



Hidden with Christ

The Call to Enclosure

Getting It Right!

By Sr. Juliana Schmitt, O.Cist.

During my senior year in high school, I remember praying intensely to discover God's will for my life. Would it be the married state? Single life in the world? Or the religious life? I didn't really mind which one, so long as it was God's holy will for me. Then, the summer after my freshman year at Thomas Aquinas College, I was looking over a book called *Why I Entered the Convent*. Many different orders were represented and a member of a different order wrote each chapter. I didn't read the book from cover to cover, but was skimming the chapters that caught my eye. It annoyed me that there were only active sisters in there. Teachers, nurses, social workers, missionaries... there was not a single contemplative community represented! Then the thought occurred to me—"You be that contemplative" and "I need you to be a contemplative nun." ("Need" meaning "want very much"!)

Maybe it was not a perfectly logical syllogism, but it was at this point that I knew God really wanted me to be a nun. And at the same time, I discovered how much I really wanted to, also!

My next step was to visit a contemplative community and speak with the vocation directress. The monastery I was most familiar with was St. Benedict's Center, which had both nuns and monks at that time. I spoke with Mother Mary Clare, who was very kind, and sensing my immaturity, sug-

gested that I go for one more year of college. This I did, and consequently continued my education at Thomas Aquinas College, graduating in 1986.

My spiritual director, Father Vincent, helped me to further discern God's call. It was during this time that I discovered a beautiful monastery overseas. It seemed right to me. I loved the way they sang the Divine Office, I loved the thought of being far away from home, hidden in a life totally dedicated to God. That was something very attractive to me. I felt so free and sure and glad about my vocation!

However, my experience at that monastery was complex. Cut off from family, God was literally all I had. I had never felt close to anyone outside my own family, and the community was definitely outside that circle. But I didn't mind or care—I had God. I loved God. After my year as a postulant my superiors weren't sure what to do. They had doubts about my vocation, I guess, because I still hadn't "warmed up." About that time, the elderly abbess retired from office and a younger one was elected. The new abbess asked me what I thought about the unexplained delay in my clothing ceremony. In my usual stoic way, with scant emotion, I replied with what was recently read at Mass: "In the Gospel, Christ says not to worry about your clothing or what you are to wear." She was impressed with this



answer and right then decided I was ready for the habit. I could sense that God was telling me to "stay there." This was in the fall of 1987.

I could really relate to our new abbess. The thought entered my mind that even if she felt incompetent as a mother to all the older sisters, she could be a good mother to me! At last, I "had a place," a role to play: her spiritual daughter! We had a really close friendship, a first for me. No matter how close we were, I still was extremely reliant on God, asking Him about everything I did before I did it, including everything with regard to the abbess.

A short while later, the abbess' parents came to visit. We were all in the parlor and she announced, "Does anyone want to come up [to the grill] and meet my parents?" I did! I really wanted to meet the parents of my friend! Nobody made a move to come forward. But I stepped up toward the



elderly couple and at the same time glanced in the direction of the abbess and saw that her face had a look of embarrassment! I was crushed! Later when I turned to God in prayer after this, it felt like He “let me down.” I was depressed, to say the least. But God was still saying to “stay there.” So I stuck it out.

After a year of postulancy and a two-year novitiate, the time for my first vows was approaching. The abbess asked me, “Do you feel at home here?” I definitely never felt “at home” in that foreign land. I answered, “No, Heaven is my home.” When I prayed, I still had a sense that God was saying “stay there,” but I was really unhappy.

Later I prayed, “Please, let me *not* have to be here!” One night, I went to the chapel to get things straight with God. When He said, “I want you to stay there.” I argued, “There? Stay there? If you call this place “there,” that means you’re not here! And I don’t want to be where you’re not!” I suddenly felt happy—I felt victorious! Sometimes God wants us to stand up to Him—like the Syro-Phoenician woman. And I felt something like her in this situation. After this conversation I knew I was free to leave.

I was really happy upon departing from there. I was also eager to do whatever God wanted. I ended up taking a schoolteacher position. Shortly thereafter I started getting really depressed, worse than at that monastery!



Returning to St. Benedict Center, I found Father Basil who really helped me. Together we discerned God’s calling for my life. He asked “Would you like to be married?” I answered, “I’d make a weird mother!” “Would you give anything to be a mother?” “No! But I would give anything to be a nun!” The words were out before I had a chance to stop them! I quickly added: “I mean, it would have to be God’s will...” But he was just smiling, and at that point we both knew my vocation was to the religious life! I was so happy again!

I took a vocation manual, which listed all the orders in the United States, and an open mind to the Lord saying, “Lord, whatever You decide—active or contemplative.” I started making a list of the orders that attracted me. When I finished, I read over the list. I found that they were all contemplative, not a single active one. So that decision was easy.

I began visiting various houses on the East coast. Yet Father Basil knew about Valley of Our Lady Cistercian Monastery, and so I wrote to them for information. I remember holding the letter I received from them when I went to see Father Basil. We talked about other topics and I hadn’t said a word about the Cistercians, and he suddenly said, “So, what’s the good news?” pointing to the letter in my hand. We both laughed. It must have been the happy way I held it! The good news was the answer to my question: Are you allowed to eat snacks between meals? “Yes, we have a time for a coffee break in the morning and in the afternoon.” This made me so glad, because at my previous monastery, they had only the three meals and my metabolism needs more frequent fueling. But what convinced me that Valley of Our Lady



was right for me, was that after two visits I had the conviction, “I could love these sisters.” My experience at the other monastery was more a solo project preventing me from seeing community life as it really is, a “foretaste of Heaven.”

Looking back now, I see that it was truly a beautiful and fervent community. I see that it probably *could have* been God’s arena to work on me, to prepare me. The problems were within me, not in my surroundings, and God graciously “took me where I was.”

What did God’s words “Stay there” mean? Perhaps it was revealing to me that my decision was “somebody else’s wish,” and what needed to take place was a decision coming from my own heart. But even a misunderstanding of God’s message can be a real part of God’s ways. Mistakes and even sins within the decision process don’t bother God. He blithely uses all sorts of materials for His divine purposes! I’m thinking of Jesus’ own genealogy. How many foreigners, prostitutes, illegitimate children, and sins are involved! So this should give us plenty of reason to hope in our own discernment process, that in the end, we’ll get it right, with God’s help. 🕯

For more information please visit:
ValleyOfOurLady.org or
NunOCist.org