

Sister Marilyn's Vocation Story

It all began with a doll....a "sister doll" that I won at the Sisters of Mercy Fair. She was dressed exactly like the Sisters who taught me in school. I couldn't wait to get her home so I could investigate and discover how she was pinned together. I was especially interested to see if she had hair under that veil. My guess is that at the ripe old age of six, my introduction to school was also my introduction to real, live nuns. They amazed me and intrigued me! I recall thinking that their lives couldn't be much fun: teaching all day and praying all night - or so I assumed.

For some reason, there is another unrelated memory which I associate with that early chapter of my life. I was sitting on a blanket that my Mother had placed on the front lawn under the sugar pear tree. It was a familiar spot. The wind was softly blowing a long blade of grass to and fro beside the blanket and as I watched it, I wondered: "Is it alive? It moves....it must be! It must be alive - grass must be like me - alive!" Why that discovery made such a profound impression on me is a mystery to this day. But these two "events" - curiosity about nuns in general and the discovery of life in things around me were linked together. It seemed to me that one had to look deeper into what was evident in order to see REAL things.

Gradually, I grew interested in going to church - and not always with exalted motives. I remember my 9th Birthday and the gift of a lovely ruby rosary. I brought it to Benediction with me and spent the "holy" hour admiring another of my birthday gifts - a shiny birthstone ring which I prominently displayed as I fingered the new rosary.

By the time I was in the 8th grade, I had begun to attend daily Mass. The church was close by to our home and Mass was very early in the morning, allowing time for me to attend before heading off to school. I noticed that nearly all those attending were elderly and I recall thinking: "How come only 'old people' come to daily Mass? I'm going

to start coming while I'm young..." There was no deep theological reason for my newfound piety - just a firm, matter-of-fact decision that from then on, my days would begin with Mass at the "French church - St. Marie's".

But then came high school with all its excitement: new friends, basketball and football games, boys, proms, membership in important-sounding organizations like: "The Bio-Chemistry Club" and "Quill and Scroll". I wanted those four years to last forever. During Junior year, I attended a class retreat. I told the priest-director - a Jesuit - that I thought I might be called to religious life

but that I didn't want to think about it "right now". Father told me it "wasn't something to toy with" and that I needed to spend some quiet time talking it over with God. I did. And gradually - very gradually - like in between vacations at the beach and the thrill of attending Girls' State, I began to take a more serious interest in what I would do after graduation.

One day while at the library I came across Thomas Merton's book: "Seeds of Contemplation". Although most of it was far too deep for me, something about that word: "contemplation" fascinated me and I wanted to learn more about it. I asked

my Latin teacher - a Sister of Mercy - if she could help me. She pointed me in the direction of the monastery across the street from our high school and suggested that I might stop by there to speak with some of the Sisters of the Precious Blood. Right about this time, my cousin, four years my senior, entered the monastery as a postulant. In retrospect, I am firmly convinced that the Lord used my Latin teacher, Sister Mary Benigna, as His "ally" in drawing me to His service because she began sending me to the monastery "on errands".

It was all very mysterious.....this monastic business. When Sister would open the grate at the front door to



speak with me, I tried my best to see beyond into the dark background. Intriguing though it was, I wasn't at all sure I wanted to get involved. The fun of dances and dates was still a mighty strong "pull" in the opposite direction.

Looking back on it all, I guess I cannot claim to be among the many who recall a special invitation to religious life on the day of their First Holy Communion. As you can see, it was rather a conglomeration of events that propelled me toward monastic life. "Propelled" isn't appropriate, either. Some days the excitement of thinking about the drama of leaving everything behind and surrendering my life to God's service was thrilling. But then there were those days when a realistic look at the possibilities of a career as a journalist or better still as a reporter for U.S. News and World Report seemed so enticing that I couldn't bear to think of leaving "the world" forever.

Then, too, I hadn't bargained as a senior in high school, for running into the roadblock of parental objection. After all, my older brother had gone off to college to begin pursuing his dream and my two sisters had chosen nursing school as theirs. All my friends were making plans, too! However, my parents were adamant. I had two choices: either continue my education or go to work for at least a year. That was the bargain: "If you still want to enter the monastery after a year, you may go with our blessing...."

I suppose, in their view, the fact that there had been no obvious break with my routine of dates and dances led them to the conclusion that I was of two minds and truly not ready to make a life-time choice. But in the secrecy of my own inner world, I had become convinced of something that was not easy to speak about. During hours of adoration at our parish church, I had discovered a relationship with Someone very real. Prayer was no longer "saying prayers" but had become a conversation with Jesus. There was an element of stability in this newly discovered relationship which I could not explain. I began to realize that nothing here on earth lasted. That truth made a profound impression on me. Looking forward to events I loved and enjoyed always resulted in the inevitable: they came to an end!

My Dad was quite a philosopher. Being a newspaperman all his life, his interests were exceptionally varied and he was a great conversationalist. Often we took long walks together. More than once, I heard him quote the familiar: "All things are passing, Marilyn, and we along with them!" Those words began to take on special meaning for me. The thought that God might be calling me to religious life was still somewhat remote. How could I be certain? I knew only what my heart was telling me. But the greater source of strength was coming from hours

spent in the Presence of the Blessed sacrament on Sunday afternoons. The Presence of God had become Real.

I began to see that prayer is powerful. It could take me all over the world to do God's work. Prayer could help missionaries in China, nursing sisters in hospitals, teaching sisters in schools. Then one day I read something called "the Sitio" written by Catherine Aurelia Caouette, the foundress of the Sisters Adorers of the Precious Blood. Every line spoke to me and I decided that nothing on earth could be more important than becoming a Sister of the Precious Blood. Four years of college looked like an eternity and so I reasoned that one year of work would be a quicker route to my goal.

Accordingly, I went to work for the Telephone Company and enjoyed an enriching year of new relationships, several of which have lasted a lifetime. True to their promise, my parents agreed that I could enter the monastery at the end of that year. The day I left the company, the chief engineer presented me with a parting gift and said: "We couldn't lose you to a better fellow!" Much as I had enjoyed being part of the business world and earning a weekly check, my dream of entering the monastery was far more exciting.... that is, most of the time. The day I planned to shop for "oxford style nuns' shoes" was not a successful venture. Instead, I came home with a lovely Nile green crinoline petticoat that I simply could not resist. The "old" Marilyn was to die a hard death in order to give birth to the "new".

So many events crowded into those final months before my actual entrance into the Manchester Monastery. It is a tender, somewhat tangled tale and it will always be a sacred part of me. The extremes of emotions - the desire to give my entire self to God's service and the intermittent pulling back, the doubts, the fear and the nagging question: "Can I do this?" Only God's grace could have carried me through to that memorable day when the enclosure door closed quietly behind me. All I know is that I am glad I eventually gave up kicking against the goad and decided that God knew best. He called me to the most rewarding life I could ever have imagined. Discovering one's place in life is very much like finding a sky to fly in....the freedom and adventure of it all is beyond words to describe. When Jesus promised "the hundredfold" to those who follow Him, it was no idle promise He is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Happy and blessed are those who follow where He leads!

