

**Vocational testimony:
Sr. Eliora M. J.**



Peace and good! I am Sr. Eliora (an unusual name that means “God is my light”): Sr. Eliora Maria Joy. The name itself is a bit of a symbol for my spiritual journey, for the way that God has **enlightened** my path, through **Mary** (and the Catholic Church), leading me ever more fully – through the discovery of my vocation in this religious family – into **Joy**.

I grew up in a Protestant family. My Mom taught me from when I was very young to read my Bible every day; my parents and I would pray together before bed every night, we usually went to church on Sundays, and I was part of a church youth group in junior high and high school. I was a quiet, introverted, poetic type, drawn to the silence and beauty of nature; I was also gifted in academics, graduating co-valedictorian of my high school class and among the top 10% of my class at a prestigious private liberal arts college, where I earned my Bachelor’s in English Literature with a minor in Classical languages. I went on to earn a Master’s in Humanities before diving into the world of teaching, and I thought that the academic world would be my world forever; I thought I would spend my life teaching the subjects I loved to the students I loved, while putting my talents of poetry and writing to use in a quiet way as I strove to find words for the marvelous beauty of God’s creation.

As I pursued my academic career, however, another journey had also been unfolding: my longing to encounter God in a more tangible way had begun to draw me towards the sacraments in college, and over the course of six years I gradually moved from non-denominational Protestantism to conservative Anglicanism to Catholicism.

On May 22, 2015, when I was 25 years old and two years into my teaching career, I was confirmed as a Catholic.

I had everything...and it wasn’t enough

Once I finally became Catholic, I thought my big life decisions were over. I was thoroughly entrenched in my “dream job” as a full-time teacher at a prestigious preparatory school, where I taught Latin, Great Books, and Poetry (as well as serving as a dean of students); I was well-loved at my school, and I loved my students, my colleagues, and my work. I lived in a nice apartment right off a huge park, full of trees and lakes, and was able to travel to Europe during my free time in the summers. I quickly got involved in my home parish, where I helped with a women’s group, RCIA, and the youth ministry. I was able to attend Mass every day before school, and often dropped by for a few minutes of Adoration on the way back home. A couple serious crushes had turned into a few dates in the years after college, but I had never been at peace with the idea of getting married, and at this point I was content to be single.

I had everything, in short, that I had thought I wanted in life. **And yet something was missing.** While my colleagues happily dug their roots deeper into the good things of this world – their young families, further education, their teaching careers – I found myself relentlessly looking for something else, something “more.” It called to me like a siren whose words I didn’t understand; I only felt the restlessness, the emptiness, the sense that I was reaching right through the things my friends found solid, and didn’t know what I might find on the other side. The Gospel reading on the Monday after my confirmation, my first daily Mass as a Catholic, was the passage of Jesus and the rich young man: “*Sell all you have, and follow Me, and you will have treasure in heaven.*” Those words resounded within me with kind of urgency, and that very day I began to ask myself what they might mean for *me*.

The call

That summer I was one of 16 applicants accepted to participate in an overseas program offered by the National Endowment for the Humanities: a five-week course on Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in Siena, Italy. It was a secular course, but over those five weeks, I found myself on a kind of miniature pilgrimage, praying before the Blessed Sacrament in the various churches throughout Siena and attending Mass almost daily at the church where St. Catherine of Siena once lived. The most important moment for me by far was the one free weekend we were granted during the course – during which

I decided not to go to Venice with my friends; instead, I went alone to Mt. La Verna, where a Franciscan monastery now marks the location that St. Francis received the Stigmata. I was deeply and beautifully unsettled by what I encountered on that mountain: the simplicity, the peace, the rhythm of the friars' prayer, the wildness of nature and the greater wildness – marked in the flesh of Francis – of the love of God. It was another note in that symphony endlessly calling me from what I knew into...something deeper, something greater, something else. (*But what?*)

Less than three months later, in August of 2015 (the first day of school), I attended a Mass in honor of St. Philomena at my parish. As I was lingering in the courtyard after Mass, watching the sunset, our permanent deacon walked straight up to me and casually shattered my world.

"You're discerning your vocation, aren't you."

The question was so unexpected, and so obviously lacked a question mark, that I sputtered for a reply. He had not specified a religious vocation, but in less than a split second I knew that that's what he meant, and I knew that the answer was *yes*. There was a sudden upheaval within me, and with that single word – *Vocation* – everything crystalized. *Yes*. That is what I was doing; that, in some way, was what I had always been doing. In the midst of many other talents and interests, I had always felt the need **to give my all, in a radical way, to God.**

The more I thought about his question, the more it made sense of the person I had always been. *Maybe this is why I have been reaching through things, maybe this is why I have everything I thought I wanted and yet feel like I'm living someone else's life instead of mine. Maybe this is the reason for this relentless longing, this restlessness when I think of St. Francis, this sense of urgency when I hear Jesus' words to the rich young man...*

The First "Sign" of Confirmation

I remember trying to teach the next day more distracted and excited than the first time a boy asked me on a date. *Could it be?? Imagine, that God might want me to be His in such a special way!* A religious vocation! On one hand, it was exhilarating, a door opened on a world that I didn't know could exist for me; on the other, I already saw from afar (and dreaded) the tremendous pain it would inflict on my family, and on me in tearing myself further away from them. And so I didn't dare share this intimate secret, newly conceived, with anyone; partly out of prudence, and partly out of fear, I wanted to allow it to mature without the opposition of my Protestant family or the encouragement of my Catholic friends.

Three weeks later, the first weekend of September, I wrestled with the possibility of attending a local Vocations fair to learn about the religious orders in my diocese, but I was afraid of exposure...*what if I see someone there I know?? My secret will be out!* So I went to Mass instead, praying specifically that God would continue to guide me in my vocation.

After Mass, something unusual happened. Normally, by the time I left the church, no one else was around (since I would stay in the pew for quite a while to pray) – but this time, I was surprised to find that one person in the otherwise-empty courtyard had waited for me. *"Excuse me,"* came a voice from behind me as I stepped out of the church: I turned to find an elderly lady peering up at me, who looked at me hard, and smiled.

"I'm sorry," she said, *"I don't know why I feel like I have to tell you this..."*

but I think that you have a religious vocation."

I was shocked. I knew it certainly isn't unheard-of for pious old ladies to inform pious young ladies that they ought to be nuns, but the "coincidence" here was too significant to ignore. She didn't even know if I was married, she had never seen me before in her life, but on this exact day that I had gone to Mass and prayed for my vocation instead of going to the vocations fair, she had seen me from the other side of the church and had waited outside just to tell me that.

My encounter with the community

This sign encouraged me to continue taking steps in my vocational discernment; I quickly made appointments to talk to my parish priest and then to the diocesan vocations director, but they both advised me to keep discerning through prayer. For the next nine months I continued to teach, attend daily Mass, and devote more and more time to prayer and Adoration, wrestling to understand whether my own desires – together with the "coincidences" that kept accompanying me on this

journey – indicated a call from God. Near the end of the schoolyear, the director of female vocations for the diocese suggested that I ask the pastor of my parish to be my spiritual director – the very person I had been thinking of asking for the past six months! As soon as we began to meet for spiritual direction, my progress picked up speed.

I wanted to experience a wide variety of religious orders, so over the next eight months I visited several very different convents: cloistered Poor Clares, active Franciscans, active Dominicans, cloistered Dominicans. Some of them were perfect for me “on paper,” and all of them were lovely, but I didn’t find peace with any of them.

Around Christmas of 2016, I heard an ad on the Catholic radio station for a website aimed at vocational discernment, and when I looked it up, I found that it had a page on religious orders. As I scrolled through a massive list of congregations, one caught my eye: *The Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*. I went to their website and was intrigued by the pictures; it seemed like St. Francis of Assisi had popped into the modern day! They radiated with a joyful poverty and brotherly love that seemed too good to be true. The radicality fascinated me – *who are these people?*, I thought to myself, *they run around in these sackcloth-like habits, and evangelize, and hitchhike, and don’t use money...is this for real??* I couldn’t get them off my mind. I consulted with my spiritual director, and in early January of 2017, I contacted the community. I visited them on the first weekend of February, and from then on, I didn’t look at any other communities. I had found one that answered my need for radicality and my love for St. Francis with a sincere attempt to live the Gospel to 100%. In June, I returned for a fifteen-day experience, and on August 15, 2017 (the feast of the Assumption and the day after my 28th birthday), I flew out to Louisiana once again to enter the Aspirancy with the *Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*.

“Which Scroll?” – A sign for the Postulancy

The six-month Aspirancy with this community is particularly focused on discerning God’s will with certainty, and I found myself praying to understand whether He wanted me to continue into the Postulancy (which, as the Aspirancy lasts six months, would begin on the **first day of the seventh month**). One day – October 5, the day after the feast day of St. Francis – a scene from the Old Testament came to mind: where Elijah bows down in prayer and sends his servant seven times to look out over the sea for a raincloud (1 Kings 18). Merging that scene in my mind with the Biblical scenes where God gives a prophet a scroll to eat (*Ez 3:1ff; Rev 10:8*), I wrote this prayer:

*“Lord, I [bow down in prayer] and like Elijah bid my soul, ‘go up, and see what you can see.’ And though it come back six times without a word, grant that I may send it back a **seventh** and know your will. I have a hunger for it, Lord: for the expectation, the command, the clarity: ‘**take this scroll**, son of man, and not another.’”*

Moments later, I went into the convent chapel and my eyes fell on the missal. I thought, “*what if this is my ‘scroll?’ What if I find my answer here?*” So I knelt down and read the readings for Mass that day, and was shocked by what I read:

*“On the **first day of the seventh month**, Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly... [and] opened the **scroll** so that all the people might see it...Ezra read plainly from the book of the Law of God, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read....And they said, ‘go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks...for today is holy to the Lord. Do not be saddened this day...’” (Nehemiah 8).*

As well as the references to the **first day of the seventh month** (which would be the first day of the Postulancy) and the “**scroll**” which I had just been praying about, I was struck (among many other things) by the fact that that *Ezra read and interpreted the Law of God so that everyone could understand* – and only two days before, one of the friars had told me that one of this community’s greatest goals is to explain the Catholic faith clearly and accurately!

I kept reading, and found to my surprise that the other part of this “**scroll**” in the Missal, the Gospel reading for the day, was from Luke chapter 10, where Jesus sends His disciples out to evangelize without taking anything for the journey: **the exact passage quoted by the primitive Rule of this community**, and a key passage for this particular lifestyle and charism! (A long time later, I would realize that this same Rule has a large image of a **scroll** on its cover page!)

Encouraged by these readings and other signs, I continued on my journey with the community, and on February 22, 2018, the Feast of the Chair of Peter, I entered the Postulancy with the *Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*.

Further up and further in...¹

My first few years with the community were certainly not lacking in the difficulties of transferring from “the world” to community life, complicated by my own insecurities. I was faced with the challenges of integrating myself with sisters and brothers who came from very different educational and cultural backgrounds than I did, while also starting to break down the impassive (or sometimes even boisterous) façade that I had spent my whole life manufacturing in order to hide my deep sensitivity and vulnerability. I had to recognize and begin to chip away at the self-reliance which had served me well as an independent young adult in the workplace, but now often prevented me from having the humility to let myself be helped. I also struggled with how to make sense of the good and beloved things of my past, particularly the academic world I had left behind, which still attracted my heart, though I knew it could not satisfy it.

Thanks to God’s grace, my good will, and the patient and loving assistance of my sisters and brothers, I have made great strides along this path, to the point of experiencing – and experiencing deeply – the grace and fraternity which are such precious treasures of this religious family. I have found mercy, authentic friendship, and true purpose for my life in this community in a way I had never before encountered. To paraphrase something our founder, Friar Volantino, once said, it’s true that I have studied many good and beautiful things in the world, and I could have studied and been successful at many more...but now I am studying the one thing that really matters: ***how to rise from the dead***. This hope of the Resurrection – with a body, perfect, glorious, and forever young, as we say so often in the community – is the “good news” that Christ has asked me to give my life, with His, to win...for myself, and for many others.

As I have journeyed with these brothers and sisters, through the joys and trials of community life, through the adventures of long-range hitchhiking pilgrimages and short-range parish missions, through the many meditated rosaries in churches and houses, and above all, in our effort to live the Gospel in our ordinary lives, God been fulfilling, more and more, the promise of my third name: ***Joy***. As Friar Volantino points out, our joy (as the Psalm says) is in God’s will (cf. *Ps 119:16*).

I thank God that He – through the humble courage and fidelity of Friar Volantino, and through the luminous witness of my brothers and sisters – has given me the opportunity to live out my calling to *leave everything behind and follow Him* ever more fully in this family of “Little Ones.”²

I ask for your prayers...and I pray that you, dear reader, may enter fully into His project for your life; that you may rocket from your tomb one day into the joy of life unending; and that *you* may become *a very great saint*.

*Sr. Eliora Maria Joy
(Jessica McCaleb)*

*28 October 2023
Feast of St. Simon and Jude
Matamoros (Tamaulipas, MX)*

¹ Cf. C.S. Lewis, “The Last Battle”

² In the Italian title of the community (*Piccoli Frati e Piccole Suore di Gesù e Maria*), the word “Piccoli” means “little” – cf. *Matthew 18:3* and *Matthew 11:25*