

Shared life offers means to discover signs of God's will

By Sr. Maureen Servas, RSM
Guest contributor

I remember very well the invitation. It came in the form of a hall pass during homeroom at Cardinal Mooney High School when I was a senior there in 1977. God's call was made manifest through a young man with a goatee; a teacher I didn't know very well at the time.

We were together the night before at a prayer group run by the campus ministry office. During the evening, I had joked with two friends who were thinking of entering the Brothers of the Holy Cross that I would enter their order in an instant if I could. Brother Robert deLeon, CSC, had picked up on my comment, and he sent me the pass the very next day.

When I walked into his room he said to me, "You said something very interesting

VOWS

last night." I couldn't imagine what I'd said. He repeated my remark to me and then added, "Have you ever thought of religious life?" My answer was, "No!" but from that day forward the question never left me.

What did I think in those days? I thought that God was fullness and excitement and indescribable joy. I knew that for the first time in my life I saw beyond the God of my childhood and recognized my own personal God, because I was being drawn to live a life shaped by that relationship. I wanted to be with people who believed and were searching. I wanted to share our feelings about God and encourage each other. Deep down inside I wanted everything I did from then on to reflect the incredible love I felt in those moments. Little did I know where this would take me and how God would continue to be revealed to me.

Immediately after high school I looked into three different communities. Their policies were the same: I had to be at least 21 years old before I could enter and give religious life a try. My two friends were due to leave for Massachusetts to enter the Brothers of the Holy Cross in the fall. I can vividly remember the long conversations we had. They were filled with questions that sometimes started at 5 a.m. when we'd take off to see the sunrise at Hamlin Beach and not end until we arrived back home hours later.

We were so innocently convinced that the vows would be a cinch! After all, we had the "awesome" God on our side. Nothing seemed more than we could handle. They had the opportunity to find this out at summer's end; I had to wait. At first this seemed a little unfair. Only in retrospect did the wisdom in waiting become clear for me.

A great deal happened in that summer after graduation. I began dating one of these friends, and the other fell madly in love with someone and applied elsewhere for school. Summers can definitely carry their own magic. Life was so wide open to us!

Even during this time of love, adventure and challenge, the question of religious life remained. I again found myself seeking inspiration. I was looking for community because I knew God so well in other people.

Then I met Sister Gloria Ruocco, RSM. I enjoyed her company, which was always full of laughter, and her absolutely decadent chocolate snacks. What better way into a teenager's heart than through batches of double-chocolate-chip cookies and pounds of real milk chocolate! Of course it was really her genuine interest in my life that drew me to her and her invitation to join the Sisters of Mercy's Faith Sharing program that introduced me to some of the most significant women in my life.

The Faith Sharing program was a once-a-month opportunity for young women to come together for experiences of prayer, retreat, fun and conversation. I met many sisters and learned a great deal about their commitment to the poor, their wonderful sense of hospitality and their good humor. I found the greatest encouragement through their personal invitations to me to share in their community life. They helped to keep the question within my grasp, and God kept the desire alive in my heart.

Junior year in college brought many significant changes into my life. I came to realize the relationships that nurtured me were a very important part of my spiritual life, but I was somehow being drawn into solitude with God. God no longer held out the arms of home and familiarity, and this was an experience I'd never known before. Its empty feeling kept me searching for distractions. Almost everything failed to satisfy, and only served to create a greater space within. In time I realized that this emptiness was actually full of desire for God. It is this often empty yet very full place of desire in which I see my call more clearly than ever.

From high school on I knew I needed community to help me. Coming from a family of 10, I think I was born and raised to live a common life. And I now realize

that all my life I have been called to nurture this relationship and respond to the great gift of love that it is. I've chosen to do this through a life of Mercy.

After graduating from Nazareth College, I applied at Our Lady of Mercy High School and was hired to begin teaching art in the fall of 1982. I entered the Sisters of Mercy in September of the same year. I knew that the time had come to respond to the question.

In my first years, I began to experience what community life was all about. Reverently holding others' stories and, in turn, sharing my own allowed me to see the remarkable grace of God active in our lives. Community is a place where we challenge one another to live a life of loving response to God. It is where we recognize each others' giftedness and weaknesses. It is a place to laugh and cry with each other. It is here that we are called to face our strengths and our limitations, as we attempt to authentically live out our vows.

The Sisters of Mercy profess four vows: poverty, chastity, obedience and service of the poor and sick and the ignorant. Each vow draws us closer to God, and makes no sense whatsoever out of the community context. Poverty is a choice to live simply, allowing us to cling to God's words and God's promises rather than to possessions. It invites us to a greater dependence on the goodness of God and others. It calls us to be generous with our possessions and frees us to be generous with our time.

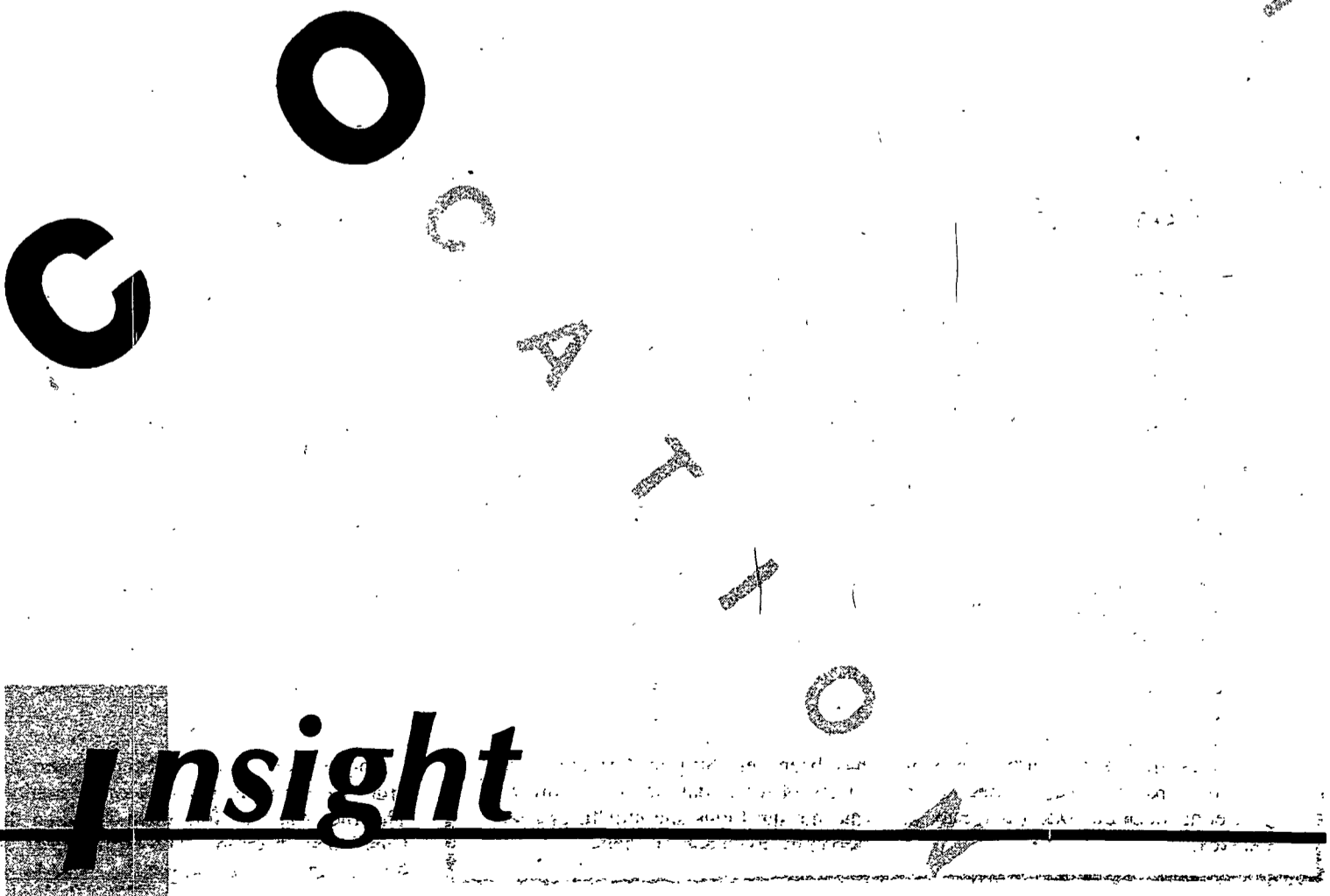
The vow of obedience speaks of our total dependence on God. It means that we give over our entire will to God. A shared life in

community gives us the opportunity to pray together and discover what God's will is for us. Left to my own resources, I can become blinded by what I want to what God wants for me. We as congregation, community, sisters and friends draw out the questions for each other to grapple with. Together and individually we bring our hearts, minds and daily experiences before God so that all we are and do is an obedient response to God.

Chastity is the vow that most fascinates my students. How can you live without sex? Without a man? Without children? The questions usually come in that order. Just the other day a few of my students started asking questions and giving their direct opinions about my life. "Won't you miss, well, you know, like, don't you want to have, you know, sex? Kids?"

They had this deep, gut-level conviction that I was being misled. They offered to fix me up with a date. I pointed out that the last couple they fixed up only lasted together

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