



## GSR in the Classroom: VOCATIONS

# LESSON – THE PERMANENCE OF COMMITMENT

**SUMMARY:** A young sister reflects on the permanence of the commitment she has made through her vows.

**BEFORE YOU READ:** Alone or with a partner, discuss:

- Does it feel like this class lasts forever?
- Does it take forever for the microwave to heat up a bag of popcorn?
- Does it seem like forever until your next vacation?

We know that good things are worth waiting for, but sometimes the waits warp our perspective. What's really a few minutes seems like an eternity. How long is forever?

Keep in mind while you read:

It's said that nothing lasts forever, but many people manage to make lifelong commitments. Married couples vow to love each other "til death do us part." Sisters also commit to be true to their vows for the rest of their days. As you read the story of this young sister, consider the strength and gifts she'll need to live her vows forever.



THE VOW GROUP AT THE RECENT RELIGIOUS FORMATION CONFERENCE LIFE COMMITMENT PROGRAM (COURTESY OF THE RELIGIOUS FORMATION CONFERENCE)

## FOREVER IS STILL POSSIBLE

BY TRACY KEMME

Sep 21, 2018

In a conversation about women in the church, a colleague said, "Well, I hope soon they finally let sisters get married." There was something like sympathy in her eyes. I know the comment was well-meaning, but it also revealed that she didn't understand my commitment at all.

The unique contribution of this vocation comes precisely from renouncing a life commitment to a person and instead making a life commitment to God and God's

people. The strength in my vocation comes from living in community with women who have made the same life commitment. My vows are freely chosen and free-ing. Poverty, **celibacy**, and obedience are the framework that make my life what it is.

Of course, the **vowed** life is changing. And alongside conversations about the evolution of **religious life**, conversations are happening about alternative and complementary forms of religious life. Many communities continue to explore and develop the **associate** relationship. In January, Jamie Manson spoke with FutureChurch about how the church might include non-vowed but committed people as we imagine the future of religious life, particularly highlighting intentional communities that have taken shape around values of hospitality, sharing and justice. These are fruitful questions that flow out of authentic human longings. Our God is infinitely creative and loves diversity; of course, there could be new ways of living commitment to our timeless tradition!

However, as a young vowed religious, I am uncomfortable when the conversations seem to seek not additional forms of commitment but replacements for vowed religious life. Some have suggested that it's time to focus on temporary commitments, that young people today aren't capable of committing for life. Some accept a diminishment paradigm; they believe that vowed life is dying or increasingly irrelevant. I reject these notions.

The truth is this: God is still calling people to make lifelong, vowed religious commitments, and people are still saying yes.

In July, I attended the Religious Formation Conference Life Commitment Program, for religious preparing for or discerning **perpetual vows**. There were 22 of us from varied congregations, countries, backgrounds and generations, drawn together by the voice of God in the depths of our journeys. We spent a week reflecting on our vows through presentations, conversations, quiet time, prayer, liturgy and fun. Our being there with and for each other reinforced what my heart already knew: forever is possible.

Last Saturday, three companions from the Life Commitment Program professed their perpetual vows with the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), and I got to be there. As my friends stepped forward to publicly declare their total self-gift, I was overcome

## VOCABULARY

**vowed:** a way of life in which people make a life commitment to live in a certain way

**religious life:** a calling that both Catholic women and men take to live lives of poverty, celibacy and obedience. Unlike priests or deacons, people in religious life are not members of the clergy.

**associate:** a non-vowed single or married person who makes an annual or life-time commitment to a religious congregation. Associates embody the mission and the spiritual life of the congregation.

**perpetual vows:** the permanent, lifelong commitments that a religious sister or brother makes to freely live a life of poverty, celibacy and obedience. Some congregations add a fourth vow related to their charism.

**Intentional community:** a group of people who choose to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared values

with reverence and joy. They are “all in,” for the rest of their days. With every day, every breath to come, their primary, foremost commitment is to God, God's people and the Gospel. That's powerful stuff! I wonder, gratefully, what will be made possible through their freely-offered, forever “yes.”

My mind wanders back to our congregation's annual August jubilee liturgy, where my sisters celebrate 50, 60, 75 and more years lived for the mission of Jesus through the vows. Years ago, they made the same promises that my SVD brothers made last week. And they are still faithful. It's moving to imagine the impact their gift of self has had on the countless people they've walked with over so many years. This August, as I listened to them renew their vows around the baptismal font, my heart overflowed joy. Their

witness to a life commitment touched into my own yearnings. I know that I, too, want to live all of my years singularly devoted to Christ.

I want my life to proclaim that God is worth everything. I want to be available to respond when urgent needs arise. I want to love widely. I want to serve in places nobody else wants to go. I want to share life in common and build **intentional community**. I want to stand for justice. I want prayer to be the source of all I do. I want God's call to be the only claim on my life. I want to help make God's love visible. And I want to do all of this with my sisters who have made the same life commitment. There's something special about knowing that we are "all in" together, that the sisters I walk with in formation now will very likely be by my side when we stand around the baptismal font at our own jubilees. It will not be easy, but with God's grace, it is possible.

I'm aware that this article might seem to come at a strange time, in the midst of scandal and tragedy. Some might wonder why anyone would want to talk about life commitment in the Catholic Church right now. I get it. I am outraged, saddened and disgusted by the actions of some bishops and priests. They caused unspeakable harm to precious human beings. They did not live in a manner worthy of their call. I add my voice to the multitude that has already spoken: the sins must come to light, there must be accountability, clericalism must be condemned and the way the church is led must drastically change. At the same time, I feel more compelled than ever to live into the depths of my own commitment. The church is not just the institution. I, too, am the church. You are the church. I want to strive to be a credible witness to the love of the God who has called me. And that is worth the gift of my life.

Each vocation reveals something of God; each person living out her or his God-given call contributes something unique to the building up of the reign of God. I firmly believe that the world still needs that which a vowed life commitment makes possible. For generations, women and men religious have felt impelled by Jesus to offer everything that they are to Jesus' cause. Young people today still have the capacity and the desire for such commitment. We can be faithful because God is faithful. And our fidelity can hopefully, in some small way, reflect the everlasting commitment of God to God's people.

*Tracy Kemme is a Sister of Charity of Cincinnati who authored the blog *Diary of a Sister-in-Training* during formation. After a decade in social justice and Hispanic ministry, she is working toward her master's degree in pastoral ministry at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.*

## AFTER YOU READ:

Sister Tracy Kemme describes in her own words what it means to be “all in.” This includes:

- to proclaim with her life that God is worth everything
- to be available to respond when urgent needs arise
- to love widely
- to serve in places nobody else wants to go
- to share life in common and build intentional community
- to stand for justice
- to have prayer as the source of all she does
- to have God’s call be the only claim on her life
- to help make God’s love visible

1. Which of these goals seems most important to you?
2. Which would seem hardest to live up to?
3. What values, people and practices will help her live these vows forever?

**SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT:** The Book of Ruth is a story of loyal love, faithfulness, commitment and endurance. We witness how Ruth is more committed to Naomi than to her own interests and needs. Three times, Naomi badgers her to go home, but Ruth vows that she is not going anywhere and commits to remain with her until the end of time. The healthy relationship and a blending of lives they model are rooted in prayer, transparency, free will and trust in God.

*But Ruth said, “Do not press me to go back and abandon you!  
Wherever you go I will go,  
wherever you lodge I will lodge.  
Your people shall be my people  
and your God, my God.*

*Where you die, I will die,  
and there be buried.  
May the LORD do thus to me, and more, if even death separates me from you!”*

*Ruth 1:16:18. For more about Ruth and Naomi, [click here](#).*

1. How does Naomi and Ruth’s relationship reflect your relationship with God?
2. How does Sr. Tracy Kemme’s life commitment to God parallel with Ruth’s commitment to Naomi?

3. Ruth serves as a visible reminder of God's presence in Naomi's life. How can Sr. Kemme be an instrument of God's love, kindness and hope in today's world? How are you being called to share God's love, kindness and hope with others?
4. How was Ruth a true friend to Naomi? What characteristics do you look for in a true friend? Where do you see examples of extreme loyalty in today's world?

## THE CHURCH'S CALL

Pope Francis recently affirmed how members of religious congregations and orders promote growth in the Church:

*"Religious life ought to promote growth in the Church by way of attraction. The Church must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world.... To be prophets, in particular, by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection. A religious must never give up prophesying.... Let us think about what so many great saints, monks and religious men and women have done, from St Anthony the Abbot onward. Being prophets may sometimes involve making ruido [Spanish for noise]. I do not know how to put it... Prophecy makes noise, uproar, some say 'a mess.' But in reality, the charism of religious people is like yeast: prophecy announces the spirit of the Gospel."*

*Pope Francis, meeting with the Union of Superiors General, November 29, 2018*

1. Think of two saints, one female and one male, who were members of a religious congregation and who inspired growth in the Church? How did they wake the world up during their time?
2. Think of two religious, one female and one male, who today inspire growth in the Church? How are they waking up the Church today?
3. How are you being called to wake up the world?

## SYNERGY WITH SISTERS

Sr. Tracy Kemme is among several members of her congregation, the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, featured in a series of videos that debunk myths about vocations to religious life. Find the videos here (scroll down the page a bit to find the videos) and discover hopeful news. Form a study cluster with four other people. Have everyone watch a different video, then share what they've learned with the group.





## ACT

In her article, Sr. Tracy Kemme asserts, “I want prayer to be the source of all I do.”

1. Why is prayer important to Sr. Kemme? How can prayer sustain Sr. Kemme’s vocation, ministry and her relationship to love as Jesus loved?
2. How important is prayer to you? Reflect on your personal relationship with God? How often do you talk with God? Does your prayer time consist of reciting traditional prayers or talking with God? How can you deepen your relationship with God?

### PRAYER IDEAS TO CONSIDER:

1. **Create a quiet place for prayer:** This is your safe and sacred place to talk with God. Try sitting still or in silence. Remember, during prayer you don’t have to talk all the time. Focus on images, not words. Allow God to move your conscience.
2. **Journal your prayers:** Let God know your thoughts, feelings and dreams. Try not to hold back. Be as honest as you can--share your worries, fears and hopes. If you prefer, draw your prayers or put your prayers to music.
3. **Pray with Scripture:** Read the readings of the day. Ask yourself, “What is God saying to me through the readings? Click [here](#), then click on today’s readings or subscribe to the daily audio readings.
4. **Take a prayer walk:** We are told that creation is a window into God’s heart. Share with God what you see and hear during a walk outdoors. Listen to what God is saying to you in your surroundings?
5. **Pray with the news:** When you read or hear about a distressing issue, pray for the people involved. Pray for world, church, and community leaders. What is God calling you to do? How can you best serve God and others?

## PRAY

Jesus, source of our common life, bring daylight in these dark times in which we live.

Shape us to be like women and men religious who model, creatively and nonviolently, different ways of thinking, acting and living.

Keep us steadfast in our belief that you are forever with us, even in the coldest seasons of our lives.

Guide us to listen to the Spirit within and to freely respond to your call with open minds and hearts.

Liberate us to leave behind what hinders and to face with courage the challenges within and those that await us.

Prepare us to stand for justice, to be quick to act when urgent needs arise and to lead with care.

Spark the contagious joy of women and men religious who each day awaken the world by their commitment to a life of service.

Amen.