

There is something very beautiful about a young woman who, prompted by love, surrenders herself entirely to God and chooses the more perfect way: the life of a religious. You can easily imagine her standing there at the airport. Friends and family hold her for one last hug. She promises she'll write them often. She squeezes them with all her might, fully believing this distance she is willingly putting between them will be for the rest of her life. At this moment, she likely has no doubt this is God's will. She might say to them, "We'll see what God wills," but more than probably the last thought from her mind is: you don't have a vocation; and even if there is such a doubt, it is still that: a doubt.

The thing is, not everybody is meant to be a religious; sometimes God has other plans and that same woman, so desirous to give everything up, so excited and happy to take on the title "Bride of Christ," may come to realize through her own discernment or through the discernment of her superiors that she is not meant to be a religious after all. So she finds herself once more at the airport, but the atmosphere is entirely different. There is no sense of pride; more than likely there is shame, a sense of failure.

Her family is excited for her to come home, maybe they saw this from the get-go; maybe they perceived long ago she didn't really have a vocation and are elated she has now come to this realization herself. All the more reason for her to feel the heaviness of broken pride weighing on her shoulders, these shoulders that were so used to being donned with a habit that no longer graces her frame. She reaches for the rosary that used to hang from her belt to console herself, to pray, but it's no longer there. When she sits, she reaches to pull her scapular out from behind her, but there is just an ordinary skirt that feels now very short. Trembling fingers pull on the ends, trying to pull it down further. She is used to wearing the same thing every day; she isn't used to an ounce of skin being shown, isn't used to the light feeling of single layers, isn't used to a head of short hair no longer covered.

She rises, waits in line, goes to the counter to get her boarding ticket. "Praised be Jesus Christ!" she blurts out. The woman gives her a quizzical stare. There's no longer a habit and veil to excuse her. This "hello" she has become so used to can now no longer be used. Yet another thing she needs to let go, another pain to her heavy heart. She gets through security, manages to catch her plane. There, on the flight, she's asked by a young man what her name is. "Sister Mary..." She stops herself. She realizes what had been her name for years, what she had become accustomed to calling herself even in her head is no longer her name at all. She feels like a part of her identity is gone.

Her childhood bed she has returned to is too soft now. She tosses and turns and then feels a spring. The rays of the sun come and dance across her white walls and over her face. She hasn't slept at all. Her body feels heavy and sore. Her mother knocks on her door and shouts a "good morning!" She doesn't respond. She still feels like it ought to be Grand

Silence. The floor boards creak under her weight. She no longer has a scapular to kiss when getting dressed, no longer Office to say before her morning coffee. Nobody is there to tell her what to do. She hated it at times in the convent, hated what seemed like lack of freedom, but this “freedom” she has now feels like an even greater burden. How is she to be sure she is doing God’s will?

Friends come by later in the day and drop off things she gave away to them before she left. But these same friends that come by are not entirely the same. She had expected them to be the same, had expected that the world and the people she would come back to would be exactly as they were when she left, as if time would have stayed frozen for as long as she was in the convent. She was wrong. The job she had left was no longer available. Many of her close friends were either married or at least in serious relationships; some had lost their faith. She could no longer relate to her friends like she used to. The topics they discussed left her confused. She hadn’t been following politics or the latest movies in years. They had had experiences without her and she felt suddenly very disconnected from these people she once felt such a tight-niche with; it had been as if they were sisters. Now they seemed like strangers.

And they were not the only ones to have changed. She had changed too. Her personality, once so bubbly, was now reserved and careful. She gave the appearance of being phlegmatic simply because she was so used to always remaining calm when crosses hit. You couldn’t as readily throw a tantrum in the convent as you could in the world. She had gotten used to holding her tongue, speaking only at set hours or for sake of necessity. They hint at how she’s changed, how she seems so calm and how they can’t understand it. She feels misunderstood.

She expects to find comfort at least before the Tabernacle, but even there she feels anxiety. Doubts flood her mind. The devil tempts her to discouragement. *Look at all the time you’ve wasted, pursuing a vocation you never even had*, he says. “It wasn’t a waste,” she tells herself. But he persists, *if you hadn’t left for the convent, you probably would be in a relationship like your friends. What did you gain? Are you really that different, that much more of a saint?* And she begins to feel she hasn’t grown at all; in fact, maybe she has gone backwards. She felt much holier at the airport the first time, fully intent on giving her life wholly to God, than she does now, sitting before the Tabernacle, feeling a deep sense of worthlessness. Of course, sanctity is not measured by how holy we feel, she knows that, but still the tempting thoughts continue.

This woman was me. This woman is many women who have left the convent. I want to address some of these hardships: the feeling of shame, confusion, and disconnect a woman or man may feel after leaving a life so different from that of a life in the world. Most people

who leave either the convent or seminary are subjected to at least some of these crosses and I assure you, with God's help, they can be overcome.

The pursuit of a vocation is never a waste when done with the right motives. Maybe you were mistaken, maybe you should have listened to that priest on retreat who told you that you didn't have a vocation, but, out of love for God, you did what you thought He was asking of you. How can an act of love like that be a waste? It isn't. Those years you spent giving yourself to God likely prepared you for the real calling He had in mind for you. Look at Saint Thérèse's parents; they both wanted to be religious. Zélie Martin found herself in tears on her wedding day because she envied her sister behind the grille who she had come to visit, but in a letter to Pauline she made clear that Louis did not find his wedding day spoiled because of her tears, but, on the contrary understood and consoled her because he had similar inclinations (Piat, *The Story of a Family: The Home of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, p. 45). But it was not God's will for either of them to be religious. It was His will that they give birth to religious, that they foster vocations in their children. Perhaps, that is why He allowed you to "waste" so much of your time in the convent or seminary. It was quite likely a preparation for the real task He had in mind for you.

The daily life of a religious can be likened to that of a layperson on retreat, except for a religious this retreat is constant. Think of how much growth is done when someone goes on retreat. Think of the graces that are given to a soul when on retreat. The religious is on a retreat almost every day of their life. How many graces would they have gotten during this time? How many years in purgatory would they have canceled out? We do not know, but I am sure on judgment day we will be happily surprised by the answer.

It can certainly be daunting to go from being told what to do even in the tiny day-to-day moments of your life, to having to set yourself a schedule and make your own choices in life again. The fear you may not be doing God's Will is a burden. You may feel you cannot fall back on "obedience" anymore and tell yourself your superior knows best. But you can still consult your spiritual director about even these tiny details, ask him what schedule he thinks you should follow, tell him some careers you are considering, see what he says and obey him. Gradually you will most probably have to let go of some of the convent schedule depending on your new duty of state, but your spiritual director can help you with this new adjustment. If your spiritual director is too busy or you cannot correspond very easily, you can instead go to someone you trust: a parent, an older sibling, or a friend and consult them on the matter. And, of course, you can seek the answer from God through prayer and spiritual reading. God's Will may never be as clear in secular life as it is to a person living as a religious, but He will in no way abandon a soul who is genuinely trying to do His Will.

We should not allow ourselves to bitterly question the Will of God. He knows what will make

us happy far better than we do ourselves. He knows the path that will best lead us to Heaven. We especially should not judge His plans based on a little piece of the puzzle that is viewed separate from the work in its entirety. How often have we suffered and, even in this life, looked back later and realized that God did, in fact, know what He was doing? The life outside of a religious vocation is not something to be ashamed of. If Saints Zélie and Louis Martin had pursued a religious vocation instead of marriage, we would not have Saint Thérèse. God has a purpose for us even if it is outside the walls of a cloister. The foundation ground for saints is often a good family.

Another likely reason God may have allowed you to test out your vocation was to lay a foundation that one may not be able to get living a normal secular life in this world. Being a convert, I found the foundation I received in the convent made up to a great extent the foundation I was lacking having been raised in a very worldly household. But even for those who came from good Catholic families, there is nothing quite like the foundation you will find in a convent or seminary. It is one thing to obey your parents, but a whole other thing to obey someone who may be less educated than you, who isn't even a blood relation, who has no knowledge of your background and who may not seem to understand.

The convent life taught me how to love. Before, being a convert and still quite young, my faith, my love for God was still a bit sentimental. The constant aridity I endured in the convent, the mundane lifestyle, which was very against my spontaneous nature, forced me to make decisions not based on feeling, but based on logical reasoning and with my will. I believe that having learned this will later help me as a wife and mother because when things get rough in the marriage and those emotions fade, I will know how to love with my will and for my husband and God's sake, not for my own satisfaction.

The example of Saint Zélie Martin ought to be a great consolation to those who left the convent simply because she understood what it was like to be "refused" such a calling and it is a great comfort to know you are not alone, that somebody can relate to your suffering. During prayer, Zélie said to her God: "Lord, since, unlike my sister, I am not worthy to be Your bride, I will enter the married state in order to fulfill Your holy will. I beg of You to give me many children and to let them all be consecrated to You." (Piat, *The Story of a Family: The Home of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, p. 33)

Those who had to leave the convent or seminary can likewise make this their prayer. Notice Zélie did not put down the religious state, which some people may be tempted to do after leaving, but she still held it in high regard even though it was not her calling. Notice also how she makes it very clear that she wishes to accomplish His holy Will, not her will which was likely to be a nun, but His. That needs to be our focus. Following a way we perceive is more perfect is not going to sanctify us if it is not God's Will for us.