

"HE COUNTS THE NUMBER OF THE STARS AND CALLS EACH ONE BY NAME"

(Ps 147:4)

Peace and Good to all! My name is Sr. Stella (or "Star"). I am 23 years old, and I come from Goiosa Jonica (Italy). With the help of the Holy Spirit and my own good will, I will try to be clear and brief in explaining my witness, in hope of satisfying – at least in part – the healthy curiosity of many young men and women who ask why someone would make the kind of profound and radical decision that I have made. I, too, used to ask myself this question when I met the *Little Friars and Sisters of Jesus and Mary* in person for the first time. They were young – very young – men and women who could have continued to do everything they were already doing in the world, fully achieving their (worldly) goals, but instead they preferred to respond to God's call. They were a bit like Mary who, after receiving the Annunciation, said: "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; may it be it done unto me according to your word*" (Luke 1:26).

A GENERAL SKETCH OF WHO I WAS BEFORE...

My legal name is Rosamaria. I was (and still am) a happy girl who loves to smile and get along well with others. I was the daughter who always tried to fend for herself in order to not be too much of a burden for my parents, who made sure I wanted for nothing; they sustained me economically throughout my studies, got me a car for my birthday, and were always willing to help me out financially (within their means). Even if it wasn't always sunshine and roses with my family (as I think is the case for all families!), and we didn't lack for misunderstandings, things would start to go better with the grace of prayer that the Lord aroused in the depths of my heart. I was the kind of girlfriend who wanted to spend her honeymoon in Africa helping sick children. I was the dear friend who would say, from the bottom of her heart, "I couldn't bear to be far from you...I love you dearly and would give my life for you." (At that time, I would never have thought that the Lord would take me at my word, as you will see later on!) I was the colleague who tried to put her whole self into her work and carry it out with reliability and commitment.

All things considered, I had a very good life...but at the same time, I had the strange feeling of only being "halfway," of not feeling fully satisfied, of never doing enough though I tried so hard. All of this troubled me deeply, and I couldn't help but wonder why it was happening.

I was doing a job that gave me great satisfaction, a job that embraced my studies as a child welfare worker and my future aspirations to work in the social field, placing me with people who were highly qualified in that sphere. They were the kind of morally upright people that I had always sought to be around. My job allowed me to meet young people from all over Europe and beyond, continuing to travel here and there, having fun, getting to know new places, enriching myself culturally, and always having new experiences. I aimed to advance professionally, certainly not out of pride (and those who knew me know this well), but because I felt in my heart that *the greater my reputation in the workplace, the more I could realize the dream in my heart of helping those in need*. I aimed to give meaning to the life of those who no longer have anything to cling to and to hope for. (I wanted to do so more than in just a material way, but I myself didn't understand well how to succeed in this endeavor until I met Friar Volantino, the founder of the **Little Friars and Nuns of Jesus and Mary**. Thanks to him, I would later learn that not only material aid is necessary, but above all, spiritual aid, as Pope

Benedict XVI says: *“Social justice and the Gospel are inseparable from each other. Where we bring to men only knowledge, skills, technical skills and tools, there we bring too little”* (B. XVI O.R. 11/09/2006.) I wanted to give others the peace that I myself was looking for! **But my overabundant worldly occupations were preventing me from understanding what true peace is, which is found only in Jesus Christ (cf John 14:27)** – as it is written: *“ great Peace (o Lord) to those who love Your law” (Ps 119, 165)*. I hoped – in my small way – to change things a little and make a difference. Sometimes I was full of certainty; at other times, my certainty dwindled and the weight of its absence was overwhelming (because this was not the “cross” that the Lord wanted for me: for Jesus says, *“My yoke, in fact, is sweet and my burden light” (cf. Matt 11:30)*).

Humanly speaking, my restlessness didn't make sense. In addition to a good job, I was lucky enough to have a special someone: my boyfriend was a great guy, well-established in his work, kind and attentive, who made sure I lacked for nothing. He doted on me: the chocolates I loved, the long motorbike trips (one of my great passions at the time), the outings to go snow-skiing on the weekends, the dream-vacations on the Danube, the prestigious hotels...I could go on and on about how much affection I used to receive.

In short, it seemed like I had already found my Prince Charming...at least until I met the One who is True Man and True God – the only **PRINCE CHARMING** who wins the heart of those who are truly in love: **JESUS!** In the end, what is written in the Sacred Book of Proverbs came true for my past projects: *“The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer comes from the Lord.” (Prov 16:1)*

HOW I MET THE POOR FRIARS

One morning, my mother came from Rimini to spend a few days with us in Calabria. When I received her phone call, she told me that her train had broken down and she'd had to get off a couple stations before her stop. I picked her up in Locri, and decided to take a different way back than the one I had taken to get there. At the end of the curve that leads to the highway, there before my eyes were two friars from the community of the Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary (cf. *Gen 32:1-2*), who were hitchhiking.

Another car had already stopped to give them a ride, so there was nothing to do but continue on my way. In the meantime, though, I couldn't help but tell my mother how much I would have liked to meet them, and while I was said so, inside my heart I heard a voice telling me, “Turn, turn, go back...” I knew that if I didn't, my conscience would not be at peace. I went back, and found, with great joy, that the brothers were still there, almost as if – in a mysterious way – they were waiting for me. As soon as they got into the car, I felt a pleasant sensation of peace which accompanied me throughout the entire journey. They got out at a gas station not far from Rosarno, and we parted ways; when I got back into the car, I burst into tears. Still to this day, I can't quite explain that episode. I felt a great liberation, and I believe that someone was healing my soul in that moment. After that day, I didn't see or hear from the friars until August 2008, on the occasion of the National Gathering of their Prayer Groups which was held in Isernia. There, while I was in the sanctuary of Castelpetroso, a young, composed nun caught my attention: Sr. Veronica, the Mother Superior of the Little Nuns. Once again, inexplicably, I found myself in tears. I was crying, and I couldn't help but feel that someone inside me was healing my soul again. I came to realize that it was the sight of that nun which had triggered so much emotion, but I still didn't understand why this was happening to me; it upset me, a bit like Mary who was troubled after the Annunciation and wondered what it meant (cf. *Luke 1:29*).

After those three days, I returned home and resumed my usual life: work, study, going out with friends, commitments, trips with my boyfriend, etc., etc. ...but I never worried about dedicating the right amount of time to the One who deserves the most important place in the scale of values: the Lord!

I continued to stay in contact with the friars after the summer, and together with my aunt, I decided to open an *adp-vv* Group of Prayer. I continued on with my normal life, and a few days before Christmas, Friar Antonio informed me that on January 6, in Sicily, the first Interregional Calabria-Sicily *adp-vv* gathering would be held. After countless ups and downs, I decided to make the trip that would allow me to better get to know Friar Volantino and the rest of the community.

MEETING FRIAR VOLANTINO

I had the grace of meeting Friar Volantino in person on January 3, 2009. Today I am certain that our meeting did not happen by chance; the powerful hand of God moved diligently to make it happen.

Let me start by saying that I initially refused Friar Antonio's invitation, because I had other places to be during Epiphany. Although I had the chance to go snow-skiing with someone, I'd preferred to arrange things so I could spend the holidays in Rimini with my mother instead. The Lord permitted, however, that I ended up doing neither; as it is written, *"The mind of man thinks much about his path, but the Lord directs his steps"* (Prov 16:9). At that point, I decided to participate in the gathering. I left with the idea of listening to Friar Volantino's catechesis (even if at the beginning I didn't like it very much) and returning home with greater peace in the Spirit, since at that time my life wasn't going super well (as was often the case). I arrived in Caltanissetta three days early, and it was there that the Lord in a completely providential way gave me the great opportunity to have a weekend of experience with the community, to seek out the full Will of God (cf. Col 1:9) for me.

I say that all of this was completely by divine Providence because – among other reasons – the community at that time was on a spiritual retreat, during which they normally do not receive anyone to have a vocational experience with them (much less those who haven't even understood yet whether or not they are called to marry!). But as it is written: *"Nothing is impossible for God"* (cf. Luke 1:37). I should mention that before this, despite the intense activity that went on inside me which never allowed me to find the full peace I was looking for, I had never (with only one exception) taken into consideration that thought of totally consecrating myself in religious life, and much less had I ever considered that my sadness came from the fact that I was not fully responding to God's will. Furthermore, I would never have imagined that the Lord has had this plan for me from all eternity, as it is written: *"I know the plans I have made for you, says the Lord: plans of peace and not misfortune, to grant you a future full of hope"* (Jer 29:11). In those days of total detachment from the world and all its distractions, and thanks in a special way to Friar Volantino, I began...to discern.

As Friar Volantino helped me retrace some stages and events of my past, I discovered with amazement and with a certain certainty (both spiritual and rational) that the Lord had already been speaking to me for some while. It was God who gave light to my intellect through the luminous "keys of interpretation" of this humble and extraordinary friar, keys which he had obtained at the cost of his own life, and which finally opened the door of my intellectual being, so that I understood that the Lord wanted me to serve Him differently (though I didn't yet understand exactly how). For this reason, Friar Volantino advised me to make a powerful prayer to the Lord, asking Him for a clear sign to show me whether I should consecrate myself or get married. I returned to the little cell where I slept, and as soon

as I was left alone, I burst into tears; raising my eyes to heaven, I cried out in the depths of my heart, so that no one could hear my prayer, and this is what I prayed: “*Lord, please, now that you have brought me this far, tell me what you want from me! Do you want me to get married or to give my life totally to you? But if you want me to consecrate myself to you, give me this sign, and I will understand.*” The sign I asked Him for was this: “*Lord, you must put your hands on my head physically. I don’t know how you will do it, but so that my mind can espouse my heart, I ask nothing else: from this, I will understand!*” I truly made this prayer with all my heart (*cf. Ps 86:17*), and the Lord was not slow in giving me the sign I was looking for; it was impressive how precisely He answered me! About a half hour passed when they told me that Friar Volantino wanted to talk to me. My legs were trembling when I arrived at the “cenacle” where we all gathered to pray. As soon as Friar Volantino saw me, he asked me, with the concern of a father, “Tell me, did you ask the Lord for the sign?” And I replied to him in tears: “Yes, I asked the Lord for the sign, and to help me understand that I must give him my life, He must...” I had not yet begun to confide in him what I had specifically asked for, when Friar Volantino spread out his hands and rested them on my head, and I felt a warmth pouring from his hands. We both looked at each other in amazement! I will never forget that day. From that day on, I understood that the Lord has used and still uses this Little Friar as a channel of grace to respond to our requests. But not only that; the Lord, by giving me that sign through Friar Volantino, put it in my heart that from that moment on I would be able to trust this servant of His, who, in a certain way, through his boldly Gospel-founded lifestyle, would open for me the door to paradise.

And so I finally decided to say my “yes” to the Lord. As the community’s Rule requires, I returned for a second weekend for another vocational experience, then for the 15-day experience, then for the 6 months of prolonged experience, and so on and so forth. The signs and confirmations that I receive every day are too many for me to be able to write them all (*cf. John 20:30*).

Now that the Lord, through Friar Volantino, has shown me the path I must travel, I hope in holy perseverance to fully do His divine will until the end of this earthly pilgrimage – *all for the greater glory of God and the salvation of the most souls possible!*

I conclude by thanking Friar Volantino and the Little Friars and Little Nuns for having lovingly welcomed me into this unique community, allowing me to assume my position on the “construction site of love” [as we say in the community] to work full time for Jesus and Mary, testifying above all – as someone has said – that

WE ARE BORN AND WE DIE TO DO TWO THINGS: BELIEVE IN GOD (cf. Heb 11:6) AND gradually DO HIS WILL (cf Matt 7:21): some to 30%, some to 60% and some to 100% (*cf. Matt 13:23*), each according to the gift of God in their heart. Because without the Lord, as our founder likes to remind us, “**EVERYTHING ENDS IN THE COFFIN**”... But we are here to come back out of it one day.

Peace and good, and best wishes for attaining a blessed immortality!! (*cf. Wis 2:22a*). Amen!

In Faith,

Sr. Stella Maria Piccola