

1. "WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS, THERE ALSO WILL YOUR HEART BE"

Matthew 6:21

Peace and Good to all! My name is Sr. Bela, I am from Portugal and I'm 55 years old. With great joy, I would like to share with you my story of how the Lord called me to the consecrated life: an unexpected call that I received when I was 47. The Lord was so clear that I had no hesitation in setting out "in haste" to accomplish it (cf. *Luke 1:39*). The Lord had knocked on the door of my heart many times in the past, but I had been lost in many superficial desires and distractions...

Despite this, the Lord worked a miracle with me! If it had depended on my own will, I would never have chosen the lifestyle I now live in the community that God has brought me to, the *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*. Although I am naturally shy and afraid of travelling by car, today I find myself evangelizing many people and traveling around the world on foot and hitchhiking!

In this testimony, I will try to highlight the most significant steps of my vocational journey, and show you how the Lord has guided me here, to grant me the true treasure that my heart was seeking, in view of bringing me the fullness of joy.

BEFORE DISCERNING MY RELIGIOUS VOCATION

Ever since I was a child, I have been very shy and reserved; I didn't get into trouble at home or at school and I was a friend to others because I felt in my heart the desire to help others and do good. Even though my family was a simple and humble, I always tried to share the little I had with others.

My great dream was to found an orphanage, to be able to take care of abandoned children or children without families, who needed to be loved; the film about Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who brought in children from the streets, had remained impressed in my heart. I also dreamed of meeting a man who could make me happy, but the two serious relationships I had did not go well.

I had the grace of growing up in a Catholic family, where I received a Christian education. When I was a child, we would pray the rosary together at home or when we traveled. As time passed, my siblings distanced themselves from the Church and only my parents and I remained faithful and close to the sacraments of Holy Confession and Holy Communion. I actively participated in the life of the church, taking part in some movements that were present in my parish, such as the Scouts, the "Convívios Fraternos," the Message of Fatima, and the Focolare, and since I have always loved singing and playing the guitar, I helped with music in the choir and at Taizé vigils. In the meantime, I graduated with a degree in "Religious Studies" and in "Management and Social Development," courses that I attended at the Portuguese Catholic University. For 15 years, I taught Religion and Morals classes to children and young people in the public schools. I felt fulfilled in what I did!

2. HOW I MET THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY OF THE LITTLE FRIARS AND LITTLE NUNS OF JESUS AND MARY

Even though I believed that the things I did would make me happy, though, there came a point in my life when I realized that I had everything...and yet I had nothing! I felt that I lacked a lasting peace and joy, which led to a growing inner restlessness about many things that were not going so well. I experienced a very difficult moment during the years I studied at the University while earning my second degree. I studied at night, and to support myself financially and to be able to pay taxes, I taught Religion and worked another job during the day. And as if that were not enough, I suffered injustices at work, which added to the problems I had at home; no one in my family was happy because of our arguments and disunity. I came to think that there was a curse on us and that I should offer my life for the conversion and salvation of my family. (In fact, it is written: "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*" (*John 5:13*).

All this began to make me think. I had to quit one of my jobs so as not to come to the point of physical and psychological exhaustion. I was living in deep suffering, I was not at peace with myself or others, and the emptiness was growing within me: emptiness, sadness, loneliness, disappointment, and a sense of rebellion. Even my faith seemed to fail. This was the moment when I began to raise my eyes to heaven and ask myself, "*why is all this happening? Maybe this isn't the right way, maybe I'm doing something wrong!*"

IT IS NECESSARY TO PRAY GOD WITH A SINCERE HEART (cf. *Ps 84:12*)

Today, looking back, I remember the great grace that the Lord gave me on **August 15, 2011**, when, in tears, I made an earnest prayer at the Shrine of Fatima, praying with a sincere heart to Mary: I told her, more or less in these words: "*My heavenly mother, please help me! You know I can't take it anymore. Help me to find the right path to follow, to understand what God wants from me, to be truly happy, and find authentic meaning in my life.*"

I have participated in many beautiful spiritual retreats, where I felt the strong presence of Jesus knocking at the door of my heart, but it was there, in front of Our Lady of Fatima, that for the first time I asked sincerely and with all my heart what God's plan was for me. Until then I had always made choices according to my own will and whim, and even if my intentions were upright, I was blind and distracted, without much understanding. But the Lord, who is good and merciful, looks at the uprightness of our hearts surprises us when we least expect it, meeting our deepest desires and showing us the way to follow. He showed great mercy towards me and truly listened to the prayer that I had made with all my heart: a short time later, he helped me meet Carlos Peixoto.

At that time, Carlos was part of the *adp-vv* (*Allies of the Little Ones - Green Flyers*) prayer groups and the leader of his prayer group. (Today, Carlos is a full-time *adp-vv* lay missionary in our community.) My encounter with him and his family was an act of providence that radically changed my life, but at that time, I had not yet realized its full import. As I have already said, I have always been a practicing Catholic, close to the sacraments and close to prayer, and when Carlos invited me to participate in the prayer of the holy sung and meditated Rosary with his family, I thought, "*Oh, a sung and meditated rosary? How beautiful!*" In addition, Carlos had told me about the charism of this community, and one aspect that struck me deeply was when he told me about the spirituality of this religious community. I was amazed, especially by the fact that they don't use money!

I remember that I was very impressed by the welcome I received in his home, and in particular by the communion and union that existed in his family. I immediately felt at home, experiencing great peace and joy: exactly what I longed for and had been searching for! The prayer of the holy meditated Rosary *adp-vv* was very different from what I was used to, because – in addition to the melody which I found both beautiful and helpful to my prayer (as Saint Augustine reminds us, "*he who sings well, prays twice*") – we were committed to praying with the Word of God and the Teaching of the Catholic Church, and the meditations written by the founder of the community were simple and concrete while also being profound and luminous, helping us understand how to put the mystery into practice in our own lives. In short, it was not just a mechanical recitation of the Our Father and the Hail Mary, but a prayerful meditation on the mysteries of Jesus' life, and it was this that made me decide to continue to participate in the prayer of this Rosary. From that moment on, everything started to change!

3. THE HOLY MEDITATED ROSARY: THE GREAT IMPETUS THAT PUSHED ME TO SEEK FOR GOD'S WILL THE GRACE OF THE PRAYER

After praying the holy meditated Rosary *adp-vv* for the first time at Carlos' house, I continued to do so assiduously until **January 8, 2012**, when I too became an "ally" [a member of the *adp-vv* groups of prayer]. I recognize that I received many graces in my prayer group, above all, the grace of God (who has worked so hard on me!): I learned to recapitulate in Jesus all that I heard and meditated on (cf. *Eph 1:10*), and this allowed me to reflect on my way of being Christian. I reflected on the fact that, before, I knew and spoke of the Gospel more in words than in deeds, because I too often succumbed to the temptation of resentment, lack of forgiveness, and prejudices, thus giving an example of an inconsistent Christian and failing to obtain the fruits I expected to receive.

But in the end, thanks to the prayer, I understood that many things were not going well because of my presumption in believing that I was already a good Christian, when there were actually so many ways I needed conversion! My way of thinking and my way of acting were gradually changing, especially in the way I related to myself, to others, and to God; I was learning to control the impulsiveness of my character, to reflect on how I used my words, and to accept my limitations, and above all I began to understand the meaning of all the suffering that God had allowed on my journey.

I was reborn to new life, and deep inside me there matured a desire to understand what the Lord really wanted for me. In the meantime, Carlos had put me in touch with Friar Picchignito, who is also Portuguese. I remember that when I wrote to him about my desire to understand God's plan for me, he responded by asking me a question that shocked me: he wrote, "*Are you willing to do whatever the Lord asks of you?*" That was undoubtedly the first great shock I received from the Lord, because those words fell on me like a bomb. I kept questioning my heart and saying, "*What do I do now?*" Something was beginning to move within me and pushed me to concretely seek the Will of the Lord, no longer just in words.

4. NOVENA TO SAINT JOSEPH MY PROMISE

A great desire was born in me to get to know the *Little Friars and the Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary* personally. I looked at their photos and videos and always saw them smiling, they always transmitted so much peace and so much light: that was what I wanted, too! Jesus' words often echoed in my heart: "*where your treasure is, there also will your heart be*" (*Matt 6:21*). I kept asking myself, "What do you want from me, Lord? And what does it have to do with them? Why do I always have them in my mind and heart? Surely they can help me." Thus, was born the desire to ask to be able to have an experience with them, to understand the mission that God had for me!

Summer was approaching, when the *Little Friars and the Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary* have the opportunity to live the itinerant aspect of their charism, traveling throughout the world by foot and hitchhiking in total reliance on divine providence in order to evangelize those the Lord helps them meet. My prayer group and I were all eager for the visit of a little friar or little nun, but when we inquired with them about the possibility of passing by us in Portugal, we

were told that it was impossible for them because of the university exams that some of them were taking. I remember being disappointed that they could not come to us, because I wanted to be with them so that they could help me in my discernment. I did not have the financial resources to go to Italy to visit them, since my salary was not enough for me to be able buy the plane ticket. However, I didn't give up, I told myself I had to do something! I have always been very devoted to St. Joseph, so I turned to him: I made a **NOVENA** asking for his intercession, and, aware that "*with God all things are possible*" (Matt 19:23), I **prayed**, "*I can't go to them, but if the Lord wills, He can open a door for them to come to Portugal. If only we could pray together at Fatima on August 15, so that they might help me understand the Will of God!*"

But not only that, I also made the promise: "if they come get me, I will leave everything and go with them." Obviously I had not said a word to anyone about this. Some time later, we received an email informing us that Friar Picchignito and Friar Volantino would come to visit us. I had asked the Lord for *some* of them to come, it didn't matter who – but imagine my joy when I learned that it was the founder of the Community who was coming to visit us! I immediately saw that the powerful hand of the Lord was opening the doors for me and answering my prayer again. I was sure that whatever God wanted to tell me must be something great and important if He was getting the founder involved, and I felt in my heart that they were coming to take me back with them – I had no doubts. My certainty of being called to follow Jesus was gaining more and more ground in my heart.

5. THE MEETING WITH FRIAR VOLANTINO AND FRIAR PICCHIGNITO

Finally, on **August 14, 2012**, Friar Volantino and Friar Picchignito arrived. We were all very happy. We were not in Fatima (as I had asked in prayer to St. Joseph), but the powerful grace wrought by the Lord is that they were there with our prayer group. While we were sitting at the table, something unusual happened: Friar Volantino was sitting at the head of the table, and, turning to me, he called me "**Beeela**," as if to imitate the bleating of the sheep. I don't know how to explain it, but hearing my name said in that way gave me immense **joy**, I felt a great **peace** and a "**fire**" that burned in my heart! (cf. *Luke 24:32*).

I'll explain: while praying the *adp-vv* meditated rosary, I used to love to look at the "pennant" and listen to the words with which the meditations often began, "*my dear and sweet sheep*;" the "pennant" is a wooden diptych with an image on both sides which is given to each *adp-vv* prayer group, and at that time one of the images was of Jesus the Good Shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders (while the other was of Our Lady of Mount Carmel). I had often wondered who had written those sweet words, "*my dear and sweet sheep*," and why he called us that. That's why I was so amazed at the way Friar Volantino had pronounced my name – **how could he have known?** As soon as I heard him call me "**Beeela**," I immediately recognized him as that "**good shepherd**" who could guide me with so much love to Jesus and Mary. For me, this was another great sign from on high; indeed, a few years later I would take that name as my religious name, Sister Bela Maria.

I recognized in these two friars the great wisdom that was given to them by God. The firmness with which they proclaimed the Gospel, their simple way of interacting with people, and their bright and contagious smiles, filled my heart with joy. I felt that finally my reason and my heart had come together and, in a certain way, had espoused one another! That meeting with the friars will remain with me *in eternum* as the great turning point of my life, because it aroused in me an even stronger and surer desire to follow them, to want to live their experience more closely, leaving everything behind – as when the Three Kings met the little and sweet Jesus in Bethlehem and then, warned by the Lord, went back another way: because when we have sincerity in our hearts and are careful in welcoming the signs that God gives us, He helps us understand which path to follow, and we won't take another. Somehow, these little friars were really messengers that God sent to me to show me the right **WAY** to follow.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPEAKING CLEARLY AT THE RIGHT TIME

The whole time that Friar Volantino and Friar Picchignito were with us, I never had the courage to tell Friar Volantino how much I had prayed for them to come to us, and that, if the Lord would grant me this grace, I would leave with them to have a vocational experience to understand God's will for me. I didn't talk to him about it because I had come up with the idea that he, in particular, had the gift of reading people's hearts and minds, and I acted like he should be the one to tell me everything I had to do without any need for me to talk to him about it. But when I heard him say that "*I had to come to understand, step by step, the Will of God*," I didn't want to believe it and I asked myself, "*what's this? Doesn't he see that I want to go with them? And that I prayed so much...?!*"

I was very much at odds with myself. On the one hand, I expected him to read my mind; on the other, I couldn't fail to see him as a true man of God and how the Lord was accompanying him. But even so, I didn't give in. I was sure they had come to Portugal for me. Finally, one evening, as we prayed the holy meditated rosary, I asked the Lord again for a sign of confirmation, saying to Him, "*Help me, give me a sign to understand if what I think comes from You or is just my whim! And if you are really calling me, let Friar Volantino see it.*" When we finished the prayer we took a group picture: I took the picture, and in the photo you could see a special light which to Friar Volantino looked like a **DOVE**. For me, this was the **SIGN**, it was God's answer to my prayer. Even so, however, I kept everything to myself, not saying anything to anyone.

"IT WAS NOT YOU WHO CHOSE ME ..." (cf. John 15:16)

The next day, after lunch, I went to the Church of Carmel, where there was an image of St. Joseph, to seek comfort and alleviate the sadness and doubts I felt in my heart. I also prayed to Our Lady to confirm the sign of the dove that we had seen in the picture the night before. I repeated that I did not want to go with the friars on a whim; I wanted to know that it was God's will for me.

I was praying to get out of that state of confusion, and above all, I wanted to consider the advice that Friar Volantino had given me, the one about coming to understand, step by step, what the Lord wanted from me. I returned home and opened the Bible "at random," leaving the passage up to the Holy Spirit: and the Lord responded clearly to my prayer with the passage where Jesus says to the apostles, "*It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit*" (John 15:16). I understood that God was really calling me to do more for Him, and that He was telling me to have an experience in that Community.

"DO YOU WANT TO COME WITH US?"

The last day of the friars' stay in Portugal had arrived, and I had a really terrible temptation: I didn't want to go to Carlos' house and pray with them, I didn't even want to see them. Thank goodness I changed my mind and went! During Morning Prayer, I was struck by the words of the Psalm, "*Listen, God, to my prayer; do not hide from my pleading*" (Ps 55:2), because they expressed the sorrow of my heart.

How was this possible? They were about to leave and I wanted so much to go with them, but I lacked the courage to tell them clearly that this was my great desire. I hadn't told them anything – not even the signs I had received up to that point. I couldn't understand how it was possible; I had prayed so much for them to come to Portugal, and now that they were there, I didn't have the courage to speak.

While we were walking to Mass, Friar Volantino smiled and asked me unexpectedly, several times, "*what about you? Do you want to come with us?*" I still didn't understand what was happening, thinking he was just joking around with me. So, with a smile, I jokingly replied, "*Be careful – if you ask me again I just might back my bag and come with you!*" Then Friar Volantino told me, "*let's pray for the Lord to enlighten us and help us understand if it is His will for you to come with us.*" In that moment I felt reborn; I thought that maybe it was still possible to leave with them.

We had gone to the church where I had prayed to St. Joseph, and looking at his image, I asked him for the umpteenth time, "*St. Joseph, help me to go with them. You can do it!*" The entrance song began and it seemed to me a good sign, since the words of the song were, "*What joy when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord*" (Ps 121:1). (Later, during my vocational experience with the community, I found that Friar Volantino explains in a document called the "*Sacred*" *Passport of the Christian* that it is important to seek the Lord in the right "Temple").

And the sign and seal came in the first reading, from the prophet Ezekiel, when the Lord says to the prophet: "*Now, son of man, pack a bag...and go into exile...leave this afternoon...place your bag on your shoulder in their presence...*" (cf. Ez 12:1-12). I was speechless and happy, and saw that Friar Picchignito was smiling at me. He told me that he too had asked the Lord, "*Give her a powerful sign!*"

Well, the words of that reading couldn't be clearer! He had told me several times, "*leave this afternoon,*" and they were leaving that very afternoon! One of the things I remember with amazement was the fact that Friar Volantino had decided to spend an extra day with us, because he was very happy with our prayer group and wanted to stay a little longer. He stayed another day, and it was on that day that we heard the words of the prophet Ezekiel. ***How could he have known?***

During lunch, Friar Volantino kept repeating, "*Do you want to come with us? If you want to come with us, we'll entrust ourselves to Divine Providence and find you a ticket.*" Mamma mia, I also had help with the ticket! I couldn't miss this opportunity. It was at that moment that I had the courage to say, "Yes, I want to come!" It was amazing: not only did we find the providentially-provided means to pay for my ticket, but we found a ticket on the same plane! I only had time to rush home, put a few things in my backpack, and set off with them to finally have my vocational experience. After all those signs, how could I not say Yes? I had made a promise to the Lord!

6. RETURN TO PORTUGAL FOR A YEAR, AND MY DEFINITIVE ENTRY IN THE COMMUNITY

During the experience in Sardinia in one of our communities, I found myself having to deal with my own limitations and fears. I made the decision to go back to Portugal, but something in my heart told me that it was not a "goodbye" forever. I felt that one day I would have the courage to come back to the Community, and as I flew home I saw a rainbow from the window of the plane: a sign that the Lord continued to be close to me, and that one day He would give me the courage to start my experience again. I spent almost a year in my country, but it was not in vain.

The detachment from the Community only made me grow in the conviction that God was calling me to religious life, as my "YES" to the Lord matured more and more in my heart and I was helped in overcoming my limitations. I was often reminded of Jesus' words: "*where your treasure is, there also will your heart be*" (Matt 6:21). I realized that my heart was very attached to these *little brothers and sisters* in Christ. Today I am grateful to the Lord and also to Friar Volantino for the opportunity I received in being able to come back on a very special day: it was the eve of the APPROVAL of our Statute, granted by the Bishop of Noto, Mons. Antonio Staglianò, on May 30, 2014. In communion with them and with Jesus, I can say that my deepest desire – that of finding peace and lasting joy – has come true. I am grateful to everyone for welcoming me with the same joy, welcome and love that they had for me the first time!

7. CONCLUSION

What more can I say? The Lord calls and it is never late to understand and do His Will. But we must seek it, with a sincere heart, sustained by the power of prayer, which can work so many miracles in our lives: that is what happened to me! I am the **fruit of one of our adp-vv** groups of prayer. If I had not accepted Carlos' invitation to come pray the rosary at his home, I probably would have lost a lot of time before I met the Community. As Pope Francis says, "*Vocations are born in prayer and of prayer. And only in prayer can they persevere and bear fruit.*"¹

Then, once we have understood God's will for us, we must set out as soon as possible and not look back, being very careful not to give in to temptation, since the devil always tries to throw a wrench in the gears (as he tried to do with me). I also advise you to seek a good spiritual guide who will help you understand God's will for you. For this, I am grateful to Friar Volantino and also to Sr. Veronica, for their patience, dedication, and wise spiritual counsel, enlightened by the Word of God – which helped me to improve the knowledge I have of myself and to grow, both spiritually and as a person. Yes, today I am a different person, more serene, happy, more mature in faith, with a different outlook on life.

I thank God again for the opportunity I have to live within this Community, where His presence is never lacking: the God who cares for us, filling us with so many graces and so many good things, especially spiritual goods. Here, I found the true Treasure, Jesus, and a true family on which I can lean, living with the joy and lasting peace which I did not find in the world. Of course, I still have a long way to go, and many things to learn. There are still many limitations and trials to overcome, but I am sure of victory, if I always keep the good will alive in my heart and my eyes fixed on Jesus, asking every day for the grace of holy perseverance and fidelity till the end, in the hope that one day I can reach the much-desired crown of eternal life. This, in fact, is what the Lord promises us: "*Remain faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (Rev 2:10).

Today, dressed in a sackcloth-like habit, so poor and simple, I feel the joy of being clothed "*in a robe of justice, as a bride adorns herself with her jewels*" (Is 61:10), trying to do not forget the voice of the Lord which tells me,

*"My lover speaks and says to me, 'Arise, my friend, my beautiful one,
and come! [...] O my dove [...] Let me see your face,
let me hear your voice, For your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.
Set me as a seal upon your heart.'"*
(Song 2:10, 14; 8:6)

I WISH you *bon voyage* towards holiness, leaving you one more piece of advice: do not be afraid to seek out what God wants from you, because "*those who seek the Lord understand everything*" (Prov 28:5), and have the courage to set out with a "holy haste" to put it into practice, because it is written, "*Blessed is the man who finds strength in you and decides in his heart [to undertake] the holy journey*" (cf. Ps 84:6), and St. John tells us, "*whoever does the will of God remains forever*" (1Jn 2:17). We have only one life and it is short, but the stakes are high: only the Lord can give you life and happiness that will never end!

In faith, Sister Bela Maria
January 24, 2022

¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Regina Caeli*, 21.04.2013.