God Alone Suffices

God Alone Suffices

A Guide to Vocation Discernment for Catholic Men and Women

Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD
and Tasso Dattenberg-Doyle

Teresian Press

First published in 2026 by Teresian Press, Carmelite Priory, Boars Hill, Oxford OX1 5HB

Copyright © Jerome Ituah, OCD and Tasso Dattenberg-Doyle 2026

The right of Jerome Ituah and Tasso Dattenberg-Doyle to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The personal testimonies in Chapter VI are published with the permission of their authors. The testimony of Sister Thérèse Wilkinson is edited, with permission, from "Every Day in the Monastery Is Different and Full of 'God's Surprises'", Mount Carmel Magazine, 30 March 2026.

Imprimi potest: Fr. Jim Noonan, OCD, Provincial, 1 October 2026

ISBN [978-0-947916-64-0]

Cover image: Tasso Dattenberg-Doyle

For everyone who has ever heard, quietly and without warning, the question: Is it I, Lord?

Nada te turbe,
nada te espante,
todo se pasa,
Dios no se muda;
la paciencia
todo lo alcanza;
quien a Dios tiene
nada le falta:
solo Dios basta.

***

Let nothing disturb you,
let nothing frighten you;
all things are passing,
God never changes.
Patience
obtains all things.
Whoever has God
lacks nothing:
God alone suffices.

— St Teresa of Ávila

Contents

Preface 8
Acknowledgements 10
I. Introduction 11
II. An Unbroken Line 14
III. The Landscape of the Church 22
IV. What to Expect 30
V. Hard Questions 35
VI. Personal Testimonies 44
- Peter Collins — Permanent Deacon 45
- Father Matthew Roche-Saunders — Diocesan Priest 47
- Sister Mary Christina — Active Religious Sister 50
- Brother Elliott Cannon — Temporary Professed Discalced Carmelite Brother in Formation 52
- Father Jerome Ituah — Discalced Carmelite Priest 54
- Susan Watson — Secular Carmelite 58
- Brother Noel — Non-ordained Religious, Order of Discalced Carmelites 60
- Sister Thérèse Wilkinson — Enclosed Nun, Order of Discalced Carmelites 63

VII. Saints 66
- Benedict of Nursia 67
- Clare of Assisi 68
- Ignatius of Loyola 69
- Catherine McAuley 69
- Jean Vianney 71
- What the five have in common 71

VIII. The Compass 72
Opening the Door 75

Preface

Solo Dios basta. God alone suffices. The words close a short prayer that St Teresa of Ávila wrote for herself, and which, the story goes, was found in her breviary after her death: nine lines she kept close, the way you keep a note in your pocket that you need to read more than once. They give this book its title because, in the end, they are the whole of what it wants to say. Everything else in these pages (the history, the map of the Church, the account of formation, the hard questions, the testimonies, the saints, the practices) is a commentary on that one line.

In twenty-six years as a Discalced Carmelite, nineteen of them as a priest, I have sat with a great many people carrying the same quiet question. Some brought it to confession, some to a parlour or a retreat, and some, more recently, to the monthly discernment days I lead for those considering Carmel. What struck me again and again was not that they lacked generosity. They had plenty. What they lacked was information, and a method.

Sometimes they had been told to "pray about it", and no one had told them how. In some cases, they did not know the difference between a nun and a sister, a diocese and an order, a postulant and a novice. They imagined the road to be a single irrevocable leap, when it is in fact a long and careful path with many doors and many exits. And almost all of them were carrying fears they had never said aloud to anyone. This book is an attempt to meet those needs plainly, in a form that can be read in an evening and lived with for a season.

A word on whom it is for. It is written for Catholic men and women, both of them, deliberately, on every page. It speaks of the diocesan priesthood and the permanent diaconate as well as religious life, of active congregations as well as enclosed monasteries, and it does not forget that for most readers the answer will be marriage or the single life, which are vocations in their own right and not consolation prizes. I am a Discalced Carmelite, and I have not tried to hide it: Teresa and John of the Cross, Thérèse and Elizabeth of the Trinity turn up more often than strict fairness might require, and several of the testimonies come from the Carmelite family. But this is not a recruitment pamphlet, for Carmel or for anywhere else. Its only interest is that you find the particular life God is asking of you, wherever that turns out to be.

I owe a particular debt to those who agreed to tell their own stories in Chapter VI. Arguments about vocation are cheap; a life is not. I have placed my own story among theirs, not because it is exemplary (its beginning was anything but easy) but because it would hardly be honest to ask others to speak of their discernment and stay silent about mine.

Finally, a request, the same one the Introduction will make: read slowly. If a sentence stops you, stop with it. God alone suffices, but He is rarely heard in a hurry.

Fr Jerome Ituah, OCD

Carmelite Priory, Kensington, London
1 October, Solemnity of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, 2026

Acknowledgements

This book would not exist without the generosity of the people whose lives appear in it. Our first thanks go to Peter Collins, Father Matthew Roche-Saunders, Sister Mary Christina, Brother Elliott Cannon, Susan Watson, Brother Noel and Sister Thérèse Wilkinson, who wrote honestly about the most private turning points of their lives and allowed their words to be edited and shared with strangers. Their testimonies are the heart of this book.

We are grateful to Mount Carmel Magazine for permission to adapt Sister Thérèse Wilkinson's article, "Every Day in the Monastery Is Different and Full of 'God's Surprises'".

We thank our brothers and sisters in Carmel, friars, nuns and Secular Carmelites alike, whose daily fidelity to prayer is the real argument of these pages, and our Provincial and the Vocation Team for their encouragement and patience while it was being written.

My thanks also to Fr. Yamai Bature, OCD, and Fr. Jim Noonan, who read the manuscript in draft and made it better, and to Teresian Press for bringing it into print.

Above all, we thank the men and women who have come to our discernment days and brought their questions with them. Many of the questions in these pages are theirs. Whatever is useful here belongs to them; whatever is lacking is ours.

Chapter I: Introduction

This is a book about life in service to God, and it will speak about it plainly, because such service should be understood clearly.

It is not here to recruit you. It is here to show you a set of lives that stretch from a room in Jerusalem two thousand years ago to the altar of your own parish last Sunday and the convent chapel where someone was praying for you this morning, and to ask you to look at them honestly for an hour or two. What you do afterwards is between you and God.

Let us begin with the claim from which everything else follows: your life is sacred. Not merely valuable or promising, but sacred. It was given to you, by One who knew what He was doing, and it was given for something. Saint John Henry Newman put it memorably: "God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another."[1]

The word the Church uses for this is vocation, which comes from the Latin vocatio (a summons), and before that the Greek klesis (a call). It is not a career, which one chooses the way you might choose a subject at university, but a call, received the way you might hear your own name spoken across a crowded room. Throughout both Testaments, Scripture is consistent on this point: it is God who calls, and the call is His to give, not ours to invent. You do not write your own

[1] John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions of the Late Cardinal Newman*, ed. William P. Neville (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893).

vocation; you receive it, and are then asked what you will do with it.

Newman's conviction, that each of us has some work not committed to another, is one that people nowadays find hard to believe. Many of us have grown up in a world of noise, which offers a thousand ways to be looked at and hardly one way to be known. It encourages us to curate and promote ourselves incessantly. Those who have left that way of living behind often describe it as tiring, like carrying yourself around all day with nowhere to set the burden down. The self, placed at the centre of everything, becomes a heavy thing to carry.

A consecrated life is, among other things, the laying down of that burden. This is not a loss of self; the priests, brothers, sisters and nuns you will meet below seem more themselves, not less, for having given themselves away. It is rather a surrender of the self into the hands of God. They give everything: their time, their futures, their fatherhood and motherhood in the ordinary sense, even, in a sense, their names, since people who share none of their blood will call them Father, Mother, Sister or Brother. In return they are given lives spent close to the places where God touches the world: at the altar, in the confessional, in the classroom and the ward, at the hospital bedside, at the font and at the grave, and everywhere else they are needed.

The cost of living such a life is not small, and this book will not pretend otherwise. Celibacy is a real sacrifice; obedience is demanding; and there are times of real loneliness. A life that costs nothing is not possible, though, and most likely that is not what you want either. Everyone wants their life

to mean something, to be spent rather than merely used up, and yours is no different, even if it has been told more than any generation before that no such meaning exists.

The chapters that follow are arranged simply. Chapter II traces where these lives come from: two lines running side by side from the beginning, the apostles and priests who have passed on what was entrusted to them, and the equally ancient line of consecrated men and women. Chapter III offers a map of the Church, explaining terms such as diocese, order, nun and sister, which are easily confused. Chapter IV gives an account of formation: what seminary and novitiate are, and what they ask of a person. Chapter V takes up the hardest questions, among them celibacy, worthiness, the fear of getting it wrong, and whether an enclosed life is a wasted one. In Chapter VI, people who live these lives today tell their own stories, and Chapter VII recalls five saints whose example should be encouraging. The book ends with four practical steps by which an ordinary person can begin to discern what God is asking of them.

You can read this book in an hour or two. We ask only that you read it attentively, without skimming, and without guarding yourself against being moved. Somewhere in these pages a sentence may speak to you, and it would be a great loss to miss it.

Finally, if, when you close the book, the question is still with you (Is it I, Lord?) then do not be afraid of it. No one is worse off for asking what their life is for. The question comes from the same God who made you, and He does not call anyone in order to diminish them.

Chapter II: An Unbroken Line

Vocation is older than the Church herself. God called Abraham out of Ur with nothing but a promise, and Abraham went, not knowing where he was going. He called Moses from a burning bush and a stammering tongue, Samuel by name in the dark of the Temple before the boy knew whose voice he was hearing, and Isaiah with words every priest since has half-heard inside his own call: Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Here I am; send me. By the time a certain carpenter's son stood on a Galilean shore and said follow me, God had already been calling His people for a very long time.

Every vocation in this book begins in the same place: an upper room in Jerusalem on the night before a Friday execution. A man takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and says words no one had ever said before: This is my body. Do this in memory of me. Twelve men are there to hear him. Eleven of them will spend the rest of their lives doing exactly that, and ten of those will die for it.

Let us consider who they were. For the most part they were not scholars, aristocrats or orators, nor men of obvious promise. They were fishermen, a tax collector, a political radical and a handful of tradesmen, whose names would have been forgotten had they not been called out of those lives. This is worth remembering, because the world tends to assume that great missions are for exceptional people. The Church has the opposite conviction: God takes ordinary men and women and entrusts extraordinary things to them. We carry this treasure in earthen vessels, Saint Paul

says, to show that the power belongs to God and not to us (2 Corinthians 4:7).

After the supper, the apostles laid hands on others, and those men laid hands on others still. This is not a metaphor: it is a physical succession, hand upon head, running back without a break from the newest priest ordained this year to that upper room. Through two thousand years of persecution, plague, schism and revolution, the line has not been broken. When a bishop lays hands on a man at ordination, the man is joined to it. This is part of what the Church means when she calls herself apostolic.

Alongside this line, a second one began very early. In the earliest Christian communities, alongside the apostles and their successors, there were men and women who gave themselves to God in another way: not by ordination but by consecration, renouncing marriage and property to belong wholly to Christ and to the Church. Saint Paul wrote about them in his letters as an established fact of Christian life within twenty years of the Resurrection. They had no habits, monasteries or rule; they had simply understood that if the Kingdom is real, then a whole life can be arranged around it.

Both lines were tested immediately. In the first three centuries, to be a priest could easily cost a man his life, and yet men still came forward. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was hauled across the empire to be killed in the Roman arena around the year 107; he wrote letters along the way, begging the Christians of Rome not to interfere with his martyrdom. Beside him in the record stand the consecrated women:

Agnes, a Roman girl of about thirteen who refused a marriage and chose death; Cecilia; Perpetua and Felicity, a noblewoman and a slave who died together in Carthage and whose prison diary (written by Perpetua) is one of the earliest surviving texts by a Christian woman. Wave after wave of persecution broke over the Church, and still the number of Christians grew. As Tertullian put it, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

While the persecutions ended, the movement did not. It went to the desert. Through the fourth and fifth centuries thousands of men and women walked out into the sands of Egypt and Syria to seek God in silence and self-denial, and the tradition remembers them together: the desert fathers and the desert mothers. Amma Syncletica, Amma Sarah, Amma Theodora sat under the same sun as Antony and Pachomius, and their sayings were collected with the same reverence. When the Western Empire fell, it was largely monks and nuns who preserved learning through the centuries that followed, copying manuscripts by hand so that the classics reached later generations. Saint Benedict wrote the Rule that shaped Western monasticism, and his sister, Saint Scholastica, is honoured as the foundress of Benedictine nuns.

When Europe's cities revived, a new kind of religious walked into them: friars, who owned nothing and went everywhere, preaching in marketplaces to populations beyond the reach of the monasteries. Francis of Assisi is the famous name; but a few years after his conversion, an eighteen-year-old noblewoman of the same town, Clare, had run away from her family's house to join him, and founded the order that still bears her name (the Order of Saint Clare, also known as the

Poor Clares): the contemplative branch of the same movement, praying while the friars preached. And in those same years, on a mountain ridge above the Mediterranean, a small band of hermits settled in the caves of Mount Carmel, which is the mountain of Elijah, to live lives of silence and prayer. They asked for a rule of life from Saint Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem, and received one, and became the Carmelites: an order built on the conviction that before anyone can give God to others, they must first seek the face of God themselves. Some three centuries later, a Spanish nun, Teresa of Ávila, undertook the reform of the Order, founding seventeen convents in the face of fierce opposition; she was later declared a Doctor of the Church for her writings on prayer.

When the age of exploration opened the oceans, the Church was on board the first ships. Francis Xavier left the university life of Paris and spent eleven years preaching in India and Japan, baptising, it is said, until he could barely lift his arm, and died on an island off the coast of China, still hoping to enter it. Priests and religious walked into the Americas, into Africa, and the Arctic. One of them, Damien of Molokai, volunteered for a leper colony in Hawaii knowing precisely what it meant; he served its people for sixteen years, contracted the disease, and announced it to his congregation by opening his sermon with the words "we lepers". He remained until his death, and during his last illness it was the Franciscan sisters who had followed him there who nursed him, and who stayed on after his death to continue the work.

But not all the Church's notables have hailed from distant shores. Some of the most remarkable chapters of her story were written in these islands. When the priesthood was outlawed in England, and the Mass driven into attics and barns,

young Englishmen slipped across the Channel to a college at Douai, founded by William Allen in 1568, to be trained as priests and smuggled back in. They knew the danger: once landed, a missionary priest in Elizabethan England could expect only a few years before capture. Hundreds came all the same. Cuthbert Mayne was the first of the Douai men to die for it. Edmund Campion, one of the most brilliant Oxford scholars of his generation, whom Elizabeth's court had hoped to win for its own service, chose ordination instead, returned to England in disguise, was hunted, taken, offered his life repeatedly if he would only conform, and was executed at Tyburn in 1581. The seminary that formed those men still exists. It moved, in time, from Douai to Chelsea, and it bears its founder's name: Allen Hall, where many men from this country are formed for the priesthood today.

Those priests could not have survived without the families who hid them, and very often it was the woman of the house who bore the greatest risk. Margaret Clitherow, a butcher's wife in York, sheltered priests in her home for years; when she was finally arrested in 1586 she refused to enter a plea, knowing that a trial would force her children to testify, and was crushed to death under a door loaded with stones rather than betray anyone. She was just thirty. Around the same time, a Yorkshirewoman named Mary Ward looked at a Church that offered consecrated women only the enclosed cloister and concluded that God wanted something else: religious sisters who could move freely, teach openly, and be governed by their own superiors. The Church of her day imprisoned her for it. She was vindicated centuries later, and the schools founded by her spiritual daughters (the Sisters of Loreto) are

still teaching. "I hope in God," she wrote, "it will be seen that women in time to come will do much."[2]

And lo and behold, so it was: In Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a remarkable generation of women showed what she meant. Nano Nagle, a wealthy Cork woman who could have lived comfortably in Paris, came home instead to run illegal schools for Catholic children when Catholic education was a crime, walking the lanes of Cork by night with a lantern to visit the sick (they called her the Lady of the Lantern) and founded the Presentation Sisters. Catherine McAuley opened a house on Baggot Street in Dublin for destitute women and girls, came under pressure to give the work a recognised religious form, and so became a nun in order to continue it. She founded the Sisters of Mercy, who within a century were on every continent. Mary Aikenhead's Irish Sisters of Charity built hospitals. It is no exaggeration to say that much of the Catholic educational and medical provision of these islands, including schools your parents may have attended and hospitals founded before any state provided them, was built by consecrated women and men of rather humble origins. So: if anyone imagines religious life to be a retreat from the world, they will find this history a good corrective.

Not all heroism, however, is loud. In a forgotten French village called Ars, a priest named Jean Vianney, a man who had nearly been dismissed from the seminary because he could

---

[2] Mary Ward, "The First Address on Verity" (November 1617), in *Mary Ward und ihre Gründung: Die Quellenschriften bis 1645* [Mary Ward and Her Foundation: The Source Writings to 1645], vol. 2, ed. Ursula Dirmeier (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2007), 44.

not master Latin, spent some forty years hearing confessions. By the end, as many as a hundred thousand people a year were travelling across Europe to kneel in front of the peasant priest in a village of about two hundred and thirty souls, because word had spread that God could be met there. In a Carmelite convent in Normandy, a girl named Thérèse died at twenty-four having done nothing the world would record. She never left her cloister, never founded anything, never met anyone of importance, and yet she is now a Doctor of the Church and the patroness of all missionaries. Together they show what the Church most honours: not brilliance or scale, but fidelity.

The twentieth century, the bloodiest of them all, only added to both lines. In Auschwitz, when a prisoner escaped and ten men were chosen to be starved to death in reprisal, one of the ten cried out for his wife and children, and a Franciscan priest named Maximilian Kolbe stepped out of the ranks and asked to take his place. The exchange was granted. He led the condemned men in prayer for two weeks in the starvation bunker and was the last of them to die. In the same camp, a year later, a Carmelite nun was taken from the transport to the gas chambers within hours of arriving: Edith Stein, who was born a Jew, and who was one of the most brilliant philosophers of her generation, and had walked out of her convent door under arrest with the words "come, we are going for our people". Thousands of priests, brothers and sisters died in the camps and the gulags beside them, and in parts of the world they are still dying for the faith.

Over two thousand years, these two lines have included fishermen and philosophers, martyrs and missionaries, a struggling Latin student and some of the finest minds of Oxford,

a butcher's wife, a Cork heiress and a girl of thirteen. Few of them felt ready, and none thought themselves worthy, but each was called nonetheless. The lines have crossed every ocean and outlasted the empires that tried to end them. Yet they do not continue by themselves. They continue only when, in each generation, a young man or woman hears the same call and answers it.

Chapter III: The Landscape of the Church

Anyone who begins to look seriously at a vocation quickly hits a wall: the vocabulary. Diocese, order, secular, religious, friar, monk, nun, sister, brother, charism, enclosure... These words are rarely explained, and a lot of vocational materials assume you already know them. This chapter sets out to make all these things a bit clearer.

The best place to start is what you can see from your own pew. The Church on earth is divided into territories called dioceses. There are currently twenty-one in England and Wales, with others across Scotland and Ireland, each governed by a bishop, who is a successor of the apostles in the most literal sense: hands were laid on him in a line that runs back to the upper room. A diocese is divided into parishes, and a parish is served by a priest. This basic structure of the Church has changed little over many centuries.

The priest in that parish is, most likely, a diocesan priest (sometimes called a secular priest), from the Latin saeculum, "the world," because he lives and works out in the world rather than inside a religious community. At ordination, a diocesan priest makes promises — celibacy, obedience to his bishop, the daily prayer of the Church — and he is incardinated into his diocese, which means that he belongs to that diocese for life. Thereafter, he will spend his priesthood among the parishes, schools, hospitals and prisons of one patch of the earth. His superior is his bishop; his brothers are

the priests of his diocese; his people are whoever lives within the boundary lines, Catholic or not.

Alongside the priest there is another ordained minister who is easily overlooked: the permanent deacon. A permanent deacon *is* ordained (the diaconate is the first of the three degrees of Holy Orders) but not to the priesthood. The permanent deacon may be a married man with a job and a family, who serves at the altar, preaches, baptises, witnesses marriages, and carries the Church into the ordinary working world in a way a priest sometimes cannot. He is not a half-priest or a priest-in-waiting. The confusion arises because every man preparing for the priesthood is first ordained a transitional deacon; but the permanent diaconate is a vocation unto itself.

Now, you may have noticed that some consecrated men and women have letters after their names such as O.P., S.J., O.C.D., O.S.B. These letters point to religious life.

A religious belongs first to a community (an order or congregation) rather than to a territory, and takes vows of poverty, chastity and obedience rather than promises. A religious owns nothing personally (poverty) and vows obedience to their religious superior. A religious lives with their brothers or sisters in a common life. Where the diocesan priest's stability is a place, the religious's stability is a community.

The orders are not interchangeable, which is why we need to remember one word, perhaps the most important for telling them apart: charism. A charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit given to a founder and passed down through his or her spiritual family. It is a particular way of living the Gospel and of

being given to God, and it is the reason there are many orders rather than one.

To make all this a bit clearer, let us sketch a rough history of the men's side of religious life:

Monks came first. From the deserts of Egypt onward, men withdrew to seek God in silence, and Saint Benedict gave the movement its great Western rule. A monk vows stability: he joins one monastery and stays, and the world comes to him. Think of the Benedictines at Ampleforth or Downside.

Friars emerged in the Middle Ages. As Europe's cities grew, Saint Francis, Saint Dominic and others sent men out, owning nothing and preaching wherever they were needed. A friar's home is his order, not one house. The Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and the Carmelites are friars.

Clerics regular arrived with the modern age, being built for missions and flexibility. The Jesuits, for example, vowed to go wherever the Pope most needed men, which is why they ended up running universities on every continent. Some priests belong to neither a diocese nor an order in the strict sense, but to a missionary society built for exactly this kind of work. The Church calls this life apostolic rather than religious, as a distinction of church law more than of daily life.

Oratorians are a special case worth knowing in this country: communities of priests founded by Saint Philip Neri who live together without vows, bound by charity rather than a rule, each one independent of the others. It was to the Oratory that John Henry Newman, whose words we quoted in the Introduction, gave his priesthood, in Birmingham.

Everything we have said so far about religious life (vows, community, charism) is as true for women as for men. But the women's side has its own vocabulary, and one distinction that is often confused.

Strictly speaking, a nun and a sister are not the same thing. A nun is a woman who takes solemn vows and lives the contemplative life within an enclosure (the cloister). It is a life given over primarily to prayer. She does not run a school or a hospital; her work is to seek the face of God on behalf of the whole Church, in silence, for life. Additionally, nuns often have some kind of craft: baking altar bread, making scapulars, painting, writing, and much more. The Carmelite nuns, the Poor Clares, the enclosed Benedictines and Dominican nuns live this way.

An active sister, by contrast, belongs to an apostolic congregation: she takes vows and lives in a community too, but her charism sends her out into the world to teach, to nurse, to care for the poor, to assist the parish, and other such work. The women who built the schools and hospitals of these islands were sisters. When you call every woman in a habit a "nun," you are making the same mistake as someone who calls every priest a monk. The word marks a real difference.

Between and around these two great forms lie others. Some communities live a mixed life, weaving contemplation and action together, such as the Dominican pattern of handing to others the fruits of contemplation. There are contemplative communities and active ones and every shade in between, and the only way to learn which is which is to visit and see.

There is also one form of consecrated life that is older than all the orders and quietly reviving in our own day: consecrated virginity. In the very first centuries, before monasteries existed, there were women who consecrated themselves to Christ and were solemnly blessed by their bishop to live as brides of Christ in the midst of the world, not in a convent but at home, belonging wholly to God. The Church never abolished this ancient path; today a woman may be consecrated by her bishop to a life of virginity lived in the world, working an ordinary job, belonging to no community but to Christ and her diocese. It is one of the oldest vocations in the Church, and one that is growing again today.

Two more forms are worth mentioning, both of which are easy to miss because they don't require a habit. A secular institute gathers men or women consecrated to God by vow or its equivalent who live entirely on their own. They live in ordinary flats and do ordinary jobs with no common life and nothing about them visibly set apart. They are meant to be a hidden leaven in society. A society of apostolic life, by contrast, lives in community much as a congregation does and can look identical from the outside, but its members bind themselves by promises instead of vows. This reflects a difference rooted more in church law than in everyday life. The Daughters of Charity, who have been running hospitals and refuges since the seventeenth century, are the best-known example; among priests, the missionary societies, which were built specifically to evangelise across a border rather than to serve a settled charism at home, belong to this group as well.

One further clarification is important: religious life and ordination are two different things that often coincide but do not strictly need to. Some orders of men contain brothers

— men fully vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience who are not ordained and never will be, not because they failed to become priests but because their calling is the consecrated life itself: the prayer, the community, the work, without the altar. The brother's vocation is not a waiting room for the priesthood, nor a lesser calling; it is a complete gift of life, as old as religious life itself. The same is true of the apostolic sister: she is not "a nun who couldn't be enclosed," any more than the brother is "a priest who didn't make it." Each is a whole vocation of its own.

So how does one choose? Certainly not by using a checklist or asking which is best. In practice, discernment usually hangs on a few considerations. Does the thought of one group of people in one place for life appeal to you? Or the thought of a community that might send you anywhere? Do you thrive in the endless human traffic of the parish or the school or the ward, or does something in you yearn for silence and depth? Most people will find the answer through contact rather than introspection. The best advice therefore is to visit a seminary or an order, sit in the chapel of an enclosed convent for an afternoon, and see if something in you says these are my people.

This brings us neatly around to the people from whom this book comes.

The Carmelites are the only order in the Church that is named after a mountain. Mount Carmel is located in the Holy Land and it is where the prophet Elijah stood alone against the prophets of Baal. Towards the end of the twelfth Century, a band of hermits settled near the spring of Elijah to live for God in silence. Around 1210 the same group asked

Saint Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem, for a rule of life and received one of the shortest and most beautiful in the Church. It taught that each hermit should remain in his cell "meditating day and night on the law of the Lord and watching in prayer." After the Crusader states collapsed, the hermits migrated to Europe and became the friars that remain to this day.

The Carmelite charism can be summed up as contemplation in service to the Church. Its conviction is that prayer is not a form of preparation for work, but is itself the work. Its watchword is Elijah's own: "With zeal have I been zealous for the Lord God of hosts."

In the sixteenth century, the order took two roads. In Spain, Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross led a reform seeking a return to the primitive intensity of the Rule, and from their efforts came the distinction of Discalced Carmelites (O.C.D.) and Carmelites of the Ancient Observance (O.Carm.). They share the Rule, the Scapular, the Marian heart and the contemplative charism, with differences of history and emphasis that would be better covered by conversation than more reading.

Anyway: this small order of silence has given the Church some of her greatest spiritual teachers, and women stand at its very centre. Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, both Doctors of the Church, wrote maps of the interior life that everyone else still uses. Thérèse of Lisieux, a French girl who died at twenty-four having never left her convent, is also a Doctor of the Church and the patroness of all missionaries. Once you add to them Elizabeth of the Trinity and Edith Stein, the philosopher who entered Carmel and died

in Auschwitz, it is clear that the Order's greatest voices have as often been a nun's as a friar's.

So it is that Carmel really is one mountain. There are the friars, Carmelite priests and brothers, living the contemplative charism in community and carrying it out into parishes, chaplaincies, retreats and missions. There are the nuns, the enclosed Carmelites, in their hidden convents, who are not an appendage to the Order but its contemplative heart, living Teresa's own reform in the cloister and holding the whole Church up in prayer. And then there are the seculars: laypeople, married and single, of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites, who make promises (as opposed to vows) and live the Carmelite spirit in the middle of ordinary life.

That, though somewhat simplified, is the landscape of the Church. But no one ever discerned a vocation from words alone. The purpose of this book is to help you (should you so wish) to take the next step, whether to a vocations director, a seminary open day, a convent guest house or a priory door. With that in mind, let us take an honest look at formation.

Chapter IV: What to Expect

Of all the words in this book, seminary and convent are probably the most misunderstood. People often imagine a door that locks behind them, or a commitment that they can't take back. These fears rest on the mistaken belief that entering formation is a final commitment. It is not. It is simply a continuation of discernment, with better guidance. At every stage, it is very possible and straightforward to conclude that this is not for you and to leave with the Church's blessing. People do leave, and many say afterwards that the years were not wasted. After all, knowing oneself and God better is always profitable.

So what actually happens? The paths differ a bit, so we will take them one at a time, but they have much in common.

Entering a seminary or religious community is not like applying to university. It usually begins with a conversation. Every diocese has a vocations director, as does every religious order and community. They are a priest, sister or brother whose task is to talk with people like you, without commitment or pressure, usually over many months. If the sense of a call persists and matures, the application becomes more serious: interviews, references, medical and psychological assessment, time spent with the community, a formal acceptance. This thoroughness should reassure you rather than intimidate you. The Church examines her candidates carefully because she intends to entrust souls to them, and that is a serious matter indeed.

For a man training as a diocesan priest in these islands, the time to ordination typically takes six to seven years. That may seem long, but doctors are trained for a similar length of time to care for the body, and souls are no less complex.

Broadly speaking, formation begins with a preliminary (propaedeutic) year, which is often spent away from the seminary proper in a community dedicated to that purpose. That year has one aim: to lay a foundation of prayer, silence, and self-knowledge before study begins.

Once at a seminary such as Allen Hall in Chelsea, the academic phase commences. It starts with philosophy because theology is the study of God, and before someone can think rigorously about God they must learn to think rigorously at all. After that comes the theology proper: Scripture, doctrine, the sacraments, moral theology, canon law, Church history. Throughout this time, the seminarian is woven into pastoral placements at parishes, schools, hospitals, prisons, and so on, so that priests are not formed in isolation from the people they will serve.

Along the way, the man is admitted to candidacy and instituted in the ministries of lector and acolyte, which are public steps by which the Church and the candidate test the call together. Near the end he is ordained a deacon, makes the promise of celibacy, and usually serves for a time in a parish before, at last, priestly ordination. This most often takes place in his home cathedral, with his family present, when the bishop's hands join him to the apostolic line described in Chapter II.

What must be remembered through it all is that formation is not chiefly about acquiring information but about shaping

a person. It is, among other things, years of learning to set down the burden of the self described in the Introduction. Obedience, common life, and honesty gradually wear away what is false until something more solid remains. Many who have been through it say they came out freer.

For anyone entering a religious order, whether as friar or monk, nun or apostolic sister, the shape of formation is remarkably consistent. The stages are broadly the same across the Church, for men and women alike:

First comes a period of unhurried contact, visits and time spent alongside the community, usually called aspirancy. Then comes postulancy: a period of months in which one lives with the community while remaining entirely free to leave.

If they wish to continue and are accepted, a postulant enters the novitiate. The novice receives the habit, steps back from outside commitments, and dedicates themselves to learning the community's charism from the inside. It is the least "busy" and most important stage of formation. In a contemplative order it is above all a school of silence and prayer.

Afterwards comes first profession: vows of poverty, chastity and obedience made for a limited period and renewable, during which the young religious lives the common life fully and, where the vocation includes it, pursues studies. Only after a number of years does the religious approach solemn (or perpetual) profession: the permanent, total gift of self to God in this community, for life. For those men called to the priesthood within an order, diaconate and priestly ordination follow; for the brother, the sister, and the nun, final profession is the final step.

For a woman entering an apostolic congregation (teaching, nursing, pastoral, missionary) the structure is the same: aspirancy, postulancy, novitiate, temporary vows, perpetual vows. What differs is the texture. Her novitiate forms her in the community's active charism as well as its prayer; her studies and training may point toward the work the congregation already does and her common life is lived not behind an enclosure but as a base from which she is sent out.

For a woman or man entering an enclosed, contemplative Carmel (or a Poor Clare or a Benedictine cloister) the structure is the same again. The enclosed life is the one most distorted by films and popular imagination, so we would like to correct some misconceptions.

Enclosure is not a prison and the nun inside it has neither run away nor given up on life. She has judged that seeking the face of God, in silence, is worth the whole of a life, and she has arranged her life to make it possible by removing the distractions the rest of us cannot switch off. What is asked is very real and consequential: she embraces separation from the world, simplicity of life, long hours of prayer and silence, and the loss of the ordinary freedoms of coming and going.

This does not mean that she is cut off from those she loves. Enclosed nuns write letters, receive visits from family in the parlour, and in most communities today keep real bonds with the people who formed them; the grille and the parlour, which films use as symbols of coldness, are simply the practical furniture of a life of prayer. Most of all, she is not alone: she lives in a community of sisters who become, in the deepest sense, her family for life. In fact, visitors to Carmels

are often struck by the joy of the women inside: their laughter, and the freedom of people who no longer have anything to prove. A well-lived enclosure can be a very happy place indeed.

A few practical points to conclude. Formation is free for the candidate. The Church and the community fund it. It is open to people across a wide span of ages and backgrounds; neither a university degree nor a spotless past is required, and conversion stories are well represented in every seminary and novitiate in the world. What is required is baptism, freedom to commit, honesty in the application, and a call that has survived being examined. The propaedeutic year, the novitiate, the years of temporary vows, and everything that follows exist precisely so that the person and the Church can discern together if this is right. The Church has been known to say no to a candidate for their own good, and candidates have been known to say no to the Church and walk away completely at peace.

In short, formation requires prayer, study, community and time. We hope that answers a few of your questions but some will surely remain. Could I really live without marriage and children? What if I am not holy enough? What if I go and I am wrong? Isn't a life behind an enclosure wall a life wasted? In the next chapter we will try to address these kinds of questions and more.

Chapter V: Hard Questions

If you have read this far, you are probably mulling over questions the previous chapters did not answer. Let us look at a few serious ones now.

"Could I really give up marriage? A husband, a wife? Children?"

This might be the biggest question. After all, celibacy is a real renunciation of real goods. Marriage is holy — the Church herself calls it a sacrament and so much of the theology of love is written in its image. Children are a great blessing. A man who feels the pull of a wife and children, a woman who feels the ache for a husband and a child at her breast... These are not feelings of temptation; they are feelings God built into them. The celibate priest, brother, sister and nun will not live those things. There will be evenings when the house is quiet and they know exactly what they said no to. Anyone who has lived this life honestly will tell you so.

Christ himself, however, describes the meaning of such a life. "There are eunuchs who have been so from birth," he told his disciples, "and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (Matthew 19:12). He does not soften the idea. But he adds the words that give it meaning: for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever this life costs, it is not without purpose.

The world also tends to see celibacy as subtraction only; a life without intimacy or love. The Church sees it differently:

celibacy is not the absence of love but a particular form of it. Lived merely as a rule, it would be very hard to sustain. It is livable as a total gift of the heart to a Person, Christ himself, who lived it first. So the real question should not be "could I cope without marriage?", but "is there Someone I could love with that kind of totality?" Only prayer can answer that question, which is a subject we will turn to later.

Consider also what the gift makes possible. A married person's love is rightly concentrated: a spouse and children have first claim on them and rightly so. The celibate's renunciation of that one claim is what makes them available to everyone: able to be sent, woken at any hour, given wholly to whoever is in front of them. This is the reason people call the priest Father, the sister or nun Sister, and the superior Mother. These titles reflect the fatherhood of God and the motherhood of Mary. Ask a priest of thirty years how many souls he has baptised, absolved, married and buried; ask a sister how many children she has taught, or a contemplative how many strangers she has carried in prayer whose names she will learn only in heaven. For them, fatherhood and motherhood are not lost but take another form, and reach far more people.

A final word on the matter: celibacy is a calling, not an achievement, and not everyone has it. If, after real prayer and real counsel, you find you are made for marriage, then marriage is your road to God (of which more below), and a vocation in its own right. The question this book asks is not whether celibacy is possible for someone. It is whether it is asked of you.

"But won't I be lonely?"

This is a different question, and the honest answer is: sometimes, yes. But the distinction is not between a lonely consecrated life and a life free of loneliness. Such a life does not exist. Marriages contain loneliness; just ask any honest husband or wife. Flats full of friends can be lonely too. The most connected generation in history reports more loneliness than any before. Loneliness is a feature of the human condition, and no vocation will get rid of it; the only question is what life gives you to meet it with.

What these lives offer is real community: people who pray beside you, eat with you, and will be there in forty years. They offer friendship, which religious need and are encouraged to cultivate, and a spiritual fatherhood and motherhood that reaches many people. Above all they offer a daily life of prayer, which is why the loneliest religious are almost always the ones who stopped praying, and why formation gives so much time to prayer. There is a difference, then, between loneliness and solitude: loneliness is an emptiness, solitude is a presence. A person can feel desperately lonely in a crowd and profoundly accompanied in an empty chapel.

"I'm not holy enough. You don't know what I've done."

You're probably right. But the same goes for every priest, sister or nun you have ever met. If personal worthiness were the entry requirement, the Church would have never had any ministers at all. Peter's first response to Christ was "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." (Luke 5:8) Christ's response was to make him the rock. Matthew was called from his tax booth. Paul had helped kill Christians. Augustine spent his youth running away from God and said

so in a whole book. The pattern is consistent: God does not call people because they are worthy; He calls whom He wills, and then spends a lifetime shaping them.

So the sense of unworthiness you feel is not evidence against your vocation. The lives of the saints show that it often accompanies a genuine call. A person who is certain that they deserve the altar or the veil would be much more of a concern to a vocations director. As for your past: there is a sacrament for that. People with real conversions behind them stand in every seminary and novitiate in the world, and often make the most merciful confessors and the wisest sisters, because mercy is not theoretical to them. Your history does not disqualify you from asking the question. The Church has never required anyone to arrive finished; that is what formation is for.

"What if I go and I'm wrong?"

This fear lies beneath many of the others: that you might get it wrong, commit yourself, and spoil your one life. Three things are worth saying about that.

First, as the previous chapter explained, starting does not mean finishing. Between first enquiry and final vows stand years explicitly designed as mutual discernment, with honourable ways to stop at every stage. Many people leave formation for good marriages and fruitful lives, and they often say the same thing: the years taught them to pray, gave them friends, and showed them who they were. A serious attempt to find God's will is never wasted time, whichever way it goes.

Secondly, consider the picture of God behind the fear: one who speaks ambiguously and then punishes people for guessing wrong. That is not the God of the Gospel. A father who sees his child sincerely, prayerfully trying to do his will is not laying a trap for them. God writes straight with crooked lines and He is not defeated by a mistake made in good faith.

Thirdly, the question can be asked the other way round: what if I do not go, and I was called? The first mistake is corrected by years of prayer, counsel and careful testing. The second may never be examined at all, and can remain with a person for a lifetime as a question they have trained themselves not to hear. The greater risk is not giving the wrong answer, but refusing to ask the question.

"Isn't a life behind an enclosure wall a life wasted?"

This question often falls on women, usually from family and friends who love them and mean well: all that intelligence and warmth... how could it be spent behind a wall in prayer?

One answer is Thérèse of Lisieux. She entered Carmel at fifteen, rarely left her cloister, and died at twenty-four. Yet she is a Doctor of the Church and patroness of the missions, because the Church does not measure lives as the world does. She believes that a life of hidden prayer is not a withdrawal of energy from the world but a secret engine within it; that the contemplative in her cell, holding the world up to God in prayer, is doing something as real as the work of the surgeon or the teacher. You may not feel the force of this immediately. But those who have visited these communities and met the women in them rarely come away pitying them; more often they are moved, and sometimes a little envious. Joy like that is hard to reconcile with a wasted life.

"What will people say?"

Something, inevitably. The reaction can be hard to bear, particularly for young women who choose the veil: the disbelief, the "such a waste," the quiet assumption that something must have gone wrong in a woman who chooses God over a family. Men face it too: friends go quiet and relatives grieve for the grandchildren that will not come. Such reactions are real and they can be painful.

And yet this fear is, at heart, the instinct to arrange a life around how it will look to others, which is no way to decide about anything that matters. The saints, without exception, at some point stopped letting other people's opinions decide

for them. There is also this consolation: the people whose opinion you fear are usually fewer than you think and those who truly love you often come round when they see that you are happier and more yourself. In the end, the judgement that matters is God's.

"Isn't the Church a scandal? Why would I give my life to that?"

Your friends may well ask this. The abuse crisis is real: the crimes were real, and so were the failures of governance that concealed them. Anger at this is justified, and cannot be minimised.

But consider why we are angry. It is because a priest or religious is genuinely meant to be trustworthy, and the betrayal of that trust is sacrilege as well as a crime. We hold these people to a standard but that standard is not restored by good people leaving. In earlier and darker periods of her history, the Church was renewed not by her critics but from within, by men and women who gave her their lives in difficult times. The answer to unfaithful priests and religious has always been holy ones.

"And what if the answer is marriage or single life?"

This is also a very important question. This book is about consecrated vocations, but they are not the only holy way to spend a life. Marriage is also a vocation. It is a sacrament and a path to God every bit as real as the priesthood or the cloister. To raise children who know they are loved, to stay faithful to one person across decades, and build the domestic church where the next generation first meets God: this is a calling in its own right, and a demanding one. A couple who live it well are a great gift to the Church.

Equally, there is a third road the modern Church increasingly recognises: the generous single life. Not everyone is called to marriage, and not everyone is called to vows, and it is entirely possible to be called by God to live single in the world — to be free and available, given to friendship and service and prayer in a way neither the married nor the vowed can quite manage. Such a life is also a path to holiness.

Paul, writing to a Corinthian church that was anxious about this very question, said plainly that the one who marries does well, and the one who remains single for the Lord's sake does even better (1 Corinthians 7:38). The Church has always held consecrated celibacy in particular honour, while insisting that marriage too is holy; and a single life chosen deliberately, rather than drifted into, takes a particular kind of resolve.

Finally: most readers of this book, whatever else they discern, will also spend a great part of their lives at ordinary work, and Scripture asks that this too be given, not merely endured. Work is not the punishment that arrived after Eden; God put the man in the garden to work it before anything

went wrong (Genesis 2:15), and Paul's instruction to the Colossians holds as well for a shop floor or an office as for a monastery: "whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men" (Colossians 3:23). Discernment, in the end, is not a search for the one holy option among several worldly ones. It is the search for which of these three genuinely holy lives (marriage, the single life, or the consecrated life this book has been describing) is for you.

Why say so in a book about consecrated life? Because a vocation chosen by elimination is not what God wants. The point of discernment is not to talk yourself into one particular life. It is to find the one that is yours, and to be able to say yes to it freely, precisely because you knew you could have said yes to something else and chose this instead. If these pages help even one reader to be married, or serenely single and serving, then the book has done its work, because it will have helped someone to live deliberately and in answer to God's call.

Into the light

There are more questions left than we have space for. In most cases, the best answer will likely be to go and ask someone. The vocations director's office, the convent parlour and the spiritual direction recommended in the final chapter are all there because print has limits.

What remains is the practical question: what should I do now? The final chapter will get to that. First, however, let us hear from some people who have walked the path of discernment before you.

Chapter VI - Personal Testimonies

Peter Collins – Permanent Deacon

My name is Peter Collins. I was born in 1955 and raised as a cradle Catholic by my mother, because my father was not religious. I attended a Catholic primary school and became an altar server. As a child, my faith was strong and God felt very close to me. I nearly went to junior seminary, but my mother did not want me boarding away from home. Instead, I attended the local secondary school and later sixth form college in Aylesbury. It was there that I met Michelle, who would become my wife in 1976. After studying chemistry at Loughborough University, I graduated in 1978 and began a 37-year career in the paint industry, starting at ICI Paints and eventually becoming a Technical Director at the Paint Research Association. Since retiring in 2015, I have continued working as a technical consultant, and I remain active as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Michelle and I moved to Great Missenden in 1984. By then we had two children, and a third on the way. We were drawn there to the parish of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, served by priests of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (SSCC). One day, our parish deacon, Tony McHale, suggested I consider the diaconate, but I felt unworthy and too busy with work and family. In 1987, my job took us to Cleveland, Ohio, where we found a warm parish community and welcomed our fourth child. Returning to the UK in 1990, we later had a fifth child. Life was full: family, work, and parish life were all thriving.

Once again in 1994, I seriously considered the diaconate and discussed it with our then parish priest, Fr (now Bishop) Pat

Lynch. His advice: concentrate on your family for now, there will be time to pursue this later and if the calling is real it won't go away. He was right! In 2013, I mentioned to friends that I thought I was too old for the diaconate, only for another parishioner, responsible for diaconal formation for southern England, to approach me the following week. She encouraged me to pray and speak with our diocesan vocations director. After a propaedeutic year, I began formation at Wonersh seminary. In 2017 I was ordained as a permanent deacon by Bishop Peter Doyle in our parish church.

Ordination was the beginning of a wonderful new stage in my journey with God. I now realise I should have listened to the Lord much earlier, because serving as a deacon—alongside being a husband, father and now grandfather—has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life. The permanent diaconate is a threefold ministry of service: charity, the Word and liturgy. Deacons are members of the clergy, privileged to accompany people at moments of deep need: visiting the sick and dying, and meeting families as they plan funerals for loved ones. We prepare families for their children's baptism, often when they have been away from parish life since Confirmation. This offers a wonderful opportunity to encourage them back to the Church to receive the graces poured out through the sacraments. Our prayer life is enriched by taking part in the Church's morning and evening prayer, and preparing to preach draws us more deeply into the Scriptures, so that we can proclaim and preach the Gospel at Mass. During Mass, we prepare the altar, standing beside the priest during the Consecration, and then serving as ordinary ministers of the Eucharist, offering

the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ our Lord to our brothers and sisters.

Our calling from God is usually recognised over time through prayer, service as lay people, encouragement from others, and dialogue with the Church. If you feel drawn to serve God and His people in this way, I encourage you to speak with your parish priest, parish deacon or a member of your diocesan vocations team.

Father Matthew Roche-Saunders – Diocesan Priest

I'm so happy to be a diocesan priest!

I'm not sure I would have believed these words when I was a teenager, when the idea of becoming a priest first landed on my heart and seemed so far away from the life I'd expected for myself. To me it seemed like becoming a priest meant saying goodbye to all the things I'd looked forward to.

I was about 13 or 14 at the time – I remember being struck whenever my parish priest would preach his homily. I don't remember understanding very much of what he shared each Sunday, but I recall experiencing a deep desire to 'feed the flock'. That feeling would stir and grow within me – I even remember giving practice homilies in my head while doing the dishes at home, pretending there was a group of people listening! But I didn't know where to take this thought. I didn't go to a Catholic high school and I didn't know anyone else my age who thought God was calling to them. I would watch occasional YouTube videos about the life of priests,

but when asked about what I wanted to be in the future I didn't include priesthood in my reply.

I had a profound experience at the age of 17 at a Catholic festival called Youth 2000. There, Jesus became real to me, in confession, and in Eucharistic Adoration. I had never stopped going to church, and I tried to pray as a teenager – but the difference it made to encounter Jesus as a living person, as someone who wanted to save me from sin and fill me with a joy I'd never experienced before: this changed my whole approach to life. All of a sudden, knowing Jesus rather than simply knowing about him, I wanted to do anything he asked me to. And I would still use those words today: I want to do anything Jesus asks me, because I have experienced how much he loves me.

I went to university at 18, and studied psychology. This felt like the next right step for me, to study something I would want to do as a career if priesthood wasn't for me, and to learn the key life skills that come with moving away from home. And there in my second year, as my call to the priesthood grew stronger and as my life of faith deepened, I met a beautiful young woman which completely knocked me sideways. This was a total curveball that didn't make sense to me! I shared this with the priest I was meeting with for spiritual direction, and he simply asked me: do you still want to be a priest? Yes, I said, and truly I meant it. Well, he said, now you're free to say yes! This advice has always stayed with me. I could only really say yes to Jesus, when I knew what it was I was letting go of. I was now more able to say yes because I knew the cost of my yes.

At the end of my degree, I entered seminary, and studied there for six years before my ordination as a priest. There are so many other moments in seminary that come to mind as I write this, not least a powerful gift of peace that Jesus blessed me with in the year leading up to my ordination, a year that saw me starting to panic about whether everything would be OK on the other side of commitment. Would everything be OK? I still don't know the answer to this question. Would Jesus be with me in all things? This is far more beautiful, but takes a greater act of trust. I felt the gift of peace enabled me to say this and mean it.

I'm so glad I did. I'm a priest today because Jesus invited me to be one. After just a few years of ministry, I've already journeyed with countless souls, and seen time and time again how Jesus wants to work the miracle of his saving love in each of them. He uses the hands, the words, the silence and the character of priests to do this. As a priest I need to remember every day that my strength lies in him. He will never leave me, and his grace is enough, for me and for you. Trust in him!

Sister Mary Christina – Active Religious Sister

When I was fifteen, the priest of our local parish, who was eighty-two, was attacked in his house by an intruder who stole thirty pence. He died two days later. The convent girls were asked to sing at his funeral, and it made a deep impression on me. I thought: life is short and eternity is long. I wanted to spend mine in God's service.

I had always wanted to teach, so at nineteen I joined the Teaching Sisters of the Holy Cross, the congregation who had taught me at school. After my profession I went to Digby Stuart training college to train as an English teacher — and when I left college I was asked to teach Maths instead, which I enjoyed.

My first school was our own at New Malden in Surrey. While I was there I started a Crusader group, inspired by the Jesuits, and the youngsters loved it. We had contact with one of our schools in Zambia and sent them parcels of clothes. Every day we said our special prayer together: O Jesus, through the most pure heart of Mary, I offer thee all my prayers, works and sufferings of this day.

After eight years I was sent to our convent in Corby, Northamptonshire. While I was there I took my A Levels in Physics and Chemistry and did an Open University honours degree. In the parish I ran three Legion of Mary groups, who visited elderly parishioners among other things. We joined up with a neighbouring group, held an all-night vigil, and went away to a retreat centre for a weekend. It was all good fun. I also started keeping bees.

Twenty-three years later I came to The Grange Convent at Chalfont St Peter in Buckinghamshire, where for several years I helped with St Joseph's youth club and the catechetics programme. I joined the local beekeeping society and took their exams, and went on to teach the beginners' classes and tutor new beekeepers through their module exams. I have been keeping bees now for fifty years. It is great to be able to give friends a jar of honey. Like all creatures, bees are one of God's amazing works.

At Christmas, Easter and other feast days we Sisters come together to celebrate — Mass, a meal, and some homemade entertainment of our own. It is good to enjoy each other's company. Sometimes we travel to our Mother House in Switzerland to see our Swiss Sisters, and Sisters from our provinces in Africa, India and Chile come to stay with us while they are doing courses in England. Some of ours have visited them in their countries. It is good to have those international links.

Having been a religious for over seventy years, I am grateful for all the graces God has given me. Of course there have been good times and difficult times — that is the way life is — though I think the good times have outweighed the difficult ones. I loved teaching, though it was not always easy. I am still in touch with two pupils I taught fifty years ago. I pray that more young people will want to follow the richness of a life dedicated to God.

Now, in the latter part of my life, I find it hard that so many of my good friends in the congregation have passed on. I look forward to seeing them again when I join them. Not being as active as I once was, because I am not so physically able, is not easy for me either. So I pray and meditate, and keep in

touch with my friends, and wait patiently until God calls me to himself.

Brother Elliott Cannon – Temporary Professed Discalced Carmelite Brother in Formation

I have always been a passionate person and when I discovered the Carmelites I found the place for my passions to rest. As a kid I was full of life and for that reason school bored me. I would sit daydreaming about being outside as the teacher dribbled on about mathematics. I longed to be in the summer fields that lay beside the window.

As I grew so did my desires. In my teenage years the desires of the world really took hold and I was ambitious without fault for what I then considered life's greatest achievements — having a girlfriend and getting drunk at parties. It was, of course, a flawed vision, but at the time, nothing seemed better.

Inevitably, the harvest was poor and suddenly one day I realised how empty my life was. It was as if a switch had been turned on and the shadows of happiness I found in debauchery disappeared. It was here that the Lord found me and made me desire Him. He taught me to pray and I no longer searched for shadows of happiness for I had found genuine joy. In Him my life became meaningful.

It is no wonder that the Carmelite Saints inspired me to pursue an intimate friendship with Jesus and total dedication in service of the Lord who spoke to my own heart. Everything I

desired and wanted to be I found in them and so I joined the order.

Teresa of Ávila founded the Discalced Carmelites so that the Lord might have true friends. People willing to dedicate their whole lives in pursuit of communion with the One who loves us.

The Carmelite life is summed up in our motto — "With zeal I have been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts" (1 Kings 19:14). I joined the Carmelites because I wanted to experience what our Saints had.

To dream of Carmel without the Cross is impossible. Upon entering the Lord made it very clear that I cannot sit at His right hand without drinking from His chalice. For me this has been the most difficult part of Carmel. I find the Science of the Cross so raw. But over and again the Carmelite Saints reveal that to become like Jesus we must suffer with Him, we must become to him like "another humanity in which he can renew his whole mystery"[3], both His Resurrection and His Passion. Our vocation is to share in the joys and sufferings of all of humanity, this is the meaning of "living life to the full."

My life as a student consists of prayer and study, a match made in heaven. For the majority of the year I travel into seminary for lectures and cycle back to pray in our Priory. It's the perfect mix of the active and contemplative lives which we experience as Carmelites.

---

[3] Elizabeth of the Trinity, "Prayer to the Holy Trinity" (21 November, 1904), in *The Complete Works of Elizabeth of the Trinity*, vol. 1, *I Have Found God: General Introduction and Letters 1899–1904*, trans. Aletheia Kane (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1984), 183–184.

I love so many things about the Carmelites but the hours of silent prayer really stand out. We say all the offices together and spend two hours in silent prayer every day. In these hours I can sit with my beloved and rest, I can tell Him my desires and needs and find strength for the journey. Prayer is never boring. It is like "the lonely valleys that are quiet, pleasant and cool for they flow with fresh waters."[4] With Jesus I invite you to come and see, read our saints; enter into a life of prayer. "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, buy and eat!" (Isaiah 55:1)

Father Jerome Ituah – Discalced Carmelite Priest

On the 16th of July 2026 I marked twenty-six years since my first profession as a Discalced Carmelite, and on the 18th of August, my nineteenth anniversary of priestly ordination. Looking back, those years seem to have passed like a single day, though the beginning of the journey was not easy at all.

As a child, people would tell me, "You're acting like a priest." As I grew older and became an altar server, even more people made the same comparison. Did their words get into my head? Did I become a priest simply to fulfil the desires of others, or was there truly a call from God — and if so, how did I hear it?

I first contemplated the seminary in 1991, after secondary school, but for family reasons went instead to university to

[4] John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, stanza 14, no. 6, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 530.

study architecture. The desire never left me. There, I would go to confession in town, usually with Fr. Charles Newell, an elderly Carmelite priest, who would follow each confession with a small communion service for me in the chapel. That simple kindness left me with the sense that the Carmelites had something special, and made me want to know more about them.

One day, Fr. Christopher Clarke gave me a copy of *The Story of a Soul*, the autobiography of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, and invited me to accompany him to the Carmelite novitiate in Nsukka. I was thrilled, and my closest friend, Stephen (now with God in heaven), agreed to come with me.

Telling my family was the hardest part. My father, who had every confidence I would graduate and succeed as an architect, responded to my announcement by saying, "If this is the way you want to end your life, after all I have done for you, then go ahead," before withdrawing into his room. I feared for my safety that night and barely slept. My mother and siblings were supportive, but no one could challenge my father, who then withdrew all financial support for my education.

My final year at university was consequently very difficult. My mother sustained me with food and small amounts of money, and my spiritual father, Rev. Fr. Richard Wall, SMA, became a steady support. I took on design jobs to raise money of my own. When I needed funds for my final-year project, I brought my list of expenses before the Blessed Sacrament and asked God to move my father's heart. That same day, unprompted, my father asked if I needed anything,

and gave me the exact amount on my list — the last money he gave me before I graduated.

The vocations director, Fr. Martin Conroy, OCD, later visited my family to speak with my father directly. My father told him plainly, "If Jerome goes, he is on his own and ceases to be part of the family." I told Fr. Martin I would continue regardless, out of conviction, and that my father's harshness only reflected how much he loved me and wanted to protect me. Fr. Martin was struck both by my father's bluntness and by my own resolve. Weeks later, my father — now certain I had not changed my mind — offered to fund my studies anywhere in the world if it meant abandoning my vocation. I declined, and he was even more upset.

While waiting to begin my postulancy in May 1998, I continued attending Master's classes as a kind of cover, though I was really only marking time. When the day of departure finally came, my father returned home agitated, and the house fell into chaos as he struggled to let me go. I remained calm, said goodbye, and left for Nsukka with my mother seeing me off.

The two years that followed, through postulancy and novitiate, were devoted in large part to praying for my father's conversion — not that he became a different man, since he was already a good one, but that he come to accept my vocation and draw closer to God. A painful letter from my youngest sister, Isi, describing the family's hardship after our father withdrew support, nearly made me give up. What kept me there was the conviction that if God had truly called me, He would care for them. I prayed all the more intensely for my father from then on.

As my first profession approached, set for 16th July 2000, I wrote first to my mother, and then, once my father was upset at not being told directly, to him as well, inviting him. He remained angry, blaming my mother for supporting my decision, and I did not expect him to attend.

Then, on the Thursday before the ceremony, a brother in the community told me my parents had arrived — both of them. I ran to my father and embraced him, overjoyed and astonished. It felt like a miracle, an answered prayer. The following days, as he saw how we lived in community, he was especially moved to see the prior, Fr. Jim Noonan, personally serving food to the guests — a moment of humility he said he had never witnessed in a priest before. Before he and my mother left, he told me, "My son, you are in a good place."

After my profession, I began formation in earnest: three years of Philosophy at the Dominican Institute of Philosophy and Theology in Ibadan, followed by Theology at Tangaza College, a constituent college of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, graduating in 2007. I returned to Nigeria and was ordained to the priesthood that August.

Priestly life has since been a time of great blessing — years in parish ministry, at a retreat house, and directing retreats for others. Since 2014, much of it has been devoted to study: a licentiate in Sacred Scripture, and now a doctorate in Biblical Theology nearing completion.

God has been with me all along, and I can only say: thank You, Lord, for the gift of the Carmelite vocation and the priesthood. It has not always been an easy road, and there have been difficult seasons along the way — but that story is for another day.

Susan Watson – Secular Carmelite

Here I am Lord, a married woman leading a busy life, juggling home responsibilities, work, prayer time, attending Mass and studying my bible. I am ready to serve you Lord but don't know where to find the deeper teachings of the Catholic Church. I want to find that treasure hidden in a field that Jesus talks about. I want to find a group of Christian people who can accompany me on my spiritual journey and support me when I feel lost and alone. I am spiritually hungry and long to go deeper into the mysteries of the Trinity and have an intimate relationship with Jesus that the saints talk about. I can't become a nun or join a convent because of my family and work responsibilities.

That was where I was before I was introduced to Carmel. I had no idea that there was a secular Carmelite order or met any secular Carmelites. That was when a Carmelite Friar became our parish priest and invited anyone interested to attend a meeting to talk about starting a secular Carmelite group. He explained that practising Catholics could join the lay movement attached to the Teresian Carmelites. The charism of Carmel involves going deeper in prayer as an inspiration for everyday action. We learnt that we would feed our souls on the teachings of the great Carmelite Saints like St Thérèse of Lisieux. I had heard the names of St John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila but their books had not made any sense years ago. Our Carmelite group started to meet every month and the focus of these meetings was on study of the saints' writings, discussion and prayer. We started off with the book of Life of St Teresa.

Gradually we progressed as a group and became close spiritual friends who shared our ups and downs, the graces, consolations and desolations we were receiving and supported each other on our individual and joint spiritual journey. Not everyone found that God was calling them to a vocation in our secular Carmelite group and left. We were taught that the Rule of Life involved the private recital of the Morning and Evening Prayer of the Church and a desire to spend time alone with God during a daily period of silence and contemplation. This has to be incorporated into our daily life schedule which is not always easy but comes with discipline and determination. Also regular attendance at Mass.

Soon we learnt that we were not an isolated group but that membership of a local community is also part of a larger Order of Secular Carmelites in Great Britain and part of the worldwide order. Every year we go on a residential retreat for a few days where we can meet with other seculars across the country. We also have the opportunity to meet and study with friars and nuns from Carmelite communities. On this journey there is always something more to learn and opportunities to deepen our relationship with God which is exciting and enriching.

Brother Noel – Non-ordained religious, Order of Discalced Carmelites

I worked in a merchant bank in London. It was a good and well-paid job. It was shift work, so I had one week off every month which I used to travel around Europe. I had plenty of opportunities and experiences working and playing in London, but something was missing. As the years of my working life came and went, I felt a gnawing feeling that I was not fulfilling my deepest hunger. My life then seemed to lack purpose and meaning, and it felt dry and repetitive. When I would pray and attend Mass, that feeling of wanting more seemed satisfied. When I abandoned prayer and tried to ignore this disquiet within me, it seemed to intensify and I would feel empty and disjointed. I now see the hand of God in this process, guiding me to the contemplative way of life. This, for me, is how the Lord was guiding me in a very clear and undeniable way.

I used the opportunity of my monthly weeks off to start to search deeper and see where this call to contemplative life might take me, or in what form. I only knew of one contemplative order, the Cistercians, so I started making monthly visits to a monastery in Ireland and would stay with them for a week at a time. After many months, or even a year, of this dance with them, I still felt a disquiet within me and had pretty much made up my mind to search elsewhere — when a chance encounter with a Cistercian sister drew my attention to Carmelite life. When she asked what attracted me to the Cistercians, she stopped me mid-sentence and told me, "You sound more like a Carmelite to me."

I had no idea who the Carmelites were at that time, but I had heard of St Thérèse of Lisieux and had been praying to her for a sign that I was answering the will of Jesus. I got more than I asked for!

I immediately started looking into the Carmelites, and it was while visiting our monastery in Loughrea one cold, wet winter's evening that a second little miracle happened for me. I was invited to join the community for their daily mental prayer. As I sat at the back of the chapel in silence, I observed these ageing friars and thought, "Lord, how could I be happy here?" I started to pray once more to St Thérèse, and what washed over me was the value of these friars' lives. Their daily gift to God in silent adoration, and how unique and rare this offering is today. I thought: what a gift to offer to God at the end of one's life — a life of prayer, not for oneself alone but for the whole Church and world.

Once I felt confident that I had found something I had been searching for, I had to investigate further. Of course, any move away from what feels safe and known is very disconcerting, and even the thought of it, when you are faced with a decision like that, brings all kinds of unease and a little anxiety. Am I making a mistake? Have I deluded myself into thinking that religious life is being asked of me? Surely I can do both — stay in my safe, secure working life and pray on the side? That is why the process of entering this life is slow and sensible, one step taken at a time. Visits without commitment, which slowly reveal the depth of feeling and a growing confidence that this life was for me.

Once I entered, I didn't feel I had given up much at all. Not, at least, anything worth holding on to. Money, yes; a certain

kind of independence where I captained my own ship in the world. But even there, how truly free are we? Every responsible person has commitments, and we are all expected to work faithfully in whatever occupations we employ. Religious life calls for another form of commitment, but not something beyond what I was used to in my working life. The reward, however, has been immeasurable. I can't say that every day is joyful and without its stresses and difficulties at times, but the peace and spiritual security I feel when fully engaged in this life of prayer and contemplation far outweigh the difficulties.

We have a set timetable where we recite the offices of the Church, and daily Mass of course. But what is distinct about Carmelite life is our daily call to silent, or mental, prayer. Morning and again in the evening, these two pillars of concrete communion with our Lord define our life, and are shared by all my Carmelite brothers and sisters. Whether ordained or non-ordained, what makes us distinctly Carmelites, and equally all brothers in Carmel, is this daily commitment.

What I found in Carmel, trying to answer this gnawing desire for purpose and meaning, was not what I expected when I was so full of enthusiasm and desire in those early days of my journey. Twenty years have gone by so fast, and when I look back over them I find a bumpy road with potholes and weeds. Disappointments, discouragement, sufferings of many sorts. Spiritual difficulties too, where I have felt abandoned and alone, and where I have felt I abandoned God and left him alone.

What I have discovered for myself is that God never gives up on me, and that growth never ends. What seems empty and difficult are the places where the deepest changes and maturing take place. What I have discovered is that Jesus changes us through what we find most distasteful about ourselves. We try to ignore that side of ourselves, but the spiritual life shines a light on all the dark parts of us, and Jesus holds our hand as he invites us to transformation with the power of his grace.

I am the same person I was entering Carmel, but not the same!

The spiritual life in Carmel continues to challenge me, and to look ever closer at what I would rather deny and ignore. I have found the purpose and meaning I was looking for in the everyday ordinariness of life, its struggles and its joys.

Sister Thérèse Wilkinson – Enclosed nun, Order of Discalced Carmelites

At the beginning of every Easter Vigil, as the Paschal candle is prepared, the priest prays: *Christ yesterday and today; the Beginning and the end.* All time belongs to him and all the ages.

There is perhaps nowhere on earth where that is more apparent than in a monastery, where each day consists of set times of prayer. More profoundly, by religious profession our lives are consecrated to Christ and given over to him. From then on we are completely at his disposal. Every present moment belongs to him, not to us.

We are often asked, particularly by school groups who visit, to describe a typical day in Carmel. There is actually no such thing. In black and white, our timetable looks very stark, and it gives the impression that our way of life must be monotonous — doing the same things at the same time, day in, day out. In reality no two days are the same, and no two nuns in the same monastery will have the same experiences in the same day, even though outwardly we follow the same schedule.

Like the first Carmelite hermits on Mount Carmel, we are hermits who live in community, and one of the distinguishing marks of our life is its emphasis on solitude. We spend two hours a day in silent, personal prayer: an hour first thing in the morning and again in the early evening. We can go to the chapel for this, but I usually stay in my own cell. The cell is not simply where we sleep, but the primary place of encounter with God. As the Rule of St Albert puts it, each one of us is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night. Even when we are not physically in our cells, we carry them with us, in that interior space where we meet God in each present moment.

Most of the day is spent in silence. We speak only when necessary about work, and for an hour of recreation each evening, so that each sister is left free to be at prayer even in the midst of activity. My own work is mainly in the Altar Bread Office, from where we supply altar breads to several hundred parishes, schools and communities across the United Kingdom. It is the main way we earn our living, and I work there around five hours each day: bagging breads, packing parcels, preparing postage, answering customers — often receiving prayer requests along with their orders.

We are blessed to live in a rural setting. The south side of the monastery looks across fields to the River Derwent, and the view changes with the seasons: dandelions in spring, hay in summer, grazing sheep in autumn, flood plains in winter. One might spy a pair of red kites circling, or a heron flapping steadily towards the river.

Our solitary prayer is balanced by the liturgy. We gather in the chapel seven times a day for the Divine Office, which we pray in union with the Church throughout the world and on behalf of the world. It is striking how often these ancient prayers resonate with what is happening right now. The high point of each day is Holy Mass. Since it is the most important thing that happens, everything else is arranged around it.

Like many religious communities today, we live this vocation within the reality of smaller numbers and the quiet pressure of sustaining our life with fewer sisters. These limitations can sometimes be felt keenly. Yet they also reveal something essential about our charism: that it is not our strength that carries the life of the monastery, but the Lord's. In these circumstances fidelity itself becomes a form of witness — a quiet trust that God continues to work through what is small and hidden.

I have a friend in the Carmel of Aleppo, where in recent years the sisters have withstood civil war, a severe earthquake, and further violent unrest. Their first instinct is always to reach out to the people around them, Christian and Muslim, who stand most in need. While we live here in peaceful North Yorkshire, we still carry that sense of being alongside the people who live around us.

The last Office of each day is Compline, which begins with a silent examination of conscience, when we return the day into God's hands. It is also the time when, if there have been any disagreements during the day, they can be resolved, forgiven and left behind. Tomorrow is another day.

Afterwards we usually stay in the chapel for a few moments of silent prayer: for those who have asked our prayers during the day, for world events, for those who will die during the night, and for all who are feeling vulnerable or afraid.

When St Teresa began her reform of Carmel, she wrote that in the face of the world's turmoil she resolved to do the little in her power. By living this way of life from day to day in the twenty-first century, we too are doing the little in our power to help heal the wounds of our broken world.[5]

Chapter VII: Saints

Now that we have met some people who discerned their vocations in our own time, we have just enough space to look at some of the saints in whose footsteps they follow. These five are very different from one another but what they have in common is that each lived by a rule of life and several of them wrote rules that others still follow.

---

[5] Edited with permission from "Every Day in the Monastery Is Different and Full of 'God's Surprises'", *Mount Carmel Magazine*, 30th of March 2026

Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–547)

Our first saint is Saint Benedict, whose Rule has influenced nearly every form of religious life in the Western Church.

When Benedict was a young man, he set out to live alone in a cave at Subiaco because he was disgusted by what he had seen of Rome. Others sought him out and asked him to lead them. The first attempt went badly and the community that had begged him to govern them ended up finding him too exacting and, tradition says, tried to solve the issue by poisoning him. Either way, he returned to his cave and later began again. What eventually emerged from his efforts at Monte Cassino was a short Rule of seventy-three chapters that had a huge impact on the life of Europe.

What is most striking about the Rule of St Benedict is its moderation. Benedict says plainly that he hopes to establish nothing harsh and nothing burdensome. He made rules for how much wine the brothers may have and insisted that the weak should receive more help and the strong be made to help them. He tells the abbot to arrange the house so that the strong have something to strive for and the weak are not driven away. Its shape is the one the next chapter mimics in miniature: prayer at fixed hours, work, reading, and the support of others.

Fittingly, Benedict was named a patron of Europe. After Rome collapsed, it was houses following his Rule that kept the libraries, the learning and the faith alive.

Clare of Assisi (1194–1253)

Clare (or Chiara in Italian) was born to a comfortable family in Assisi in the centre of Italy. At the age of eighteen she was due to be married but absconded on Palm Sunday, cut her hair off, and put on a rough habit. Her family came to take her back by force but she held on to the altar cloth until they gave up.

While often associated with Saint Francis, whom she was a follower of, Clare's own work was the creation of a contemplative counterpart of the friars: women who lived enclosed lives of radical poverty, praying for the people who were out preaching.

Clare is also the first woman in the history of the Church to write a rule for women which the Church approved. Before her, women's communities lived under rules written by men. However, she decided to write her own.

Getting it accepted would take the rest of her life. What she wanted was the privilege of poverty; permission for her sisters to own literally nothing, not even the security of property held in common, which the authorities of the day did not accept. Successive popes offered her gentler versions, and for some forty years, much of it spent ill in bed, she declined them. Her rule was finally approved in 1253 and the document was brought to her two days before she died. She is said to have kissed it.

Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556)

The story of Ignatius starts with a vain and ambitious minor nobleman with a taste for duelling. Unfortunately, a French cannonball smashed his leg at the Battle of Pamplona in 1521, after which he took an extended period of convalescence in which there was nothing to read at the family castle but a life of Christ and a book of saints. He read them out of boredom to begin with but soon noticed something that would shape Christian spirituality for centuries.

When he daydreamed about military glory and about impressing a certain great lady, he enjoyed it intensely but afterwards felt dry, restless and empty. However, when he daydreamed about doing what Francis and Dominic had done, he also enjoyed it but afterwards felt settled, and the contentment lasted.

From that observation grew the Spiritual Exercises, which is one of the most influential guides to discernment ever written. Its central insight also underlies the next chapter: namely, that God is not usually found by working out an argument, but by paying close attention to what actually happens inside you, and learning to tell which movements come from Him and which do not.

Ignatius went on to found the Society of Jesus and send men to every continent then known.

Catherine McAuley (1778–1841)

Catherine was an orphaned Dublin girl who spent twenty years as a companion in a wealthy Protestant household before inheriting the entire fortune when they died. In 1827

she opened a large house on Baggot Street, in a respectable part of Dublin, to educate poor girls and shelter destitute women.

She had intended to work as a laywoman but this proved difficult as pressure grew on her to give the work a recognised religious form. So it was that Catherine McAuley, when she was in her early fifties and with no original wish to become a nun, entered religious formation in order to keep doing the work she had already started.

The Sisters of Mercy were founded in 1831 and came to be known as the walking nuns because they were always out on the streets, in the cholera sheds, in the prisons and the slums. Catherine's idea was that the sisters would unite the prayer of Mary with the work of Martha. Within a century of her death the Sisters of Mercy were on every continent, running schools and hospitals in countries she herself had likely never heard of.

Jean Vianney (1786–1859)

Jean-Marie Vianney grew up in the life of a farm boy during the French Revolution, learning his catechism in secret because priests were being hunted. He came to study late and was, by every account including his own, no good at it. Latin escaped him and he failed examinations. At one point, he was even dismissed from seminary. Luckily, the vicar general had him ordained anyway after learning that he was devout and prayed the rosary, judging that the Church needed holy priests as well as learned ones.

Afterwards, Vianney was sent to Ars, a village of about two hundred and thirty people where the practice of the faith had largely lapsed and ended up staying there for forty-one years.

What he did in that time was very simple. He prayed at length (often at night), ate almost nothing, visited everyone, and sat in the confessional (in later years for up to sixteen hours a day). Word spread that God could be met in that confessional, and by the last years of his life as many as a hundred thousand pilgrims a year were coming to Ars.

What the five have in common

Though very different from one another, each of the people you just read about decided, at some point, to spend time in silence before God. They kept doing so faithfully through dryness and distraction, and built the rest of their life around it. None of them was given a plan for the whole of life in advance but each was shown the next step.

Their example brings us to practical matters.

Chapter VIII: The Compass

If you have read this far, you've probably read enough and now you need to know what to do. A lot of vocation advice falls short here. People are told to pray about it, but not how. Left with only that, most people simply start to think: they lie awake weighing possibilities and waiting for certainty to arrive, which it rarely does. Discernment is not a problem solved by thinking alone, because what we are trying to discern is not an idea of our own but the voice of God. But recognising it requires something our age finds very difficult indeed: being quiet regularly, and for long enough, to learn what it sounds like.

This chapter therefore offers a simple way to do just that: four practices, within reach of any student or worker, to be kept faithfully rather than only when you feel like it. Keep them for a season and the questions will start to answer themselves.

First and foremost, you need a moment of silent prayer every day. The rosary, spiritual reading, and the Mass are all good, but they cannot replace this because you need to be silent and alone before God. To do so, choose a time, preferably at the same time each day and ideally in the morning, before the day becomes busy. Go to a church or chapel if you can reach one, or a quiet corner of your room if you cannot. There are different ways to enter into this silence. You might prefer Lectio Divina, whereby you take a page of the Gospels, read a few lines slowly, and then stop reading. Alternatively, you could gaze at the cross or a holy picture, or you could simply use your imagination. Simply attend to Him, speak

plainly, and listen. If your mind wanders, you can just gently bring it back and start again. As prayer deepens, you may need books and images less, though it is good to return to them when prayer becomes dry.

Please note that some days prayer will feel alive, but many days will also feel like nothing at all; those days count just as much, because the aim is faithfulness, not experiences. Teresa of Ávila described prayer as an intimate sharing between friends: taking time frequently to be alone with the One we know loves us. If you take one practice from this book, let it be this one.

Second: get to Mass beyond Sunday. Go daily if your timetable allows; a weekday or two if it does not. This is not because attendance is being counted, but because of what the Mass is: the summit of the very life you are considering. Someone discerning a vocation does well to spend time near the altar, letting the rhythm and meaning of the liturgy become familiar. Sit near the front, pay attention to what is happening, and ask yourself, without forcing an answer, what it would mean to live that way.

Third: go to Confession regularly. Monthly is a good rule. The sacrament does more for a discerning person than absolve them. Prepared for honestly, it becomes a regular examination of the soul and a school of self-knowledge. It is hard to hear God clearly while hiding from ourselves, and this sacrament helps us to grow in both grace and self-knowledge.

Fourth: find a spiritual director. This is the step people postpone longest and need most. A spiritual director is not a recruiter and not a therapist; he or she is usually a priest,

religious or trained lay person, who meets with you every month or so, listens to what is happening in your prayer, and helps you tell the difference between God's voice, your own, and the noise.

Attempting discernment alone tends to go round in circles, which is why the Church has long taught that God's call is best confirmed with the help of wise counsel. Finding a director takes a bit of courage because you do need to ask. So ask your chaplain, your parish priest, a convent, or a priory. If the first person you approach cannot take you on, they will know someone who can.

One more thing which is not a fifth practice but a sign to watch for while you keep the other four: peace. This is not the absence of fear, but a deeper settledness that remains whether circumstances become easier or harder. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, Paul told the Colossians, tying that peace directly to the fact of being called (Colossians 3:15). This is different from enthusiasm, which rises after a good retreat and falls after a bad week. Peace of this kind lasts through both, and that is how the two can be told apart.

That is the whole rule: silent daily prayer, frequent Mass attendance, monthly Confession, and regular spiritual direction. It is not a commitment to any particular path; every practice on the list would profit a person headed for marriage and an ordinary career just as much. It is simply the equipment for hearing an answer, whatever the answer turns out to be. As we have seen, the answer might be marriage or a generous single life, and either would be good as well.

Opening the Door

If you would like to open the door, the best thing is to speak to your priest, chaplain, a religious brother or sister, permanent deacon, or another consecrated person. You may also wish to contact the vocations director in your diocese or the religious order or congregation you are interested in. This information should easily be found with a quick search.

If you are interested in the Order of Discalced Carmelites, you may reach out to our vocations director at:
vocations@carmelite.org.uk or vocations@ocd.ie