

A Father's Story

by William R. Burleigh

Forever will the moment be etched in my memory. My wife and I were waiting outside the Cincinnati airport for our daughter's arrival back home so we could swap cars and leave on a trip of our own. It was springtime 1998 and she had been on a retreat.



There was no way to prepare ourselves for what we were to hear when she jumped into the back seat, although she had dropped some broad hints of what might be in store.

"I think I have a vocation. I'm going to join the Nashville Dominicans," she told us in a brief, tear-filled conversation. My fumbling response was based more on faith in her good sense than in any deep insight of my own. Because all that we really ever wanted for our children was for them to be happy in whatever they undertook, I told her we would support her decision to the utmost of our ability if that is what she chose. But I had to admit to some trepidation.

Like so many others, we had little experience with women's religious life. What we did know, given the convulsions of post-Vatican experience in so many communities, hardly engendered confidence. Was our assent casting to the wolves this wonderful little dark-haired girl of ours who was blossoming into the fine woman of our dreams?

But based on our scant knowledge, these Nashville Dominicans did seem different. As soon as we were back from our trip, my wife was on the phone doing the best kind of research, the person-to-person collection of candid opinion from other mothers who had been through the same wrenching decisions. To a person, they were nothing but reassuring about the course our daughter had chosen. The more we learned, the more reassured we became and the more our daughter's judgment was confirmed.

First off, we were convinced that this was an order that respected the freedom of its members. It was obviously not a place for brain washing. The order seemed to take pains to make sure the decision to enter was voluntary.

One sister we met later made it quite clear: "If a young woman decides to stay only a short time, that is part of her discernment. Not everyone is destined for religious life. But the time spent here will prove valuable to her."

When August rolled around and our daughter joined the other 17 postulants in her "class," it was obvious that she was putting down roots with a vibrant, joyful community. These were bright, holy women who - in the business terms of my world - had their strategic plan in sharp focus and were succeeding almost beyond imagination. Certainly what they were accomplishing flew in the face of conventional wisdom.

On that day when Catherine entered, the mother superior erased what ever doubts may have remained. "You parents," she said, "will find that you, too, are accepting the vocation and will be changed by what you daughter is doing."

How the past three years have proved her prediction accurate! Everyone in our family has indeed been changed - uplifted spiritually, disciplined and made accepting of God's will in our lives in ways we could hardly have glimpsed.

We have not lost a daughter but have gained a host of other "daughters." Today we look upon the community of St. Cecilia as part of our own extended family. Each visit to Nashville makes more evident the joy and commitment that animates this remarkable group of women. In a literal sense, they stand as beacons on the hill,

serving as reminders to the rest of us in the Church and in the world that a new springtime has arrived in Catholicism.

Our daughter has found a happiness that parents could only dream of for their children. Her vocation has, if anything, brought to even fuller flowering the person we love so much. I confess that I am still awed by her decision and am frankly at a loss to fathom the mysterious marriage that she has made with her Lord. But I now know beyond any doubt, based on the peace and happiness she has found, that she made the right choice. In doing so, she has given the rest of her family a gift of inestimable value.