News
Religious Life



(Unsplash/Liz Morgan)

by The Life Panelists

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We often remember the difficult moments in our lives, the decisions that changed our path and the challenges that tested our faith. But there are also experiences that we remember simply because they filled us with a deep sense of gratitude and wonder. These moments can become treasures in our memory and remind us of the goodness we have encountered along the way.

This month, we asked our panelists:

What has been the most "joyful ascent" moment in your life — that lifted, surprised and brought you closer to God?



Sr. Abhita D'Silva belongs to the congregation of Franciscan Missionaries of Christ the King from India. She trained professionally as a teacher and has worked as a school principal. She also specialized in counseling for people living with HIV/AIDS. D'Silva currently serves as secretary to the superior general and will complete her term in 2028. Her hobbies include reading, cooking, dancing, singing and caring for the sick with abundant mercy.

My struggle to be joyful in my religious life was a challenge. But then came a surprise visit from an angel, just as Mary was visited by an angel on the day of the Annunciation. I was caught off guard by the visitation of an angelic person who came

to guide me on my way.

Mary emptied herself in doing that which pleased God. Her unconditional "yes" made her the Mother of God and brought her the fulfillment of life. The way this angelic person guided and directed me was an experience of metanoia.

The feast of the Assumption of Mary into heaven teaches us simplicity in life, with joy in our hearts as we do God's will. Similarly, I felt called to empty myself and climb the hill of grace, reconciliation and healing from past wounds.



Church of the Assumption, Our Lady's Island, County Wexford, Ireland (Wikimedia Commons/Andreas F. Borchert)

The feast of the Assumption reminds me that if one wants to experience profound spiritual elevation in life, one needs to have a pure, unburdened heart. I was burdened by life's unsettled experiences and felt weighed down.

I had suppressed many unpleasant experiences from my childhood. After becoming a nun, I was not able to share them with anyone. Then I received an excellent opportunity to make my annual retreat under the guidance of a very young and devout priest. I had made many retreats before, but I had not been confident enough to share my most painful experiences with anyone.

During this retreat, I was able to share my struggles openly and finally empty myself. I did so with profound faith in God's transforming power. My joy knew no bounds. I felt unencumbered by the baggage of painful experiences.

This experience during my retreat brought me closer to God and lifted me up to continue my religious life with full gusto. I am aware that this transformed life does not mean an absence of burdens caused by various illnesses. But this profound experience invigorates me to move forward in life.

As I write these reflections, my heart sings Psalm 136: "What thanks, O Lord, can I render thee, for all the gifts you have showered on me? Each day I'll sing of your praise and glory. Alleluia! Alleluia!"



Sr. Christine Kresho is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, Pennsylvania, a congregation dedicated to loving and serving the dear neighbor rooted in prayer, community living and the Gospel. As a team member of the St. Joseph Spirituality Center, she hosts a weekly Zoom session titled "Spirit Companions." She is a retreat presenter and an author. In addition to five novels, her nonfiction books include *Second Childhood: Aging Into Divine Relationship*; *God Is Better than Santa Claus: A Book for Adults*; *Praying to Our Everywhere God*; and *A Way of the Cross:*

***In Communion With Creation*.**

My annual retreats have always felt like sacred vacation time with God — days set apart for rest, renewal and listening. More than 20 years ago, one retreat became something more. It planted a seed that God has continued to nurture into a ministry still alive today, one that has endured unexpected change and the upheaval of COVID-19.

The retreat was titled "Soul Sisters," led by Edwina Gateley. I returned to parish ministry with a full heart and a stirred spirit; I found myself speaking about it with anyone who would listen. One parishioner, who remains a dear friend, gently encouraged me to share that joy more widely.



(Unsplash/Filipp Romanovski)

That night, in the quiet before sleep, the Holy Spirit seemed to whisper an invitation: Offer a weekly gathering for women to reflect on the image of God. At the time, I had been the pastoral associate for a year at a parish in a senior community. I

welcomed an interested group to that first meeting, not knowing what God had already begun.

More than 20 years later, I remain grateful that some original participants are still part of the community, though the group has changed through health challenges, life circumstances and eternal journeys.

I hoped to create a sacred space where women could speak freely about the image of God that had shaped their spiritual growth, their questions, and their experiences with the church. I called the group Spirit Sisters. For five years, we prayed, sang, listened, questioned and reflected together.

Then, because my vision of church includes women and men equally united on the spiritual journey, I invited men as well, and we became Spirit Companions. Some husbands came to discover what the women had been talking about for five years. Although all the men liked what they heard, only a few became weekly attendees.

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Not everyone who attended came back. Not everyone was on the same wavelength. Not everyone was Catholic. But those who kept returning became a true community of believers — companions on the journey — growing together in their understanding of the God of unconditional love.

In 2020, COVID-19 and an unexpected loss of employment ended our weekly in-person sessions. For a time, the future was unclear. Yet I trusted that God was not finished with us. Within months, Spirit Companions was reborn on Zoom. (A joyous ascent!)

Now, as an online community, we have members from eight states and one participant from Portugal. Our Tuesday gatherings are the highlight of my week. What began as a seed planted on retreat has become a living reminder that when we listen, trust and make room for grace, God's plans can unfold in ways we could never have imagined.



Sr. Marian-Hagar Dadzie is a perpetually professed Sister of the Society of the Infant Jesus, an Indigenous women religious congregation in Ghana. She is a full-time media personnel who works with CAFDIL TV in the Catholic Archdiocese of Cape Coast as a television host, producer and public relations practitioner. She has worked in the media space for four years now. She is also the communications officer for her congregation. Currently, she is pursuing a master's in business management and corporate governance.

As I meditate on the moments of joyful ascent in my life as a religious woman, many experiences come to mind. Yet a particular experience stands out: my wholehearted fiat to God's call to consecrated life.

Such a step was not devoid of fear or questions but filled with a deep and unmistakable peace. In that surrender, I encountered a love that was greater than my own plans and dreams. I knew that Christ was inviting me to walk with him, and my positive response sparked the beginning of the greatest adventure of my life.

Over the years, I have discovered that the journey toward God is often made through small, hidden acts of love rather than events of pomp and pageantry. Sharing the pew with the grief-stricken, praying with and for a person who has lost hope, sharing a smile with a lonely child, or simply spending quiet moments before the Blessed Sacrament — these have become sacred encounters where God has gently lifted my heart.



At the St. Joseph Community of the Society of the Infant Jesus in Cape Coast, Ghana, a place where Sr. Marian-Hagar Dadzie loves to pause and meditate on the goodness of the Lord (Courtesy of Sr. Marian-Hagar Dadzie)

Time and again, I have been surprised by his faithfulness. Whenever I have felt weak or uncertain, he has provided the grace I needed for that very moment.

One of the greatest lessons I have learned is that true joy is born from trust. The closer I draw to Christ, the more I realize that he never asks us to give up something without offering something infinitely greater in return. Religious life has taught me that joy is not the absence of suffering but the presence of God in the midst of it. His love transforms every sacrifice into a gift and every challenge into an opportunity to grow in faith.

My joyful ascent continues every day. It is renewed each morning with lauds when I place my life once again into God's hands and ask him to use me as an instrument of his peace and love. I have come to believe that the greatest joy is not found in reaching a destination but in walking faithfully with Christ, trusting that every step brings me closer to his Sacred Heart.

For this journey, and for the countless ways God continues to surprise me with his mercy and love, I can only say with Mary: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."



Sr. Prisca Chuzu is a dedicated member of the Handmaids of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lusaka, a diocesan congregation. Growing up in a Catholic family, she actively served as a youth secretary at parish level. With a strong passion for healthcare, she began her ministry as an enrolled nurse and later advanced to become a registered midwife. Currently, she serves as the hospital administrator at Mpunde Mission Hospital in Kapiri Mposhi District, Central Province of Zambia. Under her leadership, the hospital received an award from the Churches Health Association of Zambia for outstanding performance in income-generating activities.

For some time, I have faithfully participated in the daily Eucharist and perpetual adoration livestreamed by Divine UK ministries on YouTube. Although I have never met the priests or members of the Divine UK family personally, I have always felt spiritually connected to them through those moments of prayer. Every day, we gather virtually before the Lord, united by our faith despite being separated by thousands of kilometers.

On my birthday, I received a heartfelt message from the Divine UK family, signed by Vincentian Fr. Joseph Edattu, the director of Divine UK, and Vincentian Fr. Paul Pallichamkudiyil, the assistant director. Their words deeply moved me. They described me as a cherished member of their prayer family and assured me that my presence is always felt during their daily eucharistic celebrations and perpetual adoration. They encouraged me to continue praying with them and reminded me that I hold a special place in their daily prayers.



(Unsplash/Markus Spiske)

The most touching part of the message was their birthday gift. They announced that during the livestreamed celebration they would offer a special prayer for me and read my name aloud before everyone participating in the service. They described this as a token of their gratitude and love. As I read those words, I was overwhelmed with emotion. Tears of gratitude filled my eyes because I realized that people I had never met considered me part of their spiritual family.

At that moment, I experienced something far greater than human kindness. I experienced God's personal love. Deep within my heart, I heard him reassuring me, "I see you. I know you. You are never forgotten." It was as though God had chosen this simple gesture to show me that every sincere prayer creates bonds that distance cannot separate.

As a religious sister and healthcare worker, I often spend my days caring for others, encouraging them in their struggles and reminding them of God's love. Like many people in ministry, there are moments when I have wondered whether my efforts are noticed or appreciated. Through that birthday message, God reminded me that his love often reaches us in the most unexpected ways.

This birthday was a spiritual milestone that renewed my hope, strengthened my faith and filled my heart with immense joy. I felt genuinely loved, valued and cared for, not only by the Divine UK family but by God himself.

This remains my most joyful ascent moment because it uplifted my spirit, surprised me beyond my expectations and drew me into a deeper awareness of God's loving presence. It reminded me that God never overlooks his children. He knows each of us by name, walks with us every day and often speaks through the kindness, prayers and encouragement of others.

Today, whenever I remember my birthday, my heart overflows with gratitude. It remains a beautiful testimony that God's love is real, personal and alive.



Sr. Suzanne Patterson has been a member of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Notre Dame, Indiana, for more than 60 years, spending eight of those years in community leadership. Growing up an Army brat, Patterson met people in a variety of cultures, providing her with experiences that enriched her religious life. Throughout her ministry, she has served as an educator and school administrator; has worked in pastoral ministry with women in Chimbote, Peru; and currently is accompanying individuals who are experiencing homelessness and living with mental health issues. Her current passion is supporting members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Moments of joyful ascent where I was brought closer to God have included belonging — in my family, in schools, neighborhoods, in community, in parishes. I have found

God in the people I have met.

I was the eldest in an Army family, and we moved often. With each transfer, we adjusted, feeling different, while trying to fit in and belong. I had another challenge: I always wanted to be a boy. I never felt as if I were a boy, I just always wanted to be one. When I was 7, my mom acknowledged my feelings, buying me boys' jeans and a Hopalong Cassidy holster. My grandmother stopped giving me dolls and called me Jack one summer. My heroes were Marlon Brando and James Dean.

It was years before I realized that I was gender fluid. I lived with a "behind the scenes" feeling of not belonging, of being on the other side of the playground, outside the circle. Perhaps it was not always true, but it was how I felt.

As a religious sister, our ministries kept me busy. I kept my feelings and thoughts about myself to myself, with the exception of sharing at my 12-step meetings. Maturing is a lifelong process. Some growth experiences are painful. Neither self-acceptance nor belonging come easily.



Linda Diltz, left, and Holy Cross Sr. Suzanne Patterson prepare the June Pride Month display of books in the St. Mary's Convent Library in Notre Dame, Ind. (Courtesy of Hugo Garza)

One special moment solidified my experience of belonging. I sensed God's amazing presence. It was the most unexpected moment of joy.

Four years ago, I attended a retreat for lesbian/queer religious sisters sponsored by New Ways Ministries. Issues of gender were presented and discussed. This first experience opened my eyes and heart.

The following year, walking down the hallway toward the retreat group, a sense of lightness suddenly filled my being. I felt young and happy. I had found my people and they had found me. These sisters expressed the same questions and fears that I had. They were finding the same joy with one another as I had begun to feel with them. We knew who we were and we could be ourselves.

The experience of belonging and becoming more myself began simply, yet it was the most significant moment in my life. Not only did I know myself and feel accepted by others, but most importantly, I felt loved and accepted by our Creator.

This feeling has grown in me as I joined Zoom sharing groups and made friends with other retreatants. It has empowered me to advocate for transgender persons in a small way. Frequently I wear The Phluid Project shirts supporting their rights, e.g., "Protect Trans Kids." Inevitably, someone remarks positively on the saying or shares a story of their own experience. This is my ministry.

It's all about belonging.

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