

"But you are '...a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises' of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1Pet 2:9)



Peace and good to all!

My name is Sr. Susanna; I was born Irene, which means “peace” in Greek...but to tell the truth, I didn't experience *true Peace* very much in my old life, and it left me altogether from the moment that – though I had grown up as a believing and practicing Catholic – I began to fall away from God and search for peace in the things of the world!

From childhood (house and church) to losing my sense of the meaning of life!

I grew up with very (practicing) Catholic grandparents, and in my early childhood the parish was almost like a second home; I still remember praying the rosary with my grandma, and the powerful emotion I felt when I would pray on my knees in front of Jesus in the Eucharist during the Mass. After my Confirmation, though, I drifted away from God and His House to do things my own way. A bit like the “prodigal son” in the parable of the Merciful Father, I started to lose a sense of the meaning of my life and threw myself into the entertainments and pleasures of the world. From my 13th year and onward, I started experimenting with “new thrills” according to my fancy, starting with cigarettes, then gradually moving into light drugs, alcohol, boys, etc...all the things that gave me the illusion of being free, though they only left me more and more enchained. Instead of giving me the peace I was looking for, they only increased my restlessness and dissatisfaction.

My first “yes” to God: a rediscovery of the Faith!

After finishing high school, I left my studies of piano at the conservatory in order to enroll in the Department of Philosophy. I had a great thirst for answers to my innumerable questions, above all

regarding the meaning of life and of death, and I thought that philosophy would be able to give me those answers. I searched for wisdom (“philosophy” means “love of wisdom!”), but I didn’t know that true wisdom does not come from this world; in searching for wisdom, I was really – without even knowing it – searching for Jesus Christ, Wisdom Incarnate. The more the years passed, the more my suffering and dissatisfaction grew: the “beautiful” moments faded quickly, leaving only a vain and indistinct memory, as well as a void in my soul that could not be filled. At that point I did not know (as I would later learn in the community) that all the beautiful things of this life are nothing more than *“the shadow of the future reality”* (cf. *Col 2:17*), and so I thought that everything would pass away in this same empty way. In the end, neither philosophy nor any other person in the world was able to give me convincing responses to my questions about the meaning of life and the reason for death.

When the fire of suffering had finally become insupportable, a lady who was a firm believer helped me to look at life with new eyes, and I understood that the moment had come to change course. I knocked down all the barriers that I had constructed to keep God out of my life, and recognized that He truly exists and truly knows everything...even the things I didn’t know about myself! I made a decision, and finally said, “OK, I SURRENDER.” This was my first great “YES” to God, and it radically changed my life. From that moment, my “watery spirit” gradually started to be transformed, not into a spirit of wine, but into a “Divine Spirit;”¹ I immediately felt a strong urge to return to the Church and the Sacraments, and thus I gradually rediscovered the true meaning of my life and all the answers that no philosophy of the world had been able to give me. I immediately left my old friendships and habits behind, and even my studies in philosophy, to dedicate myself completely to the things of the Lord. Now that I had made the greatest discovery of my life, everything else had become, as St. Paul says, “trash” in my eyes (cf. *Phil 3:8*). I started to feel once again the same peace and wellbeing that I had felt as a child praying in church; now, with the heightened awareness of one who had had many experiences of the world, I understood how true is the phrase of St. Augustine when he says, “*You have made us for Yourself, [Lord,] and our heart does not have peace until it rests in You.*”²

LORD, WHAT IS YOUR WILL FOR ME?

I started to do everything I could, going to daily Mass, praying the Rosary and other prayers, and always trying to do good, both through material works of charity and by trying to use my own testimony to help others – but all of this did not seem like enough to demonstrate my gratitude and love for the Lord. I started to ask myself, therefore, what the Lord had had in mind for me from all eternity: why did He attract me so powerfully to Himself that I didn’t have any other interest in life except to know Him and serve Him? My constant prayer became,

“LORD, WHAT IS YOUR WILL FOR ME?”

I had come to understand that each one of us has a particular mission in this life, and I wanted to discover what mine was, because I knew that whatever the Lord wanted for me would be the best thing possible. I felt an ever-growing desire to give my whole life to Him, but I didn’t understand whether that desire was only *mine* or actually corresponded to the Will of God; besides, there were many people who told me that I would never be able to understand God’s will, or that I shouldn’t ask so many questions, or that I

¹ Cf. FRIAR VOLANTINO VERDE, SLC, p. 206g. *Translator’s note: Sr. Susanna refers here to a meditation of Friar Volantino regarding the wedding of Cana: there is a play on words in the original Italian between a spirit “of wine” (Italian “di vino”) and the divine spirit (Italian “divino”).*

² Cf. ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Confessions*, I.1.1

should take life as it came, focusing on doing my duty well for the time being and then, in the future, one day becoming a good mother, having a good job, etc....

Encounter with the community of the "Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary"

After almost 5 years of this journey, during which the Lord had shaped me very much through suffering in order to detach me ever more completely from everything and everyone, I remembered a community of friars and sisters that I had met when I was still in Sicily at the very beginning of my vocational journey. I had been very struck by the joy that burst from them on every side, by the wisdom of their words (always founded on the Word of God and the Teaching of the Church), and by their lifestyle, which reminded me very much of the life of St. Francis of Assisi and his first friars.

I searched for them on the internet and found various videos that they had made under the heading of "*Vocational Discernment*," and I watched them one after the other. I was particularly struck by one where Friar Volantino speaks about *Peace, Joy, and Fire in the Heart* as initial criteria of discernment in order to help understand one's own vocation.

There was one key of interpretation in particular (one of the most luminous of all, in my opinion) which definitively opened my heart and mind: when Friar Volantino explained what, concretely, is the "Will of God," starting from the question, "HOW CAN I UNDERSTAND WELL WHAT GOD'S WILL IS?" (exactly the question I had so long been asking!). He responded by putting two passages from the Gospels side by side: passages that are well-known and frequently cited, but are never understood in such a profound way! In the Gospel of St. Matthew, Jesus asks, "*Who are my mother and my brothers? ...Behold, my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the Will of my Father who is in heaven, is my brother, my sister, and my mother*" (cf. *Matt 12:48-50*). Up to this point, we still don't understand what it concretely means to do the "will of God."

The answer, simple as it is, is "hidden" in another of the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus asks the same question:

"Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" (cf. *Matt 12:48*). Jesus Himself responds: "*My mother and my brothers are those who listen to the Word of God and put it into practice*" (cf. *Luke 8:21*)!

Friar Volantino concludes, therefore, that "this is *the Will of God* that we should carry out: we must *read the Word of God*, and *put it into practice* with sincerity (to 30%, 60%, or 100% - cf. *Matt 4:20*)."³

I wanted to do God's will, at all costs, giving the most that I possibly could (to 100%), with my whole life – in the radical way that the Lord had put on my heart from the very beginning.

I had spent time with other religious communities, but I had never felt such great fire as when I heard the explanations given by this friar, nor had I ever felt so much peace and joy – which was what gave me the certainty that what he said was founded, not on his human knowledge or personal opinions, but on the Word of God (interpreted in the right way, according to the Magisterium of the Church), and brought to life by his own personal experiences.

I decided to write an email to the address which I found on the community website, and to my great surprise, I received a response directly from the Servant Mother General, Sr. Veronica, on the Feast of

³ Cf. FRIAR VOLANTINO VERDE, *SLC*, p. 399

the Queenship of Mary (August 22, 2013). Her words only continued to feed that divine fire in me that had been lit by the words of Friar Volantino, as she told me that she hoped that one day I, too, would become a splendid queen of Paradise. As I discovered that there was a convent of sisters not far from Florence, I decided to go meet them in person, and on the road that led me to them I found the first great sign that helped me realize I was going in the right direction: while I was driving along the freeway, I saw a huge white cross in the sky (formed by two jet trails), and later I saw other crosses in the sky that drew my attention. As soon as I saw the sisters, I recounted what had happened, and what was surprising was the fact that I had recently read the passage in the Gospel where Jesus tells his disciples, *"If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me,"* and I had made a specific prayer to the Lord, asking Him, "LORD, WHAT IS MY CROSS?" – that is to say, what does it mean for me to take up the cross (since I'm obviously not going to make myself a wooden cross and carry it around on my shoulders!)? Sr. Veronica, taking from the keys of interpretation of Friar Volantino, explained that the "cross" for each of us (as it was for Jesus) is our particular calling, God's will for each one of us. The next time I went to visit them, for my first weekend of experience, I just so happened to pick a weekend (without doing so intentionally) that began on the first vespers of September 14th (the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross) and ended on the September 17th (the memorial of the Stigmata of St. Francis)! I also received a very powerful sign when I walked into the room where I would spend the night, and found an enormous white cross above the bed...and when I read the responsory after the short reading of Nones on September 14th, which said, "the sign of the cross will appear in the sky!" During this first weekend of experience, in silence and in prayer, the Lord gradually gave me many other signs which gave me ever more certainty that this was His will for me.

One of these signs, for example, came during another weekend of experience, when I went to Mass with the sisters when I arrived at the convent the Gospel of the day said, "try to enter by the narrow door" (cf. *Luke 13:24*). I was very struck by the meaning of these words of Our Lord, and made a very direct prayer: "Lord, what is the 'narrow door' for me, that I have to go through? Show it to me, Lord, in a concrete way, help me see it!" Right after Mass, we returned to the house and Sr. Veronica brought me to a room in the guest area that I had never entered so she could give me a document from the community to read during the retreat. Without knowing anything about my prayer, she held out her hand and said, "BEHOLD, the famous NARROW DOOR!" This was exactly the response, to the letter, to my specific question! This sign, and many others, helped me to ground my calling on a firm foundation and to face the difficult moments of trial which were quick in coming.

Obstacles and incomprehension...

It is written, *"Son, if you present yourself to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation!"* (cf. *Sir 2:1*), and so it was: the first problems immediately broke out at home, especially when my family realized that I wanted to leave everything behind to enter a community where the members live in total poverty, without using money, and move about by hitchhiking, without [human] securities or, at that time, even the official approval of the Church.⁴ As if that weren't enough, I was about to defend my thesis, and received an excellent job offer which I had awaited for years: a contract (for unlimited time) to work at the National Central Library of Florence! It was an offer which, according to my parents, my friends, and even some

⁴ The *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary* received the APPROVAL of the Catholic Church *ad experimentum* a few months later, on the 30th of May 2014, by an Episcopal Decree in the Diocese of Noto (SR), and were definitively approved on the 31st of May 2019.

people in the Church, I couldn't possibly refuse. The Lord, however, had brought me to understand something entirely different, and I didn't feel it was right to stoop to compromise; I realized that this was a moment in which the Lord wanted to try my sincerity and determination in carrying out, at all costs, His will for me. Thus, regardless of obstacles, temptations, and moments of intense trial, I graduated with my degree in Philosophy, rejected the job offer against the opinion of the whole world (for which I was insulted and even told I was crazy), and had the courage to make the most decisive choice of my life, entering the community and embarking upon this fantastic and exhilarating adventure – thanks be to God, above all, but thanks also to Friar Volantino and Sr. Veronica, who have guided me in the manner of Jesus and Mary, holding me by the hand and helping me take the right steps at the right time.

Conclusion

If I have given up everything to wear this habit and live this radical lifestyle, it's not – as you have seen – because I had nothing else to do in life, or because I didn't have other choices. It is because, and only because, the Lord asked this of me and I said "YES" with all my heart, knowing that, in my holy perseverance, the reward will be great: much greater than a fixed stipend, much greater than the philosophies of this world, which – though I view them with respect and admiration – are, after all, only systems of human knowledge, and, as Friar Volantino says, they have never brought anyone back from the grave. Here, there is something much greater: here, we find True Wisdom, and the solution to the greatest problem of our lives – which is death!

No one else promises us so much; no one but Jesus Christ, who promises us the Resurrection of the Body, a blessed eternal life for ourselves and many others, and glorious immortality – that is to say, the possibility (as Sr. Veronica told me that day in the email) to become glorious Kings and Queens of Paradise if we do God's will in this brief life. And given that in Paradise we will not all be equal, and every person will receive a reward proportionate to what he or she has done in this life (as St. Paul says, "*Whoever sows scarcely, will reap scarcely, and whoever sows abundantly, will reap abundantly!*" – cf. *2Cor 9:6*), I wish you the very best in discovering, practicing, and persevering in the Will of God (each according to his or her own calling...30, 60, or 100fold). I wish you all to become saints...or, even better, great saints! (cf. *Matt. 5:19b*).

With great and fraternal affection, in Christ,

Sr. Susanna Maria S.