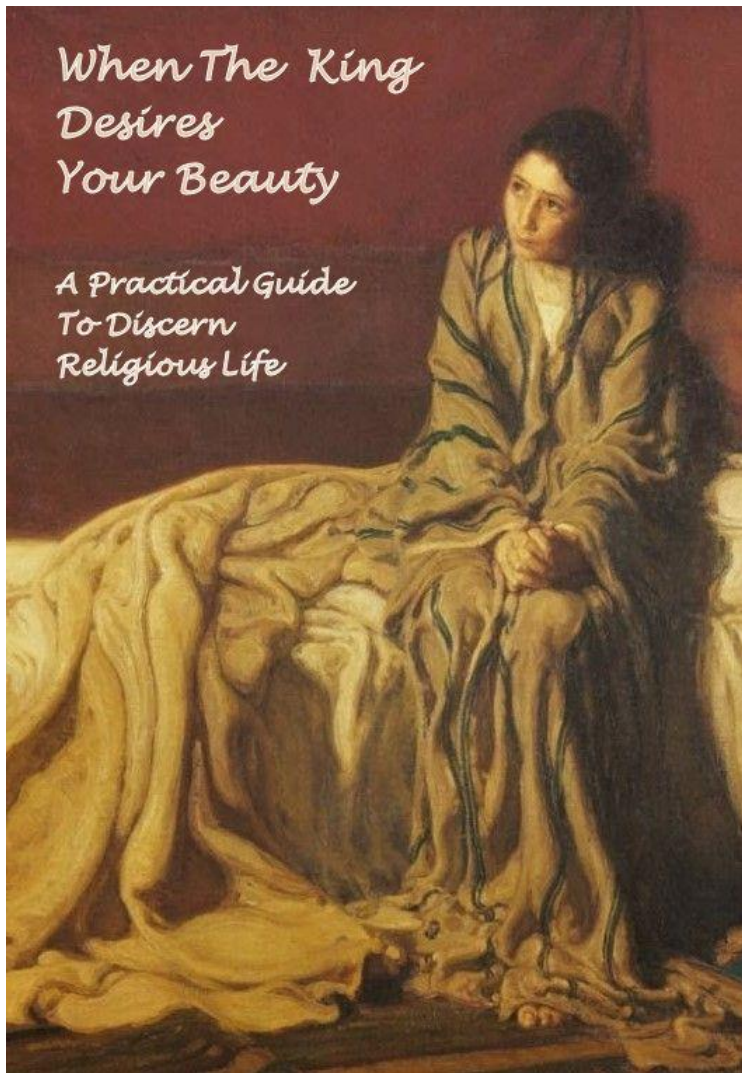


*When The King
Desires
Your Beauty*

*A Practical Guide
To Discern
Religious Life*



When The King

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María Gonzalo, OCSO

So will the King desire your beauty
(Psalm 45:12)

Most women, I would think, have a little bit of Cinderella in their hearts. Even though nowadays we might be more proactive in our search and have more open horizons, we still wish to find the “perfect one” who would satisfy our deepest longing for love and intimacy. But what if God, the one who made your heart, the one who knows you and loves you better than yourself, wanted you for himself in a very special way? What if—as incredible as it may sound to you right now—he, the king, desires your beauty (see Ps 44:12)?

As Christians we are called to follow Christ. This is our way of becoming sons and daughters of the loving Father whom Jesus revealed to us, and brothers and sisters of each other. Together we form his body, the Church, washed in his blood to become his pure Spouse for all eternity. But not all of us follow the same path to reach our common destiny. These different paths are called vocations. Going back to Cinderella, your vocation is the shoe that fits you the best and will help you get to your destination. Maybe it is not the one you would have picked at first sight, but the one your Maker—of your feet and the rest—has planned for you. Of course, walking in a pair of shoes that is too big or too small for you is possible, but would you like to do that for the rest of your life?

He is your Lord (Psalm 45:11)
Why and How

Depending on how this little book has reached your hands, you may have different questions about what to do with it. If you found it or asked for it yourself, I guess you must be open to discern your vocation, God's plan for your life. If a priest or deacon, a youth minister or a friend handed it to you without your asking, you may be wondering, "Why did they give me this?"

You may identify with the words of one of the young women who contacted me wanting to visit our community: "I don't really know what a discernment process is. I just want to visit and see if this is what God is calling me to do. I want to have a family, but there are so many *what ifs*. As of now I just want to explore, learn, and experience. In my opinion, if I am not called to be a sister, then this experience will only help strengthen my relationship with God." Like her you may not be too clear in your mind how to discern God's will for your life. You have your own plans, but you love God, and you want to know his plans too, in case they differ. Her conclusion is totally right: if you are not called to be a sister, then to explore, learn, and experience religious life will not only not harm you but will strengthen your relationship with God and, I would add, increase your self-knowledge and preparation to respond to his call for you as either a married or a single Christian woman in his Church. Believe me, this is not as complicated as it may feel right now, and the prayers of my sisters and so many other sisters, priests and committed Christians are

supporting you in this process. You are not alone.

You are going to find in this little book some information about religious life, things like how to proceed with discernment, what are the vows, what to expect when you visit a community, etc. I hope that this will give you a clearer idea about the path to follow and dispel some of your fears and misconceptions, which can make it much more difficult to move through the process with serenity and openness to the Holy Spirit. He is the one who is going to guide you, but the more receptive you are to his action the better, and leaving fears and anxieties behind as much as possible will help.

I have taken some words from Psalm 45 as the title for each chapter. The psalms are a preeminent element of the Divine Office or the Liturgy of the Hours, which religious communities pray in common, in union with the whole Church. All the spectrum of human emotions is contained in the psalms from sheer joy to total despair, absolute trust to cries of revenge. There is no embarrassment in presenting these feelings, thoughts, and actions to the Lord, giving thanks for his providence or asking for his mercy. God remains mysterious and all-powerful, but this reality does not prevent the psalmist from establishing a dialogue with him.

Now that you are faced with the challenge of discerning religious life, you may have different feelings in your heart and questions in your mind. I invite you to follow the example of those who wrote and have prayed the psalms for over two millennia:

entrust all you have—heart, head, and soul—to the hands of God, and make of this time of discernment a special dialogue with him. Ours is not the distant God who spoke through fire and thunder, but the one who revealed himself to us through Our Lord Jesus Christ, who told us, “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

Try to go through the chapters of this booklet slowly, letting what you read resonate not only in your head but in your heart. These are precisely the motions of the Spirit in the core of your being that you need to be attentive to. You will need the help of a spiritual director or the vocation director of a religious community to help you interpret these, but you are the one who has to listen and feel what is happening within you. Each chapter has a number of quoted passages woven into the text; take time to read them in their context and pray with them. May the Word of God be the light for your path (see Ps 119:105).

You are starting a pilgrimage into your heart and the heart of God. At the end of each chapter you will find a suggestion for a step forward on this journey. You may feel some interior resistance to stopping and taking the time to pray, reflect, and write something down following the guidelines provided. I would highly recommend that you give it a try even if you would be inclined to just go on reading. A pilgrimage takes planning, but ultimately, it is about the effort and the joy to put one foot in front of the other. Just thinking about it does not take us too far. Practical actions will be needed so that your process of

discernment will reach its destination as it should. Of course, you will need to take more steps than those suggested in this booklet, but the ones described are designed to give you tools, and help you grow in clarity, while staying focused on your goal. Discovering your vocation will be a fruit of cultivating your relationship with Christ. When you see more clearly who you are for Jesus and who Jesus is for you, you will also be able to recognize in what environment or way of life you can truly blossom; where you can best bear fruit for the good of the Church and the world. We will go one step at a time, it is not meant to be overwhelming, don't worry, but keep at it.

This is meant to be a beautiful experience, a time of grace for you! As you go deeper to listen to Jesus' voice with more clarity (see Lk 5:4), there will be other voices that will try to distract you: your fears, plans, and expectations or those of others, different forms of temptations or even sin. They may sound powerful, like a strong wind or even an earthquake (see 1Kgs 19:11-13), but the Lord won't be in them. Do not be afraid or look back (see Lk 9:62). At the proper time you will hear his voice, maybe as a tiny whisper, but it will be unmistakable: the Lord will be speaking to you; be ready to follow him.

Step 1: Naming your hopes and fears.

Take some time to write the hopes and fears you have about your discernment. Naming things is very helpful. When our goals are too vague, it is unlikely that we will reach them. So, what are you hoping or expecting on this journey? Also, if you know what your worries are, you will be better prepared to handle

them when they show up. For example, you might be worried about what your parents may think about your discernment or the reactions of your friends if you realize God is calling you to become a Sister. Worries tend to visit us more than once. If you name them, when this particular thought knocks at the door of your mind once more, you can recognize this ‘old friend’, say ‘hello’ and let it go without getting entangled time and again with the same story. Naming our hopes and fears help us to focus on our journey and not to identify with our thoughts or emotions. Put them in the hands of Jesus and Mary. You will be surprised how little by little your yoke becomes easier and your burden light (see Mt 11:28-30).

Listen, O daughter, give ear to my words

(Psalm 45:10)

What is to discern?

At this point I should briefly introduce myself. My name is Sr Maria Gonzalo, OCSO. I am one of the Trappist-Cistercian sisters at Our Lady of the Angels Monastery, in Crozet, Virginia. To be sincere, sometimes it still surprises me that I have become a nun, even though I am convinced that it is the best thing that could have happened to me. The first sisters I met were my teachers in middle school. When I left for high school, I thought that much of their work was admirable but simply not for me. I could not see myself in their habits or in their lives. I believed that being a nun was like fitting in a mold, as

if when you become a wife you would become like Mrs. so and so. How many wrong ideas and fears clouded my vision! But Jesus' love for me was stronger, and one question remained in my heart: how do they know that God calls them?

It took some years till I dared to ask God directly. I was in Assisi, looking at Saint Francis' crucifix while I pondered, "If he spoke to him, he can also speak to me." As I did not hear anything, I thought, "Phew, I am safe." But the 'what if?' did not go away. Finally I shared my thoughts with two friends who were also discerning their vocation. All the false reasoning against my call to religious life suddenly stopped in its tracks when they simply said, "Why not?" Did I have to take it seriously then?

The English verb *to discern* comes from the Latin *discernere* which means to be able to distinguish, to separate. When someone starts considering the possibility of religious life as God's call, God's will for her, she usually is in much need of this ability of being able to distinguish and separate what is in her heart and mind. If she dares to look inside, she may find a variety of feelings and thoughts in a rather messy state that does not let her see with clarity.

Some young women today who start pondering a religious call feel themselves in a kind of desert: Is this truly happening to me? What happens with my own plans and projects? With whom can I talk about this? Questions and fears pile up as the images of 'women in veils' (as someone told me once) start populating her mind.

If you are brave, you may start asking God in more or less these terms: “Do you really want me to be a nun?” You love Jesus. You have learned that in his will is our joy and peace, but still If this is what he wants (you think to yourself) he will have to tell me very clearly. Maybe send an angel or two?

A spiritual desert is a place where we lack our usual resources. It is difficult to keep a sense of direction. Everything looks much the same, and we know we cannot be there for too long before we die of hunger and thirst. Not a pretty picture, but the good part—and this is the sense and the experience of the desert in the Bible—is that there we can learn to rely on another. In the desert God taught his people how to rely on him alone. These are the first lessons of discernment: trust and humility.

When we are not in control, when we depend on another, we learn to be humble, to be like the children to whom the Kingdom belongs (Mt 18: 2-3). God is a loving Father, we know that; but we still worry, we still want to provide for ourselves. Now he gives you the opportunity to discover this as reality in your life: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32). Discerning is not so much about finding the right answer as about learning to lean on our beloved, Jesus. In the words of the Songs of Songs: “Who is this coming up from the desert, leaning on her beloved?” (Song 8:5).

Saint Paul tells the Corinthians, “The spiritual man judges all things, but he himself is not subject to

anyone's judgment. "For who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:15-16). This is what we need: the mind of Christ! We need to see and feel things as he does; this is the way to true peace and joy. Christ can make you whole, so that your heart does not go one way and your mind another.

You may feel like the apostles asking Jesus to increase their faith (Lk 17:5), or like the man in the gospel who cried out to him, "I do believe; help my unbelief!" (Mk 9:24). Spending time with Jesus is how we learn that he is trustworthy, and little by little we become more and more like him. The method is much more simple than we sometimes think:

- Take part in the **Eucharist** as often as you can: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him" (Jn 6:56).
- Frequently receive the **sacrament of reconciliation** and put in Jesus' hands all that may have separated you from him.
- Spend time in **prayer**, before the Blessed Sacrament or in a quiet place. Pray to the Holy Spirit to open your heart and say, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:10).
- Listen to his **Word**. Take time to read the Bible. Don't go anxiously looking for answers. This is not like preparing for an exam. Ask him to give you the attitude and desire of just wanting to learn from him, like Mary of Bethany seated at his feet (see Lk 10:39).
- **Make silence**. When Jesus came to us for the first time, there was no room for him in the inn

(see Lk 2:7). We can be the same when we are full of noises and busyness. Turn off your phone when you pray and try to do some fasting from the things that are major distractions for you (social media, binge movie watching or tv series, etc.). Only in silence can you discover your true self. There is where God's Word will resonate.

- Find a **spiritual director** or a person experienced in the spiritual life. We can talk about so many things during the day, but how often do you speak about your relationship with Jesus? Find a person with whom you can do this more or less regularly. It can be a priest or religious, or any other person who has lived his or her faith with fidelity for some time.
- Develop **true friendships**. "Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:20). We are with Jesus also when we are with those who are Christ-like. There is so much we can learn from others and about ourselves when we cultivate healthy relationships.
- **Entrust yourself to Mary**. There is no one like our Mother to teach us how to pronounce her *fiat*. Put your discernment in her hands. She will surely show you the way to her Son's heart.
- **Contact a religious community**. Some time along this process it will be necessary to take the leap to write or to speak with a religious sister. She will help you get a more accurate idea of what religious life is really about. Visiting would be the next step. We will come back to this later.

If you are serious about your discernment, you will rather soon realize that the process is going to demand that you invest quite a bit of your energy in it. As you know, driving while you speak on your cell phone is not a good idea, but it can be especially dangerous when you are trying to get to a place where you have never been before. Trying to discern religious life while you are dating can be a similar situation. It is usually better to discern one vocation at a time. If we don't, we run the risk of getting nowhere or hurting others or ourselves. There is a season for everything. God might be asking you to give him your full attention.

You are right if this process sounds a bit demanding to you. The good news is that it is not meant to last forever. Writing a journal to recognize the movements of the Spirit in your heart and keeping track of your journey can be very helpful. If with humility, patience and simple love you faithfully utilize these good tools for discernment, little by little, the confusion will dissipate. You will be truly discerning, if you are leaning more and more on Jesus, and if he is becoming more and more the one whom you love and trust. You will be coming out of the desert with a new mind and heart, ready to say, "May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

Step 2: Making a discernment plan.

We need a plan to reach our goals. Discernment is not different in this respect. If you create the right routine to listen to the Lord, he will not fail you. But you need to do your part. After a short prayer to the Holy Spirit, consider all the elements mentioned

above and write down when and how you are going to pray every day, when you are going to go to Mass, who can accompany you in this process, etc. Be generous but realistic. Write down something that you feel you can do but that stretches you a little. This is like working-out. What matters the most is a good routine that is doable but pushes your limits without being overwhelming.

You are the fairest of the children of men

(Psalm 45:3)

Spousal Love

Not long ago, at the Eucharist, I sang these words as a refrain for the responsorial psalm: *My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.* I felt privileged to give voice to the longing the Church and all its saints through the centuries have had for God. I could also say aloud what I silently carry in the center of my being: that thirst which is the response to a love greater than myself.

Before the responsorial psalm, we had heard the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “You seduced me, Lord, and I let myself be seduced; you were too strong for me, and you prevailed . . . I say I will not mention him, I will no longer speak in his name. But then it is as if fire is burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding back, I cannot!” (Jer 20:7 -9). Was I not also like him? Had I not also tried to smother the divine fire in my bones when I couldn't understand it, I couldn't control it, or was not able to

foresee or accept where it was leading me?

These realities: longing, thirsting, the experience of the unquenchable fire of love (sometimes quiet like an undercurrent, sometimes strong and overpowering like a waterfall) have become the golden thread that runs through my days. This covenant of love, invisible and difficult to put into words as days and activities come and go, holds together who I am and all I do.

Often, when I speak with young women who are trying to discern a possible call to religious life, I hear a question expressed more or less like this: “How can Jesus be your spouse if you cannot not see him?” It is not because of incredulity that they ask, but as the result of their own struggle, trying to discover how they can deal with the capacity for love they store in their hearts. When I hear this question, the experience that underlies my whole life comes to my mind, but how to express it? I can borrow the words of the first letter of Saint Peter: “Although you've never seen him, you love him. Even though you don't see him now, you trust him and so rejoice with a glorious joy that is too much for words” (1 Pt 1:8).

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux presents mystical life as a life of spousal love in the heart of the Church, the great Bride and Mother.¹ He writes in his sermon 85 on the Song of Songs,

1 Bernardo Olivera, OCSO, *The Sun at Midnight, Monastic Experience of the Christian Mystery*, trans. Augustine Roberts, MW 33 [Collegeville: Cistercian, 2012] 89.

When you see a soul leaving everything and clinging to the Word with all her will and desire, living for the Word, ruling her life by the Word, conceiving by the Word what she will bring forth by him, so that she can say, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain," you know that the soul is the spouse and bride of the Word.²

A spousal relationship is a way of being for the other, of surrendering to the one we love, in mutual belonging. Pope Saint John Paul II calls this kind of love 'betrothed love,' "a love that is especially characterized by the total self-giving, the surrender of one's 'I', which goes far beyond attraction, desire or even goodwill.³

We usually encounter spousal love for the first time under the form of conjugal love in our parents. As we grow up, the image we had is expanded and embellished; and we begin to dream about 'Mr. Perfect,' after the likeness of what we saw in movies or read in novels.

God left his image in the union between a man and a woman. In their mutual self-gift they mirror the Trinity's relationships. Human beings were created by love and in order to love, in the image of the God

2 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo super Cantica canticorum* [SC] 85.12; On the Song of Songs IV, trans. Irene Edmonds, CF 40 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1980).

3 Karol Wojtyla (*John Paul II*), *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willetts (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1981) 97.

who is love. This is why only in the true gift of self we can discover the purpose and meaning of our lives.⁴

Marriage and conjugal love remain the usual way to learn and embrace this love, but it is not the only one. To those whom Jesus calls to himself in a special way, he offers a new path to incarnate this love: the path that he himself inaugurated living in chastity, poverty and obedience. He who called himself the Bridegroom tells us, *There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends* (Jn 15:13). It is not only on the cross that Jesus loves us and the Father to the end. All his life is a pouring out of himself, just as he poured water over the feet of the apostles (see Jn 13:1-17). Thus he opened up for us an abyss of love that surpasses our comprehension. In Saint Paul's words, "I pray that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge (Eph 3: 17-19)."

When you feel this mysterious fire in your bones as Jeremiah did, the love and zeal of Jesus himself for his

4 "Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, "that all may be one . . . as we are one" (John 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself" (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 24).

Father and for the coming of the Kingdom, you need to renounce, at least temporarily, the images of spousal love and of your future that you had created for yourself so far. Each one of us is different in this sense; it might be for you the picture of the perfect wedding, husband, family environment, and children or profession. Jesus may have envisaged another path for you, and you have to open your heart and mind a little wider to see his path, his dream with you and for you.

If you trust him and his love for you, maybe suddenly or little by little, a new song will awake in your heart, ever more beautiful, and all your being will also sing, *My soul is thirsting for you*. You won't be able to express it perfectly, but a smile in your eyes will tell it all.

When you live for the one you love, when you put in his hands your joys and sorrows, challenges, desires, past, present and future, your eyes open and begin to see without seeing. He is present to you even in the apparent absence. Then it will be clear for you how Christ can become your Spouse.

Step 3: Evangelizing our imagination.

Take some time to think about how you portray love. What images come to your mind spontaneously? Our present culture tries to sell us selfishness disguised under the image of love. Let the images of love that you find in the Old and New Testaments, the lives of the saints, and contemporary faithful Christians evangelize how your imagination depicts what love looks like. Are your images of love mostly of romantic

and passionate love? A love that is easy and makes no demands? The love that Jesus wants to offer you is much more than that. It is a love that brings true joy because it does not depend on circumstances but on the grace of God and the total gift of self for the good of another.

The only thing greater than lasting love is everlasting love, a love stronger than death. This is Jesus' love for you.

Sons shall be yours in place of your fathers

(Psalm 45:17)

Spiritual Motherhood

Spiritual motherhood—even if these precise words are not used—is one of most frequent topics in my conversations with young women discerning their vocation. The fact that those of us who have embraced religious life don't have our own biological children prompts the question of how to deal with this reality that for many women feels like a great loss.

For others the subject has a broader meaning, not restricted to the biological part of motherhood. Many of us chose a career and invested a great deal of time and effort in it. We believed that it would be not only a way to support ourselves economically but a true means of giving ourselves to others. Is all that going to be wasted if I become a sister? How am I going to be able to contribute with my talents and training to give life and build a more faithful Church, a better

humanity, a more beautiful world? In other words, how is my life going to be fruitful if I follow a call to religious life?

It's easy for those of us who haven't had children to idealize motherhood. When couples with little ones come to visit us or to pray at our church, they bring me back to reality pretty quickly. Only the great love of good parents can navigate without complaint from the most beautiful and candid embrace of their child to the worst kind of tantrum, all in a split second. This scene takes different forms, but it is repeated many times from early childhood to adolescence, and even later... In truth, motherhood, either physical or spiritual, is meant to lead us from the selfish child who lives inside each one of us to the love that is total selfless gift. The question is: do we want to take the challenge?

Even though Mary of Nazareth was asked to give her consent before she became a mother, the Mother of Our Lord, I think we can catalogue her motherhood among those that are unplanned. Consider the first words she addressed to the angel: "How can this be (Lk 1:34)?" You may have similar doubts. I do not think the description of the child whose mother she was going to become was very reassuring. When she pronounced her *fiat*, things were not clear at all for her. Probably angels do not show up openly too often because, if we were going to ask them all our questions, they would not have a chance to leave! Our Mother, on the contrary, trusted completely and set out on the new way that opened before her (Lk 1:39).

Mary had to learn on the way: from Galilee to Judea and back, then to Bethlehem, Egypt, and back to Nazareth. What did she ponder in her heart (see Lk 2:19, 51)? Would she revisit the scenes of her own life as we do when we pray the rosary? Maybe this is why she invites us to the same. Treasuring in her heart the mysteries of her Son, her life became prayer, and so will ours. This life of prayer prepared her to give away her Son on the cross, and give herself with him. Thus she became the Mother of us all (see Jn 19:25b-27).

When all our being becomes prayer, we are true spiritual mothers or fathers. Saint Rafael Arnáiz, who died in 1938 in a Trappist-Cistercian monastery when he was twenty-seven years old, taught me this lesson. Pope Saint John Paul II proposed him as a model for youth in 1989, and he is a perfect patron for those who are discerning their vocation, as he had to go through innumerable obstacles to respond to Jesus' call to follow him.

During one of the times he had to leave the monastery because of the illness that finally caused his death, his younger sister became terminally ill. The doctors said there was no cure, and the girl was suffering acute pain. This is how Rafael relates the situation to a close relative: "She [his sister] would look at me in such a way . . . if you could imagine, as if she was telling me: What are you doing, Rafael, that you don't pray to Our Lady?. . . Then I, like a crazy man, would go to the tabernacle, and I would offer to Our Lady my sister's prayer; mine was worth nothing . . . I would ask the Lord that he would send me all that pain, that he would make me suffer and that my sister would rest

in this life or in the other. . . .”⁵(373-374). Rafael’s prayer was worth more than what he thought, and the girl was miraculously cured after one of his visits to the tabernacle. How many are looking at us, even in despair, and consciously or unconsciously asking that we raise up their needs to the hands of our Mother? Who will be those willing to take upon themselves the pain of humanity and bring it to the Lord present in the tabernacle? We become spiritual mothers when our whole being becomes the prayer of those in need, of those who do not know how to pray.

Mary gave her body and blood to her Son, who became man in her womb. When you listen to his word and put it into practice, you also become his mother (see Lk 8:21) allowing him to remain present in the world through you. You will be his face, his hands, his feet. All your talents will be needed, even the ones you did not know you had, to serve and simply be comfort and hope for so many sons and daughters in need of love. Many are those who have none of this most precious kind of wine (see Jn 2:1-11). Yes, you will be turned into new wine, and your body and soul will become an altar for “a sacrifice of praise” (Heb 13:15), praying like Mary, with Mary: “Lord, send out your Spirit and renew the face of the Earth.”

Step 4: Boosting our zeal for the Kingdom.

When we pray the Our Father we say “Thy kingdom

5 Hermano Rafael Arnáiz Barón, *Obras Completas* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2011) 436. The complete works of Saint Rafael Arnáiz Barón are being translated into English.

come.” This phrase is not meant to be an abstract statement—*thy kingdom come*, but I am not going to move a finger—but a commitment to work for the kingdom. As Christians, we are called to see the world through this lens, thinking not how we can profit the most from society but what we can do to build up the Kingdom of God here and now. This desire is the measure of your zeal. Motherhood, either physical or spiritual, is meant to shift our view from what I can get to what I can give. So, what can you give? Look into your heart and recognize the talents you have received from God (writing them down is always helpful for greater clarity). With gratitude turn to the Lord and ask him the grace to offer them to him for the coming of his Kingdom. Make this offering, like the child who gave Jesus his five loaves and two fish (see Jn 6:1-14). You will be surprised at the miracle!

Your Arrows are Sharp (Psalm 45:5)
The Religious Vows

If you have ever been in love, you may remember how suddenly you started being interested in things that might have been of little importance to you before you knew that *he* liked them. It could be a sport, going hiking or any other hobby or type of music. What mattered is that he liked it, and you wanted to know about it too.

Jesus earthly life had three clearly marked features: He remained celibate, he was poor, and he lived in obedience to his Father. There are deep theological reasons why all religious profess these three vows, but

the basic one is very simple: we want to live as he lived.

These three vows are incomprehensible for some people. They seem to wound us in our basic dimensions as human beings: our capacity to love, having a husband and forming a family of our own; the means to provide for our own needs; and the free use of our will. The vows are like arrows; in some way they open a wound in us, depriving us of something good and very much needed for our human nature. But at the same time they take us much deeper, beyond ourselves, and extend our capacities in unexpected ways. Like the poor widow in the gospel (see Lk 21:1-4), we are putting all we have in the treasure of the temple. It is my little coin, but it was all I had to live on, and also to live for. Now he has to provide for me: Jesus will be the source of the love I give and receive; the one who ultimately takes care of all my needs; and the goal and meaning of all I do or do not do. This is not only a beautiful ideal, a thought or a feeling that can change or pass. I commit myself to live in this way. I do it for Christ, and in fidelity to the gift of the charism of the religious family that receives me, in the service of the Church and for the salvation of the world. Through the vows truly my soul clings to him and his hand holds me fast (see Ps 63:8). I choose to need him, to depend on him, and to my own surprise, he chooses to need me too in a mysterious way, to make me his: "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Is 62:5).

Some orders take a fourth vow that expresses in a peculiar way their mission in the Church, to which

they want to be particularly faithful. So the Missionaries of Charity have a vow of "wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor," and the Sisters of Life a vow to "protect and enhance the sacredness of life." The Benedictine and Cistercian tradition organizes the vows in a slightly different way, adding the vow of stability. We commit ourselves to live with a monastic community for the rest of our lives and to use all the tools that the monastic tradition provides for our sanctification. In this way we profess before this restless world that when things get tough, the solution is not to run but to remain, because "steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord" (Ps 62:12). For this same reason, even though initially all sisters pronounce temporary vows, once the stages of formation are completed, those vows are perpetual or solemn. Love needs to be forever or it is not love.

So it is important to understand that the vows are much more than the renunciations they imply: no husband, no children, no sex, no ownership or control over material goods and no doing my own will. Just imagine a betrothed woman thinking primarily about the fact that if she marries she will have to renounce the rest of the men in the world. What would you think?

When Jesus invited the rich young man to follow him (see Mk 10:17-22), the young man only understood that this meant to sacrifice what he possessed. Jesus' focus, on the contrary, was not on what the young man had to leave behind, but on what he wanted to offer him, namely, himself, and in himself, happiness and eternal life. Jesus sees what we lack, and he wants to

give himself to us as the bread of life who will satisfy our deepest desire. He is the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field (see Mt 13:44-45) for whom it is worth selling all with joy.

Step 5: Positive thinking.

Make a list of the blessings that the religious vows can bring to your life, things like the freedom that comes from belonging to Christ and loving so many people with his love, or not having to worry about material possessions—if you wear a habit, you don't even have to think about what to wear each morning; that is a liberation! Many will remind you what you will have to give up. Reflect and write about the many gifts that God may want to grant you through your consecration. Jesus was not a masochist. The way of life he chose is full of blessings. What can these blessings be for you?

They pass within the palace of the king

(Psalm 44:16)

Finding a Community

The great creativity of the Spirit is shown in the incredible variety of religious orders in the Church. If God is calling you to religious life, there are sisters somewhere to help you discover, respond to, and finally live this call for the rest of your life. The end of Psalm 86 always cheers up my heart: “In you all find their home” (Ps 86:7). It is a promise; in Christ we find our true home, the place where we belong. In truth it is he who finds it for us, and you should keep

this in mind when you contact a religious community so that you can move forward in your discernment. Trusting that he leads the way, as he always does, will help you to be less anxious or worried about the future.

It is possible that in the process of discernment you already have a sense of what kind of order or religious institute you should look for: active or contemplative, with what kind of ministry or spirituality. Search for signs in your heart: what attracts you, what do you truly desire. If you don't see it clearly, don't be too quick to refuse this or that form of religious life thinking, "He cannot possibly call me to that." Entrust all these feelings to the Lord in prayer, and talk about them with your spiritual director. Try to be like a child who presents what she has with open hands, follow the light and see what doors open.

In all religious communities you should be able to find these common elements: the Eucharist as center and source, liturgical and personal prayer, and attentive listening to the Word of God; fidelity to the charism received and put at the service of the Church of today and lived in communion with its pastors; mutual care and support among the sisters in this common endeavor to become one in Christ so that the world may believe; and the total consecration of oneself to God through the religious vows. But each order was born at a concrete moment of the history of the Church and with a particular mission. This fact shapes the common elements of religious life into different forms. When the Church approves a new order, it certifies not only that its mission—either of

active ministry or through prayer—is a gift for the good of the Church as a whole, but that it is also a true way of sanctification for its members.

So it is not a matter of visiting many communities and trying to find which one is the best. It does not work that way, just as you don't try to date as many men as possible at the same time to see which one you would like to marry. This will only make you more confused. Unless you are taking part in a "Nun run" of your diocese or parish, go slowly, leaving time so that what you have seen and experienced can settle in your heart and be presented to the Lord in prayer before you visit another community. Even if this is not the place for you, there is a lesson for you to learn. Don't move too fast or you will miss it.

When you visit a religious community, try to look at everything with new eyes and a grateful heart. You are not going shopping; you are following the Lord wherever he leads you. Jesus, the King of kings, made of a stable his first palace and of a cross his throne. Each religious community where he remains the goal and the center of the lives of the sisters that compose it is his true home and a place where he dwells in a very special way, but it may take some of the humility of the Magi and the faith of the centurion to discover his presence, bow and worship him. Try to go beyond your own plans and ideas; only the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies bears fruit (see Jn 12:24). Maybe the first thing that needs to die is your sense of comfort and false security. In the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI: "You were not made for comfort. You were made for greatness."

Open your soul with sincerity to the vocation director, the sister entrusted to help you in your discernment. You cannot discern your vocation alone, just as you won't be able to live it without the help and support of a community. Communal life is an essential part of the religious vocation. The sisters will share with you the treasure they have. Don't judge or disdain it because it is carried in earthen vessels (see 2 Cor 4:7). Ponder in your heart and open yourself to the Spirit. Don't be afraid, the door is not bolted behind you. It will take years of formation before you have to make a final decision and make a commitment. Be patient. This might be either your final destination or a station closer to it. Little by little things will become clearer.

Step 6: Contacting a community.

Do you have a clear idea to what kind of religious community God may be calling you? If you do, contact them. A short email or letter sharing a bit about yourself and your vocational discernment, and asking if you could come for a visit will do.

If you don't know yet, after saying a prayer to the Holy Spirit, write down what specific aspects of religious life are particularly attractive to you: for example, a certain apostolate like working with the poor in a foreign country, or a life completely dedicated to prayer in a community that fosters silence and solitude. Don't be afraid, let your heart flow and offer it to the Lord, asking him to find for you a community that would help you to fulfil the deepest desires he has put in your heart, even those desires you may not be able to recognize at this moment.

Speak with your spiritual director about these elements that attract you most, and listen to his or her advice. The Internet can also be a good tool for searching, but don't spend thousands of hours surfing the web checking one website after another; this will most probably make you more confused.

When you find a community that you think might be good soil for you, reach out. If it is not the place for you, often the Sisters can be the best ones to help you find another religious community that would be a better answer to your call.

Gird your sword upon your thigh (Psalm 45:3)
Go for It!

God's love lasts forever. That is good, very good. But a vocational discernment that lasts forever is not good. I sometimes wonder about people discerning for many years but still have no or very little idea of what their vocation might be. They seem to be either stuck or floating on the waters of indecision; placed at an intersection in their lives they do not take a path in any direction.

Why do some people seem to be able to discern relatively quickly, and decide to take a course of action that would help them confirm their initial insights, while others seem to be caught in some kind of perpetual discernment state that remains unresolved? The obvious answer is that we all are different. One size doesn't fit all. But there is at least

one more factor that it is good to take into account. Bishop Fulton Sheen said that some people complain that they don't get anything out of Mass, but this is because they don't bring anything into it. God's ways are definitely mysterious. No one is more creative than him. He has an original path for each one to follow, and his grace works differently for each one of us. But there are still common traits, and we can say about discernment what Bishop Fulton Sheen said about the Mass: often we don't get anything out of it because we don't bring anything or very little into it.

If you are not ready to make any sacrifices, especially of your time, you may not get too far in your discernment. If you start to discern but are not faithful to the plan of prayer, spiritual reading, etc. that you have made, or if you have no plan, it will be much more difficult for you to be able to listen to what the Lord wants to tell you. If you set out on this journey but you soon give up, put it on the back burner, and start dating without giving it much thought or making any conscious decisions, then after some time you start discerning again, and so on and so forth, you will not be able to have clarity to recognize your deepest heart's desire.

You may or may not like military imagery, but discernment is a spiritual battle. "Gird your sword upon your thigh", says Psalm 45:3. You are going to need a spiritual sword when temptations press on such as wanting immediate results, not being faithful to your prayer routine or listening to negative voices outside or inside your head. If this happens and you fail, humbly recognize your weaknesses and sins and

ask the Lord for the grace to start anew. Often our falls can teach us as much or more about the Lord and his ways with us than our triumphs. Go for it! Don't give up!

There is another important factor that will directly affect your discernment process—we need to realize your deepest motivations, why you are discerning. Yes, you are discerning because you love God, and you want to trust him, but the quality of our love can vary. Let me explain this. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux in his treatise *On Loving God* speaks about four degrees of love. Let's consider them very briefly applying them to the process of discernment.

1. First degree of love: *We love ourselves for our own sake.*

God and anyone else are mostly out of the picture. My life is about me, me, and me. Bernard thinks that self-love is important and necessary—we need to take care of ourselves at all levels—but when my own desires are the measure for reality, I end up misusing everything, including myself. How do I make decisions at this degree? If it feels good, it is good. If it feels bad, it is bad. No true discernment is possible at that level, because all will depend on how I feel, and this changes constantly—feelings come and go. There is no reference to truth because there is no true reference to reality. The ego occupies all the stage. A sign hangs on my door: Do not disturb.

2. Second degree of love: *We love God for our own sake.*

My own misery has forced me to open the door. I

realize I cannot achieve the happiness I long for by myself. I leave the door partly open; God and others can come in, but on my own terms. I start praying. Maybe God will help me get out of this. I go to him if feelings of comfort come, if not, I am tempted to give up. But if my needs or the needs of those I have begun to care for are pressing enough, I may persist in prayer, and start discovering something more, something I did not expect: what if God really cares for me even more than I do? Discernment can start at this level. The reasoning process is simple—God knows everything and he cares for me, should I not ask him about his plans for my life? Yes, it would be good to find out. My trust in him is still weak, I am far from total surrender, but I want to have his help. OK, God, would you please tell me what you want?

3. Third degree of love: *We love God for his own sake.* As I press on with this journey, I realize that I have tasted the Lord's sweetness, the Lord's love for me, and this changes everything. This experience is more enticing than any of my needs. I pray, attend Mass, I read the Bible, because I want to be with him. I need him, but now it is not so much that I want to have my needs satisfied, but that I want to be in communion with him at a deep level and to be his light for others. He is more important than my own ideas of how things should be. Now I really want to listen him. I recognize my sins and weaknesses but I want to give him all. He is my peace. Discernment now is not so much about getting an answer, finding a solution, but about following him into the deep and letting him transform me. I believe that in this process my true self will emerge and the best way to serve him and

others will become apparent. My vocation will be clearer and clearer as I follow the steps that flow from a committed life of love to him and the coming of his Kingdom.

4. Fourth degree of love: *We love ourselves for the sake of God.*

I have come full circle. Bernard says that this degree is experienced only briefly in this life. But even if it is only for a split second, I would not change this for anything. This is the joy that nothing can take from us (see Jn 16:22), the truth that sets us free (see Jn 8:32), the strength of the martyrs under open persecution and of those who give themselves daily in constant acts of love.

God's love has filled me, so much so that I forget myself, I forgot the needs that had formerly fully occupied my mind and heart. I have discovered that my life is not about myself. Discernment is then about finding what I can give, how I can serve. Love has driven away fear (see 1Jn 4:18). My prayer is, "Here am I. Send me" (Is 6:8).

These degrees are not static. Sometimes the Lord may give us a special grace in prayer, and we feel full of joy and love. Filled with these emotions we tell him that we are ready to give him everything. At other times, we get distracted with too many things, and we become lukewarm following our discernment plan—we start skipping the time we have designated for prayer or Mass, or we neglect going to confession when we know we need it—then our love for God gets colder, we forget gratitude and everything is again centered around ourselves. This should not catch us by

surprise. In many cases, people do not abandon the practice of their faith for great reasons, it simply slips away, little by little, and one day they realize they have stopped praying or going to church. Our present Western culture seems to have gentle hands, but its touch can be fatal with its anti-Christian and consumerist ideas. When we are not alert, the evil one takes advantage of it, he is never idle. "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Mt 10:16). Our Catholic tradition provides us with all the tools we need to stay fit in our faith but we need to use them.

Discernment is part of the path of Christian discipleship. Why are you following Jesus? Why are you discerning? Our vocation, as our concrete way of embodying the Christian life, responds to our deepest desires, develops our best talents, and helps us become the saints we are called to be. All the pieces of this puzzle that forms the image of your vocation are already within you. Dig deeper and you will find them. In your call, there is a sense of continuity with the person you have already been, the best dreams you have ever had. But there is also a sense of interruption, of novelty. God is always more. You can ask him questions, but let him ask you questions too. He will question you through his Word, in your prayer, and through others; then a new vision of reality will emerge, and a new vision of yourself in it. All this is the greatest miracle we can experience, but it won't happen without your work and cooperation. Are you ready?

Step 7: Do you love me? (Jn 21:17)

At the end, this is the only question that matters to Jesus, if we love him and if we are ready to feed his sheep. But love is much more than a pretty feeling. How deep is your love for Jesus? How far are you willing to go for him? Sit in prayer, and read again the four degrees of love described in this chapter. With humility recognize where you are. Be thankful for the graces received. Ask Jesus to give you his strength to overcome the obstacles, and commit yourself before him to do your part of the work.

They are escorted amid gladness and joy

(Psalm 44: 16)

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). Yes, if Jesus is whispering in the ear of your heart that he desires your beauty—the beauty he himself put in you as he created you and clothed you in the new life brought by his death and resurrection—he is doing so for your own sake. He desires your happiness, your good and all the good that will come to others through the gift of yourself to him. This will make your joy complete.

There might be some birth pains in this process (see Jn 16:20-21). Expect to be stretched and pushed beyond your comfort zone. If this does not happen at some stage of the way, something may be lacking. The discernment process like our own conversion needs to follow the Paschal pattern: there is a certain death,

but it ends in resurrection and a joy that no one can take from us (see Jn 16:22).

As you walk along the path of discernment, you will come to the realization that what you are doing is not so much about choosing but about aligning your will with God's will until they become one. Little by little you are adjusting your ways to God's ways; learning to see, hear, feel at a deeper level the Lord's loving presence in your life and personal story.

When we think about discernment as choosing, often we anxiously try to gather as much information as possible to make the best decision, and we start bombarding God asking for a sign. As you have probably already experienced, this does not work too well most of the time.

Have you ever gone to a chiropractor? When you put yourself in their expert hands, they adjust your bones, aligning your spine and joints so that your body can function properly. There might be some unpleasant noises in the process, and even some sore muscles afterwards until they get used to being back into their right position. It is not magic and it does not happen once for all. You need to cooperate and work on keeping a good posture and exercise. But with his or her help and your work, you will soon experience that your body functions much better, free and loose. This is very much like the process we have been talking about. Gradually we are aligning our will with God's will through his grace and the tools you have read about in the previous pages. It takes some effort and discipline, but the results will be amazing: your true

self will emerge with new joy and freedom, ready to love and serve in the way proper to your vocation.

Does this mean that we should not ask for signs? Just stop for a minute and look at your life. Has not God already given you many signs? He will send a confirming sign when the appropriate time comes, but when we pester him, we make ourselves blind to recognize his true action. What can be a greater sign of his love than his cross? What better sign of his providential care than each breath he grants you? He gave you your first breath and he will lovingly receive your last.

Instead of signs I prefer to talk about the *Visitations of the Word*, as the Cistercian tradition does. As the Lord had a first coming with the Incarnation and will have a second coming at the end of time, he comes to visit us in between, making himself more perceptible to our limited spiritual senses, even though at a deeper level he remains always with us. Be alert but do not look for the extraordinary. If you are not vigilant you can easily miss him. He comes and goes like the charming light of the fireflies. You will not perceive it if your heart is full of artificial lights or if you are not willing to walk in the mysterious darkness of faith.

But is the light of the fireflies unreal because we cannot control it or predict it? Of course not! Count your “fireflies”—these unexpected insights—as you count your blessings. Ponder over them; do not let them pass unnoticed, and they will lead you to your place of destination, to him who said, “I am the light of the World” (Jn 8:12). The path to him is the path

to discover and live your vocation.

Jesus is our joy, our peace, our everything... If you hear his voice saying “come,” don’t hesitate. Now you, like Peter, can walk on the water (see Mt 14:22-33). Keep your eyes fixed on him, even if the wind starts blowing; you will never regret it. And remember, “Nothing is impossible for believers, nothing difficult for lovers”⁶.

Step 8: Walking on water.

Yes, you can! Jesus is giving you the grace to walk over your fears and doubts; you can walk past them if you faithfully use the tools I have mentioned in the different chapters. Have you written your discernment plan as I suggested in step 2? If you haven’t, this is the time to do it. If you have, recommit yourself to follow it as best you can each day of your discernment process. Wherever it takes you, you will not regret it. You will see your faith, love, and hope growing like a beautiful and healthy plant. But “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2Cor 9:6-7). You are like beautiful land where a treasure is hidden. Jesus has given all he had to buy back this land for you, because you are for him of the

6 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on Conversion*, trans. Marie-Bernard Saïd OSB, CF 25 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981) 76.

greatest value (see Mt 13: 44). Now he asks you to dig deeper and find the treasure of your vocation as a means to give his love to others. Will you do it for him? There is no greater joy.

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