

## **Answering The Call To Be A Sister Of Life** **By Marlena Loughheed**



As a child, I wanted to be famous. It wasn't so much that I wanted to be well known or revered. Rather, I wanted my life to matter. In my limited childhood understanding, fame was the reward for a life that mattered. These innocent childhood longings expose the true desire of the human heart to be known and loved. They point to our inherent dignity and our call to greatness.

My post-secondary studies were directed toward satiating my appetite for human connection and my love of storytelling. I earned degrees in communications and journalism. My studies and internships allowed me to live in six major North American cities in six years. By the time I was 25, I was well-educated, well-travelled and landed my dream job as a faithful young Catholic in the Office of Public Relations and Communications at the Archdiocese of Toronto. Life in Toronto is noisy. And I'm not just talking about traffic and the ambulances that fly over my apartment regularly on their way to St. Michael's Hospital. For a young professional, Toronto provides endless stimulus. It is the perfect place to experience all the things the world suggests will lead to fulfillment.

For five years, I've lived the abundant Toronto life. I could be the poster child for well-adjusted millennials, complete with fancy road bike and regular consumption of kale. In fact, I once was featured in a prominent ad campaign for the Toronto Yonge Street 10k race, flashing a huge smile and a double thumbs-up as I ran seemingly effortlessly through the city, a model of health and leisure. My work, friendships and hobbies are inherently good and I do my best to orient these things toward God. But these things, when elevated beyond their proper place, can add to the noise that distracts from the voice of God that speaks in the silence. It's the voice that calls out to that place of childhood innocence and pure desire, inviting me into the greatness for which I was made.

In the midst of a good life in Canada's noisiest city, that gentle voice continued its lifelong pursuit of my heart. This pursuit became increasingly personal and powerful. As I made more intentional time to listen, suddenly that voice became louder than all the other noise in my life. C.S. Lewis wisely writes in *Till We Have Faces*, "It was when I was happiest that I longed most.... The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing ... to find the place where all the beauty came from."

My life is an embarrassment of riches, yet I still find myself asking bigger questions: What is the appropriate outlet for my life and my love? How am I called to attain Heaven for myself and those around me? How can I best use my gifts to bring Christ to the world? In His great mercy and personal love, the Lord used very ordinary circumstances in my life to reveal the answers to these questions. He used my work. He used relationships. He even used sports analogies.

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I, an ordinary 30-year-old, am called to religious life. In 2015, the Catholic Church celebrated the Year of Consecrated Life. I was assigned a project to feature the vocation stories of a handful of religious men and women serving in our archdiocese. I diligently went to work, sharing the beauty of religious life with my audience in video and print. I suppose it was somewhat naïve to think my heart would remain untouched by this beauty.

In spite of being a practising Catholic my whole life, I hadn't had much personal contact with women religious. Suddenly my life was filled with young, joyful sisters who had obviously encountered Christ and happily responded to His call. I became friends with the Sisters of Life, a young, vibrant order based in New York and present in downtown Toronto, where they serve women in crisis pregnancies. Their fourth vow (after poverty, chastity and obedience) is to protect and enhance the sacredness of human life. I saw their charism of life play out in how they love people for who they are, not what they can do. "We serve not because we are good, but because others are good," I once heard a Sister of Life say. Essentially, they love with the heart of Christ. And they are so joyful and normal while doing it.

Gradually, I saw an abundance of signs that my heart was made to love in this way. I saw how my desire to joyfully serve the Lord with my life that had been partially fulfilled through my career in the Church could come to completion in religious life, where I could serve with a totally undivided heart. I saw so many ways that I could use my gifts to achieve true greatness by living for others.

The most beautiful part is I'm running toward Christ and not away from a less-than-ideal life. It is because I have abundantly tasted the goodness of life that I desire to help others to live fully and know the dignity of human life. Nothing in my life has made more sense than setting aside temporary goods for the sake of this eternal goal.

Inside every young person living a noisy existence are those pure childhood desires to make our lives matter and live for more than ourselves. Every time hedonism is exercised as a response to the quest for happiness, young people are robbed of the possibility to attain the fulfillment that comes from living for others.

Love is a choice. It's a hard choice that requires radical sacrifice and resisting fleeting happiness — those things that feel good for a while but ultimately leave us longing for true greatness.

It is for love alone that I quit my dream job, am getting rid of my walk-in closet full of clothes, am leaving behind my amateur triathlon career, my friends and the possibility of a family of my own.

Two years ago, this was unfathomable. But mercifully, the Lord knows my heart and never ceases to pursue it, even when I am unworthy of His love. He spoke in a way that only I could understand and gave me the freedom to respond when I was ready.

Love broke through the noise of my life and offered the answer to the deepest longings of my heart. Like anyone in love, once I saw that I was called to love Christ as His spouse, the peripherals didn't matter. The only appropriate response was to put my stuff for sale on Kijiji and run toward the greatness for which I was made.

We are all made to be united with Christ forever in Heaven. It is the greatest privilege and mystery of my life that I am potentially called to witness this to the world. On Sept. 9, I entered postulancy with the Sisters of Life in New York, where I can more intentionally discern the call to a spousal union with Christ.

I am not called because I am particularly holy or worthy, but because I am loved. In this noisy world, love needs to be known. In a strange but perfect series of events, it appears I'm one of the people who has been entrusted in a special way with love's volume button. In the infamous words of Jennifer Lopez, "Let's get loud."