

# DIVERSITY OF VOCATIONS



*Marie Dennis*



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# Catholic Spirituality for Adults

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## Catching the Rhythm of God's Voice

*Then one of the seraphs flew to me holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here I am; send me!" (Isaiah 6:6–8)*

*He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them, "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Mark 4:2–9)*

“**T**HEN I HEARD the voice of the Lord. . . . Listen!” Catch the rhythm of God’s voice. Sometimes we hear it deep in our own souls; at other times, through a dialogue of the heart with another person; or through discernment in community; or in something we read or observe about the earth herself or events in the world.

John Neafsey writes about the “divine source of wisdom, mysteriously both beyond and within ourselves” that “guides us in the path of our true calling and summons us to our destiny.”<sup>4</sup>

To understand our vocation we need to listen to that “still, small voice” within us. God is whispering to us all the time about the good, the happiness to which we are called, but it is hard to hear God’s voice because we are too distracted, too overwhelmed with internal and external noise. We need to be still, to lay aside concerns about money, security, and ambition, and catch the rhythm of God’s voice. Then we will begin to discern our vocation, the kind of person we are called to be.

“Letting the land of our lives lie fallow,” according to religious educator Maria Harris, who died after a long illness in 2005, is to allow “the tiny country each of us comprises, whose geography we know so well to rest.” We are, she claimed, to let that land be still — “the land of our bodies, our blood, our breath, and our bones. . . .giving it not only physical nourishment but regular, ritual rest.”<sup>5</sup>

One characteristic of many societies in these early days of the twenty-first century, our own included, is a nearly frenetic level of activity. In impoverished countries and communities, this often is “survival” activity — work for little or no pay that provides (often barely) for the basic necessities of life. In

wealthier settings busy-ness has many faces relating to both work and leisure. “Letting the land of our lives lie fallow” is a tremendous challenge to an economy that drains the last drop of energy out of workers trying to make ends meet; to cultures that define the value of persons by their job description, level of income, or possessions, and to lifestyles that fill every nook and cranny outside of work or school of every day with noise or electronic images or organized play.

### Practicing Shabat

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, one antidote to this situation is shabat, the sabbatical, the jubilee. Abundance — the thirty-, sixty-, hundred-fold — is the fruit of stopping, setting limits. And stopping, setting limits, creating the space in our lives to “be,” enables us to hear the rhythm of God’s voice in our own souls, through dialogue with another, through discernment in community, in communion with nature. Stopping, setting limits, creating space in our lives sometimes makes it possible for us to see the reality of our world or the earth with new eyes, to imagine in new ways our own next steps.

For many of the past thirty years I have been involved in the work for social justice and peace. I have spent long, long days and seven-day weeks at work, loving what I was doing and, in fact, defining “faithfulness” by the number of hours I spent working each day, each week, each month. Between working and tending to my children and relating to Assisi Community, there was not much time for *listening*.

At one point along the way, something in my being became desperate for space, for physical space (of which there was not

much in our community houses, where we were living at that time) and for soul space. I suspect most of us have reached that point at one time or another in our busy lives.

For a long time I sat with that yearning, trying to take a step in some direction toward what felt like necessary but utterly unreachable relief. Those steps I did try to take were often too big, too uncertain. I simply could not regularly take weekends off, or even Sundays. As soon as I said, "I will take every other Saturday off to re-create myself," or "I will never work on Sunday," something unavoidable came up. I couldn't find an evening that could be freed on a regular basis from a wide variety of obligations. I began to think about what I could realistically do that would weave my body and soul back together, and a few pieces began to make sense: time with my children and their children (especially as they approached adulthood our time together was never long enough or often enough, but it was always healing) — and dirt.

When we joined Assisi Community in 1987, we had moved from a very rural area where we had grown most of our own food into an inner-city neighborhood where cement covered almost every square foot of soil. I had tried and tried to grow anything in the small yard of the house in which we lived, but to no avail. No sunlight could find its way around our tall urban row house to shine on the little bit of dirt in its front yard. The longer, narrow backyard was almost all cement.

But that year, as I doggedly pursued wholeness, I found I had neglected to notice a very small patch of earth in front of one of our community houses. There I dug in compost and manure and planted and cared for a tiny, really tiny, little garden and found that what grew there was much, much more

than beans and tomatoes and eggplant! Taking twenty minutes or half an hour, even at 5:00 a.m., to get my hands in the soil drew my attention to that place and helped me to live in that moment. And my little garden began to nurture my relationships with others living in our neighborhood as well. People I had never seen before stopped by to comment as the vegetables grew. Many had grown up on farms in North Carolina or Virginia. They wanted to know what kind of tomatoes I had planted and just how they were doing. The little harvest was a treat that went well beyond Assisi Community! And I began to feel more whole, more woven together, more integrated, better able to listen to the voice within and better able to converse, really converse with others.

I share this little story here not because it offers a formula, but as encouragement to listen to the stirrings of the Spirit in your own life, knowing for sure that She will guide you toward right pathways and wholeness. And perhaps even more to share with you a few of the lessons I gleaned from this simple Sabbath practice that has been so enormously enriching in my life:

- that in one way or another, we who are trying to catch the rhythm of God's voice and allow it to set the direction of our lives need to create spaces to be present and attentive, for the stirrings of the Spirit are often drowned out by our daily routines that are packed with even-very-good activities.
- that although the Sabbath might feel like a necessary nurturing time for our own survival, it is much, much more about righting relationships with others (our neighbors,

our children, our friends, our communities, our enemies) than about anything turned too intensely inward. Sabbath invites us to live in a manner carefully attuned to the world in which we live, with all its hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. Unless we are still enough to see (really see) what is going on in our broken world, we will never have the will or capacity to accept a vocation that participates in its healing.

- that we cannot separate ourselves from the earth. In some manner Sabbath practice has to be about righting our relationship with the rest of creation and discerning vocation there. Growing something in the front yard was for me an entry point back into a deeper connection with the place I call home, an invitation to help heal the illness of “placelessness” that is afflicting our world. More and more we are uprooted people, able to participate in the pillaging of creation because we have no allegiance to and no roots sunk into a particular piece of home called earth.
- that Sabbath, even tiny Sabbath practice, is profoundly countercultural and even more counter to the prevailing wisdom of free market capitalism. It takes some real discipline and faith to believe that I am valuable, not because I am producing or consuming today, but because I *am*. To opt out of buying and selling even long enough to tend a tomato plant goes against the grain of a system that helps us create needs in a world where the real needs of a vast majority are never met; that tells us to buy more in a world of terrible waste; that tells us to produce

more, to exploit the rest of creation in any way necessary, to grow our economies without limit on a planet with very real limits that are rapidly approaching!

Sabbath practice, if it is genuine, will lead us to participate in the transformation of the world, the gospel vocation described so clearly by the Synod of Bishops in 1971: "It fully appears to us," they said, "that action for justice and participation in the transformation of the world are constitutive to the preaching of the Gospel."<sup>6</sup> "We need," continues Maria Harris,

to be people whose every activity has an underlying residue of receptivity, quiet and contemplative being. We need to be listeners: not only to the creation surrounding us, but to the creation and the land that we are. . . . Sabbath means that we live in time, in the present. Sabbath means that we practice shavat. . . . It means that we stop.<sup>7</sup>

But *where* we are when we stop will also affect our ability to catch the cadence of God's voice. Here two of the lessons from my own tiny Sabbath practice may be worth rewriting:

1. Sabbath is about righting relationships, living in a manner carefully attuned to the world in which we live, from near to far, with all its hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. Unless we are still enough to see (really see) what is going on around us, we will never have the will or capacity to accept a vocation that participates in its (and thereby our own) healing.

2. We cannot separate ourselves from the earth. In some manner Sabbath practice also has to be about righting our relationship with the rest of creation and discerning vocation there.

### God's Voice in Friendship

For many of us, discerning vocation is about establishing or nurturing right relationships — within and around our families and places of work, our parishes and community activities, our blocks or towns or neighborhoods. If we listen, we can hear the rhythm of God's call close to home.

Several years ago, in *St. Francis and the Foolishness of God*, I, with several other authors, wrote a whole chapter on friendship — as a source of renewal and joy, a source of courage, a source of revolutionary accompaniment, a place of accountability, and a place to meet God.<sup>8</sup>

True friendship, we said, “nourishes our capacity to move through suffering. . . . [It] is a place where grief is made bearable and where we find the strength to even face death.”<sup>9</sup> True friendship “fills us with a desire for the good.”<sup>10</sup>

“Our deepest friendships offer us the possibility of confronting in ourselves the inclinations to stray from the journey toward New Creation. . . . Truly loving and respectful confrontation toward genuine accountability in Christian discipleship is most possible in the safe place of intimate relationships.”<sup>11</sup>

We wrote about the important links between life in God and life in another. “Life in God, for example, requires an other-centeredness not unlike selfless friendship. . . . Life in

God requires that we risk all in the cosmic effort to live justly. Intimacy requires that we risk as well — in the miraculous discovery of mutually respectful, life-giving, and just relationships.”<sup>12</sup>

The role of friendship in the discernment of vocation is key.

In fact, friendship itself may be a vocation that contributes generously to discerning the will of God in our lives — at any age. What could that mean? What would such a vocation look like? What would it mean to say yes to *this* vocation?

For as long as I can remember, my life has been overloaded. I have always said yes to much more than I could possibly manage and have constantly scrambled from one end of the day to the other. I have a wonderfully loving family, who are among my dearest friends, and I have cherished friends, all of whom have forgiven me over and over for being so hard to pin down.

Either I don't have, or I have never acknowledged, a personal vocation to friendship. Yet I have witnessed and been beneficiary of the friendship of others who have clearly embraced this vocation and allowed it to help shape who they are and how they are present in the world.

One dear friend, now retired, is the matriarch of a very large family. She provides hospitality, transportation, an open heart, a listening ear, nursing care, a challenging conversation, honest advice, childcare, a good argument, a game of tennis, a family recipe, prayer, wisdom, encouragement, and unrelenting friendship to the most amazing spectrum of people — from children and grandchildren to strangers, from friends in or retired from the Navy to those protesting U.S. foreign policy, from the very wealthy to the very poor. Over and over

again, her wisdom and attention have helped people catch the rhythm of God's voice. Her vocation to friendship has been well tended for over a decade.

Another dear friend, a Franciscan brother who lived in Assisi Community for many years, also has a vocation to friendship. His cup of tea and handwritten, snail-mail notes in an e-mail age are characteristic of his whole approach to life. His Franciscan vocation has enabled him to nurture friendship in some of our country's most forsaken places — in the parishes of poor neighborhoods, in soup kitchens, in prisons, in an AIDS hospice. He stays in contact with my children, visited them when they were away at school, and remembers their special days. He does the same with all the children of Assisi Community — and so many other friends. They have caught the rhythm of God's voice through his friendship, through his vocation to friendship, which also has been well tended.

### God's Voice at the Margins

Right relationships at a personal level are vitally important. Right relationships with people who are impoverished and excluded are equally important for all of us.

The Sabbath practice of righting relationships in a world where poverty and brokenness abound may help move us in that direction. Neafsey reminds us that we will hear the Voice of God “by listening with an open heart to the cry of the poor and the oppressed.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, our vocational possibilities will be clearer if we look for them through the lived experience of those in our world who are excluded from

the benefits of society and by more frequent encounters with the painful reality of a threatened earth.

One of the most powerful and disturbing experiences of my own life was realizing that I could neither see nor hear the word of God as long as our family's life was isolated from the broken reality that shaped the experience of the majority of people in the world. The long, long journey toward a simpler lifestyle with more direct connections to people living on the margins in our own country and around the world is very far from over for me. I suspect it never will be.

The steps we have taken — especially from suburbia to an organic farm, where we could experience the kind of work for survival and right relationship with the rest of creation that shape the lives of so many of the world's poor; and from the farm to Assisi Community, where inner-city poverty and violence were woven into the fabric of our lives — were vital, but I know there will be many more steps necessary in the future. Over and over again, we who come from an affluent world have to reappropriate our vocation of relinquishment and relocate ourselves in relationship to the poor. On the way, I believe, the rhythm of God's call will become more clear.

In *St. Francis and the Foolishness of God*, we wrote,

the gospel calls us to the margins of society in order to bring about the conversion that is begun in our encounter with the poor. . . . Relinquishment is much more than giving up material goods. It means giving up prestige and privilege, learning to listen and to accept criticism and learning how to use our power differently and ultimately to share . . . the power available to us —

our resources of wealth, education, influence and access — with those who lack these things. . . . The way of relinquishment is the lifelong process of removing the obstacles to loving and just relationships with our neighbors on this earth.<sup>14</sup>

The way of relinquishment opens space in our lives to hear the call of our God, to discern the movement of the Spirit in our lives.

### Seeing Reality with New Eyes

One place of intersection between the poor and marginalized of the world and affluent and powerful people of faith who lived in the suburbs of Washington, DC, was the Center for New Creation, where an important dimension of my own vocation was nurtured and directed for over a decade.

In 1979 we wrote:

The Center for New Creation is a gathering of men and women motivated by the Gospel to work together for a just and peaceful society — who are striving to “let go” of whatever they hold in excess of need so as to be in solidarity with the poor as they reach out to take what is rightfully theirs; whose mission is to seek initiatives, both public and private, that would be a sign of that personal and societal relinquishment which promotes the New Creation.

A few years later, we added:

We try to be an agency for social change, a voice that begins to connect our own personal and local experience of injustice with a broader, even global trend, . . . a voice that enables us to see the far-reaching effect of lives lived here, of choices made here, . . . a community whose primary reason for existence is to facilitate social transformation towards a just society.

An important goal of Center programs was to orchestrate encounters between the two vastly different worlds of poor and nonpoor and thereby to create a context in which the privileged, ourselves included, could catch the rhythm of God's call.



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Regularly, we brought people from the margins of our world in El Salvador or Honduras or Appalachia to tell their stories in affluent, powerful northern Virginia. We published their stories and perspectives in *New Creation News*. We brought delegations from wealthy U.S. parishes to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. We brought people from the suburbs into Washington, DC, neighborhoods that were

both broken and full of life, where they had previously never ventured.

Slowly, slowly all of us began to get a glimmer of what life was like at the margins. We saw devastating poverty, the horrific impact of war on human life, and the frustration of people for whom the “system” was a source of oppression. But we also saw incredible hope, determination, and faith. In those years, base communities in Central and South America with which we were interacting both here and there were bringing the gospel to life in their own communities and countries in amazing ways — in spite of, or perhaps because of, terrible violence and repression. Over and over again we were led by their faith to ask what we, as middle-class people of faith in the United States, should be doing in response to the struggles for social justice, peace, and dignity of our brothers and sisters around the world. We were led by them to listen with great care to the movement of the Spirit in our lives and our communities, to try to catch the rhythm of God’s particular call to us in those years.

### **Maryknoll at the Margins**

That challenge continued for me when I began to work for Maryknoll. One of the great gifts of accompanying Maryknoll missionaries has been in the consequent relocation of my own life’s journey.

Maryknollers are present in almost forty countries, in the slums and barrios of growing urban centers, in rural villages, in refugee camps, in indigenous communities, among women and people sick with HIV/AIDS and with people on

the move. Always there they find, and help me find, life and hope. Always there they hear, and help me hear, the call, the vocation to discipleship, the invitation to follow Jesus.

In Oaxaca, for example, Maryknoll lay missionaries have witnessed the struggle of Mayan farmers to survive as the agricultural reality of Mexico shifted from *ejido* production for local consumption to large-scale exportation of specialty crops.

In East Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central America, Maryknoll missionaries see the utter devastation of HIV/AIDS and other treatable diseases.

In Panama, South Korea, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, Maryknoll missionaries have lived with the social and environmental consequences of a huge U.S. military presence.

In Kenya they watched a people struggle to oust a tyrant and reclaim their own system from rampant corruption.

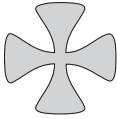
In Tanzania and Nicaragua they lived through hope-filled times when the New Creation seemed just around the corner. Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, who is now a candidate for canonization, was a parishioner and friend of Maryknoll missionaries in Tanzania. The foreign minister of Nicaragua after the revolution that threw out dictator Anastasio Somoza was a Maryknoll priest. Maryknollers lived through the devastation of those dreams and the repeated impoverishment of the people they loved, and they saw glimmers of hope again on the horizon from time to time.

In Chile and Brazil, lay missionaries and sisters accompany women resisting violence and reclaiming self-esteem. In Honduras, Zimbabwe, and Cambodia they do the same with youth and children.

In the Sudan and East Timor, in the Great Lakes region in Africa, in Palestine and Guatemala they have experienced first hand the impact of what seemed like unending war and violence.

On the U.S.-Mexican border and the Burmaese-Thai border they have seen the frustration of millions of people trying to cross a dangerous border to make ends meet day after day.

In the Philippines, Panama, Mexico, Tanzania, Chile, and Zimbabwe they accompany the earth and feel her pain. In Bolivia, East Africa, Bangladesh, Panama, and Nepal they live with the immediate impact of global warming.




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As I visited them in many of these places and began to look at the world through an even broader lens, I found the challenge constant and heard the question asked over and over again: What am I called to do to be a faithful follower of Jesus in these times in this world? Who and how am I called to be in this broken world?

To see reality through the eyes of those who are now excluded and impoverished is a vital step toward vocational discernment. In some ways this might seem antithetical to the kind of sabbath living I described above, but I don't believe

it is. We have to learn to listen to the “inner voice,” but we also have to find ways to do so that are deeply rooted in the margins of our world where the rhythm of God’s call is most clear.

### Listening in Community

Every human being is unique and uniquely beloved by our Creator God. In many ways we are profoundly alone as we discern the meaning and shape of vocation in our own lives, as we listen for “my” call to discipleship. But human beings are also persons in community, and that fact will affect our hearing.

Although the Assisi Community has been central to my journey for many years, several other communities have been important in my life, making me acutely aware that communities come in all shapes and sizes.

#### *Pilgrims after Christ*

One community that was extremely important in my own formation process was the Pax Community, a Eucharistic community in northern Virginia that has celebrated Mass together every Sunday since 1969. Founded within a parish in the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council, Pax (“Pilgrims After Christ”) has been committed from the beginning to excellent liturgical preparation, to actively supporting and challenging each other to live the gospel, and to service in the wider community.

Every week a team of Pax members meets with the priest who will celebrate the Eucharist on the following Sunday to identify and develop a theme based on the readings.

The careful exegesis and rich reflections they share result in meaningful homilies, prayers, and music and help the whole community deepen its ability to hear the word of God.

As the community matured, a deep concern for social justice led to thoughtful discussions, sometimes across significant differences of opinion, and to action.

I remember in the early years, when Pax was discerning its mission, reading with others in the community a little pamphlet by Elizabeth O'Connor from the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC. Entitled *Calling Forth of Charisma*, it was the impetus for many Pax Community conversations about vocation and mission that shaped my own sense of "call" and, many years later, affected the way I responded to my children as they discerned directions in life.

In the Pax Community early on I also witnessed a very deep generosity of spirit, time, and treasure that enabled the community to provide extensive daily support for a dying member of the community, a witness that has been repeated many times in the thirty-five plus years of the Pax Community's existence and that shaped my own understanding of vocation in communal terms. I believed then that I was called to be a wife and mother, a homemaker, and to be occasionally involved in community service work, but I also began to see that a deep and real commitment to community life, with all its gifts and demands and challenges, was to be an essential part of my own and our family's vocation.

### *Listening Together at the Center for New Creation*

Another, smaller community that was very important in my own life was the community that gathered around the

Center for New Creation. There, *process* was key: the way we worked together was intentionally shaped by what we claimed to believe. All major decisions were made in a participatory manner, and we worked very hard to promote real dialogue, even across significant differences of opinion. The positions we took on the critical social justice and peace issues of the 1980s were shaped by consensus and rooted as much as possible in the experience of the people we were coming to know who lived on the margins of the world; in careful analysis to identify root causes of poverty, war, and oppression; and in the gospel and Catholic social teaching. Over ten years of experiencing what was a really wonderful model of shared discernment also made me shy about trying to hear God's call on my own, which gave strong impetus to my decision to help found and make a long-term commitment to Assisi Community.

### *Listening with Assisi Community*

Assisi Community has had an extremely important and positive influence on my understanding of vocation as well. The diversity of age and deep life experience of community members provides a unique base for shared discernment. Our commitment to daily prayer and reflection on the signs of the times, plus weekly community meetings and twice-yearly retreats, affords ample opportunity to develop the habit of careful listening and fruitful dialogue when important decisions are to be made by individual members of Assisi Community or by the community as a whole.

Often in Assisi Community we are able to encourage each other to hear the invitations of the Spirit we might prefer to

ignore and to take steps that are risky or exceptionally difficult. Without the community's support, I suspect that many of us would simply ignore the still, small voice that John Neafsey describes so well. Neafsey writes, "The image of the still, small voice resonates deeply with many people. It seems to capture something of the depth and nuance and mystery of the inner voice, the patience and practice it takes to hear it, and our intuition that there really is something *worth* listening for beneath all the noise and activity on the surface of our lives."<sup>15</sup>

In 1992, as the quincentenary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas approached, many people were suggesting that the time was appropriate for a deep apology to the indigenous peoples whose ancient roots went very deep in this land and whose numbers were decimated by violence and disease after the Europeans arrived. Public and private events were planned across the Americas to hear the story retold from the perspective of native peoples and to ask for their forgiveness.

With a focus on Latin America in my work for Maryknoll, I had visited many of the countries in the Americas and knew well the devastating story of the indigenous peoples. I was acutely aware of the significance of the quincentenary for many indigenous groups and was listening very carefully for movement of the Spirit in terms of how to respond. When I received an invitation to participate in a forty-two-day water-only fast, I knew my answer had to be yes. But I am not sure I would have even heard the invitation and I know I would not have considered it a possibility for me had I not lived in and prayed with Assisi Community at the time. In explaining the reasons for my fast, I wrote in part:

We are called to make concrete and visible the signs of our repentance and to offer them in all humility to the ones who have suffered from our unjust ways. We are called to risk all in the cosmic effort to live justly. We are called to shape our journeys in a manner explicitly informed by the Gospel we proclaim. We are called to resist evil, but to go beyond resistance into life “as if,” and to believe that in the process of profound conversion we will discover who we are, who are our brothers and sisters, how we are to live with all of creation, and toward what vision of life we are to journey together.

Much could be said about the impact of that fast to which I felt a clear call. It was a difficult time for Assisi Community, for my family and co-workers and for me. Assisi Community helped keep it all in perspective, for I was neither the first nor the last member of the community to fast. It also was a graced time, a time of joy and deep meaning. My first grandchild was born on the eleventh day of the fast and I turned fifty two days later. Fasting focused my attention on both of those very significant events in my life, especially on my granddaughter's arrival, and cast them in a historical and a global context. My new vocation as grandmother would have to be infused with my consciousness of our society's great need for repentance and conversion. And I knew that the call to discipleship would be as demanding in my later years as it was early on.

There were many other times when Assisi Community provided fertile ground for catching the rhythm of God's voice. The presence and participation of community members

whose own journeys began in situations of *involuntary* poverty completely changed our conversations about voluntary poverty and simple lifestyles. Dehumanizing poverty could never be described as an ideal; only the kind of gospel (evangelical) poverty that helped close the gap between the rich and the poor was a state to which we might aspire.

The presence in the community of people from countries where the innocent disappeared at the hands of repressive governments challenged our discernment about civil disobedience with its *pro forma* few hours in jail.

The presence in the community of survivors of torture and war pushed us to listen more carefully to promptings of the Spirit with social and political consequences.

The presence in the community of survivors of childhood abuse made us place great value on the vocation of accompaniment within our own community.

The support of Assisi Community actually made it possible for me to live simultaneously my vocation to motherhood, by then as a single parent, and my vocation to the work for social justice and peace through Maryknoll, which included a lot of traveling.

The solid values of Assisi Community helped me hear as well the invitation to accompany my own mother in the last years of her life. My move out of Assisi Community to live with her was supported by the vision Assisi shared of community life embracing young and old and providing mutual support for each other at every stage of life. How to make care for the elderly and those with special needs possible in the context of community is an important question that remains before us.

An equally important role in the discernment process has been played by my family community, especially as my children have moved into adulthood. Their discernment was essential, for example, as I tried to figure out how to be a single mom or as we contemplated moving into Assisi Community and even more so, years later, as I, with their strong support as well, moved out of Assisi Community and struggled to fulfill the demanding vocation of caretaker for my aging mom.

Often I think in terms of our *family's* vocation, one rooted in the amazing experiences we've had together and shaped by the now often separate journeys of each one. Alone, as several different nuclear families, and as a vibrant and deeply interconnected extended family, what does vocation mean? How will *this* community respond to our "call"? Are we listening to the rhythm of God's call? What can we offer to the world together?

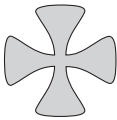
### *Listening with the Rest of Creation*

Just as we are called to place ourselves on the margins of society and allow right relationships with those who live there to open our hearts to the divine invitation, so we are called to reshape our relationships with the rest of creation and to allow those new relationships to move us beyond where we are into a new way of life.

As the New Creation comes into being, we must be as present as possible to its unfolding; we must look for its signs and wonders and hear its groaning. . . . Created in the image of God, humanity's vocation is to participate

fully with God in the process of creating a world where peace and justice reign, and to claim the divine image within us so that we can find our right relationship to creation.<sup>16</sup>

The groaning of creation in our times is in tune with the rhythm of God's call. Our vocation "to participate fully with God" in the creation/re-creation process will become more evident to us if our hearts and minds are attentive to life in all its wondrous forms around us. Listening to the cry of the earth sharpens our capacity to hear God's voice.



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*The challenge and opportunity before all of us is to choose carefully where we plant our feet while listening for the rhythm of God's call.*

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When thirty years ago we responded to a call we thought we heard from the poor of the world and moved from a suburban neighborhood to a sixty-five-acre run-down farm, I was excited because we were trying to simplify our family's life. We were leaving behind many of our "more expensive" or unnecessary possessions, our "excess baggage." We were moving from comfort and convenience to discomfort and hard work. We were moving our children to a less advantaged school district, but one where a wonderful diversity of children and experiences awaited them. We were moving to a place where we would have the basics, we thought, but not much more. We were trying to "live simply so others could simply live." As we moved, we wrote to our neighbors

that we had been very happy in the wonderful neighborhood where our family's life was centered, but that we had to try to put into practice what we claimed to believe: that none of us should have more than we need when others were struggling just to survive.

I had no idea how profoundly our lives would be affected by the years we spent on that farm and the deep relationship we would build with the earth there. We learned to farm organically, slowly retrieving the land from years of being dowsed with chemicals. We worked our fields and planted our gardens with old, low-tech equipment and lots of hand and back labor. We came to know every square foot of our sixty-five acres, where the rocks were, where the good soil was, where the ground tended to be too wet or too dry. In the summer and fall we handled every bale of hay and every tomato or bean or eggplant personally. Collectively, we knew every weed in the garden. As we introduced animals to the farm, we watched them settle into a good relationship with the land and with us as well. Every morning in the dark I listened to God's voice as I milked our cow.

We were outraged when low-flying planes spraying chemicals on nearby farms came too close to ours. I remember clearly our children on the roof of our little farmhouse shouting at the threatening plane to go away.

Our years of farming tied my soul to the land and the gently rolling mountains of western Virginia. When I head out west from Washington, DC, to visit my children who still live in rural Virginia, I am convinced over and over again that out there I can catch much more easily the rhythm of God's call. And even when I am not in the Virginia countryside, I can feel

God's presence in the city's beautiful trees, in my backyard garden, in the birds returning in the spring. At least from time to time, I find I have to listen for God's call with the rest of creation.

The challenge and opportunity before all of us is to choose carefully where we plant our feet while listening for the rhythm of God's call. Vocation, obviously, is lived in a wide variety of ways; there are many different pathways even in one faithful life, but the first step is a challenging one: to create the space in our lives to listen and to place ourselves in those situations where we can hear. By stopping to let the land of our lives lie fallow, by nurturing friendships, by moving to the margins, by ensconcing ourselves in communities committed to faithful discipleship, by living in harmony with the rest of creation, perhaps, just perhaps, we will catch the cadence of God's voice and hear the call or calls that are ours.