

Newly professed sister finds beauty in living in intentional community

BY ELISE STANKUS ■

Correspondent

Sister Maria Dela Paz describes her final vows as “a love letter to my congregation,” the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia.

She sees her vows as a commitment not only to her own congregation, but to the future of religious life. The median age of religious sisters in the United States is 89 and, as sister in her mid-30s, she believes it is important to acknowledge that there are young women who see the beauty of living in intentional community.

“For me, professing my final vows is saying ‘there is a future here – and it is already present.’”

Sister Maria, who was born in the Philippines but grew up in East Windsor, attended St. Anthony of Padua Parish, Hightstown, where she was an altar server and received her faith formation and sacraments throughout her childhood.

FAMILY AND FAITH

“The church was really the center of my family life,” she said, describing her family’s involvement in parish life. “I was a product of the parish.”

For the Dela Paz family, faith always went hand-in-hand with service. Sister Maria, her sibling and her father were regular volunteers at a soup kitchen in Trenton.

“Faith isn’t just something that is lived inside the church, it’s something that is supposed to go outward, that’s supposed to be a life of service to God and to our community,” she said.

At Jesuit-run St. Peter’s College (now University) in Jersey City, she began to examine more deeply her personal relationship with God. She learned about Ignatian spirituality and explored new

forms of prayer, such as the examen, Taizé, and movement prayer. “That just opened the world to me, opened an individual relationship with God in my life,” she said.

After college, she became a Jesuit Volunteer in the Federated States of Micronesia, where she came to appreciate more deeply the value of intentional community and living with other volunteers her age.

“I realized there is a different way of living,” she mused. “And I was a little bit different after that experience.”

‘SOMETHING WAS MISSING’

In the time that followed, she moved across the country.

“I was living the ultimate ‘American Dream,’” she said, laughing. “But I was sad. Something was missing.”

She found comfort in her experience of community as a Jesuit Volunteer. “I realized what I missed was that sharing and community that I had when I was a JV. [...] That’s what I missed. That’s what I really wanted.”

Sister Maria turned to spiritual direction and found it in the guidance of a Sister of St. Francis of Philadelphia. Beginning to feel a call to religious life, she started to spend more time with different religious congregations, but she found herself always turning back to the Franciscans.

“I loved their sense of humor and just how fun they were,” she said with a smile.

As she learned more about the order, she discovered a deep spiritual connection with their charism.

“What drew me to want to be a Franciscan was the teaching ... that Jesus would have come anyway even if sin hadn’t happened,” she said. “And it was just such a beautiful way to look at faith.



St. Francis of Philadelphia Maria Dela Paz makes her final profession of vows in Aston, Pa., Aug. 11, on the Feast of St. Clare of Assisi.

Courtesy photo

It wasn’t out of this deficit mindset. ... That overflowing love was just a way that I had never looked at God before.”

DOUBTS ALONG THE WAY

As she began her formation with the sisters, she found freedom in the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. “I learned that it wasn’t about giving up things. It’s an invitation by God to live out and to be my most authentic self.”

The eight years between entering the order and her Aug. 11 final vows in Aston, Pa., were filled with joy, but also some doubt. “Moments of challenge made me more honest with myself,” Sister Maria said, turning again to what had brought her to the Sisters: community.

Professing her final vows was a culmination of years of discernment. She said so many things happened before she could say “I choose this freely and unreservedly for the rest of my life.”

Through juggling moments of desolation, she learned to take time for herself.

“It’s all about balance. I can’t give from an empty cup. Jesus also had to go up to the mountain to pray.”