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TWENTY SOMETHING

Evangelization by Hitchhiking: How to Find an On-ramp



TWENTY SOMETHING

Christina Capecchi

The place infants nod off and teens open up is also where road-weary adults will probe their spirituality: in the car.

That's the secret behind a new religious community, the Little Poor Friars and Poor Nuns of Jesus and Mary, who dress and live like St. Francis of Assisi: in poverty, entirely dependent on God's providence. They were founded in 1999 by a 25-year-old Sicilian and approved by the Catholic Church in 2014.

They are a throwback order, offering something that feels like the original to young adults wary of cheap imitations. Thirty-some Catholics already have joined, fulfilling a bold mission: to make like the apostles and spread the Good News. So they stand at the edge of a highway in their khaki-colored habits, with Bibles on their backs and sandals on their feet—the women in veils, the men with their St. Francis hairstyles shaved into a crown—and stick out their thumbs.

Evangelization by hitchhiking.

Sister Effata was 24 when she set out hitchhiking for the first time as a Little Nun, intending to travel with two friars from Sicily to France, their community's new home. She stepped outside and promptly asked: "OK, do we have to go to the right or the left?"

Surrendering to the unknown thrilled her. "I had that radical call in my heart," she said. "I wanted to be all in."

Born Mirijam, the young German chose the Hebrew name Effata as her religious name because it means "be open."

To hitchhike as a Little Nun was to embrace the open road, she felt, to be born of the Spirit, like the wind: "You do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (John 3:8).

"It's an experience of letting yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit," Sister Effata said. "It's amazing to have that freedom, to go in the direction of the highway, stand there and stick out your thumb and wait till someone stops and can give you a ride to the next town."

One morning during her first hitchhike, Sister Effata had a premonition that she would meet someone who had attempted suicide. This was close to her heart: As a teen, she had plunged into anorexia and depression and attempted suicide before finding God.

Sure enough, the trio soon encountered a young woman who had tried to take her life the day before. Her name was Miriam.

"God works mysteriously," Sister Effata said. "When we pay attention, we can catch those moments when we can really touch people's hearts."

Now 37 and working toward a master's of theology from the Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, Sister Effata has spent thousands of days hitchhiking.

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“People will bring up their most profound struggles. When we enter their car and say, ‘Peace to this car and peace to all who enter it,’ sometimes people will respond, ‘I need some peace.’ It can happen quickly. They get emotional or share a struggle.”

In turn, Sister Effata has learned to accept the invitation of strangers to join them for a warm meal and to sleep on the couch. “I have seen how God’s providence works through people. God takes care of us all, like the birds of the sky.

“There is so much evil in the world, but when we hitchhike, we meet so much goodness. You have to dig for it. You have to make a sacrifice to reach it. It’s why we need to evangelize: to bring that good forth, to make it shine.”

Christina Capecchi is a freelance writer from Inver Grove Heights, Minn., and the editor of SisterStory.org, the official website of National Catholic Sisters Week.

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