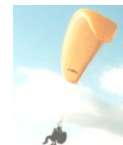


## From party night life to night life prayer ..... a journey into God's Love

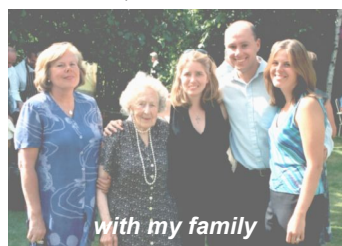


My journey continues to be a discovery of who I am and what my life is about. Until a couple of years ago, on the surface I "had it all".... a fantastic career earning loads of money, a social life second to none, jet-setting round the world... but underneath it all, there was a deep emptiness inside me. Society had conditioned me to believe that what was necessary and of value was power, prestige, beauty, success, and most people consider it a terrible and incomprehensible waste that I have now "thrown it all away".

I was born in 1972 and spent the first four years of my life in Toronto, Canada where my sister, Robyn, was also born. My parents met in my mother's native London where my father was spending a few months as part of his travels on a scooter across Europe. Five years after he had left home, my father returned to South Africa with us in tow and what was meant to be a beach holiday, lasted over twenty years.



Growing up, apart from Sunday Mass, which I found quite boring, prayer didn't feature in our family and God was a distant concept. But in trying to make sense of suffering the



loss of my Dad to cancer when I was 18, I began to be aware of the reality of God's presence in my life. Around that time I was told about Medjugorje and in my heart I was immediately convinced of the truth and the importance of



Our Lady appearing there. I started to try and live the Gospel as she taught, but before long my first serious boyfriend was on the scene and my zeal soon faded as the joys of falling in love, University-life and all the discoveries that went with it took

over. I had loads of friends, loved a good party and would always have a drink in my hand, pulling everyone up to dance. When I felt that I needed to choose between putting Jesus first or continuing the way the relationship with my boyfriend and my life in general was heading, I chose to pursue my own path. When I was in danger of failing an exam I would scream for help in God's general direction but that was it. My Faith didn't really mean much to me and I stopped going to Mass because I thought I was being hypocritical and was, quite frankly, mostly not in a fit state on a Sunday morning.

Even though I had decided that I didn't need God spoiling my fun (which I was sure He would do given half a chance), a picture of Jesus and Mary holding my hands and leading me down a wooded path would come to mind now and then. In spite of myself, I felt myself always responding to that image saying: "Don't let go of my hands. I'm not ready for you yet but don't let go." I am sure, that even though I have at times felt very far away from God, He has never let go of my hand and I know that it is the prayers of those who love me that brought me through some of the darkest parts of my journey.

I must have caught the travel bug from my Dad and I left Cape Town when I was twenty-one, looking for adventure and new experiences but always intending settle back home eventually. My year-long backpacking travels took me to the running of the bulls in Pamplona, on a bus trip through Russia, climbing the Himalayas and generally seeing as much as I could of Asia, America and Australia/New Zealand before my money ran out. On the island of Santorini I met Nicki and JoJo and we became great friends as we travelled together for a couple of months through the Greek islands and Turkey. On the 8 September, a date that 11 years later my Abbess would designate as my feast day without initially realising the significance, we took a day-trip to Ephesus. As we were leaving, there was a sign that pointed to the "House of Mary" as the place where Jesus's mother had died. I couldn't figure out what she would have been doing in Turkey and thought it was probably another tourist trap. Although all we wanted to do was to escape the burning heat, I felt that as a (nominal) Catholic, I couldn't leave without having a quick look. Inside the Chapel I instantly knew in every part of me that Our Lady was physically present even though I couldn't see her and the tears poured down my face. It was one of the most profound experiences of my life but a few hours later I was straight back to downing vodka jelly and dancing on the tables in the beach bars.

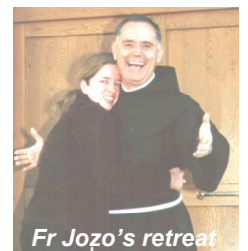
Tired of living out of a backpack and short on cash I decided to start building my career in London, along with most of my friends from home who were also travelling. After a series of relationships, in 1998 I came close to marrying a very special Spanish man whom I was very much in love with but, even though I couldn't put my finger on it, I felt that there was something I wanted that he couldn't give me. Some Christian friends, who knew I was searching even before I did, suggested that I do the Alpha course, a 10week introduction to Christianity. I felt I

had nothing to lose, and I managed to convince Cesar, who was a confirmed atheist, to join me but halfway through the course I just knew the relationship had to end even though the decision was indescribably painful. Through Alpha, and the prayer ministry that was offered I began to wake up again to the presence of Jesus in my life. Paradoxically, at the same time, my life seemed to pick up speed and I was living the London high life to the full, clubbing and partying. As head of European marketing for one of the leading financial institutions in the City, I travelled extensively, staying in some of the finest hotels in the world, participating in conferences and gala events. On the surface I had everything anyone could possibly want yet none of those things brought peace to the restlessness within me. I was beginning to see that there wasn't anything meaningful in my life and I was increasingly aware of an emptiness inside me that I tried to fill with the best of what the world had to offer even though I knew that nothing was really satisfying me.

Although I felt aware of a growing pull towards God within me, I wasn't willing to give up my lifestyle and I felt that Jesus would ask for more than I was willing to commit to and following Him would cost more than I was willing to give. Instead I continued to give myself to a way of life that only ended up costing me more than I ever imagined. Over time, I came to a point where I was no longer sure who I was or even who I was trying to be. The liberation I had felt in living my life the way I wanted to was short lived and did not end up being in any way liberating but instead nearly destroyed my sense of self respect. It was in my brokenness that I had an experience of the presence of God one day in October 1999 on the lakeshore of Chicago: I can only describe it as feeling in my heart as if He placed a mirror in front of me and asked, without judgement or condemnation, "This is who you are, is this who you want to be?" My Dad had always told me that it is important to be beautiful on the inside and I didn't feel that way but I wanted to. I had judged myself and tried to confirm my value as a person, by society's values but God's power to transform and heal touched my heart that day and slowly He showed me that my identity, value and self worth are rooted in the fact that I am His precious child and He loves me as I am.

I started going back to Mass and a few months later my Faith was re-ignited as I met Jesus in Adoration for the first time at a Youth2000 retreat and a friend took me to a charismatic prayer group. I realised with surprise: Wow! The Catholic Church is alive! I began to feel that I wanted to get rid of the weight of guilt and pain I was carrying so I went to confession for the first time in years. I was really afraid that the priest would condemn me, but all I experienced was the mercy and compassion of Jesus. There was huge relief in unburdening myself and knowing that God forgave me unconditionally and that there is nothing I have ever done or could ever do that will stop Him loving me. My life didn't change automatically and I wasn't even really aware how God was leading me, but He was and it is only in looking back that I can see how His hand has guided me towards the work He has planned for me to do.

I had always wanted to get married and have lots of children but the thought of religious life began to surface and wouldn't go away even though the absolute last thing I wanted was to be a nun and the very idea of it totally freaked me out! Out of the blue, in February 2001, my friend, Rani, arranged for me to go on my first trip to Medjugorje and to Fr Jozo's retreat. I didn't know what to expect and had only vaguely heard of Fr Jozo, but I went with an open heart and expecting great things from God. Something I had been struggling with was the fact that the Bible says that Jesus loves me but this was a concept that I simply couldn't relate to, or understand. I knew what it was to love and be loved by a man and by my family but I had no idea what the story was with God's love. Religious life would mean giving up everything I had always assumed would be part of my life and I just wasn't sure that Jesus would be enough to compensate for that loss. Then, one afternoon towards the end of the retreat I had an indescribable, completely incredible experience of being totally and utterly overwhelmed by God's love for me. A desire to respond with my whole heart welled up within me and that night, during a time of prayer, the fear of religious life was simply lifted from me. I was given the Grace to trust that Jesus wouldn't lead me anywhere I wouldn't be happy and I was no longer afraid, knowing that the deepest desire of my heart and all I wanted, was to give my life completely to God and live it for Him, whatever that meant.



At the end of 2001 I joined Cornerstone, a discernment community that was being set up in London by a group of young women considering religious life and wanting to take the discernment seriously and it was a huge help and support to journey alongside others who were also seeking His Will for their lives. We lived and prayed together while still working full time and so I was able to experience community life for a year and a half without making a huge leap out of life as I knew it.

Through prayer, reading Scripture and exploring the lives of the Saints I became more aware of the relationship that is possible with Jesus. I realised in the depths of my heart that even though I wanted to get married and have children, I could find no peace at following that path because I also felt a strong desire to give myself totally to Jesus in a way that I couldn't if I were married. In August 2002, at a Youth2000 retreat, I couldn't stand the indecision one minute longer and so I told Jesus that I was deciding for religious life and if it wasn't what He wanted for me, He would have to tell me quickly so I could find a husband!

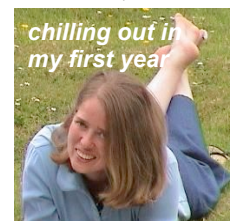
A couple of months after that, I was praying with the story of the rich young man (Luke 18:18-23) and I read the footnotes: "in order to establish the Kingdom, Jesus needs fellow workers who are especially available; it is from these that He asks radical renunciation of the cares of family life and possessions". I felt the most incredible peace at these words and it was as if everything came to rest within me. I just said OK Lord, if that's what you want for me then that's what I'll do. Once again, the fear and the anguish lifted and I recognised the amazing gift that was being offered to me. I left the Chapel and went for a walk on the cliffs and a huge feeling of joy came over me. I would never have believed in a million years that I could even vaguely consider the idea of religious life without running away screaming, never mind actually feeling total joy and peace at the prospect!



God has graced me with some wonderful gifts and I am a passionate lover of life, so I was sure that there was no way, given my background, skills and personality that I could ever even consider an enclosed order. I felt I had the spirit of an evangelist, I love interacting with people and I know that there is so much I could do for Him in the world, but at the same time there was a mystery in enclosed life that made me very curious. I struggled to make sense of why any sane, normal person would consider locking themselves away for the rest of their lives when there is so much to be done in the world. I knew there had to be a reason, there had to be something that made that way of life worth living and the enclosed sisters I had met all seemed so joyful, at peace and on fire with love for Jesus. Although I couldn't explain it and tried to resist it, there was a part of me that felt drawn to what they seemed to have.

I investigated all kinds of different religious orders but it was only the enclosed community of Poor Clares that held my interest. I was fascinated by the story of how St Clare and St Francis of Assisi had responded to God's call nearly 800 years ago and St Clare's invitation to her Poor Clare sisters through the ages to "give yourself totally to Him who gave Himself totally for your love" struck a chord within me. When I told this to Patrick and Nancy Latte in Medjugorje, who have been a wonderful support from the moment I met them, they enthused about the Poor Clares in Galway making me promise to at least contact them, which I reluctantly agreed to do. What I knew of Galway, which as far as I was concerned was in the middle of nowhere with horrible weather, was a blurry memory of a wild hen-night I had been on some years previously! Still hoping to be able to cross enclosed life off the list once and for all, I visited the community in June 2003. I'm not sure what I expected but I was surprised to meet a lively, friendly group with lots of young sisters. I could find no reason not to try the life out for two weeks, which I did three months later as I could see that this was really the only way to come to a decision.

I hoped it would be clear that enclosed life could never be for me but at the same time I wanted to be totally open to God and the reality was that I experienced a deep peace during my two weeks living with the community and had great fun with them. I just felt that I fitted in and I loved the rhythm of prayer and work and that throughout the day, and for some time during the night, the Sisters take turns in Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. I was totally inspired by their selfless courage in answering this extraordinary call from God and, believing strongly that they are on the front line of the spiritual battle, I felt a desire within me to stand beside them.

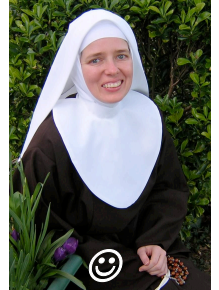


Soon afterwards I went on a one-month guided, silent retreat, where I wrestled seemingly endlessly with myself and with God. There was so much I felt I could do in the world but at the same time I was sure that nothing was more valuable or effective than prayer. All I was sure of was that I wanted to completely give myself to Jesus and do whatever He asked of me. Our Lady showed me that giving myself to a life of prayer was the way she was asking me to help her Son and so, even though there are not many people who understand or support my choice, I joined the Poor Clares in Galway on 2 March 2004. Jesus has always given me the courage and trust in Him that I have needed to take each next step and on 2 March 2005 I received the habit of St Clare as a Novice.

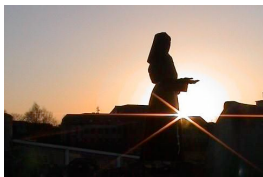


I have journeyed these 32 years of my life with my wonderful family who I love deeply and so many friends who I cherish and who remain close to my heart. My sister, Robyn, who is also my best friend, has been my rock and even though she would a million times over wish that I hadn't chosen this path, she has still given me her unconditional love and support, which means more to me than words could ever express. The hardest thing for me about the decision I have made, is the pain that I have caused my family but I have to trust that God will take care of them. I can't be there for my family and friends in the same way that I was before, but I absolutely believe that I am infinitely more use to them now than I ever was before, as I hold them in prayer. My love for them is undiminished as we continue to walk together, just in a different way.

Only God knows what will happen in the next 10 years, or the next 10 minutes for that matter, but the restlessness that I felt for a long time has gone. I have deep joy and peace within myself and I am sure that this is where I am meant to be, at least for now. My decision to follow this path is not based only on my own reasoning, but is a response to a call that lies within the mystery of God and so I cannot really explain it, even to myself, but I know what is in my heart. My "yes" to God has had to be a complete letting go of myself, and what I think is necessary for my life, and a launching of myself into the vast abyss of God's love for me. His invitation does not include a roadmap and so it calls for deep faith and trust beyond imagining. All He asks is that I place my one hand in His hand and let go of the apparent security of the world with the other by taking each next step that He presents and trusting in His promise that He will faithfully be with me, whatever the struggles and joys may be.



### **I will try to give some idea of what it means to me to follow in the steps of St Francis & St Clare**



St Clare, a companion and follower of St Francis of Assisi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, had "everything". She was exuberant, beautiful and wealthy and yet she chose to let go of all the possibilities life offered her and live a life of prayer, offering everything of herself to the Lord in total freedom. She truly lived the Word of God, allowing herself to be transformed by it, so that she reflected its light on her sisters and on the world. She saw this as the mission of the Poor Clares, the religious order that she and St Francis founded.

The path they followed is the path pointed out by Jesus through His attitudes and sentiments. To follow Jesus meant for St Clare no other desire than to risk everything and be united with Him, humble and poor upon the cross. St Francis and St Clare made of their whole lives a complete "handing back" to God whom they loved totally and to whom they radically committed themselves.

### **What does it mean to be enclosed?**

"None of us came to the cloister for anything else than to develop a deeper relationship with God, to be sought by Him and to seek Him, to know and love Him fully." (Mother Veronica Namoyo, Poor Clare, Zambia)

Enclosure means that we rarely leave the monastery (e.g. going to the dentist, constitutional voting) but family and friends can visit occasionally and we are able to correspond with letters. The point of enclosure is to create an atmosphere of prayer where we can be continually attentive to the invisible reality of God's presence. The silence and solitude help us to listen to God and encounter His love for us so that we can be led into deeper union with Him.



*"The enclosure is a special way of being with the Lord, of sharing in Christ's emptying of Himself by means of a radical poverty, expressed in renunciation not only of things but also of space, of contacts, of so many benefits of creation. Their life is entirely dedicated to God, loved above all else, where without undue interference from persons or material things, they may, intent on God and absorbed by him, live solely for the praise of His glory. Their life is a reminder to all Christian people of the fundamental vocation of everyone to come to God." (Pope John Paul II)*

### What are the stages before making a final commitment?

In the first year I lived alongside the community in order to experience their way of life and wore my regular clothes. As part of the discernment process, after 10 months I went home for 2 weeks and applied to formally enter the community. As a Novice, I have a further 2 years of formation (a study and discernment period) and I now wear the habit - the white veil shows that I have not taken vows.

After this time, if the Community discerns that I am called to this way of life and if it is a step I choose to take, I will make vows for a limited period of 3 years (and change the veil to a black one) and study and formation is ongoing but will be less intense. Once those 3 years come to an end, if I decide to make a permanent commitment I will make vows for life, like marriage.

The truth is that I have spent most of my life preoccupied with how I look and wanting to be popular and I have let my sense of self-worth be determined by what I think others think of me. This was a huge obstacle for me to get over in considering this way of life because, frankly, the habit is not designed to make you look good and just about everybody I know thinks I have lost the plot! But letting go of all of that and just being who I am, regardless of the opinion of anyone else, has brought me huge interior freedom.

### Why waste all your gifts and talents that are so needed in the world?

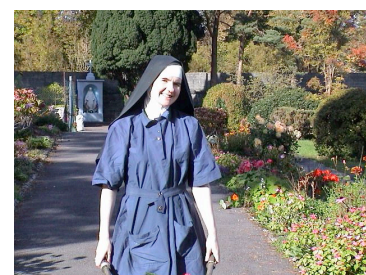
I am convinced that there is nothing more important or effective than prayer, and that I can reach out and help infinitely more people and situations by my prayer than by my physical presence. Jesus calls us to follow Him and when He does call, we cannot be attached to anything in the world, not even our gifts and talents. "At once they left their nets and followed Him" (Mat 4:20). God has given me everything I am and have - every gift, skill, and talent. The way I see it, it is therefore up to Him to decide how I can best use what He has given me to help Him and His people. I have come to realise that Jesus is asking me to open my heart to receive what He wants to give me; letting go of everything I think I can do for Him and allowing Him to lead me.



*"The Church is deeply aware and, without hesitation, she forcefully proclaims, that there is an intimate connection between prayer and the spreading of the Kingdom of God, between prayer and the conversion of hearts, between prayer and the fruitful reception of the saving and uplifting Gospel message." (Pope John Paul II)*

### What do you do all day?

We combine solitude and togetherness in the warmth of the Franciscan family spirit. Our day is centred on the Mass and Eucharistic Adoration, which is at the heart of our vocation. The community prays together seven times during the day and at midnight we rise to pray together and spend time with Jesus in Adoration. This is our most important "work", around which our day revolves. There is also time to pray in silence and time to read or play music or do any of our hobbies - I am discovering hidden talents! We play tennis as often as possible but keeping the ball from shooting over the wall into the river is a constant challenge! The monastery has large grounds and we pray the Rosary together in the gardens (weather permitting!) every evening. We have our meals as a community and for half an hour every day we have time to all relax together and my sides can be sore from laughter at the end! We have conferences and study sessions regularly and each Sister shares in the work and upkeep of the monastery and gardens. It is not the importance or the prestige of the work that gives it its value in God's eyes, but the love with which it is done.



We depend on voluntary alms and also support ourselves by making altar breads. God's providence is incredible and we have never gone without anything we need. Society is preoccupied with relentlessly achieving and "doing" but this life is more about "being". It's hard to explain, but it's about who we are and how we relate to each other and to God rather than what we "do" as such.



*"The contemplative nun fulfils to the highest degree the first Commandment of the Lord: "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind", making it the full meaning of her life and loving in God all people." (Pope John Paul II)*

### What is it like living in a monastery?

I consider it a privilege to be living with 16 such vibrant, diverse and joyful women, each with an inspiring story of her journey. One of the greatest blessings of community life is the support it offers and we help, pray for, and inspire one another because God has entrusted us to each other and His grace makes it possible for us to live this way of life in joy and peace. Being here gives me a chance to be heart-to-heart with God in a totally unique and special way: "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her heart" (Hos 2:14).

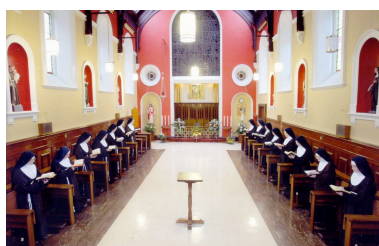


There are times that are hard, when I miss the contact I used to have with those I love, when I long for my country and when the awful weather and endless grey skies test my spirit. I have given up a lot of things that I love: spending time with my family and friends, travelling, camping, horse-riding, body-surfing and scuba-diving, seeing the sun set over the ocean, skiing and so much more, and it would be stupid to willingly do without the wonderful opportunities life offers unless you were exchanging it for something greater. Some may think I am crazy but I'm not stupid - even though there are moments when I have to do a reality check! ☺

### Are you escaping from the harsh realities of life?

Poor Clares are not women who have selfishly turned their backs on the world and its troubles. We have however withdrawn from the fringe in order to live at the heart of things, even though the opposite may appear to be the case. As we pray in our chapel, I believe that we are closer to the heroin addict huddled in misery than is his companion who lies in the same doorway. Our prayers reach the most pitiful recesses of human suffering and draw down to them the light and grace of God - we are not here to become wrapped up in our own private spirituality. People who just need to be listened to or who are in desperate situations write letters or come to us to be held in the mystery of our prayer. They are refreshed and strengthened in the knowledge that we travel alongside them. We have access to current events through radio, newspapers (mainly catholic), TV(occasionally) and visitors and so we are not merely isolated individuals but are part of the Body of Christ, engaged in God's work of creating, redeeming and transforming this world in which we live.

Lord help me to withdraw so that others may come in without asking.  
That they may deposit their burdens without being seen  
And I'll come, silently, to get them by night  
And you Lord will help me to bear them (Michel Quoist)



Society has no time for prayer, no time for silence or stillness and yet it hungers for this. In our silent witness of a deeper reality, to a world that frantically seeks to acquire security, power and which places self-interest and pleasure above all else, we say: "put your trust in God, who created you and who loves you. He will not fail you." My withdrawal from the activities of the world is not a flight from the reality of sin and suffering and the struggles of life. It is a coming to grips with the weakness and brokenness in the depths of my own soul. This life is not for the timid that find the world too harsh a place to live in. It is not a place of safety for the immature, those who have given up looking for a husband or the emotionally unstable. It is a life of deep and solid faith in God and is a place for dedicated hearts that have strength, determination and the courage to choose to give their lives to God in response to the mystery of His call.

(our website has more information on our life and monastery : [www.poorclares.ie](http://www.poorclares.ie))