

How Can God call a California Beach Girl to be a Sister?

Sr. Kathy Bryant, RSC

It all began when I was a junior at San Clemente High. A gentle tug in my heart to consider religious life was the beginning of an exciting life that I could never have imagined at that time. It is as if God took the simple piece of who I was at that time, full of fears and self-doubts, and has continued to create a living quilt of diverse ministries, people and countries.

That was 31 years ago. As a Religious Sister of Charity (RSC) God has given me more than I could have ever hoped for. I lived in the bush of Africa for the happiest five years of my life where I was nicknamed "Sr. Namoonga." God called me to teach in Ireland and to study spiritual direction in Wales. As a pianist I earned a degree in music, taught elementary and high school in California and worked on retreats and liturgies. Along with 50 other sisters and priests I ran the L.A. Marathon for Vocations 5 times. My life has been so full and rich that I couldn't ask for more.

How did God move me from fears about becoming a sister to such enthusiasm and peace? Through prayer and more prayer. For an hour a day I sat and listened to God. And God's love enabled me to let go of fears and doubts in order to be an active, loving and joyful sister today. That hour a day still keeps me energized.

Community Bonds

Since I am the oldest of eight children, my brothers and sisters were concerned that my life as a sister would be boring and lonely. I can honestly say that I have never had one boring day. I have had some lonely moments at times, but my life has been blessed with intimate, loving relationships with many people.

Whether I have lived in the United States, Ireland or Africa, I have lived in community with our other sisters. Because each community shares a common bond and vision, I discovered that I could walk into a convent of ours in other countries and feel right at home even though I knew no one. This experience taught me that each religious community creates an atmosphere that grows out of a shared history and tradition. Even though I didn't know the sisters, there was a common understanding of who we are and have been for years.

I think that the happiest time in community for me was in 1983 when I was living in a community with four RSC's, each from a different country; yet there was a unity of minds and hearts that bound us together. We lived in Namwala, Zambia, a place so remote that there was no telephone, TV, newspaper, or gas station for miles. Our community life consisted in not only praying together but also sitting around a fire at night telling stories. What happened there around the fire was the same thing as what first drew me to enter the convent. I discovered that sisters could have a great time and a lot of fun just being with one another. I have enjoyed the times we've spent

singing together, story telling, teasing and joking with each other, as well as moments when we shared faith.

I remember a time when I was living in Zambia, when the pump at the river broke down and consequently there was no running water for 10 days. We had some water for drinking but none for washing! The river was not safe for swimming as it was infested with crocodiles, snakes, hippos and bilharzia. On the 10th day, two African sisters and myself went down to see what we could do. We brought buckets and skimmed water off the top, poured it through a net and began washing. Since we were also singing and laughing the hippos resented this noisy intrusion and began to bellow. All of a sudden God's sense of humor was very vivid. Here I was on a river bank, with the hippos complaining, with my community, in the middle of Africa. I started laughing and rejoicing at the way God could bring me from the beach in California to this particular riverbank!

Loneliness and Tears

It's not that there haven't been hard times. Once I remember waking up in the middle of the night in Zambia feeling lonely. I went into the little chapel and prayed, "God, you got me here so you had better take care of me." Any letter written to my family would take 3 weeks to arrive and 6 for a response. There was no phone to pick up and call a friend. I opened my Bible without direction, and there lay the passage in which Jesus promises that anyone who leaves their country, family, etc. will receive hundreds of mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. With that I went back to bed.

The next morning at school, a Zambian teacher walked up to me and said, "Sister Namoonga, I am your uncle and you are my niece." I wondered what he meant until I discovered that the role of the uncle in Tonga tribe was to advise the niece, protect and look after her. And so that promise of Jesus came true to me. It has come true many times as I tearfully left different places where I have lived to become part of another family.

In my 30s, the issue of family emerged again. I really struggled with the fact that I would never have my own child. The reality was brought home by seeing the Zambian women carrying babies on their backs and allowing me to carry a little boy, Emmanuel, on my back. I felt the pain of not ever having my own baby. My community helped me deal with this issue. The sisters that lived with me allowed me to talk about it and work it through. Looking over my entire life, I came to the sense of how I still would choose celibacy. I felt a call to give life wherever I lived. The presence of God within became very real for me. We like Mary, can bear Christ to others.

Poverty of Spirit

The other struggle that I have experienced has been that of people needing more than I had to give. Whenever I feel on "empty" and aware of my own poverty, I experience God providing me with whatever I need to say or do. It may happen by my consoling a

2nd grader whose mom is dying of cancer. Sometimes when I am asked to speak to a large group, I feel frightened, but after prayer and trying to leave it to God, it always goes well. When I act as a spiritual director, and have heard another person's story, at times I am aware of my own poverty and have nothing to say. Later on, the person comments on something that I said that just "hit the spot!" These are all invitations for me to let go and let God's grace work in whatever ministry I am called to for the time.

My life as a sister has consisted of some very unexpected turns. My name has been changed many times, which reflects the different stages of my life. I entered when the community was still wearing the long traditional habit, and I was called "Sister Mary Joseph." Later we returned to our baptismal names and I was Sister Kathleen. In inner city Dublin, the high school students called me "Sister Kahy" for Kathy with their distinct brogue. In Zambia the teachers gave me the last name "Namoonga" as part of the Tonga tribe and the students gave me the name "Choolwe" meaning lucky or blessed. So for 5 years I was called Sr. Choolwe Namoonga. With each new mission God gave me a new name. Along with each new name came the grace for my current ministry.

As a woman in the church I have seen opportunities evolve in ministry. At first I believed that the most I could do ministerially would be to teach religion. With changes in the church I find that at times I have been asked to bring Eucharist and preach to communities that have no priest. I studied spirituality for a Masters at the University of San Francisco and earned my Doctor of Ministry a few years ago. I would never have imagined myself doing these things when I was a teenager! At the present time I am a Vocation Director for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. I interview men who want to enter the seminary. I also interview women and help them to find which community they may be called to enter. Through organizing programs at the archdiocesan level, I find that the challenge of being a woman religious in the church has taken on new directions.

Even though my life has been full of different opportunities I feel God holding it all together and continuing to call me forward. Trust God to do the same for you!

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