

Wistful Longing

JEANNE MCNULTY

Our souls come from beyond, and that fire of yearning desire we experience is that “beyond” trying to draw us back to itself. Saint Augustine taught that our souls are filled institutes of consecrated life. He also said that our souls are filled with restlessness until they rest in God. There is no sense denying it. We are all restless. Some of us don’t know what we are restless for. It can take a lifetime to put a name on it and then only after traveling many roads toward dead ends.



In Union with God

In a modern translation of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a fourteenth-century anonymous work of Christian mysticism, Redemptorist Fr. Dennis Billy instructs us in our desire for union with God that we have to lift up our hearts to the Lord “with a gentle stirring of love.” In the beginning of the spiritual life, the Lord oftentimes bestows on the initiate a tender sweetness in his presence. It is so easy to pray, to meditate on the mysteries of the life of Christ, to place ourselves before him and to feel his tender touch. Then it is as if he says: “Come out into the deep.” The deep is dark and scary. There are no consolations or warm gentle breezes, and we are anything but sure-footed on a tremulous sea. God seems hidden, even absent behind a heavy cloud that we are trying to, as *The Cloud* teaches, pierce with our darts of love. This can go on for days, months, even years, as in the case of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

When I personally experienced this struggle, my spiritual mentor counseled: “Don’t give up prayer! Stay with it. Light will eventually come.” He asked me if I was seeking the consolations of God or the God of consolation. I had to admit that I was searching for both. The yearning was viscerally palpable. The words of the Song of Songs at a gut-wrenching level, became my own: “On my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves—I sought him but I did not find him” (Song of Songs 3:1).

With all the trials we face, it would be easy to think God has abandoned us. But that’s not the case. God is love, and we are made in his image and likeness. Nonetheless, God lives in light inaccessible and is blinding to the naked eye. We yearn to see him, but if we did we could no longer exist on the earth.

Once, as a home-health nurse, I cared for a patient in the hills of West Virginia. He had suffered in a bodily prison of terminal illness for many months. His home was many miles away from our office, and by the time I arrived at the large family farm house there were no signs of life in him; no blood pressure, no movement of the diaphragm, no carotid pulse. His daughter was exceedingly distraught over her father’s apparently visible death. I asked if she would like to say a prayer with me and she answered, “Yes.” We laid our hands on his shoulder and began: “Our Father....” With those words he sat bolt upright in the bed with his arms flailing out to



St. Thérèse of Lisieux



Pope Francis with an audience of 200 Franciscan leaders. Fr. Michael Perry, head of the order, is to the right of the pope.
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Who are the consecrated people?

“I want to say one word to you and this word is joy. Wherever consecrated people are, there is always joy!”

—Pope Francis

Who are the Consecrated?

- “Through vows or other sacred bonds, they profess the evangelical counsels: chastity, poverty, and obedience.”
- “They strive for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom of God.”
- Those living the consecrated life are part of an “institute,” often recognized as an order or community, such as the Franciscans, Redemptorists, Jesuits, Carmelite Sisters, and others.
- All must faithfully observe the mission and spirit of their founders, which have been sanctioned by “ecclesiastical authority.”
- “By its very nature, the state of consecrated life is neither clerical nor lay.”
- “By their communion as brothers and sisters” who are “rooted and founded in charity,” those living the consecrated life are to act as “an example of universal reconciliation in Christ.”

—Paraphrased and quoted from *Norms Common to All Institutes of Consecrated Life in the Code of Canon Law (Canons 573–607)*



Martyrs Friars Michał Tomaszek, left, and Zbigniew Strzałkowski, Polish Conventual Franciscans, will be beatified this December.

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A nun holds a rosary during a Marian prayer service at the grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes in Vatican Gardens.
© CNS Paul Haring

Sr. Suja Francis, a member of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, greets children inside a United Nations camp for internally displaced families in South Sudan. © CNS Paul Jeffrey



the sides. His head tilted upward and his wide-opened gaze fixated straight ahead, as if he was seeing something unimaginable. His daughter and I were totally taken aback. We don't know what he was seeing or experiencing, but it astounded him and he was speechless. Two times I whispered in his ear: "Do you see the Lord? Go! Go to him." He then took one last breath, lay gently back on his pillow and was gone.

Reflecting on this incident over the years, I recalled a passage from the writings of St. John of the Cross where he speaks of a soul going out all unseen while the house is still and quiet. My patient really left his earthly home and reached for the eternal. The room was wrapped in stillness as sister death approached. His passions and appetites were subdued and there was nothing else to do but surrender. He did.

Many spiritual masters in various religious traditions make it abundantly clear that there is some groundwork that has to be done in the spiritual life for us to obtain the union with God we yearn for. Saint John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, was known to have preached that salvation comes easier for country people. I am sure it's not that country people are better than city people. God intensely loves all his children and desires their love and intimacy with him in return. It is just that some milieus are easier to find God in. In the Curé's time, the country life was quiet, still, and close to the earth and all of nature. Today most folks live at an even more frenetic pace.

With all the technology of mass and instant communication—texting, smartphones, video chats, and tablets—it is so easy to get caught up in a whirlwind of communicating with everyone except God. We go so fast that there rarely is a moment within a day where we can just be. *Yearn*, do we? Yes! Yet we are we really focused on what is necessary? The necessary

thing is sitting at the Lord's feet with a silent receptive heart ready to receive and give back to him.

Neophytes in contemplative life are taught that they need to have a remote preparation for prayer. A mother or father who comes home from a hectic day at work yet still needs to get supper on the table, supervise homework, and run a child to soccer practice can hardly get silent enough

inside to center in God in a deep and meaningful way. It isn't a given in life. We have to *make* time. We have to carve the way for space to savor a verse from the sacred Scriptures. We need to be able to breathe deeply and slowly. We must rest in the Almighty.

One mom told me the only place she can find some silence is in the bathroom. Another mother related that she has to get up really early, while

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the house is still, get a mug of coffee, and spend her time with the Lord and her Bible in a quiet place in the house. Once I asked a father of a large family: “Why do you love to go hunting?” His answer? “I want to be alone with God.” He obviously didn’t care if he brought home any bounty.

St. John of the Cross also points out in his writings that we must have no willful attachment to serious or even minor sins. The emphasis is on the word *attachment*: clinging to them on purpose prevents our intimate union with God. When we read the Gospels, that point is evident. If there is anything Jesus desires, it is to do the will of his Father. It seems if we can get our lives in line with our Father’s will, there will be peace even in times of pain and affliction. A soul that is in a constant state of agitation will find it very difficult to center itself in God.

Are we seeking the consolations of God or the God of consolation?

I think of Nelson Mandela and how he suffered so many years in prison for his stand against apartheid—the aloneness and the isolation he experienced. Think of Dorothy Day, who started the Catholic Worker Movement with her “houses of hospitality” for the homeless. She spent time behind bars and was ridiculed for her beliefs. There was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*. How he suffered for what he preached! Saint John of the Cross was brutally beaten and imprisoned by his own Carmelite brothers and thrown into prison. In that dark, dank, putrid cell he wrote some of the deepest mystical treatises on union with God we have ever seen. These folks yearned for God and found him—even in enforced solitude, but especially in their emptiness. They were vessels God could fill because they were not full of themselves.

All that being said, no one can deserve or be worthy of the prayer of contemplation or a state of intimate union with God. It is pure gift. It cannot be earned, but we can be disposed to it by the way we live. The Lord sees our desire for union and, since he is love, will he not give us what is best for us if we entreat him with all our hearts? Some suffering may come first. We can compare our own lives to wet logs placed on a fire. The wetness purifies. First of all we hiss and spit and sometimes it is ever so slowly that the flames, if we allow them, take over the resistance and we finally become fire. Is this the real aim of our lives: to be totally caught up and transformed in the warmth and light of God? ●



FR. DONALD B. WILLARD, CSSR



Honoring Their Vows

This is a year to celebrate consecrated life. It is a year to be thankful that so many women and men have given themselves to the Lord's service through evangelical councils. By taking the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, men and women have deepened their baptismal calling and given their lives in service and love to assist the people of God.

It is through the **vow of poverty** that the lives of religious people stand in witness against the materialism and consumerism that can dominate our lives. Instead, this witness reminds us that our true home is in heaven and we are but pilgrims here on earth. Consecrated women and men own nothing personally, but as a community find that their needs are fulfilled. This reminds us that in the community of the Church we will find our deepest longings fulfilled.

It is through the **vow of chastity** that consecrated women and men profess their one true love, Christ. They follow the Good Shepherd wherever he may lead. It is their loyalty, faithfulness, and devotion that inspire the people of God to dedicate themselves ever more to Christ. Having given their mind, body, and soul to the Lord, consecrated women and men celebrate an intimate relationship with the Lord that brings them hope, peace, and love.

It is through the **vow of obedience** that consecrated women and men remain faithful to all that has been revealed about God through Jesus Christ. The very mission of Jesus Christ has been given to the Church, and so consecrated women and men follow unreservedly all the teachings of the Church and are faithful to the charism to which they have been called. These vows remind us that we, too, should be faithful followers of the Church and proclaim the Good News we have received so that all of the world may follow the path of salvation that God has granted us.

Not only do we give thanks for the consecrated life and the witness that the evangelical vows give to our lives, but we also look hopefully to the future. It is through the witness, evangelization, and prayers of consecrated women and men that the Church continues to grow and provide for our needs. The consecrated life is a constant witness that our happiness is not found in the pursuit of power, property, or prestige, but only in knowing, loving, and serving the Lord. May God continue to call women and men to the consecrated life, and may they find the courage to answer that call in hope, love, and joy. ●

The consecrated
life is a witness
to our happiness,
found in knowing,
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Sr. Ninet D'Costa greets students in Detang, a village in Southern Sudan.

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The Redemptoristines

In recognition of the Year of Consecrated Life, Editor Elizabeth Herzing interviews nuns from the Redemptoristines (the Order of the most Holy Redeemer) about their contemplative life of prayer.



*The **Red Nuns**, as they are called, see themselves as **global missionaries** connected to the world through their fervent offerings to Christ on behalf of others.*

A sense of fulfillment, joy, and community seems to be the recurring message shared by the Redemptoristine nuns. Their eyes were bright, their smiles broad, and their spirits benevolent, *apropos* of the remarks of Sr. Marcia Allen, CSJ, president-elect of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) at a news conference earlier in 2015 on the Year of Consecrated Life: “The service by women and men religious is fundamentally and directly a work of their order’s charism.” The charism of the Redemptoristines is prayer—to act as living memories of Jesus—to exemplify Christ’s all-encompassing redemptive love.

Following a vision of Venerable Sr. Maria Celeste Crostarosa, OSsR (declared venerable in 2013), with the support of St. Alphonsus Liguori, CSsR, the **Order of the Most Holy Redeemer** (Redemptorists) was founded in Italy on the feast of Pentecost, May 13, 1731. In 1957, the first U.S. convent was established in New York. Three years later, the Redemptoristine monastery in Liguori, MO, was founded. Two of the eight founding sisters—Canadian transplants Sr. Eleanor Wilkinson, OSsR, and Sr. Barbara Armstrong, OSsR—remain with the community in Liguori. Today there are more than forty Redemptoristine communities throughout the world.



VENERABLE SR. MARIA CELESTE CROSTAROSA, OSSR, WIKIPEDIA



SR. ELEANOR WILKINSON

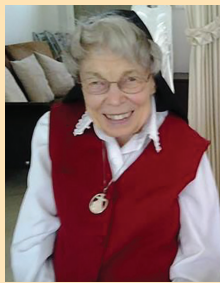
When asked what advice they would give to someone discerning a religious vocation, the sisters were sensitive to the essence of human reality and the struggle with sacrifice—of self, family, and stuff. The Redemptoristines offer an annual “Come and See,” where single Catholic women are invited to share in a week of prayer and community life to discern their spiritual calling. Ultimately, the consensus is to heed the voice—the inner yearning for a more intimate union with Jesus the Redeemer.

The misperception might be that the sisters’ work in emulating the hidden life of Jesus in seclusion and prayer lacks purpose or is a waste of time—especially when there is so much need throughout the world for physical intercession. But to that, **Sr. Eleanor** would say: “Many underestimate the power of prayer.” The sisters receive numerous prayer requests online, via the phone, and mail. The Redemptoristines see themselves as global missionaries connected to the world through their fervent offerings to Christ on behalf of others. ●

The Redemptoristines see themselves as global missionaries, connected to the world though their fervent offerings to Christ on behalf of others.



FR. JOHN SCHMIDT, CSSR WITH THE SISTERS FROM LIGUORI'S REDEMPTORISTINE COMMUNITY AT A LITURGY WORKSHOP
—PHOTO COURTESY OF REDEMPTORISTINES



SR. NANETTE DURHAM

Before answering their vocational calling, the sisters led a variety of occupations. **Sr. Nanette Durham, OSsR**, who has been with the order for forty years, worked as a pharmacist. **Sr. Maria Celeste Kay, OSsR**, a Thailand native, has been with the order for twenty-two years, after serving as a United Nations secretary in Bangkok. Working as a translator for UNICEF (the United Nations Children’s Fund), she saw firsthand the oppression of the forlorn. And while she was happy and found her work worthwhile, something was missing. Her love for solitude and prayer led her to the Redemptoristines. “I know this is God’s place for me. I feel full,” says Sr. Maria Celeste.



SR. MARIA CELESTE KAY



SR. JAN KLEIN

Prioress **Sr. Jan Klein, OSsR**, worked at Rockwell International, where she built communication devices—and not cell phones: think circuit boards for Boeing. She agrees with the sentiment of her spiritual director, who warned her that her greatest joy of religious life could also be her greatest challenge. “Community is a blessing and also your cross to bear. It’s difficult to give up a piece of yourself.”

Throughout a normal day, the sisters come together five times for the Liturgy of the Hours. In addition, they commemorate Christ in regimented times of silence, carve aside time for private meditation and devotionals, and—in line with their charism—heed in the charge of 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to “pray without ceasing.” In her twenty-six years with the Redemptoristines, Sr. Jan recognizes that with this constant examination, forgiveness comes easily.



SR. ANNE MARIE GOOL

Sr. Anne Marie Gool, OSsR, has devoted forty-four years to the Red Nuns, as they’re affectionately called, primarily for their habits of deep red, the color for charity and love. In reflection, Sr. Anne Marie admits she had no intention of becoming a nun. When she envisioned her future, it included marriage and a big family, but God had other plans. “I have a

large family here with the sisters, and through prayer [and God’s intercession], I can reach others.” She agrees with Sr. Jan that, for her, the greatest joy of her vocation is the sense of community. “Everyone works together,” she says. “There is an abundance of support and love; it’s very uplifting.”

The sisters ask us to be mindful of Pope Francis’ call to celebrate the lives and benefaction of those living the consecrated life. They ask that you join them in prayer:

Prayer for the Year of Consecrated Life

O God, throughout the ages you have called women and men to pursue lives of perfect charity through the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. During this Year of Consecrated Life, we give you thanks for these courageous witnesses of Faith and models of inspiration.

Their pursuit of holy lives teaches us to make a more perfect offering of ourselves to you.

Continue to enrich your Church by calling forth sons and daughters who, having found the pearl of great price, treasure the Kingdom of Heaven above all things.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.