

So you want to be a nun?

What to do when you feel called to the convent

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Maybe you're losing sleep over it. Or there's a nagging feeling in the back of your mind every time you watch "The Sound of Music." Or perhaps you simply feel called to live out your faith in a deeper way and are curious about what life is like for those women in habits and how you could fit in.

No matter what the reason, you're thinking about the religious life. What now? When faced with making a decision about one's vocation, the process can seem overwhelming and even a little scary.

Sister Margaret Michael Gillis is the national vocation director for the Daughters of St. Paul. She knows firsthand how difficult discernment can be.

"To come to that point where somebody admits or acknowledges that they're discerning, that takes courage," she said.

The only answer, she suggests, is to bind yourself to God and His will for your life.

"Sometimes we get overwhelmed trying to figure out where we're supposed to go and what we're supposed to do," she said. "I always think of something a sister told me many years ago — Jesus said He is the Way. If we cling to Him, He who is the Way, we're going to know exactly what we need to do and where we need to go."

Prayer is paramount

Although the discernment process is different for everyone, there are a few necessary steps, according to Father Brian G. Bashista, director of the diocesan Office of Vocations. The most valuable ingredient in a healthy discernment process is prayer, he said.

"Prayer is absolutely paramount," he said. "One will never discover a vocation in Christ if they're not talking to Him daily and frequenting the sacraments."

Sister Mary Emily Knapp, director of vocations for the Nashville Dominicans, suggested women in discernment participate in the sacraments, frequent Holy Hour and eucharistic adoration, and spend time reading the Gospel and praying the rosary. She also suggested working with a spiritual director and getting involved in the local Church, especially young adult communities.

"(Women in discernment) should be tapped into the enthusiasm and vitality of other young people seeking holiness," Sister Mary Emily said. "Be with other young people who are also striving for holiness so you can have support for your vocation. You can't do this alone."

Reaching out

After prayer, reach out to religious orders to get to know them and their ministries.

“I don’t think you’ll ever know this life unless you experience it for yourself,” said Sister Mary Emily. “Young women love hearing our stories — ‘How did you know you were being called?’ We want to share our stories freely with them because we love our life and we want to share that.”

One way to get to know religious orders is to participate in activities planned by the Office of Vocations. Yearly events include Fiat Days for high school students, a women’s vocational weekend retreat and a “Nun Run” — a day for women aged 17 and older to visit local convents.

When a woman is seriously discerning, office administrative assistant Celia Schmitt will invite her to a monthly women’s discernment group. Schmitt said between four and eight women attend the monthly meetings. In the past five years, 18 women have entered religious orders through the group. This fall alone, four women will enter orders.

Many religious orders hold retreats for women in discernment. The Daughters of St. Paul hold weekend retreats as well as a monthly discernment mini-course at their center in Alexandria. The Nashville Dominicans hold four retreats a year — two entirely focused on vocations.

When visiting religious orders, it’s important to keep things in perspective, said Sister Margaret Michael. Finding an order should be different than choosing a college or a job, she said.

“There can be a little bit of a risk there because you need to remember, it’s not about ‘me making a decision.’ It’s really about God’s will,” she said.

It’s also important to remember the discernment process is not one-sided.

“While (women) are looking at a community to see if it’s a good fit, the religious community is looking at the young women to see if they can detect traces of the charism in her,” Sister Margaret Michael said. “It’s really a mutual looking and it should be done both respectfully and in a mature way.”

“As we speak with these young women, we’re discerning with them and with the Church, helping them to know how God is calling them,” said Sister Mary Emily. “We say that God has a specific plan for each one of their lives and we’re helping them to discover that — how they can best become the young woman God is calling them to be.”

Be not afraid

Lastly, after spending time in prayer and learning about various orders, a woman in discernment needs to place her complete trust in God.

“Trust that God speaks through your feelings and experiences,” said Sister Vicki Ix, vocations director for the Benedictine Sisters of Virginia. “Trust that God wants to bless your life. And, when clarity comes, don’t be afraid to embrace the gift.”

As difficult as it may seem, women need to prepare themselves to surrender their plans and aspirations and really give their lives over to God.

“Be ready, if He invites you, to give everything to the religious life,” Sister Mary Emily said. “Because a vocation is kind of beyond us, it’s a supernatural calling. It’s not of us, it’s of God.”

“Most religious sisters would have never in a million years imagined themselves in this life, but as we disposed ourselves to Him, He revealed the invitation to us,” she said. “It’s nothing we could have created. It’s a gift He has given to us and we responded.”

Taking the leap

One woman preparing to enter a religious order next month is Sarah Richardson. For the past five years, Richardson has worked as an administrative assistant for the diocesan Office of Youth Ministry. This fall, she will join the Visitation Sisters of Georgetown as a pre-postulant.

For Richardson, the decision has been a long time coming. She has been actively discerning since college. After becoming involved with the women’s vocation group, she visited the Georgetown monastery and felt instantly at home. She began learning about the community and joining them for prayers.

“I went on a 10-day retreat in February in Georgetown and it was just like falling in love,” she said. “It felt like something just resonated that hadn’t before or with other communities. I felt like I belonged there.”

In August, Richardson will move into the monastery. She will spend her first few months working at Georgetown Visitation School to pay off some of her debts. From there, she will be considered for the next step — six to 12 months as a postulant. If she discerns God is calling her to the order, she will spend two years as a novice and another three years before taking her final vows.

She was drawn to the Visitation Sisters because of their charism of gentleness and humility. Richardson said she’s humbled by the ways the sisters put each other before themselves. It’s a behavior she hopes to exhibit herself one day.

“I’m looking forward to learning more about what it means to live in a community in relation to others and the sacrificial love that community draws forth from us,” she said. “My hope is that He will give me the strength to persevere all the way to final vows, but right now He’s just asking me to try to step out in faith and give it everything I am.”

Rebecca LaFever, a project manager for the Office of Informational Services at the Chancery for the past four years, left her post to enter the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist this summer.

She first met religious sisters after coming to work at the Chancery and befriending Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist Clare Hunter, director of the diocesan Respect Life office. As she was going through the discernment process, LaFever took part in the women's discernment group, spent time with the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist once a month and met with a spiritual director.

After attending an "amazing" weekend retreat at the Franciscan Sister's motherhouse in Meridan, Conn., LaFever decided to enter the order.

One of the things that drew her to the Franciscans is their professional focus — the sisters work in various fields, always with the goal of affirming the dignity of the human person.

She will enter the order in August as a pre-postulant. If she and the order mutually decide she is a good fit, the total amount of time before she can take final vows will be between six and nine years.

Like Richardson, LaFever is looking forward to living in a community of faith.

"The motherhouse is really where the source of the community is, where all the sisters go through — where formation for the community happens and where you're most connected in the prayer life, the work schedule, chores shared very intentionally on Saturday mornings, eating together," she said. "I'm looking forward to being embraced by and surrounded by the heart of the community."

Responding to a call

No matter what stage of the process, discernment should be thought of as responding to a call. Instead of focusing on what one would be giving up — marriage and motherhood, for example — a woman should focus on what she could gain — a deeper and more intimate relationship with God.

"Discernment is less complicated than it sounds," said Sister Vicki. "It is choosing between two or more goods in an effort to align your life with God's will. Specific to vocations, it can be a bit more complex, but God's grace is always sufficient to the task before us."

"God wants us to be happy and the Lord who made us and made our hearts knows what can bring us to the greatest happiness," said Sister Margaret Michael. "Really living and discovering our vocation should bring us to our greatest joy, so I would encourage women to really look and see what His will for them is. Whether it's marriage, single life or religious life, God has our greatest happiness at heart, so we don't have to be afraid."