

Sisters



An Inside Look

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Contents

<i>Series Foreword</i>	9
<i>Introduction</i>	11
<i>Chapter 1</i>	
How Do I Know Whether I Am Called to Be a Sister?	13
• Who Can Be a Sister?	
• Obstacles to Answering the Call to Religious Life	
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
How Do I Become a Sister?	23
• Stages of Religious Formation	
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
The Vow of Obedience: The Promise to Listen	30
• Understanding the Vow of Obedience	
<i>Chapter 4</i>	
The Vow of Poverty: The Promise of Simplicity	38
• Components of the Vow of Poverty	
<i>Chapter 5</i>	
The Vow of Chastity: The Promise to Love	48
• Personal Skills	
<i>Chapter 6</i>	
Behind Convent Doors: What Living in a Convent Is Like	56
<i>Chapter 7</i>	
What Do Sisters Do?	63
• Types of Ministry and Advocacy	
• Aspects of Ministry	
<i>Chapter 8</i>	
Everything You Want to Know About Sisters but Have No One to Ask.	72
<i>For Further Reading</i>	80



Series Foreword

An old Hasidic legend about the mysterious nature of life says that God whispers into your newly created soul all the secrets of your existence, all the divine love for you, and your unique purpose in life. Then, just as God infuses your soul into your body, an assisting angel presses your mouth shut and instructs your soul to forget its preternatural life.

You are now spending your time on earth seeking to know once again the God who created you, loves you, and assigns you a singular purpose. Raise your forefinger to feel the crease mark the angel left above your lips, and ask yourself in wonder: “Who am I? How am I uniquely called to live in the world?”

The authors of the five titles in this Vocations series tell how they approached these same questions as they searched for meaning and purpose in their Christian vocation, whether as a brother, a married couple, a priest, a single person, or a sister.

Christians believe that God creates a dream for each person. What is your dream in life? This is how Pope John Paul II, echoing Jeremiah 1:5, speaks of the Creator’s dream and the divine origin of your vocation:

All human beings, from their mothers’ womb, belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos

and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow whose days are numbered and whose vocation is even now written in the “book of life.” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 61)

In spite of believing that God does have your specific vocation in mind, you probably share the common human experience—the tension and the mystery—of finding out who you are and how God is personally calling you to live in this world. Although you can quickly recognize the uniqueness of your thumbprint, you will spend a lifetime deciphering the full meaning of your originality.

There is no shortage of psychological questionnaires for identifying your personality type, career path, learning style, and even a compatible mate. Although these methods can be helpful in your journey to self-discovery, they do little to illuminate the mystery in your quest. What is the best approach to knowing your vocation in life? Follow the pathway as it unfolds before you and live with the questions that arise along the way.

The stories in this Vocations series tell about life on the path of discernment and choice; they remind you that you are not alone. God is your most present and patient companion. In the “travelogues” of these authors, you will find reassurance that even when you relegate the Divine Guide to keeping ten paces behind you, or when you abandon the path entirely for a time, you cannot undo God’s faithfulness to you. Each vocation story uniquely testifies to the truth that God is always at work revealing your life’s purpose to you.

In these stories you will also find that other traveling companions—family, friends, and classmates—contribute to your discovery of a place in the world and call forth the person you are becoming. Their companionship along the way not only manifests God’s abiding presence but also reminds you to respect others for their gifts, which highlight and mirror your own.

Although each path in the Vocations series is as unique as the person who tells his or her story, these accounts remind you to be patient with the mystery of your own life, to have confidence in God’s direction, and to listen to the people and events you encounter as you journey to discover your unique role in God’s plan. By following your path, you too will come to see the person of tomorrow who lives in you today.

Clare vanBrandwijk



Introduction

“What is it like to be a sister?” This question has been asked of me and other sisters in various ways and by people in all walks of life. This book is my answer.

When I was a high school religion teacher, my most animated classes were those spent discussing religious life. My students, for the most part, had already experienced eleven years in Catholic schools, yet they knew little or nothing about the lifestyle of sisters. In my conversations with adults and in parish adult education programs, I found the same keen curiosity and lack of information. Conversations with people of other faith traditions were just as inquisitive and stimulating. When I researched books on Catholic sisters, I discovered that most are written for the professional reader. These experiences planted the seeds for this book.

For most adult Catholics, knowledge about sisters ended in the sixties, when religious life began to change radically. The fixed religious “habit” of sisters yielded to “normal” clothes; their ministries expanded beyond the traditional role of teacher, and they enjoyed more personal freedom. What was once clearly understood about the life and the place of a sister became less apparent in the years that followed.

Information for young people who never experienced the “traditional” sister comes largely from two sources—their parents (or grandparents) and Hollywood. Whoopi Goldberg cavorting in full habit in *Sister Act*, Sister Stephanie as assistant sleuth in the *Father Dowling Mysteries*, and the singing and dancing sisters in *Nunsense* are the mistaken images of sisters today. Adults, too, share this erroneous view. Fiction and reality have become so fused that the layperson has difficulty knowing where one ends and the other begins.

This book is neither a scholarly explanation of religious life nor a guide to a particular religious congregation of women. It is a popular presentation for Catholics and those from other faith traditions who want to know more about this lifestyle. The book offers an inside look but also an overview, a “bird’s-eye view,” of religious life. Although it is my story, woven throughout are the voices of other women who have chosen this life but who would have different experiences about it to share.

My own background gives me a unique perspective on this lifestyle. Because I was married and did not enter religious life until the age of thirty-three, I have experienced life in three vocations: single, married, and religious. I can relate to the curiosity, questions, and confusion about sisters; once they were mine.

One day the disciples of John the Baptist had been following Jesus. They asked Jesus, “Where are you staying?” Jesus responded, “Come and see” (John 1:38–39). Like Jesus, I invite the reader to come, “open the convent door,” and see what a sister’s life is all about.



How Do I Know Whether I Am Called to Be a Sister?

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

(“The Road Not Taken,” by Robert Frost)

On which “road” have you been called to travel? God calls everyone to one of four vocations: married, ordained (deacons and priests), religious (sisters, nuns, brothers, and monks), or single. This vocational call is in harmony with and fits your unique personality and gifts. It is the most effective lifestyle through which you can serve others, achieve personal holiness, and find happiness. God desires your happiness. Many people find this happiness in married life, yet God invites some men and women to religious life, priesthood, or single life. The Creator knows that these lifestyles will bring happiness and fulfillment; however, some people avoid their call to a particular vocation because of fear or ignorance. My own journey to religious life illustrates this possibility.

*God calls everyone
to one of four vocations.*

I was born in 1950 into a Catholic family, went to public schools, and attended what were then known as CCD classes (sponsored by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine). In these weekly classes, I received instruction in the Catholic faith. By the time I reached high school, my formal religious instruction was over, and my practice of the faith consisted of Mass on Sunday, the sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession), a rather childish understanding of God, and a simplistic prayer life.

In my senior year of high school, I met the man I would marry. He was three years older, had a management position in his company, and was quickly advancing in the corporate world. I was drawn to his intelligence, humor, and drive for success. We married less than a year after

meeting. My parents opposed this marriage but eventually relented when we informed them that we would elope if they continued to disapprove. We married in the Catholic church after my graduation from high school. I was eighteen; he was twenty-one. This was *not* my vocational call; in retrospect I know that it was an infatuation. But it was the “call” I wanted to hear, and so I decided that I had “heard it.”

The marriage lasted less than two years, and we divorced. I was hurt, depressed, and very angry with God. Why had God not taken care of us? Why did God not make this marriage work? I pointed the finger at God—after all, is God not in the business of answering prayers? For me God was the proverbial genie in a bottle: rub the magic lantern, say the right words, and out comes the genie god to do my bidding.

I was about to embark on my first lesson in adult faith. God’s failure to “save” my marriage was the kickoff. With a childish desire for revenge, I was determined to show the Divine One *my* wrath! I stopped going to Mass, quit praying, and shunned the sacrament of Reconciliation. In my mind God was the one who needed to come to *me* and seek forgiveness for failing to appear and to rescue me. This mindset prevailed for the next seven years of my life.

What I had failed to see or even to consider is that married life is not the vocation God had in mind for me. Marriage is not the lifestyle that fits my gifts and personality. It would not fulfill me as a person or enable me to use my talents in the service of others. God is for me; marriage is not.

God did not abandon me; God respected my free will. God is not a genie. Just because I had made a wrong decision, God did not jump out of the magic lantern and change who I am or what my abilities are.

Here is a metaphor to illustrate the point. You shop for a pair of shoes and find a pair you really like, but your size is not available. Pushing good sense aside, you buy them anyway. Well, you have the shoes, but the walking is tough going. Because you can’t change your foot size, you find ways to make the shoes fit—with insoles or stretching. However, the shoes will never fit right or comfortably, no matter how hard you try.

It is the same with your vocation. When you find the one that “fits,” walking through life becomes easier. Not that you won’t be walking into

some difficult or challenging places, but your feet won't hurt on the journey. When you are living out the vocation that fits you best and is God's call to you, an inner peace and strength accompany you, no matter where life leads.

*What are some indications
that you may have a
vocation to religious life?*

What are some indications that you may have a vocation to religious life? The answers to the following questions are possible indicators:

- Do you have a regular prayer life? Are you growing in your relationship with God?
- Are you an active Catholic who attends Mass? Are you involved in some form of parish activity, such as singing in the choir, reading at Mass, teaching in the religious education program, participating in a youth group or other organization?
- Do you have healthy friendships with men and women alike?
- Are you someone who reaches out to others through volunteer work or simple acts of kindness, such as visiting an elderly neighbor or someone ill in the hospital?
- Do you have an increasing sense that something is lacking in your life? Are you looking for more meaning and purpose?
- Do you experience a deepening awareness of God and a growing hunger to draw closer to God, to the church, and to others?

Answering yes to all or some of these questions does not necessarily mean that you should be a sister, but it does indicate your potential for this lifestyle.

As for myself, I was twenty-seven by the time I could hear God's invitation to religious life. Jesus said, "The truth will make you free" (John

8:32). Up until this time, I had been unwilling to face my own truth. I was still blaming God for my failed marriage. Not until I honestly looked at my life and willingly took ownership both of my decision to marry and of the choices I made in my marriage could God bring me to healing and wholeness. Only then did my relationship with God begin to grow into one of love. God was no longer my enemy.

Soon I started to consider religious life. After getting over the initial shock of such a consideration, I made inquiries and eventually went on weekend retreats to explore this vocation. I also pursued an annulment of my marriage, which was granted. (The church, after a formal inquiry into a marriage, can declare the marriage null and void, based on events or conditions present before the marriage; a civil divorce must already have been obtained.) Over a period of time, I became certain that the vocation of sister was my calling, and at the age of thirty-three, I entered the religious congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Philadelphia.

Who Can Be a Sister?

I will later explore what I call obstacles to pursuing religious life, but if there are no obstacles, the following general qualifications apply to most religious congregations, in one form or another.

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Age

A woman between the ages of twenty and fifty is eligible to begin the initial stage of inquiry into religious life. Women today generally enter this process between their mid-twenties and early thirties. They have a career, a college degree, and established friendships, but they feel that

something is missing in their lives. For such women only religious life will bring fulfillment. As Saint Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee” (*Confessions*, book 1, chapter 1).

I was in my early thirties when I began my religious formation, the academic and spiritual program that leads to lifelong promises of poverty, chastity, and obedience. I don’t regret entering at that age. Although I am grateful for all my life experiences up to that point, my life has never been as happy, as purposeful, and as graced as it has been since I became a sister.

Life Experience

Religious congregations today prefer women candidates who have had some college education, experience in the workplace, friendships, and dating relationships. Religious life is no longer what it was twenty or more years ago, when women entered the convent at the age of seventeen or eighteen. Early entry is no longer encouraged. An individual needs to have developed a sense of self and an ability to live a common life with other women in a committed relationship to God and the religious order. A woman cannot say yes to this lifestyle if she is not clear about what she is also saying no to.

Older women have had varied life experiences. Although it is not common, some—like myself—have been married and have obtained the annulment necessary before joining the religious community. Some women have borne children before entering religious life. In these cases the children must be grown, and the woman needs to be free of any marital commitment. A woman who has been sexually active can enter religious life; however, the vow of chastity does mean a life of abstinence from that point on.

The truth of the matter is—surprise!—we sisters are human! We come from varied backgrounds and life experiences. We are not born with a veil on our head and baptized in a black baby habit. We are women who at some point in our life realized that God might be calling us to religious life, and we explored this possibility. The more we searched, the greater the conviction became that this is the life we desire. We say our yes freely and joyfully.

*We say our yes
freely and joyfully.*

Obstacles to Answering the Call to Religious Life

Among the major obstacles to responding to a religious vocation are ignorance and misconceptions, fear, lack of support from family and friends, and previous life choices.

Ignorance and Misconceptions

Many people have little knowledge of what the life of a sister today is really like. Their information tends to be a mixture of myth, memories of sisters long ago, and Hollywood’s version. With such a lack of information, they find it difficult to assess this lifestyle choice. Questions surface, such as: “You can’t go home and see your family, can you?” “Are you told all the time what to do?” “Can you wear a bathing suit?” “Is your life boring?” All these questions attest to a lack of information and can certainly be obstacles to hearing a call to religious life. The answers to these questions, for most religious communities, are: “Yes, we can.” “No, we’re not.” “Yes.” “Definitely not!”

Fear

Fear of commitment is common in today’s society. Many people fear the unknown and hesitate to take a risk, especially if the decision involves an eventual life-altering change. Although such fear is understandable, not addressing it is unhealthy.

I can remember my own fear when I first began to think about religious life. My concerns centered on leaving my job, selling my car, moving to another state—all valid considerations. But when a woman begins talking to vocation directors and visiting different congregations, she is still a long way from taking action. In my own fear and ignorance, my mind was jumping from a simple questioning phase to a committed life

as a sister. I was not living in the present; rather, I was projecting myself into the future and imagining all sorts of serious decisions. I was overwhelmed, but over a period of time I realized that the process of becoming a sister is a gradual one. The journey is one of stages paced to the needs and readiness of the individual.

Exploring the possibility of religious life does not mean becoming a sister, any more than the mere thought of having children makes someone a parent. Looking into the possibility of a religious vocation calmly and intelligently is nothing to be afraid of. Meeting with a vocation director, asking questions, and making a weekend retreat on vocations are all smart forms of inquiry. No sister will be lying in wait, ready to hustle you off to the convent!

*The love of God
will never lead you
down the wrong road.*

The worst action you can take is no action. The love of God will never lead you down the wrong road. As Jesus said, “Do not fear, only believe” (Mark 5:36). The wise Chinese proverb, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” might also be helpful to remember.

Lack of Support from Family and Friends

One vocation director said to me, “I’ve yet to meet a young woman whose parents are not very upset by their daughter’s attraction to religious life.” Why is this so? Why do family and friends often react in horror when a woman considers this lifestyle as a possibility? One possible answer is the lack of accurate information, as if a person were to think that today’s teachers, doctors, nurses, and scientists study and practice exactly as they did fifty years ago. Although these careers retain their

basic elements, they look and function differently than they did five decades ago. The same is true with religious life: the vows have not changed, but other aspects of the lifestyle have evolved. Yet, religious life is the one vocation that people seem to “fossilize” in the past.

Another reason for the lack of support is that popular culture frequently sees religious life as a “waste” of a person’s life. Marrying, having children, and living as a “twenty-first century single” are viewed as the only lifestyles that can bring real happiness. This view could not be further from the truth. Ask the thousands of sisters who live extremely happy lives and find fulfillment in their lifestyle. People who oppose religious life for a friend or family member need to answer two questions. First, are their fears and worries based on factual knowledge of this vocation? Second, whose happiness is really at stake here?

I recently talked with a woman who had been considering religious life and had spoken with her parents about her desire. They were adamantly opposed and even forbade her to discuss the topic. A few months passed, and one day the woman invited a sister friend to the house. When the mother saw the sister, she turned to her daughter and slapped her in the face. She had assumed the sister was there to discuss the possibility of religious life.

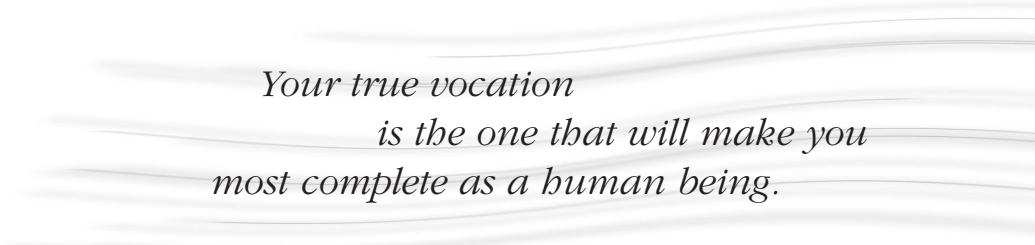
Yes, this is an extreme reaction, but women encounter active resistance in many forms—not as violent as a slap in the face but just as real and hurtful. These negative reactions create grave problems for women who feel attracted to the religious lifestyle. Parents and friends need to examine seriously and honestly their own attitudes toward this vocation. Lack of vocational support is a difficult obstacle for women to overcome, and sometimes they can’t.

Previous Life Choices

One choice in life can preclude making others. My marriage is an example; I had chosen marriage for the wrong reasons. By the time I was asking myself the right questions, I was afraid to hear the answers. I had traveled so far down the path that it was harder and harder for me to turn back. In other cases a marriage has brought children into the world,

and the parents have the responsibility for their care. A drug or alcohol addiction would be another hindrance to answering the call to religious life.

In all your life choices, is God still with you? Yes. Does God continue to grace and help you in your lifestyle? Yes. God's love and acceptance of you are unconditional, but God also respects your free will.



*Your true vocation
is the one that will make you
most complete as a human being.*

God, who cares about your happiness and well-being, chooses your vocation for *you*, not for God. Your true vocation is the one that will make you most complete as a human being. My hope is that you have not taken any irreversible detour. As Robert Frost wrote, "Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back."