

The Sisters of Our Lady of Grace Monastery

“I AM MY FATHER’S DAUGHTER”

The Ministry of Jennifer Horner O.S.B.



On April 3, 1963, my parents and older brother took me to St. Columba’s Presbyterian Church in Broken Hill, Zambia, to be baptized. In the midst of the community, I was baptized “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Through the sacrament of baptism, I was called to share a vocation in ministry. Signed with the cross, I was claimed for Christ.

“I am my heavenly Father’s daughter.” What shape would my call take? When I speak of my vocation, what does it look like? A vocation is not a nice idea, but rather a life lived in Christ. For a Christian vocation to be real, it must be lived in a particular time and in a particular place. My vocation was nurtured and shaped in and through a Protestant family, a Protestant community. I was encouraged to listen, to pray, and to follow God’s call.

I. CALLED OUT OF AFRICA AS A CHILD OF GOD

I was born in Zambia and raised in South Africa. Living in the system of apartheid, as a privileged white person, I might not have felt the effects of apartheid so strongly had I not lived in a family that fought strongly against such a system. My father, a pastor and editor of a Christian newspaper, did not believe that he could preach the gospel and uphold the system of apartheid at the same time. As a result, my childhood in South Africa was not an idyllic one, but rather one caught up in the struggles of political strife.

Even though I found this frightening as a child, in retrospect, I can see that it was part of the call for me to live the Gospel; this call to speak out for justice that would begin

to shape me as a child of God. I believe it was at this time that I first heard God’s call. I knew that I wanted to spend my life walking with and toward God. Yet, as a daughter of a Presbyterian minister, I never dreamed that I would one day live out this call as a Catholic nun.

As a child, people often told me, “You are your father’s daughter.” Mostly this meant that I looked and acted like him. Sometimes I hated these comments, but when all was said and done, I had to say that it was true. No, we are not carbon copies of each other, but we are alike and one can definitely tell that a lot of who I am today comes from his formative influence.

When my father was a child, he was raised in a Roman Catholic family and lived in England. He attended catechism class, but his parents did not set out to form him in his faith. He would later feel called to join the Congregational church. His parents had great difficulty with his decision and did not initially support him when he felt called to the ministry. My father would later leave the Congregational church and begin serving as a pastor within the Presbyterian denomination.

I was raised in a Presbyterian family, a wonderful family of faith. Our family provided a place where our love of God was nurtured through prayer and community. We listened to the Scriptures together and prayed both in church and as a family. A close relationship with Jesus was fostered in our family, and I remember spending time in conversation with Jesus as I climbed trees and explored the neighborhood. It was in this Christian family that I would come to hear God’s call, in ordinary ways and in ordinary time.

In 1977, we left South Africa because of my father’s views and actions. This move was very difficult for me and it involved leaving my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. It was a painful time and I experienced deep grief. We traveled to the United States and settled in Idaho; rural Idaho I might add, where my fellow students thought I had lived in a jungle and had finally come to civilization. I reminded them often that

Johannesburg is a huge city and I had lived a civilized life! Adjustment to a new culture was not easy for me, but I soon settled in, began to make friends, and lived a life that was much more peaceful than the one I had known in South Africa.

In 1980, I graduated from high school and began my studies at Boise State University. This first year of college was difficult for me. I felt lost and could not find a church home that felt right for me. For a time, I participated in Campus Crusade for Christ and other student religious organizations at Boise State. I also visited several churches, but missed the liturgical life that I had known in the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa. I searched but found myself becoming discouraged.

My roommate Martha belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. She invited me to attend with her and at first I declined. But, after prayer and conversation, I decided to go with her. I remember the evening clearly. We walked into St. Paul's Catholic Church and Martha knelt down. Not sure what to do, I knelt down beside her. I had this intense sense of peace within me. It was a feeling of coming home.

I visited that church, that faith community, many times that semester. Each time I felt God's call more strongly. I visited with other students and asked them many questions. I attended a retreat so that I could pray and listen. I started taking classes so that I could learn more about the Catholic faith. Within this faith community, I was allowed to question, to struggle, and to "be with" others. These people did not pressure me but rather companioned me as I discerned God's call in my life.

After two years, I finally talked to the priest about taking instruction to become a Roman Catholic. As you can imagine, I did not relish the thought of telling my parents. I went through the classes a couple of times and each time decided that it was not the right time to join the church. Really, I was too afraid to tell my parents. "I am my father's daughter." How could I disappoint him? How could I hurt the parents who had nurtured my faith and brought me to this place in my life?

Something happened to me in 1983 that changed my life forever. On my way back to school after spring break, I had an automobile accident that left me fighting for my life. During my five weeks in the hospital and in subsequent rehab, I began to realize that I did not have forever to choose to respond to God's call. We are given today and, as St. Benedict would say, we must do now what will profit us forever (*Rule of Benedict*, Prol. 44).¹

Yes, my parents had nurtured and tended my vocation, but it did not belong to them. Baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I am claimed by God and for God. Yes, "I am my Father's daughter," but more importantly, "I am my Heavenly Father's daughter."

In the waters of baptism I was called and chosen to live my life for God. God had prepared me in many ways and through many experiences to say "yes" to God's call. All I had to do was respond. Respond with my whole life.

II. CALLED INTO COMMUNITY AS A CHILD OF GOD

I joined the Roman Catholic Church the year after I graduated from college and, although my parents were not happy in the beginning, they came to see the joy and peace that came from my desire to follow God's call. It wasn't long before I began to visit a Benedictine monastery. The love of prayer and community that was instilled in me within my Protestant family's home became the gift that drew me to consider a call to the monastic way of life.

Community and prayer had long been an important part of my faith. It was in community and through prayer that I had become aware of my vocation. Although I felt called to live a life devoted to God, I could not imagine that God was calling me to become a Benedictine Sister. I continued dating believing that I was called to be a wife and mother. However, God seemed to have different plans for me.

Increasingly, I felt drawn to the monastery. As I visited more often, I felt a sense of call embrace my heart. I loved praying with the sisters and joining them for common work and recreation. What had seemed foreign initially now began to feel like home.

After visiting the monastery for a couple of years, I chose to enter the community in 1989. At my monastic profession, the formal and public commitment of the monastic way of life, I made the promises of stability, obedience, and *conversatio morum* (fidelity to the monastic way of life).²

Vow of Stability: In stability I promise to live my life in a particular place and time and to work out my relationship with God and others.

Vow of Obedience: My promise of obedience calls me to listen as I discern God's will in life. My primary obedience is to God, but this is lived out in the listening stance we take in community both with our prioress (or superior of the monastery) and with one another. God speaks in many ways and places and through many people. It is our responsibility to listen for and to God's voice.

Vow of Fidelity to the Monastic Way of Life: Finally the promise of *conversatio morum* is translated to mean "fidelity to the monastic way of life." It is through fidelity to the monastic way of life, a call to Gospel living, that God transforms me. This is not a once and for all conversion, but rather a daily "letting go of self-will" so that I might put on Christ.

A call to seek God in community through a life of prayer and work has become the way I live out my vocation. It is a path that I do not walk alone. Supported by the love of my sisters at Our Lady of Grace Monastery and sustained through prayer, I respond to God's call each day of my life. As part of our monastic profession, we sing these words: "Receive me, O Lord, as you have promised and disappoint me not in your hope."³ It is because God first received me that I am able to receive others. It is with trust in God that I continue my journey.

My vocation is a gift given freely by God. It is something I can never take for granted, but must nurture each day of my life. Through the daily living of my vocation, may I “make God a song my whole life long” (Psalm 104).

III. CALLED BY GOD FOR MINISTRY AS UNIVERSITY CHAPLAIN

God’s call has brought me to the University of Indianapolis where I serve as the University’s co-chaplain and director of the Lantz Center for Christian Vocations.

I have long had a heart for ecumenism and long for the unity that Christ spoke of so powerfully. Therefore, I am excited to be part of a staff that is deeply committed to ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. As we seek God together, we search for ways to bring unity among Christians and respect between those of other faith traditions.

As one of the University chaplains, I am deeply committed to offering a pastoral presence to the students, faculty, and staff of the University in a compassionate way. Compassion calls me to offer God’s love to others as they struggle with the questions and/or pain of life. It is to offer God’s mercy and not my own judgment, to “be with” so that the space provided can become a means of God’s grace.

In my role as the director of the Lantz Center for Christian Vocations, I am deeply committed to journey with students as they discern the call of Jesus Christ in their lives. Knowing that this call is discerned in community, I find ways to provide opportunities where communal discernment can take place.

I find this ministry at UIndy to be engaging and life-giving. College is a time of questioning and growth. As I meet with students both individually and in groups, I have the opportunity to be with them as they question and search for ways to deepen their faith in God. I also have the opportunity to help them discern their gifts and find ways of using them in service so that God may be glorified.

I also have the privilege of meeting with students of other faith traditions. While their faith is different from my own, I am challenged by their faithfulness and this calls me to deeper living of my own faith. We can learn so much about God from one another if we listen with the ear of our hearts. As I approach students from other faith traditions, I do so with humility knowing that I need to listen to their needs and learn more about their faith. In doing so, I can learn to respond in ways that engage and deepen their practices through the gift of hospitality.

My ministry at the University of Indianapolis flows out of the overarching call in my life to seek God. God is always present; it is our challenge and opportunity to become aware of the ever-present movements of God in our lives. As we become aware of these moments, we come to know that the God we seek is always seeking us. God will surprise us when we take time to listen.



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SR. JENNIFER HORNER’S FAVORITE PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE:

Colossians 3:12-17

Put on, then, garments that suit God’s chosen and beloved people: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgiving, if any of you has cause for complaint: you must forgive as the Lord forgave you. Finally, to bind everything together and complete the whole, there must be love. Let Christ’s peace be arbiter in your decisions, the peace to which you were called as members of a single body. Always be thankful. Let the gospel of Christ dwell among you in all its richness; teach and instruct one another with all the wisdom it gives you. With psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, sing from the heart in gratitude to God. Let every word and action, everything you do, be in the name of the Lord Jesus, and give thanks through him to God the Father.

SR. JENNIFER HORNER’S FAVORITE PASSAGE FROM THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT:

Prologue 8-13

However late, then, it may seem, let us rouse ourselves from lethargy. That is what scripture urges on us when it says: the time has come for us to rouse ourselves from sleep.⁴ Let us open our eyes to the light that can change us into the likeness of God. Let our ears be alert to the stirring call of his voice crying to us every day: today, if you should hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.⁵ And again: let anyone with ears to hear listen to what the Spirits says to the churches.⁶ And this is what the Spirit says: Come my children, hear me, and I shall teach you the fear of the Lord.⁷ Run, while you have the light of life, before the darkness of death overtakes you.⁸
