



## GSR in the Classroom: VOCATIONS

# LESSON – THE LOVE BEHIND HER VOWS

**SUMMARY:** A woman reflects on the role that love plays in her life before she takes her final vows as a sister.

**BEFORE YOU READ:** On your own, think of:

- Three foods that you most love to eat.
- Three things that you most love to do.
- Three people that you love more than any others.

Choose one item from each category and consider what makes it so special to you. How does it make your life more fulfilling? If a partner is available, share your thoughts with each other.

**Keep in mind while you read:**

The word “love” appears two dozen times in Sr. Colleen Gibson’s reflection. It is central to her life and the decisions she makes. Consider the role of love in your life and the ways in which you love those people and things that are special to you.



SR. COLLEEN GIBSON, RIGHT, IN GREEN, WITH OTHER SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH (PROVIDED PHOTO)

## FINAL COUNTDOWN TO FINAL COMMITMENT

BY COLLEEN GIBSON

*September 6, 2019*

A little over a week from now, I will make my final vows as a Sister of St. Joseph. With nearly a decade of formal formation behind me and many more years of informal discernment, it’s hard to believe that I’ve come to this point in my journey as a religious sister. Yet, through joys and sufferings, laughter and tears, I now find myself on the cusp of final commitment.

This past year has been one of intensive discernment of what it

means to say “yes” to forever. My tertianship, the designation my congregation gives to the year before **perpetual profession**, has been one of remembering why I came to this life, refining my relationship with Jesus, and reconciling the imperfections of religious life with the deepest desires of my heart. Truly, the year has been a blessed moment of discernment.

Looking back, I see pathways that were forged in trust and companions who have inspired hope, offered wisdom and borne witness, time and again. Looking forward, I see a hopeful horizon and a promise of change that will actively engage every angle of my faith. And for all this looking back and forward, I find myself solidly planted in the present, ready to commit to and be consumed by the core truths of the religious life I am called to live.

In one of my first columns for Global Sisters Report, “Considering Commitment,” I wrote, “When I return to the question of why — why I would choose to make a vowed commitment now — my heart cries out: Love! That is what I am committing myself to.” Now, more than five years later, I know this sentiment to be all the more true. There are things I know now about what that love demands that I couldn’t have possibly known as a **novice** considering first vows, and I imagine, in time, my understanding and experience will only deepen more.

Love, it turns out, is a messy thing. It is holding those who mourn as they weep. It is naming hard truths for your own liberation and that of others. It is trusting the One who calls you, even when the path isn’t clear and consolation doesn’t come easily. Love is showing up, shutting up, and stepping up. Love is a God who knows me better than I know myself, who loves me more than I can comprehend, and who calls me to the truest version of my being. Love is a commitment, and as much as I am committed to love, I’ve also come to know and believe that love is committed to me.

Living forever in union with that love is part of what drew me to religious life in the first place. Recently at the final vow celebration of a dear friend and fellow sister, I got into a conversation with a peer. “I can’t live any other way,” she said. “My love is too large.”

It’s a love of God that is beyond and within all other relationships, that is part and parcel of this forever commitment. Neither of us denied that we had and could still fall in love with an individual. “That’s only

## VOCABULARY

**perpetual profession:** the permanent, public commitment that a religious sister or brother makes to love God and others and to live in vowed membership throughout their life

**novice:** a person admitted to initial membership in a religious community. Novices spend a year or more deepening their relationship with Jesus.

**aura:** an energy or sensation that radiates from a person or thing

human,” we agreed, “but our vows... our commitment is to live out a love, that’s larger.”

The love we are called to is all inclusive and without distinction. It finds God in every neighbor; it longs for unity and bears all things for the sake of the Gospel truth. In theory, there’s a beautiful **aura** around such love. When I first entered religious life, I imagined at its core this perfect love was what I would come to live out and which would, in turn, perfect me. I soon realized that reality is far from ideal.

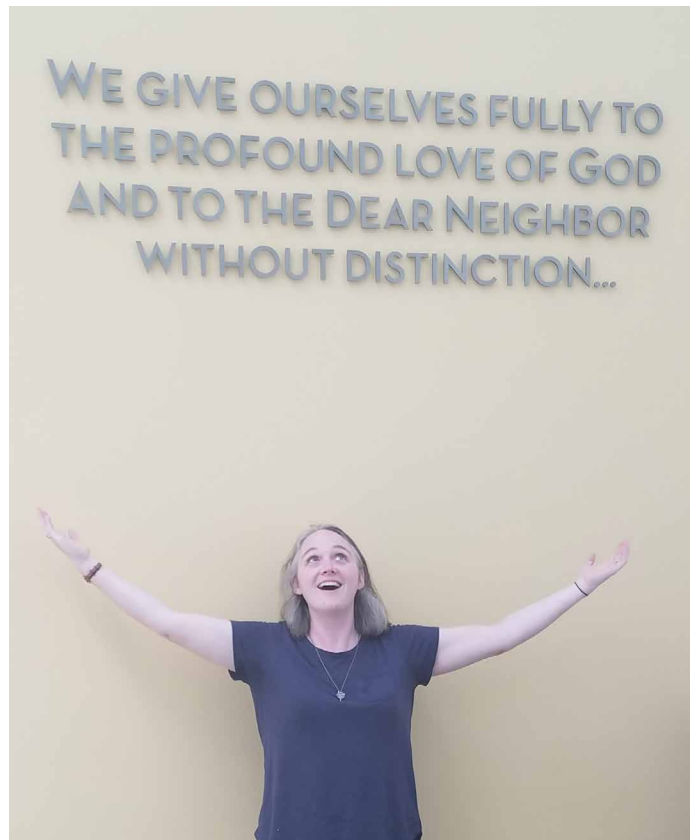
The love I live out is, in fact, perfectly imperfect, just as my (and every other) religious congregation is. Recognizing and reconciling this fact comes only with time and commitment. Rather than the perfect love of perfect people bringing about perfection, it is instead the imperfect love of people trying their best that draws forth a more perfect union within us with God and one another. To this end, to say forever is to commit to a community, foibles and all, and to recognize that we are a part of the imperfection that we often rub up against. We are all human, and when we can embrace that fact, love can flourish.

Laying claim to our commitment and those we commit to is core to this step on the journey. I claim this congregation. I claim this vocation. I claim my faith and I proclaim God’s claim on me. For all the steps ahead, I claim what is core to my being — Love through and through.

Each step I take now is one of trust. I trust in a God who loves me unmistakably and unreservedly. I trust in Jesus Christ and pray each day to imitate his compassion and to give my life to the Good News of the Gospel he proclaimed. I trust in the Spirit, whose promptings I hope always to be attentive to and who has guided me by grace thus far. I trust that God is working in and through the congregation to which I am committing to create union in the world by the very grace and gift of our humanity and imperfection.

As I walk in trust, my sole desire has become union with God and a life dedicated to love of neighbor lived out in chastity, poverty and obedience. This desire has called me this far, and I pray that it may be the desire of my life as I live this vowed religious life each day, for now and for forever.

*A Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, **Colleen Gibson** is the author of the blog *Wandering in Wonder* and has been published work in various periodicals including *America*, *Commonweal* and *Give Us This Day*. She serves as coordinator of services at the SSJ Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey.*



SR. COLLEEN GIBSON IN THE CHAPEL OF UNITY AND RECONCILIATION AT CHRIST CATHEDRAL, ORANGE, CALIFORNIA, DEDICATED TO THE SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH AND INSCRIBED WITH WORDS FROM A FOUNDATIONAL PIECE OF THE CSSJ CHARISM AND SPIRITUALITY. (PROVIDED PHOTO)

## AFTER YOU READ:

While Sr. Colleen Gibson describes the love she knows as wonderful and immense, she also calls it “perfectly imperfect.” Despite its flaws, she says love can draw people to a more perfect union with God and others.

1. Have you found this to be true in your life? How have you grown more deeply in love with God or other people despite challenges to those relationships?
2. What gifts does Sr. Colleen have, or what insights does she share, that inspire you to love God and others more deeply or purely?

**SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT:** Mary might not have seen God’s plan for her as perfect, and indeed, she was troubled and doubtful. Explore the story of her call:

*In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” But Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” And the angel said to her in reply, “The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God.” Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”*

Read the whole story here: <http://www.usccb.org/bible/luke/1:26>

1. What questions do you need to ask yourself about your life’s calling?
2. How does Mary inspire you to discern your life’s calling?
3. Gabriel presents Mary with a choice, not an order. When considering your life’s vocation, what helps or hinders your abilities to make choices freely?

## THE CHURCH'S CALL

Pope Francis shared these words with young people preparing for World Youth Day 2019:

*... [T]he theme is Mary's response to God's call, "I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Her words are a brave and generous "yes." It is the positive reply of one who understands the secret of vocation - to go beyond oneself and place oneself at the service of others. Our lives only find meaning in service to God and to other people. To be at the service of others does not only mean to be ready for action. It means also to be in conversation with God with an attitude of listening, just like Mary. She listened to what the angel said to her and then she responded. It is by relating to God in the silence of our hearts that we discover our identity and the vocation to which God is calling us. ... The important thing is to discover what God wants from us and to be brave enough to say "yes."*

*"Video message on the occasion of the 34th World Youth Day," Pope Francis*

1. What does your relationship with God look like?
2. What is God's dream for you? How is God calling you to a life of love rooted in service for the common good and a commitment that draws no attention to itself? Are you brave enough to say "yes" to God's plan for you?
3. How might a vocation to religious life bring out the best version of yourself for God and for others?

## SYNERGY WITH SISTERS

Sr. Colleen Gibson's congregation, the Sisters of St. Joseph, offer many videos to help people discerning a call from God. Sr. Rita Woehlcke offers simple guidance for people thinking about becoming a sister. Check out this video and consider how her insights could help you with decisions you face in your life, whatever path you're on.





## ACT

Create a prayer corner with images of Mary “in action” that inspire you. Consider replacing typical images of Mary with those of sisters actively engaged in ministry. These images can take the form of a sister holding a migrant child at the Texas border; a sister responding to the basic needs of the trafficked in Nigeria; a sister knocking on the doors of Congress demanding change in prison reform; a sister serving warm meals to poor Vietnamese families of those hospitalized; a sister wiping the tears of a refugee fleeing war in Syria; a group of sisters working with local women in creating sustainability in India’s tribal villages; or sisters standing in solidarity with indigenous women calling for an end to the burning of the Amazon in Brazil. (To find images, visit Global Sisters Report website: <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/>.)

1. Step back for a moment and look at the images you selected. What do these women share in common with Mary and with one another? How are they living out their “yes” to God? What emotions seem to be expressed in these images? How do their ministries call you to a deeper relationship with Christ in our midst?
2. Which image reminds you of a place in your own life or your path in life? Which image “invites” to consider a vocation to the religious life?

## PRAY

For centuries old, Mary has carried many names that represent her “yes” to God’s mission. Turn to Mary to guide you in saying “yes” to God’s calling in your life as you lift up this prayer:

Mary, Morning Star, inspire me to be open to God’s dawning in my life and to living a Gospel centered life.

Mary, She Who Shows the Way, guide me in prayer to see clearly and to discern my life’s calling.

Mary, Star of the Sea, inspire me to face life’s waves and to muster the courage to commit to a life of service.

Mary, Seat of Wisdom, inspire me to seek guidance and insight from those who may navigate me on the path that God is calling me.

Mary, Mother of Mercy, inspire me to accept my blindness to recognizing God’s great love in the wounds of Jesus.

Mary, Cause of Our Joy, inspire me to joyfully proclaim my “yes” to a life centered in justice and to use my God-given gifts for the common good.

Amen.