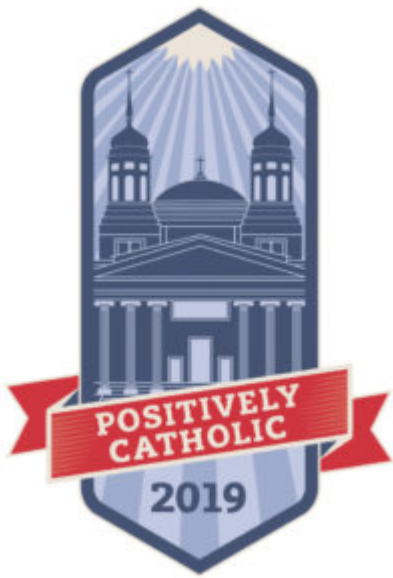


Journeys' end: Religious vocations offer enduring appeal to young women

Sixth in a Series



The October 2017 print issue of the Catholic Review explored the theme of “Positively Catholic” through Education, Health Care, Parish Life and Service. Each Review issue in 2019 will explore one of those aspects of being “Positively Catholic.” This month, we look at service.

While many young women plan for secular careers and fill their Pinterest boards with wedding ideas, others consider a religious vocation.

The Catholic Review visited with three women in various stages of their vocations journey. They are from different orders, but each serves in a ministry in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Their stories follow.

‘A beautiful plan’

Dominican Sister of St. Cecilia Marie Genevieve Robertson was born and raised

Catholic in Mobile, Ala., and had always assumed she would grow up to marry and have a large family, like her own, where she was the oldest of five children.

"I knew of (religious) sisters, but I didn't know any personally," said Sister Marie Genevieve, a religion teacher at Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville. "I didn't see it as something that young women were considering."

It was not until she was a freshman at Auburn University in Alabama, studying French, that Sister Marie Genevieve encountered a few young men who were about to graduate and enter seminary.

Sister Marie Genevieve asked them: Why sign away their lives so soon? They challenged her in return, asking if she had ever considered that God might be calling her to a religious vocation. Though she still felt a pull to married life, she also began visiting convents with friends.

After visiting the Nashville Dominicans at their motherhouse in her junior year, Sister Marie Genevieve said she was ready to drop out of college and enter immediately. When praying about it, she said, God told her, "Not yet."

She went on to teach after college, and was in a relationship she thought might lead to marriage. Everything she thought she wanted was in her grasp, yet she still felt unfulfilled.

Sister Marie Genevieve came to realize desiring both a husband and children are also essential to being a religious woman, which requires one to be the spiritual bride of Christ and the spiritual mother to those she serves.

"That's part of it - wanting to be a wife and mother," she said, adding that she surrendered that desire, knowing that her God would not leave her miserable if religious life was her true vocation. "Instead of feeling ... sadness, I felt joy and happiness and lightness."

"It was the way my heart was always made. ... I was always made to totally belong to God."

Once she knew a religious vocation was in her future, she had no doubt it was with

the Nashville Dominicans.

“There was just a joy and a feeling of being at home and settled,” she said.

Sister Marie Genevieve professed her final vows in July 2018. She taught at St. Cecilia Academy in Nashville before coming in 2015 to Mount de Sales, where she has also taught French.

When asked if she had any advice for young women discerning a religious vocation, Sister Marie Genevieve said to “know that (God) has a beautiful plan.”

“Trust in the Lord – he desires your happiness,” she said. “It just might not be the way you expect.”

‘The spouse of the Word’

Little Sister of the Poor Mary Jamina Sanchez first felt a pull to religious life when she received her first holy Communion.

“I had an idea that maybe I was called to something special,” she said.

It wasn’t until after she moved to the United States from her native Philippines to work as an occupational therapist and was confirmed at age 28, however, that she received the “go signal.”

“It’s a long-term process,” said Sister Mary Jamina, who serves at St. Martin’s Home for the Aged in Catonsville. “I got the strength of the Holy Spirit to pursue my vocation.”

Sister Mary Jamina was still working in healthcare when she met the Little Sisters on several vocations retreats and felt drawn to their mission of serving the elderly poor.

“I became a better occupational therapist for having become a Little Sister,” she said. “My motivations are different now – it’s to serve God.

“It’s not about productivity anymore. ... It’s about making the residents happy.”

The Little Sisters' vows, especially of hospitality, are special to the order. The habits they wear include a pocket, to keep a copy of their vows close to their hearts. To Sister Mary Jamina, wearing a habit is "freeing."

"You don't have to look in the closet and say, 'I have nothing to wear,'" she said with a smile. "It's a sign for other people that we represent God."

It is evident walking the halls of St. Martin's that Sister Mary Jamina gives great joy to the residents, just as much as she receives from them. The Little Sisters live on the campus.

"We're there for each other and we help each other live this vocation," said Sister Mary Jamina, who saw its appeal while discerning. "I didn't have to eat alone anymore ... That's one of the things that got me in the beginning."

The Little Sisters' day is filled with prayers and a daily Mass, for which Sister Mary Jamina prepares as the sacristan. The sisters serve meals to the residents, and share their own as a community.

Her favorite part of religious life is being able to devote time to Scripture.

"I love Scripture; I love being the spouse of the Word," she said. "Being able to study, read and pray the Scriptures and living it out in my daily life as a Little Sister ... serving the poor elderly as if they were Christ himself."

Sister Mary Jamina, who entered the order in 2006 as a postulant, has served in Baltimore since July 2018.

"Our vow of obedience can be challenging at times," she said. "You might be asked to do something like go to another home or do some job that might not be appealing to you at the time."

"It's not an easy life, but it's a life of a closer walk with Jesus, the bridegroom, and the benefits are out of this world."

'A will of God'

Delphine Okoro hears her name called over the PA system all the time at the Oblate

Sisters of Providence motherhouse in Arbutus, where she is more than happy to share her many skills with the other sisters.

Okoro, a postulant, calls herself the “baby” of the congregation, as she is one of its youngest members. She deemed her calling to become a religious sister “a will of God.”

Born in Cameroon, the second youngest of eight children, Okoro came from a privileged background. She felt pulled to religious life from a young age, though her father did not want her to enter an order.

Her education includes a stint in medical school and study of computers, information technology, counseling and nursing. Okoro has worked as a chef and for the federal government of Nigeria in information technology. She has lived in the Philippines, Germany, Canada and China, where she taught English. She also speaks German, French, Chinese and Tagalog.

“I was well-paid, but still I wasn’t happy,” she said. “I was a busy bee.”

Discovering the Oblate Sisters online, she was captivated by the order and Mother Mary Lange’s story. Okoro contacted the sisters in 2007, and moved into the motherhouse last September.

“That 11 years was a preparation,” she said. “I always say my story has a divine vocation.”

Okoro calls herself a “jack-of-all-trades.” At the motherhouse she helps in daycare, the switchboard, creating brochures and anywhere she can.

“I believe if you give God yourself, he will write every day on your empty pages,” Okoro said.

Her usefulness has included configuring all of the building’s phones, tablets and computers.

“I’m always busy,” she said. “I think he (God) directed me to the right place where I was most needed.”

She did not want to enter the motherhouse as a woman with multiple degrees, but simply as “Delphine.”

“I’m not here to work for myself and I’m not here to get paid,” she said. “Even if I have all the degrees in the world, it won’t get me to heaven.”

After living all over the world, Okoro has found a home.

“I knew I was supposed to be here. ... There’s a love I feel here – I think I’m at home,” she said. “It’s been an amazing journey every time I think of the whole thing.

“I think this is my last stop.”

*Read more “Positively Catholic” stories **here**.*

Also see:

Perfect joy: Sister Celia Ashton makes final profession as Carmelite