

My sisters

Today in the mail, I received an invitation to my little sister's first profession of vows with the Sisters of Life. I am delighted that she has found her vocation and am moved by her commitment to the religious life.

Unfortunately, my sister, as a young nun, is an anomaly. One of the saddest chapters of the modern church is the decline of female religious. Their number has dropped from 179,954 in 1965 to just 55,000 today, and the decline will only continue with 91 percent of women religious with final vows over the age of 60.

As an historian, I have been thinking about the huge impact women religious had on development of the American church, working with the poor, establishing hospitals, staffing Catholic schools, and most importantly, praying for the nation, and how desperately we need more young women, like my sister, to continue their good work.

Actually, I have two sisters who are nuns. Having sisters who are sisters provides many opportunities for horrible puns and bad jokes. They're my sisters squared. My nieces join in, too: "She's my aunt, but I call her sister." My brothers-in-law are often the butt of the jokes: "You're a great husband. That's nice, but Sister Faustina is going to marry the second person of the Trinity. No pressure!"

Slightly more important than providing some comic relief, my two sisters have had a huge spiritual impact on our family. Every letter, phone call, and visitation is like a little spiritual retreat. They are an endless source of theological lessons and inspirational stories. Additionally, their daily denial of worldly pleasures - a house, career, nice clothes and family - motivate me to seek a simpler and more devoted life.

The older of the two, Sister Mareja joined the Missionaries of Charity seven years ago, an order founded by Blessed Mother Teresa of Kolkata, but even before becoming a religious, she inspired me to be more open about my faith. For two years, we went to the same public high school. I was shy and very self-conscious, and I did not want anybody to know that I was a Catholic. My sister, on the other

hand, had pictures of Jesus, Mary and the saints plastered all over her locker, handed out religious pamphlets to all her classmates, and was constantly inviting friends to church and youth group meetings. She was not preachy or judgmental in her evangelizing. Rather, she had found something so great that she could not help but share it.

After college, she worked as a nurse at a local hospital, but found time to start a youth group and young adult group at the local parish. I was not surprised when she quit her job, and started doing missionary work in Mexico and Belize, and she finally fulfilled her life's dream when she joined the Missionaries of Charity. Following her first vows, she was sent to West Africa, and she has worked with orphans, the sick and the dying in their houses and in mobile health clinics. I know it's hot here, but I cannot imagine living in Africa (where it's always hot and humid) with no air conditioning and wearing a habit. Not to mention, she's already had malaria and typhoid fever. Yet, she never complains and is happier than ever. I can only surmise the joy of serving the poor, bringing Christ to strangers, and living as a spouse of Jesus is more than enough to overcome any physical discomforts.



Sister Mareja, left, with Pope Benedict XVI at her convent in Cotonou, Benin.

My younger sister, Sister Faustina, joined the Sisters of Life, a New York-based order founded by the late Cardinal O'Connor, three years ago, and in August she'll complete her formation and take her first vows. The order is dedicated to doing pro-life work and they take a special fourth vow to "protect and enhance the sacredness of human life." Instead of sharing her story, you can watch the video below, in which she recounts her journey to religious life. Think about forwarding it to any restless young man or woman who is not fulfilled with his or her current life. Perhaps, they have a religious vocation, and without a doubt, the church needs them.