus and others. Solidarity with our neighbors in suffering brought us together in an ever-deeper friendship. In relatively peaceful times, we worked together to establish educational opportunities for children. Times of political upheaval and armed conflict, as well as a devastating earthquake, lead us to work together in responding to the needs all around us.

Our friendship was not all work. We had outings together, visiting famous Buddhist shrines and other places of interest in upper Myanmar. We had wonderful Christmas celebrations when we celebrated with the wider interfaith community.

I became particularly close to one of the Buddhist nuns who taught me meditation. The deepest part of our friendship was the time spent together in silence, breathing in and out. Now I am back in Ireland, but I know in my deepest self that the connection we had continues and is mutually enriching us on our different journeys.



From left, Srs. Carol Regan, Ann Karnen, Eugenia Mshana, Shallotte Kum, Paula Coelho, Veronique Metiendjo and Scolastica Mhea gather during the Holy Union Sisters' October 2025 Enrichment Program, celebrating faith, community and the bicentennial of the congregation's founding. (Courtesy of Mary Lou Simcoe)



Sr. Kum Shallotte Bi is a member of the Holy Union Sisters, an international religious congregation. She began her ministry as a teacher

of mathematics and religious studies in secondary school before pursuing a career in nursing, driven by a deep passion for healing and compassionate care. Over the years, she has gained experience in leadership and clinical practice across maternity, surgical, medical and emergency units. She currently serves as a nurse anesthetist and head of a health facility in Baba I, a rural, conflict-affected area of Cameroon. Her mission focuses on improving maternal and child health through community empowerment, advocacy and enhanced service delivery.

There was a time in my life when I questioned almost everything. I struggled to reconcile what I saw around me with the Gospel values we profess. I longed for authenticity, for something real, something lived.

Then she showed up! She is from a culture very different from mine, and I did not expect that she would become the answer to many of my deepest questions. Through her life, more than through her words, she revealed what I had been searching for. She is wise, intelligent and she teaches by example.

My friend is a Holy Union Sister, one of the most humane and grounded persons I have ever encountered. She listens with her whole heart. When she speaks, her words do not judge or condemn. Instead, they create space for truth to emerge. She treats fairness as a sacred responsibility. In humility, she acknowledges that she does not have all the answers, and in that openness, she allows God to guide her.

What strikes me most is the way she loves and cares as though she has never been hurt. Her gentleness does not weaken her. It reveals the strength that sustains her even in her most difficult moments. She lives by clear values and principles, and she remains faithful to them.

She also has a remarkable way of correcting others, without humiliating them. She can say no to a request, yet somehow others still feel respected, understood, and even affirmed. In her presence, growth is spontaneous, not forced.

Through our friendship, I have learned to be gentle in my words and more patient with myself and others. My friend has challenged me to give my best, even in small and hidden ways. In her, I see the living expression of the call to be human and holy. To me, she is not only a friend. She is also a sister, a guide and a living witness to the beauty of a life rooted in Christ.



Sr. Sherly Thomas, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Lyon, was born in Kerala, India. Deeply committed to the mission of justice, peace and care for creation, she has dedicated her life to empowering marginalized communities through education, livelihood initiatives and social awareness programs. Her ministry includes accompanying the vulnerable — migrants, scavengers (caste-based sanitation workers), LGBTQ individuals, and survivors of human trafficking — toward dignity and self-reliance. Rooted in the Gospel and inspired by the charism of her congregation, Thomas strives to build inclusive communities where love and compassion transform lives.

Religious life has introduced me to people from every walk of life — children, women, migrants, religious leaders, government officials, social workers and countless individuals whose lives have touched mine in profound ways. Yet, among all the friendships I have formed over the years, some of the most unexpected and unforgettable have been with differently abled children, members of the LGBTQ community, migrants, bonded laborers and fellow religious sisters united in mission.

When I entered religious life, I never imagined that people who are often pushed to the margins of society would become some of my closest friends and greatest teachers. I believed I was called to serve them, but God had something more to teach me. Through these friendships, I have encountered Christ in ways I never expected.

The differently abled children I have met have taught me the language of unconditional love. Their joyful smiles, trusting hearts, and delight in simple moments remind me that human worth is never measured by ability or achievement. Their acceptance of me has deepened my understanding of God's boundless love.



Sr. Sherly Thomas distributes dry ration kits during an outreach initiative for members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Bangalore, India. The effort offered practical support while creating a space of accompaniment, respect and recognition of human dignity. (Courtesy of Sherly Thomas)

My friendship with members of the LGBTQ community, especially transgender persons, has challenged many of my assumptions. As I listened to their stories of rejection, discrimination and loneliness, I discovered people of extraordinary courage, resilience and generosity. Through livelihood programs and shared experiences, our relationship grew beyond service into genuine friendship. One person once told me, "Sister, today I feel that I am also a human being." Those words continue to remind me that every person longs to be seen, respected and loved.

Accompanying migrants and bonded laborers has also transformed my life. Many have endured exploitation, displacement and hardship while striving to build a better future for their families. Yet, despite immense suffering, they continue to hope and persevere. Their resilience has inspired me to recognize not only their

struggles but also their remarkable strength and dignity.

Another precious gift of my vocation has been building friendships with religious sisters through networking. One of the networks closest to my heart is AMRAT Talitha Kum India, where women religious across the country join hands to combat human trafficking. Working together in prevention, protection, rehabilitation, advocacy and awareness has shown me the power of solidarity. These collaborations have become genuine friendships rooted in our shared commitment to defend the dignity of every human person and bring hope to those most vulnerable to exploitation.

These friendships have transformed me far more than I have transformed others. They have taught me to approach people with greater compassion, to listen more deeply and to accompany others with humility. They have shown me that authentic friendship grows from our shared humanity.

As a Sister of St. Joseph of Lyon, I am called to build unity and reconciliation. These unexpected friendships have made that calling real. They have expanded my heart, strengthened my faith and reminded me that the Gospel comes alive whenever we cross boundaries with love.

Looking back, I realize that my most unusual friends have become God's greatest gift to my vocation. Through their courage, joy, resilience and trust, I have discovered the compassionate face of Christ. They are no longer people on the margins of my ministry; they are companions who continue to teach me what it truly means to love without boundaries.

This story appears in the **The Life** feature series. [View the full series.](#)