

Peace and good!

My name is Sister Clara (born Marta Peixoto) and I am from Portugal; I am 24 years old, and entered the community when I was 17. As a child, my dream was to meet my “prince charming” and have a family...so how did I ever end up becoming a nun? In the following paragraphs, I’ll try to explain a little from my vocational path, in order to “give the reason for the hope that I have” (cf. 1Pet 3:15).

ENCOUNTER WITH THE COMMUNITY OF LITTLE FRIARS AND LITTLE NUNS...

In my family, I was the first daughter and granddaughter, so I grew up like a little “princess.” My childhood aspiration was to marry and have a family, like in fairy tales. Although my childhood was full of love, my family was seriously lacking in peace; arguments and litigation were frequent, until the day that we met the community of *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*. In 2007, a friar with two nuns of this community hitchhiked from south Italy to Portugal (relying totally on divine providence, as is our charism). My father met them on the street and was thunderstruck by these religious who possessed nothing and yet had such a contagious peace and joy – feelings that we didn’t have! We welcomed them into our home and remained in contact even after they returned to Italy. In 2009, they unexpectedly returned to Portugal, and during this second visit my parents (together with myself and my little brother) decided to begin to become part of a lay group of prayer with this religious family, praying the meditated and sung Rosary according the Word of God and the Teachings of the Church. This group in 2009 included Sr. Veronica, our mother general, who would accompany me throughout my entire discernment.

HOW DID MY VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT BEGIN?

The story of my calling is very gradual. At the age of 16 I had to begin making decisions about my future, especially at an academic level. What did I want to do for my whole life? I had my plans pretty well defined, but...what was God’s plan? Thanks to the prayer of the meditated rosary, I had matured a sense of the importance of the will of God and I was conscious of the fact that the Lord has a specific mission for each one of us. (I think that people sometimes run the risk of living this life as if it will never end, when in reality “*we do not know either the day or the hour*” (cf. Matt 25:13)!) Looking toward the future, I didn’t understand the meaning of my life. I could not conceive of my life plan without understanding with certainty whether or not it corresponded to the plan of God...and so, to put it simply, the search began for the most precious treasure that there is: one’s own vocation!

When I decided to search for God’s will, I remembered Sr. Veronica: the Little Nun I had met in 2009, who had left a profound impression on me. From the first moment that I contacted her, she made herself completely available to help me in my search for my vocation – help which I consider precious and fundamental. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “*According to St. John of the Cross, the person wishing to advance toward perfection should ‘take care into whose hands he entrusts himself, for as the master is, so will the disciple be, and as the father is so will be the son.’ And further: ‘In addition to being learned and discreet a director should be experienced. . . . If the spiritual director has no experience of the spiritual life, he will be incapable of leading into it the souls whom God is calling to it, and he will not even understand them’*” (CCC 2690). I want to emphasize that when I began to search for God’s plan for my life, I confident that He would not ask me to become a

consecrated religious; but I did not have the *certainty*. And during the year and a half of discernment, a desire to give my whole life to the Lord gradually grew within me. This is how it happened:

“LORD, WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?” AND THE REPLY OF THE MESSAGE OF FATIMA...

During my discernment, my personal prayer to God was always the same: **“Lord, what do you want from me?”** – until one day, while I was speaking with my father, he told me that some years before, when he was making the same prayer, he had come across the message of Our Lady of Fatima on May 13, 1917, where she says, *“Come here for 6 consecutive months and I will tell you **what I want from you!**”* What great joy I felt when I heard that he had gone there for 6 months and, in some way, receive the response to his prayer! In the face of this realization, I instantly decided to go to Fatima for 6 months so I, too, could understand what I should do; but first, thanks be to God, I spoke with my spiritual director and she explained to me (thanks to the teachings of our founder) that, rather than literally going to Fatima, I should consider the *spiritual* meaning of this message and dedicate 6 months of my life in a place of retreat (as Fatima was in 1917) solely to understanding what the Lord wanted from me. My heart and my mind came together thanks to this response, and I found some peace in place of the restlessness that wouldn’t leave me! After her words, I asked if they would allow me to spend 6 months in this community (though I still had to finish the last year of high school). From that moment, my life was in “suspense:” I had begun to live in expectation of those 6 months in which I was sure that Our Lady would reply to me. What I did not expect, however, was that my heart would change...to the point of feeling an incredibly strong desire to leave everything to follow Christ!

THE CALLING TO EVANGELICAL PERFECTION...

One of the things that caught my attention was the calling of the rich young man. It was a time when I was reflecting on perfection and how I was going about the effort to become perfect in everything, especially the things of God. By chance, while I was leafing through the Bible, the passage from Matthew 19:21 fell beneath my eyes: *“If you want to be perfect, go, sell all that you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me!”* These words pierced me like a sword...they had read my thoughts! But at that time I, much like the young man of the Gospel, could not put all my plans aside; even if my heart understood that God was responding to me, I was not yet at the point of admitting it to myself. Besides, I was convinced that I would never be happy if I set my own plans aside.

THE FILM “CLARE AND FRANCIS”...

The first time that I felt the desire for religious life, I was watching the movie “Clare and Francis” (which I hadn’t known about before that point). The character of Clare, as a person and in her mission, struck me deeply, to the point of thinking, “Maybe I could even do the same thing!” This was just a passing thought, but it opened a new and unknown door within me – the possibility of consecrating myself totally to God! And this brought me to make a prayer to the Lord: “If in the future You help me understand that You want me to become a religious, I would want to take the name Clara” (the Portuguese version of Clare).

THE CONVERSION OF A FRIEND AND THE LOVE FOR THE SALVATION OF SOULS...

Another event that I consider fundamental in my journey was the conversion of a very dear friend. She was a good girl with noble sentiments, but had gone astray among the things of the world. I wanted to help her return to the Lord and the Sacraments, but I didn’t know if it was the right moment to speak to

her. So, before going to bed, I made a prayer to the Lord and asked for a sign that would help me clearly understand that *“the earth of her heart was ready to receive the seed of the Word of God.”* That same night, I had a dream that I remember as clearly as if it were yesterday: *I was on the mountain of the Covenant and at the bottom of the mountain there was a city in flames. My friend was in that city, and she couldn't leave; so I came down from the mountain and went to get her and bring her with me.* This dream was a huge encouragement to me, and in all my “littleness” I threw myself into evangelizing this girl who, after a time, converted and returned to the Sacraments! I can't explain what I felt on the day that she went to Confession; it was a joy so great that I exclaimed within myself, *“I could dedicate my whole life to doing this!”* This event was a determining factor because it was from that moment that I started to dedicate a great deal of time to the Word of God and the Teachings of the Church so that I could have responses to every question that people might ask me, and so help them to find God. From that moment I began to mature the thought of entering religious life so that I could dedicate my time 24/7 to the knowledge of God and the salvation of souls in Christ. And this, indeed, was the only thing that lit a fire and an enduring enthusiasm within my heart: something which could only come from the Lord.

THE RELIGIOUS NAME...CLARA...

The time to begin the 6 months arrived, and even though I still didn't have absolute certainty about what God wanted, I already felt the calling to consecrated life; that was the meaning of my life. I was planning to leave on the 8th of August, but my father wasn't able to make the ticket for that date, so in the end I left on the 11th of August. What a great joy it was for me when I realized that the 11th of August is the feast day of St. Clare of Assisi – the saint who had opened the door of my heart to the possibility of consecration! And even though this “God-incidence” (as someone calls it) gave my heart 100% confirmation on the matter of consecration, I received many other signs of confirmation as well that have increasingly helped my mind “marry” my heart and helped me understand – **with certainty and without the shadow of a doubt** – that this is truly my vocation!

So, the message that I would like to leave with all of those who are in discernment is this: do not be afraid of trying to do God's will, because it is only that which will really make us happy and fulfilled in this short life! And don't be content with your own opinion; look for the *certainty!* Because eternal beatitude is on the line, and a glorious resurrection – with a *body*, beautiful, perfect, and eternally young, in the image of the Risen Christ and of Mary Assumed into heaven! There is no greater meaning to life than this: *“to live without end and never see the tomb”* (cf. Ps 49:9).

Indeed, St. John of the Cross says, *“Souls have by participation that very God which the Son has by nature, and are therefore really gods by participation[,] like unto God and of His society....O souls created for this and called to this, what are you doing? What are your occupations? ...[Do you wish to be] blind to so great a light, and deaf to so clear a voice[?]”* (St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, A, 38)

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