

TESTIMONY

Of SR. BENEDETTA MARIA LUCIA

Who I was before...

Peace and good to you who are reading this brief testimony! Maybe you are bit curious as to why someone might decide to leave everything to follow the Lord; I asked myself that question many times, because I didn't fully understand *what* (or, as I would later discover, *Who*) could possibly push so many young people to give their whole life to God.

I have always been a very introverted person; I used to be very closed in on myself and didn't like talking about myself even at home. My room was my "everything" where I would take refuge, and I spent a lot of time there, often daydreaming about doing great things, but because of my laziness none of them actually came to pass, and I fell into discouragement and depression. At home and at work I was always unhappy, I always felt like I was missing something, and I searched for true peace and joy in external things but I didn't find them because I didn't have them inside of me. I started to imagine my life closed up in a convent where silence and peace would reign at least on the outside, and thought that leaving the world and living in silence was the response to my search for peace and serenity...but I was wrong, because entry into the cloister can't just be a fear-driven escape from the outside world.

The early signs...

In my journey as a Christian I frequented the ACR (Italian Catholic Action group), then with time I felt myself more attracted to the figure and life of St. Francis and St. Clare, including their total simplicity and poverty. I delved into the Franciscan spirituality with the *GiFra* (the Franciscan Youth movement), which brought me to have various experiences including on a vocational level, and I came into contact with many Franciscan religious communities, each with its own charism.

In July of 1999, I left alone for the first time to go to Mount La Verna, where, thanks to a friar-friend, I was able to spend a few days with some Franciscan sisters. One day, as I was walking with one of them through the greenery, I felt a spark lit within me as she was talking about her vocation and I her face radiant and smiling with the joy and happiness that I was so much longing for. I asked myself in that moment, *what if this were the way to happiness for me, too?* After that day, 16 years passed – yes, you read that right: over the course of 16 years, I had various experiences which shaped me in important ways on the affective level, as well as journeys of discernment with various religious communities, but none of them turned out well because of the various ways that I still had to mature. After the last experience, I went home determined to bury the question of a "religious vocation" once and for all; I thought that I had been wrong about everything, and that I hadn't really understood what the Lord was asking of me. During all this time I had never been accompanied by a true spiritual guide (sure, I would consult with sisters and priests, but not much), which was a huge mistake. Once I got back home, I was told: "Ok, now just think about work, friends, and having fun..." but I didn't do any of those things. I realized that I had no peace, and I didn't look for a full-time job that would keep me busy all day because I was practically living a religious life at home, spending my time searching for religious communities on the computer.

My meeting with the community...

Then, one day, a sister popped up on facebook as "someone I might know:" Sr. Teresa from the *Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*. I started to chat with her, without exposing too much of myself (out of fear of getting "burned" again; every time the theme of vocation came up I would disappear "offline"!)...but my curiosity

about their charism gradually grew, since it reminded me so much of the lifestyle of St. Francis (which up to that point I hadn't thought possible to live in our time). Eventually, Sr. Teresa invited me to write to the mother general, Sr. Veronica, to ask to spend a weekend with them. It took me a while to take that step, but in the end I was suffering so much where I was that I took the risk.

So it was that in August of 2014 I came to the community for the first time. I found a community full of people that were young and enthusiastic about their vocation founded on *certainty* – the very certainty that I had always been lacking, such that I had never been able to make a decisive and final choice. As we prayed the holy meditated rosary together, I was astonished by how many things there are to discover in the Scriptures, and the “keys of interpretation” of our founder, Friar Volantino (expressed in a simple way and based on the Word of God, the Teaching of the Church, and the lives of the saints) opened to me a new way of seeing the Scriptures and understanding how it is possible to put them into practice in our own lives, “30, 60, or 100%” (cf. *Mark* 4:20). I had already been frequenting the Sacraments, but in that time with the community I realized that my faith was not really fully alive, not even that most basic and foundational belief in the resurrection of the flesh at the end of time! – We profess it every Sunday in the Creed, but I had never noticed or thought about it much; I'd thought we would become little spirit-clouds or something in heaven...Well, I came home, stayed in contact with the community, and decided to come for another weekend to continue getting to know them better (and vice versa).

Understanding the Will of God ...

At that time, I still didn't have that certainty of the calling which the other sisters had. One day, one of the sisters told me to make a “powerful prayer” to the Lord and to ask for a sign (cf. *Judges* 6:17) without telling anyone else what it was. I did as she advised me, asking as a sign something that, for me, would not be easy to obtain; I was careful not to ask for something that would be easy to come by. This was my prayer: “Lord, if you are calling me to religious life, give me this sign...” and the sign I asked for might seem a bit silly, but in that moment it was what came to mind: a persimmon! That's right, a persimmon. I had seen that the fruit which came to the convent at that time was all apples and oranges, and I hadn't seen any fruit trees around, so I thought this would be something difficult to obtain. My retreat drew to a close, and I hadn't received my sign to confirm that I had not been wrong in spending all that time pursuing a religious vocation thinking that it was God's will. Before I left, though, Sr. Cometa (the formator) told me that we would eat together to go over and “summarize” the experience. I was completely downcast until they brought the fruit...and...can you guess what was there?! Yes, together with the usual fruit, this time there were also *persimmons*! You can't imagine my face – I was speechless, and I immediately showed the sisters the prayer that I had written down and carefully kept on a bit of paper; no one had read it and I had not spoken to anyone about my request! We were so happy!! This was the first powerful sign I received which pushed me to continue along the road of consecrated life with greater security. This sign alone, of course, was not enough, but I have received so many other – and more significant – confirmations along the way which have gradually reinforced, day after day, my faith and my calling. One might think that these are only coincidences, but (as someone has taught me) the Scripture invites us to ask for *signs* (cf. *Is* 7:10-14; *John* 6:26), above all when, because of our own fears and uncertainties, we need solid pillars with which to construct our faith and vocation; we must carefully treasure these signs, like Mary (cf. *Luke* 2:19), so they can help us in the difficult moments of our journey – as we bring to mind again the wonders which the Lord has worked in our life (cf. *Deut* 4:9). As Pope Francis says, “[L]earn to read God's signs in your life. He always speaks to us, also through the events of our time and our daily life; it is up to us to listen to him” (FRANCIS, *Address*, 7 June 2013).

With that being said, I will entrust you with something else that is a “precious pearl” (cf. *Matt* 13:45-46) for me and my vocation, in the hope that you will appreciate it rightly. After a few months of being in community, I had the certainty of being called to religious life, but I was still not certain that God was calling me to this particular religious family. I decided to make another prayer to the Lord; as before, I tried to think of a sign that would be difficult to grant, and what came into my mind was this: that, if I was called to be part of the *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*, someone would make the sign of the cross on my forehead, and not only that – it would have to happen before a certain date! The days passed and I started to become

a bit doubtful, until, one day, we happened to go to a parish I'd never visited to go to Mass. The church was unusually empty given it was almost time for Mass to start, so we went into the sacristy...and, strangely, we found all the people there in line to receive the sign of the cross on their foreheads with the Anointing of the Sick. You can imagine my surprise...I'd never seen anything like it! So that day I, too, received the sign of the cross on my forehead, exactly as I had requested, and that for me was a powerful sign of confirmation – thanks to which I understood all the more that *“nothing is impossible for God”* (cf. *Luke 1:37*) if what we ask enters into His project for us (cf. *1John 3:22*). This sign of blessing was also the foundation for the choice of my religious name, Sr. Benedetta¹ (or “blessed”): in the hope that my life, too, given to God, may be all the more a fount of blessing for many souls.

It has been absolutely fundamental for me to have understood God's will in a clear way, because that is what has helped me – even in moments of difficulty and trial, when my fallen humanity comes to the fore – to always remember that, in spite of everything, God loves me and has called me to this community of *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*...not so much because of my capacities and qualities, but in order to help me understand ever more fully that *“His strength is perfect in my weaknesses”* (cf. *2Cor 12:9*) and that we must die to ourselves every day (cf. *Matt 16:24-25*) to let Him act in our lives.

I understood only in hindsight and with time that all the previous experiences that I had considered failures or a waste of time had not really been so, because the Lord had been leading me step by step towards the place that He had always desired for me.

I will take the chance, in conclusion, to encourage you (who might also be searching for true happiness and the fullness of joy) to have the courage to take the risk, to take a step forward and be open to anything God might ask of you, even if it leads you into the unknown – as it is written, *“In Your will, [O Lord,] is my joy!”* (cf. *Ps 119:16*). Trust in Him, and entrust yourself to Him. He will never disappoint you!!

Buon voyage towards the true treasure...which is worth selling everything to gain! (cf. *Matt 13:45-46*)

Noto (Sicily), 22 September 2019

Sr. Benedetta Maria Lucia

¹ Noto, 23 September 2019: today, during the Mass in honor of Padre Pio, the priest gave the Anointing of the Sick. The Lord never ceases to amaze me! I finished writing my testimony yesterday, adding in the sign I'd received of the Anointing of the Sick (as the sign that this is truly my religious family). And not only that – after I had received that sign (and the certainty I had been searching for), I entered the Postulancy on September 23, the feast day of Padre Pio! I thank the Lord for these signs of confirmation and blessing!!!