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I PROMISE BEFORE GOD ❖❖❖ ALL MY LIFE

Sr. Emmanuel Wade received her monastic consecration and professed her solemn vows on January 30, 2016. Here she reflects on monastic profession.

Recently I had an opportunity to watch a BBC documentary called *Planet Earth*. In the midst of a fascinatingly beautiful display of the wonders of God's creation, the film seemed to revolve around one theme: life and death. The life-giving self-sacrifice of species for their young, the cycle of life in the food chain and the oscillation of the seasons all pointed to the same enduring reality: there is no life without death in this world.

Just as in nature, the interplay of life and death is readily found in monastic profession and in monastic life as a whole. In a traditional ceremony of profession, a funeral pall—the cloth used to cover a casket—is placed over the prostrated candidate as a bold symbol of the necessary death one undergoes in order to enter into new life with Christ. The prostrations themselves, which were significant elements in the solemn profession ceremony in January, are physical representations of the spiritual laying down of one's life, of giving it over to God in total consecration. In this sense, life flows out of death, life requires death.

This dualism permeates every level of our consciousness, and we are all too aware of our mortality. But like a threatening creature lurking in the shadows, death



is ordinarily difficult to confront straight on. Man's desire for life is deeply ingrained, and the drive to live—and live forever—permeates his existence. He shares this desire with all of creation as reflected by the propagation of species, though at the same time death is interwoven into the fabric of earthly reality. And so, if desire for life is such a natural gift given to all of creation by its Creator, what place does death have? What purpose does it serve?

"[S]in entered the world through one man, and death through sin," says St. Paul in his letter to the Romans (5:12). Every creature experiences death, and yet it was not meant to exist; in this way, death is both a natural and unnatural phenomenon. In the beginning of creation, to be sure, it did not exist. But because of the human choice to disobey God, man now has to cope with the effects of the original break from Life itself.

The good news is that death is not the end of the story. "For if, by the trespass of

the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!" (Rom 5:17). God has reversed the effects of the first sin through Christ; man now has a way to return to the Author of Life. Surprisingly, this is not done by removing death from the picture altogether, but by giving death a new purpose: to impart life.

This is a radical departure from the philosophies of the modern age. For the Christian, self-denial and death are not entities to be avoided but instead accepted as the means by which Christ redeemed humanity. His cross, the icon of life-giving death, redeemed the world; his cross reunited God and man. Only through death was the resurrection of Christ made possible. God made death the event in which the immensity of his love for mankind was revealed, and made it the doorway to life—that is, to eternal life.

The monastic candidate seeking to be united to God by means of three religious vows—conversion of life (which includes poverty and chastity), stability and obedience—might initially shudder at the thought of the renunciation required to fulfill them. Indeed, the modern world is often confounded by such blatant forms of dying to self. Chastity relinquishes the possibility of procreation, poverty turns away from temporarily life-giving goods; stability

and obedience mortify the desire to gratify one's curiosity and one's own will. While many seek the riches of the world, the monk freely disburses his wealth; while an eroticized culture promotes sexual promiscuity, the nun freely chooses virginity. Man's fallen nature insists that a person will be at a disadvantage if power, wealth and popularity are renounced, yet herein lies the very beauty of a life consecrated to Christ. This is the witness that monastic profession gives: there exists something far greater than whatever this world has to offer, and it is worth dying for.

Christ gives a religiously vowed man or woman a reason and the courage to renounce even the legitimate goods of life. He makes this death "faceable," enabling a person to "deny himself and take up his cross" (Mt 6:24). As Jesus says: "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Mt 16:24-26). In the light of Christ, one experiences the freedom to look at death directly and to choose to enter through the "narrow gate" of renunciation into eternal life. "I have set before you life and death. Choose life..." (Dt 30:19). This is the way in which the religious reveals a love for God, by dying to all that was once precious in one's former way of life in order to choose "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6).

In choosing the life that Christ gives, the monastic becomes a conduit for this life to flow into other souls languishing in the shadow of death. This voluntary participation in the Paschal Mystery expands its life-giving effects, providing a greater means for others to experience Christ's salvation. For "by this we know what love is: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 Jn 3:16). The self-sacrifice of the religious draws down vivifying grace upon the world; union with God casts a divine light in the darkness, extending Christ's living presence through a life totally conformed to his cross.

While it was an exhilarating experience for me to profess solemn vows to God in a public ceremony earlier this year, great grace and strength is required to live out this profession in these following days. Weeks before and after the event, I witnessed two

deaths – the foundress of my religious community and a parent – and these were sources of that much-needed grace. In a sense, the death of one imparted life to another. The passing of these loved ones was a response to the prayer: "Lord, make me know the shortness of my life, that I may gain wisdom of heart" (Ps 89 [90]:12). Simply observing the brevity of life on earth and the fleeting nature of things gave me renewed vigor to commit myself to God in a more radical way. Henri Nouwen reflects: "When you touch the hand of a returning friend, you already know that he will have to leave you again.... This intimate experience in which every bit of life is touched by a bit of death can point us beyond the limits of our existence. It can do so by making us look forward in expectation to the day when our hearts will be filled with perfect joy, a joy that no one shall take from us."

And so the monk or nun having made monastic profession lives in hope of the resurrection. Just as the mystical phoenix dies in fire and regains life from within the ashes, the religious hopes to follow Christ through death into everlasting life. As it was said by St. Clement of Rome: "Seeing then that we have this hope, let us knit fast our souls to him who is ever true to his word and righteous in his judgements." SEW



October 8-10, 2016

February 17-19, 2017

Two of the planned weekends here for women who are considering a religious vocation. See our website for more details:
www.stscholasticapriory.org



Sister Maria on a scooter on drive At Pluscarden Abbey

I PROMISE BEFORE GOD ❖❖❖ FOR THREE YEARS

A day of joy! The joy of the Gospel, that is the giving one's self over to God. I could hardly find words to express the day and the depth of meaning in the actions I took that day. I am glad I was not asked to until some months after! The following is my feeble attempt to describe what the Holy Spirit has unfolded for me. This is not where I am, but rather what I discover is the hope and aim of monastic life.

The rite of profession first began as it always does, with a question, a question that not only recalled the name given to me on the day I became a novice, but also gave a glimpse into the future: "Sr. Maria Isabel you have responded to God's call, what do you ask of him?" *Isabel: House of God*. I recalled Abraham, Peter, even Jesus himself, who received names "pronounced by the mouth of the Lord" (Isa 62:2). Names given by God in Scripture reveal God's mission for the person. And I am called *House of God*, a daunting mission that only God's mercy can fulfill in me. My first profession felt like a great step toward God's mission. For what is a house? According to the Oxford English Dictionary it is "A building for human habitation, especially one that is lived in by a family or small group of people." If it is God's house, then it is his human habitation, where he lives with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. His house means his rules, his way, his manner, his design; it is owned by him! This is what Christian life is: letting God be God.

I was next shown the Rule of St. Benedict and asked: "Are you resolved to commit to its demands?" What are those demands for me? St. Paul says it in one sentence: "To walk in a manner worthy of the calling you have received" (Eph 4:1). To me this has meant, and will continue to mean, that I allow transformation to occur continually in me without hindering it. That is, to go from a city girl who would walk around exploring the streets of the Bronx and Manhattan to a cloistered nun walking up and down our driveway, keeping within the enclosure. From being spun and twirled by my cousins on the dance floor to a life of silence and chanting God's praises. From being present and active to my family at every birthday, baptism, wedding, gatherings of cousins to



words, raised my hands “like an evening oblation” and sang a new song to the Lord: “Suscipe me Domine, secundum eloquium tuum et vivam.” (Ps. 118 [119] 116). “Receive me, O Lord, according to your words and I shall live.” A new song, yes, because although its use in monastic profession dates back to the Rule of St. Benedict, it is a new song every time it is sung. Receive Lord, my weakness, struggles, brokenness, my mind, my will, my past, my present, my future, all that I am. “And I shall live,” for this is the life he has called me to, and it is only in giving myself to God totally that I can truly be alive.

But what does this mean for others? Once again I return to this name given to me by God: Isabel, *House of God,* which

being fully present to them through prayer. From being a teacher in charge of a classroom of twenty-five or more little ones to giving up control and turning everything over to God. As I responded “I am” to the question, I was keenly aware that there is a long journey ahead.

The momentous point of the ceremony then arrived. I uttered the words, “I, Sr. Maria Isabel, promise for three years before God and his saints stability, conversion of life, and obedience.” I turned everything over to God, in the presence of witnesses, entering “the mystery of transformation, the mystery which is at the heart of all the vows.” (Path of Life by Br. Cyprian Smith). Stability: the transformation from my rootedness in other things or people to a rootedness in God alone. Conversion of life: the transformation of my old life to monastic life. Obedience: the transformation of my mind and will to God’s mind and will. Overall, it is a promise to work towards “a transformation of the will from the pursuit of self to the love of God.” (Smith, 55). This is the task of every Christian. If we remain stable, not running from the transformation this life in Christ is offering us, but instead remaining faithful to the life, then conversion can occur. And in so doing, we enable our souls to be in constant openness to the transforming power of the Trinity. It is quite a journey I embarked upon that day!

The I, in joy and gratitude to his infinite mercy which enabled me to speak such

God defines as “a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is 56:7). Prayer is my vocation, the vocation of my community. On a practical level this means fidelity to the Divine Office. The Divine Office, a beautiful prayer that carries one deeply into the Paschal Mystery, praising God with the heavenly church, for it is Jesus’s prayer that we are joining in. Through all darkness and trials, chaos and illnesses, deaths, births and joys, God is praised, alleluia is sung. I find this to be part of the beauty of the Office, because we remember God in all things and we remember his people. Truly it is a prayer for all people: children, the elderly, drug addicts, terrorists and their victims, Christians and non-Christians, atheists, families, friends and enemies. ALL!!! In the Divine Office, at Mass, during *lectio divina*, at our work, while we sleep and eat, we carry the world with us in our prayer. For we *become* prayer once we have given ourselves to God. And in this way we are witness of the Kingdom of Heaven where all are gathered together in Christ.

The witnesses of the blessed day of my first profession are a prime example of all the members of Christ united in his Body. Present at the ceremony was my community of sisters and brothers, some of our regular Mass attendants, and my family (from six months up to aunts in their seventies.) All were gathered together in praise to God for the work he is doing. And rightly so, for this

profession was the fruit of all their labors and prayers - all of you! First, my parents who laid the foundation and nurtured the roots of faith. We didn’t have the luxuries of swimming classes, ballet, or musical lessons, but they made sure I was in the Daughters of Mary, prayer groups and youth groups. The priorities were Church, school and family. Rosaries were prayed together, Mass attended together, service offered for others. They made sure I had a sound foundation that bore fruit this day. As this seed grew it was worked on and pruned by my aunts, uncles, sisters and cousins. It was there that my faith was tested and my heart enlarged. There where I learned to love, truly love, regardless of sorrows, joys, disagreements, fights. We gathered together despite all. We prayed, ate, danced and worked for the unity of the family—one rooted in Christ. And all of you, and my community, supported this vocation through teachings, conversations, prayer, witnessing to me the love of God.

Love of God, that is what everything always boils down to. This life, the Christian life, is all about a journey, a struggle to learn to love, love like Christ. That is the transformation that must take place in each of us. I ask that you continue to pray for me that I may live all this this life offers, that I may persevere in this journey of love. I pray for all of you, all of the world, that you too may remain in this journey and that we together may come to the perfect love of God.
SMIG

Our gift to you will be a Novena of Masses offered for your beloved dead as we celebrate November 2nd. All Souls Day.

Would you consider remembering us in your will or charitable remainder trust?

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❖❖❖ DANCERS ARE GOD'S ATHLETES ❖❖❖ Albert Einstein

It is nearly a year now since Sr Gemma and I landed at Logan Airport, returning from the Provincial Chapter we had attended in Fleury, France. As we came through the doors from Customs full of stories to share about the trip, we were met with the news that Mother Mary Clare had been taken to the hospital that very morning. From that point on, we experienced very directly that the Lord had full control and we didn't. We did not actually think we could control everything, but thought more that we could manage to do one thing at a time.

But no. The Lord helped us to go forward without much rest between so many huge things: Mother Mary Clare's poignant illness and death, Sr Emmanuel's glorious profession of solemn vows, Sr Mary Paula's serious illness and recovery, the unexpected death of Sr Emmanuel's mother, Sr Maria Isabel's joyous simple vows. They all happened from that day at the airport until April 29th! During this time two sisters traveled to England and Scotland for the rededication of Pluscarden Abbey's church, and three more attended a seminar at Pluscarden for young monastics. A new roof was put on our guest house, and the foundation dug out to drain water collecting beneath it. We've had a Monastic Experience Weekend in which nine women participated, and a wonderful woman has asked to enter as a postulant later this year. The monks are moving into the completed first phase of their renovated monastery, and have welcomed a new member into their community. Life has been full of events that God held firmly in His hands, as we tried our best to respond to His never-failing grace. It is a dance, isn't it? We all are asked to let him gently guide us to take those turns, dips and steps that we could no more do on our own than make the sun rise! Thank him with us for all his grace, his gifts – of which you are a part!

MMEK

