



Sister Celine Nohra

The Courage to Love, The Faith to Persevere

He was very upset when I told him about my decision. He said it was clearly not for me but for girls that were less pretty and less intelligent than I was. He wanted us to get married despite what he said he knew. He was right. I did not love him enough. At 17, I had no plans of getting married yet. My dream was to do something good and meaningful with my life. I was actively searching for love and was trying to figure out how to love the most. Being that reading was one of my hobbies, I read all kinds of books from romantic novels to spiritual reflections and was mostly fascinated by Saints' stories. It seemed to me they were the people who loved the most, as much as is humanely possible, and somehow I began to understand that God was the source of all love.

Like most teenagers, I was surrounded by many friends and blessed with a supportive and loving family. I was comfortable with my simple and secure life: I excelled academically, had plenty of fun, enjoyed music, singing and dancing, and certainly relished the beautiful beaches and sunshine of Lebanese summers. Yet, my heart was not completely satisfied. It always felt as if something was missing and I told myself there must be something greater in life. My wonderful mother advised me "ask Jesus for what you need and He will answer your prayers because He cares and knows what is best for you". So I did. I developed a personal relationship with Jesus. I talked to Him every day and felt that He loved me and understood me deeply, more than anyone else. Through my high school years, I joined the summer retreats and workshops directed by a young group of Antonine nuns. During those retreats, the sisters taught us that we were each given special gifts from God and are called to witness to God's love in our own special way. They suggested that a unique way of witnessing to God's love is through religious life. By spending few extra days with them, I learned more about the Antonine congregation and charisma. While maintaining a strong spiritual life through daily meditations and communal prayers, the sisters were very active in various ministries in which they focused on helping the poor, the needy, the sick and ensuring a good Christian education to the younger generations. They radiated with joy and peace and simplicity and fun. Something made me wonder whether they had found what I was looking for and if that was the reason for their genuine happiness. That one night when I prayed my heart burned within me. "Will you come and follow me?" Jesus said. I answered "yes" and there was complete peace.

I left my parents' house to follow God's call. I had seen the light and could not turn my face or my heart away. God seduced me. I felt like a young woman surprised and excited when her beloved proposes to her. I could say with the apostle Paul "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ... Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil. 3:7&12).

After two years of intense reflection, prayer, training in religious life and studies, I professed my first vows. Today I realize that God was both the inspiration and the answer for my love quest. He who had said "There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Several times I asked "Why me God? I am not worthy of such a call and may not be capable of such a holy mission". Unmistakably, the answer echoed in my heart "Be not afraid. I am He... Have faith. I am with you until the end of time". If one reads the Bible, one will find out that Jesus called men and women, rich and poor, just and sinners, the ignorant and the educated to follow Him. I am not worse or better off than those people were. No one is too smart or too dumb to answer God's call. No one is too pretty or too ugly, too holy or too sinful. A humble and amenable heart is what God looks for.

After ten years of religious life, a permutation of joy and disappointments, of progress and struggles, of spiritual bliss and darkness, I hold on to Him. God still seduces me. Every day I pray and thank God for choosing me. Every day I choose God and choose love, again. I do not count on my own strength for I have perceived my own weakness and limitations. I rely solely on Him, the faithful one, knowing that "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).