

THE COURAGE TO GAMBLE ONE'S LIFE



« Religion is the opium of the people and of the Church. With its prohibitions and the bogeyman of hell, it holds entire populations hostage. Learn to use your heads—don't put your brains in storage!»

I was still a teenager when, at school, I listened with fascination to my literature professor, a convinced Marxist atheist, who invited us to reject passive conformity and instead to question everything and courageously stand up for our own ideas... I liked his lectures but at the same time they threw me into crisis. One day, I went to the priest in charge of our parish youth group. "Father," I said in a challenging tone, "was the universe created by God or by the Big Bang? What do you have to say about it?"

That's how I lived my teenage years: caught between two fires. In the mornings I listened to uni-directional explanations of historical and socio-political events, and in the afternoons I listened to the Christian view of things. Fortunately for me, my faith developed in the dynamic years following Vatican Council II—a time in which I was deeply involved in my parish youth group. We carried out a lot of social, recreational, spiritual and charitable activities by means of our summer camp programs: recitals and concerts (in which the legendary songs of the Gen Rosso Movement featured prominently and which we performed in various local venues and nearby tourist resorts), collaboration with the *Mani Tese (Outstretched Hands)* organization in collecting rags and old iron, Sunday music performances in care homes for the elderly referred to us by Caritas; long peace marches, vigils under the stars.... All were unforgettable and emotionally-charged experiences that forged bonds of solid friendship among us and prompted us to make concrete commitments. It was an atmosphere in which faith was closely connected to daily life.

In this context, I gradually developed the desire to carry out meaningful initiatives not just part time but instead to dedicate myself full-time to others, according to the Gospel of Jesus. If what I did for a few hours a day gave me so much joy and made me and others feel good, then why not dream about living my whole life like that? I wanted to give my entire being to God and to others! But where, how?

Thus began my search to discover my vocation. I had only a few ideas about what I was seeking, but they were very clear: I wasn't interested in Institutes involved with schools because I didn't like teaching. I wasn't interested in hospital work either because I couldn't stand the anti-septic smell that pervaded those environments.

I loved life and the modern world with all its opportunities! So I entrusted myself to my parish priest who, knowing me well, said: "If you like, I'll introduce you to the Pauline Sisters. They live in communities that carry out a very up-to-date apostolate: that of proclaiming the Gospel with the modern means of communication."

At that time, I was collaborating with three friends in my parish youth group to produce radio programs, so my pastor's suggestion appealed to me. "OK," I replied. "I'd like to get to know the Sisters...but you tell my parents!"

Mine was not the classic family of practicing Christians and so my parents did not take the news well. "You've let yourself be deceived by the priests!" they accused me. "Why can't you do here what you would do in the convent? What's missing? Here you have everything you want and there you will have to ask permission for everything!" Very true, but I had lived such strong and transforming experiences that, to me, any other choice in life seemed to be colorless and mediocre, and so I left home for the convent.... It was only after my first profession that my family finally accepted my decision, although I think they were still baffled by it.

I entered the Congregation in the community of Bologna, where I was a complete stranger to the sisters because I was not the fruit of their vocational activities in that area. And, in the same way, they were complete strangers to me. I lived with them for a few months and then returned home to reflect on the decision I needed to make. And my answer turned out to be a resounding yes. Yes, I wanted to enter the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Paul and begin my formation journey because I had breathed the fraternal atmosphere that pervaded the Bologna community, witnessed the joy and serenity of the sisters, participated in their various apostolic activities and experienced their way of praying.

Now, many years later, I can say that I have not been disappointed. I have always cultivated within me the search for Truth and Beauty. I am challenged by the needs of my contemporaries and by the urgency to proclaim the Gospel to them with their own languages. Above all, I rejoice at the opportunity to concretely live in my community what I "preach" to others.

It makes me smile whenever I recall how the decision to undertake this alternative way of life blossomed. I owe it to my atheist professor of literature, who urged us to refuse to be conformists and reminded us that there is a price to pay for every choice we make. I never told him that I had taken him seriously but I think he would have been happy to know it. What was important to him was to form free and responsible people who would have the courage to gamble their lives for an important cause. In my case, I think he succeeded!

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