

# FROM THE PASTOR'S



**Fourth Sunday of Easter  
May 3, 2009 B**

## **THE STORY OF A CALL TO RELIGIOUS LIFE**

Traditionally, the fourth Sunday of Easter has been called *Good Shepherd Sunday* because the gospel is always an excerpt from John 10, in which Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd. It is a Sunday for us at Church to pray that all the men and women whom God is calling to religious life, will hear and answer God's call with generosity.

### **The call of Sr. Melissa**

The following account of Melissa Blankestyn's call to religious life appeared in the March 2009 edition of *St. Anthony Messenger*.

What does it feel like when God calls you?

Melissa Blankestyn says that in November 2003 "God reached down and grabbed a two-by-four and beat me about the head." This was her first inkling that she might be called to religious life.

Melissa thought she was insane and didn't tell anyone. She decided the idea was just stress from too much debt and a bad relationship. She managed to bury the thought for six months.

But God was patient.

On Pentecost, the day the Catholic Church celebrates the Holy Spirit's descent upon the apostles, God called Melissa again. She watched from outside her body as she walked down the aisle of St. Joseph Church in Bradley, Illinois, and picked up a flyer on vocations.

*What are you doing here, Melissa?* She thought.

Later, she told the Dominicans that she felt insane, that she knew nothing about becoming a sister. And it was the most "right" thing that had ever popped into her head.

### **Starting a new chapter**

In August 2006, Melissa, then 30, began a new life as a Springfield Dominican candidate at the order's motherhouse in Springfield, Illinois. The rest of the world might see what she left behind: her bank account, her car, a job she loved, and the chance for marriage and children. But Melissa knew what she was embracing: a joyful life of prayer, service and community with enough time and space to feel God's presence. She would truly belong.

Melissa was excited to live, work and pray with a group of women who have similar calls in life.

"Any time I'm with any members of the community, I feel like I'm just where I'm supposed to be," she says.

She was sad to leave her orchestra students at Bradley-Bourbonnais High School and reluctant to turn her car keys over to her parents. But once you hear God's voice and recognize its truth, it is hard to turn back.

Melissa felt God gave her an invitation, one that she accepted. She describes her candidate year and discernment process as a time of growing into that invitation. She says she gave her "yes" to religious life when she walked through the motherhouse door, but that she has to recommit herself daily.

One Bible passage that has inspired Melissa throughout her transition is the story from Matthew 14 when Jesus invites Peter to walk on water. She feels that God is persistently calling her to have courage, to get out of the boat. In order to get to Jesus, she, like Peter, had to leave behind a secure and familiar environment. This meant giving up her job and career path and accepting a new, undefined identity.

"When you make a big change like I did, all the labels, all the titles are taken away. You get to know yourself not as a band director, daughter, teacher, friend," says Melissa.

### **A Candidate's life**

As a candidate, Melissa, the teacher, became Melissa, the full-time student. She eagerly embraced studying Scripture and theology. She learned about how to be a vowed religious not only through several hours a week of formal one-on-one class time, but also just by living in the formation community.

In formation, she and four professed sisters shared a special wing, separate from the motherhouse, with their own common areas, kitchen and individual bedrooms. This arrangement is similar to the other small communities that make up the larger Springfield Dominican congregation. Each group shares meals, responsibilities and leisure time.

Accompanying each other through life is a hallmark of Dominican identity.

### **Time in prayer**

When Melissa describes the formation community's typical activities—cooking, prayer, cleaning—she illustrates how prayer and everyday tasks are interwoven.

In religious life, the days are shaped and ordered by prayer. It is the foundation of all that the sisters do. After her own individual prayer time at 6:00 a.m., Melissa prayed with the formation community at 7:00 a.m., attended Mass with the whole motherhouse community

at 7:25 a.m. and then prayed again with the formation community before their evening meal. Melissa also set aside time each Thursday afternoon for prayer.

“Some days I wish I could just pray all afternoon, once I settle in,” she says.

By removing themselves from the world and spending time with God, the sisters are able to reconnect with people in a more meaningful way. One of the mottoes of the Dominican Order is “having contemplated, to give to others the fruit of our contemplation.”

For Melissa, time in prayer allowed her to develop her relationship with God. This gave her a greater awareness of God’s unconditional love for her. It also gave her an awareness and reverence for God’s presence in others.

“My challenge is to share that with people I encounter every day,” Melissa says.

Some of the ways she has ministered to others are as a volunteer at the Springfield AIDS Resource Association and by playing her clarinet at the motherhouse’s Mass. Sister Rose Marie Riley, O.P., the congregation’s prioress general, noticed Melissa’s joy at discovering God in her life.

“Even in the midst of questioning and wondering, that joy was very consistent,” says Sister Rose Marie.

### **Adapting to Religious Life**

In convent life the sacred and mundane coexist. Sister Marlene Kirbach posted a countdown to Melissa’s rite of initiation as a novice on the refrigerator. Casual jokes and familial interactions are part of the way the sisters encourage each other.

“There is a feeling of support that provides me with the freedom to be myself without fear,” Melissa wrote in an essay for her Dominican history class, “Dominican Spirit and Life.”

The congregation’s vocation director, Sister Lori Kirchman, O.P., saw that Melissa came to know and accept herself better. “There is such a desire to learn and know and understand God and other people,” Sister Lori says. “What is already innate in her just kind of blossomed.”

The difficulty of leaving her career has lessened over time for Melissa. “There are still days I see a teenager and think, ‘Oh, I’d love to go be in a classroom for a while,’” she admits. Yet at the same time she is very conscious that this is a special time in her life, a gift that she won’t have again. She tries to immerse herself fully in this opportunity to grow in relationship with God, herself and her community.

Melissa said that the challenges of adapting to religious life are different for each person. For her, it felt natural to go from being independent to interdependent. And she describes relating to people of all ages as one of her gifts. It was simply not an issue for her that most of

the sisters at the motherhouse are more than twice her age.

Her personal hurdle is the constant challenge of living simply, of discerning want from need. Formation director Sister Theodora Stremmlau, O.P., says that each person has to figure out what the vows of poverty and simplicity mean to her. She notes that leaving one’s possessions behind is a more complicated process today than it was when most sisters entered right after high school and didn’t have their own car or apartment, or a full life of friends and colleagues.

“It’s a lot of letting go,” says Sister Theodora.

### **Moving Forward**

Yet each day that passes is another day that Melissa faces these challenges, sees the water below and steps forward to Jesus.

The path ahead is long. Candidacy was the beginning of a gradual, mutual courtship. The transition to full-fledged religious life takes at least eight years; Melissa won’t be a fully professed sister until 2014.

In August 2007 she and the Springfield Dominicans made the next level of commitment to each other. She received a new title—novice—and a new name—*Sister* Melissa.

Sister Melissa then spent time living and studying in St. Louis at the Collaborative Dominican Novitiate, a community of novices from different Dominican congregations. For the first time she is surrounded by other people beginning their vowed religious lives.

“We’re learners,” Sister Melissa says, referring to the experience of building community with three other women, as well as their formal classes at Aquinas Institute of Theology. She dedicates one day a week to prayer and volunteers at the Mary Ryder Home, an assisted living facility for seniors in need. The musician and former music teacher knew that her gut instinct to volunteer at the home was right when the director asked her, “You’re not a musician, are you? Because we could really use some help with the choir.”

In August 2008, Sister Melissa returned to the music classroom and worked with the band at Marian Catholic High School in Chicago Heights, Illinois. Currently she is back at the Springfield motherhouse, taking classes and work in part-time ministry.

Have a blessed week,

