

CONVERSATIO

The Story

No one enters a monastery hoping they will become the vocation director. The prioress or abbot entrusts this ministry to those who have “fallen in love” with the monastic way of life and have the potential to share its goodness with others discerning a vocation. Without a doubt it is the most challenging, inspiring ministry I have ever done. The past six years, admittedly both gift and cross, have led me deeper into the graced reality of monastic life and made me more aware of God’s movement in the lives of seekers. That is not to say that this ministry has been easy.

I soon discovered that being the Director of Vocation Ministry meant leaving the confines of the monastery to raise awareness of our very existence and hopefully to draw the curious faithful to the monastery for a taste of our life. There was no “net” to cast out—no magic slogan. I just did my best to tell our Benedictine story and answer many really good questions. If a relationship was begun, I was called to simply listen “with the ear of [my] heart,” to companion each candidate over a period of months—sometimes years—to a place of relative certainty, and to nurture the seed of God’s call over time until it was ready for the harvest.⁸ I’ve seen at least eleven women through a sea of paperwork and a battery of psychological tests that might make even Jesus a bit nervous. I’ve asked them to write their life stories and received them with reverence—each a gospel in miniature replete with Good Fridays, Holy Saturdays and resurrections. All the while

⁸ Benedict, and Timothy Fry. “Prologue 1.” *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1982.

all members of the community prayed that their lives would be God's plan for each of them.

When a candidate comes, we see a future graced by their presence in the monastery. We see the manifold gifts recognized and untapped. In each woman, we see our way of life continuing by the deliberate grace of God. Each time a woman knocked on the chapel door and entered the monastery, I felt a deep joy that made the most arduous efforts seem small. Determined from my first day on the job to place the burden of this ministry squarely in God's hands, I told my happy sisters—eager to affirm my gifts and skills—that our newest member was God's work. To God be the glory. This strategy held me in good stead—*until* a woman left our monastery.

When a woman decides to leave the monastery, it is like a death. As suitcases are packed and placed in the hallway, we walk softly past her doorway, confident that God is at work but grieving a love that is lost to us—a future we will never share. "*Their passing away [is] thought an affliction; their going forth from us, utter destruction*" (Wis 3:2-3). The first time it happened after I became vocation director, I lost my footing completely. I couldn't make sense of it. What had I done wrong? What didn't I see in all her paperwork? What did we miss in the psychological tests? How could I go forward as vocation director if my gut instinct was faulty? All that I believed about my own gifts for the ministry now seemed tenuous.

Kristen was special. Okay, she was special to me. There was some "little sister" thing going on there. I saw something familiar in her. I had hopes and dreams for Kristen and even though her trajectory had some twists and turns, I really believed that she had a monastic heart. Admittedly, I lost clarity and objectivity early on. But, trusting in our process and the many tests along the way, I thought in the end that she was meant to be a Benedictine sister. I was wrong. We were wrong. I cried the day she left and for several days thereafter. It was a loss for the community and undeniably a loss for me.

No matter how many women have entered the monastery under my guidance, it was the one who left who wound up teaching me the most about God's grace. In the midst of my grief and suffering came wisdom. It was so easy to give God the credit when good things were happening (after all, God and I were working together). It was much harder not to blame

myself when things went “wrong.” I forgot that God is always God—in our joy and in our suffering. God directs the vocational journey— when a person comes and when a person decides to leave

I have come to rest more comfortably in the mystery of God’s call. Seekers will continue to come. Some will stay. Some will leave. I believe that their coming has meaning even if they do not stay with us. The learning is mutual in this enterprise. The sisters and the seeker are on the road together.

The mystery of God’s call, however, extends beyond the journey of one religious community. I have come to clearer insight about the tension between personal definitions of success and failure and how they can deceive one about the way God works in our lives. Success and failure are part of the rhythm of life well-lived. If we are reflective ministers, they can teach us about patience, courage and fidelity even in the face of what we might perceive as defeat.