

THE STORY OF MY VOCATION

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I AM CURRENTLY in my third year of theological study in Melbourne and my fifth year with the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart—or MSCs for short—and I would like to share a part of my story and journey with you as it relates to the gospel (Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time). This is a familiar gospel text that we read from when we celebrated the feast of the Sacred Heart, our feast day just a week ago. It describes the heart of Jesus that reveals the mystery of God to mere children, and that is gentle, humble and inviting of us to lay our burdens so we may find rest in that heart. In so many ways it describes the beauty of the MSC vocation for me, as well as speaks of my journey the last few years in being formed as a MSC.

I was brought up in Singapore in a small family: Mum, Dad, my sister and me. The need to be hardworking and excel in life was impressed upon me at an early age, and I remember wanting to do something significant with my life from when I was young but the question of priesthood did not surface then. After taking part in a youth retreat during my teenage years, I had my first experience of God that inspired me to be involved in church and youth ministry work, and that gave me lots of life and joy amid the challenges. I continued this into adulthood at which point I was working in a biological research lab with every aspiration of becoming a scientist and finding a cure to help humanity—or so I thought.

I have to mention that before working in research I had just completed my university training at UNSW in Sydney and it was then that I first met the MSCs in Randwick. The MSCs are not in Singapore and I was definitely not thinking of joining them, but being involved in that parish helped to keep my faith going, and I warmed up to them because they

had a special way of living the gospel that resonated with my heart.

I realize that being a city boy and growing up and working amid the hustle, bustle and glitter of city life, silence was almost a foreign concept and I did find it difficult to really know myself as I looked back on how I was carried away by all that was happening, and hardly listening to God.

I had a chance of being able to really listen when I visited Sydney again for World Youth Day in 2008. This did not happen during the hustle and bustle of WYD itself but afterwards when I took the plunge to spend eight days in silence in the bush lands of Douglas Park. There is a retreat centre there run by the MSCs, and of course I wanted to reconnect with them having met them during my study days at UNSW. It's amazing when I look back on how God uses these seemingly random encounters to speak to me.

The retreat was my first time being in prolonged silence, and I still remember fondly how I wanted to tear my hair out even as I faithfully did the prayer exercises given to me.

I had come to Sydney having just finished a big chapter of my life spent in biological research, and I was drained and devoid of any inspiration to even write up my research findings. I just wanted to leave it all behind. I had not found what was satisfying in my life and/or impactful for others. After spending so many years in it, I had felt disillusioned and lost. I came to the retreat with that load on my chest and it was pretty hard to let it go.

There is wisdom in the recommendation of eight days, because it was only on the eighth day that I had settled into a comfortable stretch of quiet without fidgeting or worrying. It was then that I experienced a deep

peace descending on me and a passionate love firing me up. I felt loved to my bones and it was amazing. It was no longer just an emotional high but it was a deep conviction from within. For the first time I felt I could do anything with my life.

Without planning or realizing it, I had come to face the question not just of career but of vocation, and God showed me that desire for God that had always been there, that now was being fired up to live and love as God does. For me that was the beginning of discernment that led to my joining the religious community of the MSCs. For me it felt like a call to be on earth the heart of God, who loved unconditionally, inclusively, passionately and personally. That was how I had experienced God and that in turn would shape my vocation.

My time of formation was really about becoming like a child again, helpless and powerless and dependent on God to lead me into a deeper mystery of communion that Jesus eloquently describes in the mutual knowing at the heart level between him and his Abba, and how that communion invites all of us into that deeper knowing and loving, and that is life-transforming.

Yet it started off as a difficult road because it meant unlearning what my culture has encouraged me in being self-sufficient and measuring one's worth according to one's achievements and status. It meant detachment from the material and from the illusions of the self that seem to make us happy and in control, and to go deeper into the truth of who I am, and surrender to the mystery of God that dwells in me and discover the real joy that lasts and how that is available to and connects us all. I got to experience a whole new way of praying that gave me a deeper consciousness of the mystery we are all caught up in. It is about falling in love and staying in love.

Love is the only reason why I would commit my life to the religious vocation of being MSC; not my love for God but God's love for me in Jesus. Love is the only reason why



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the yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden light. Perhaps this can be understood in the context of the religious vows we take—the vows of poverty, obedience and celibacy. While most would view them as being burdensome and restricting one's freedom, they make sense only in the context of falling in love with God and responding to God with one's whole life. It is akin to two people falling in love and committing themselves to marriage or union by their vows for each other. The religious vows free us to love inclusively and that has been the beauty of the MSC vocation for me. It is also the beauty of Jesus who was caught up with spreading the reign of God here and now among his people so that he forewent the blessings associated with starting a family. Yet he would later describe such a call to be a eunuch for the kingdom as a gift since not all would be able to bear the life; but again love is what makes such a life worth living as he would testify in the way he lived.

It's my fifth year with the MSCs and I still reflect back fondly on that experience that kick-started my vocation. Discernment is truly that listening for the voice of God that resonates with the truth in our hearts; that speaks to us as children and leads us into the mystery of communion with God; and that gives us rest for our souls. Every vocation, whether single, married and celibate, needs to be life-giving and God is that source of life. Vocation is then what gives us most life, and it requires knowing oneself and taking a risk with God and with another—for me it's my community. We can

so easily be paralyzed by fear when taking a plunge, and hence God's love for me was the only source of safety, comfort and motivation that could allow me to leave all behind and go down this path less travelled.

Truly it's been a blessing these last five years with regards to spiritual insights, community life, study and friendships with many I've met from all walks of life. I do not regard this life as a bed of roses of course. As others before me have testified, there will be days of discouragement, rejection and even persecution that can happen when we stand for something or someone in our lives, when we are called to put our lives on the line in love and courage because of what or who has captured our imagination and transformed our world. It's both the challenge and beauty of every vocation.

And the vocation continues to work itself out—we never quite have it all together,

or feel most ready or worthy when we answer a call; we can only be true to ourselves when we do.

Today's readings invite us to be like children, to listen and surrender to a greater mystery of communion within and around us so that we may find rest for our souls, and from that place we can be life-giving. This is best done in silence, and I would specially like to encourage the guys who may be thinking about or discerning life choices (or if you know someone who does) to come to our special weekends called '*What's a life for?*' and spend it in silence listening for the voice of Jesus within who beckons us to come.

God is a God of surprises as I can testify, and we can't go wrong when we put time aside and live our lives for God. Information on the retreat can be found on the website: www.whatsalifefor.com.

Thank you!

WHAT'S A LIFE FOR?

More than ever young people are discerning direction for their life. For some it is the question, 'Where is God calling me?' for others, 'What is my heart's desire, its deepest desire?', 'Where can I find true meaning in my life?', 'What journey will enable me to love the best way I can?'

This genuine search is not for a comfortable lifestyle, but a life fulfilled by living Jesus' greatest command, to love God and to love my neighbour as myself.

Since 2006 more than 70 men have discerned their response to these questions at a *What's a life for?* weekend retreat. Some have discerned they are called to Diocesan priesthood, others married life, others have joined Religious Orders. The Spirit is sometimes the quietest voice; a weekend retreat assists in this voice being heard.

Discern, 'What's a Life For?' at St Mary's Towers Douglas Park...