

Youth and the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor

Vocational Discernment, A Call to Love

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Sister Jenny Favarin writes about a new form of vocational accompaniment being brought ahead by the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor. It is an accompaniment that is a fruit of a commitment to live the Gospel and to give God the first place. Priority is placed on a lifestyle of unity, one that is also nourished and sustained by the Focolare Movement's spirituality.

In speaking about vocational discernment, I cannot fail to mention 'Casetta Nova' ('little house'). Founded in 1973, in the green hills of the Castelli Romani, the small house was initially home to four nuns, each of whom had overcome moments of crisis and remained strong in their resolve to put God in the first place, believing that it was still possible to live the Gospel today. Through their contact with the Focolare Movement, this small community found itself rediscovering and giving witness to the joy that comes with finding that precious pearl mentioned in the Gospel. The Word of God was real, able to be lived and life changing.

Soon, other young women, touched by the sisters' contagious and radical witness, asked to live a similar experience. Praying and trusting in God the Father, the sisters asked his guidance in order to find ways of responding to the young women's requests. And thus, Casetta Nuova Youth Center was born. The Youth Center provides opportunities for interested young women to spend varying periods (up to a maximum of two years) living a radical evangelical experience reflecting the universal human call to love that goes above and beyond even one's future life vocation.

Discovering the Fundamental Call to Love

The Youth Center concretely responds to young peoples' desires to give more space to God, to live simply with others through daily work, service, prayer, sharing with others in need and in nurturing one's own integral human development. Through shared experiences and community, each gives all of herself, discovering hidden talents and unexpected gifts in the process. With our charism as Franciscan Sisters of the Poor, we've come to realize that the most precious gift to be shared is God's compassion and mercy. It is God who guides each one despite their weaknesses and heals wounds. The Center helps residents grow in self-awareness and integrate the varied human dimensions that allow for the maturing of decisions about eventual life choices such as marriage, societal commitment, or consecrated life.

Individual Freedom: A Sacred Threshold

Since its beginning 46 years ago, more than a hundred young women have enriched Casetta Nova with their ever new and shared discoveries and life stories. The call to give a period of one's life to God bears fruits in the lives of these youth. First contact with Casetta Nova often comes through youth ministry or when sisters are serving the needy in various communities or through other pastoral situations. For the youth, what is central is to discover God-Love and learn to love him by living the Gospel together. The words of scripture, "...those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" (Jn 14:21) are a light for those living at the Center. During these many years, too, it has repeatedly been confirmed for us that it is truly the entire community that forms and generates life. Each one's individual freedom is also a sacred threshold, one that not even God himself will cross.

Step by Step

God's creativity in guiding young people is a continual source of amazement for us as women religious. In 2011, responding to the increasingly urgent need for programs that help young people better integrate and develop the emotional and spiritual dimensions of their lives, a program called *Step by Step* was launched. The program includes a series of six weekends spread out over 10 months with the central focus being that of providing moments for stopping and focusing on God. The weekends' essential ingredients have remained the same since the beginning: sharing of concrete life experiences, growing in self-awareness and developing an attitude of giving to others, and accepting one's own past, one's own body and one's femininity, including the wounds we carry. In this light, we've repeatedly seen that discovering this universal vocation to love makes beautiful flowers bloom. It depends on us to create that needed space - with maximum humility and gratitude to God -- so that those with ears to hear (Youth are known for having good hearing!) can draw closer to God's spoken words.

God in the First Place: 'Not Always a Given'

The effects of such an experience are powerful. One young woman shared:

"I met the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor through *Step by step* in 2014 and came to the Youth Center in 2015. Right from the beginning, I felt welcome and accompanied, and we were a gift one for the other simply through our being there together. Fixed moments of prayer helped me hold on to God's presence throughout the day and maintain communion with those close to my heart, even at a distance. I discovered service to the poor in a whole new way. I tried to leave space for God so that he could take charge of my life now and in the future. It's been an experience of trusting that God knows what I need and so that studying or anything else doesn't become my everything instead. Choosing God before everything else is not always so obvious. It has been a gift, a life investment that's allowed me to realign my own vision with that of God's."