



The immediacy of eternity: time and transformation in a Roman Catholic convent

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One of the most striking things about life in a Roman Catholic convent is that every second counts. Not in the ways most of us are used to: rushing from meeting to meeting, trying to meet grant and conference deadlines, struggling to balance career with family. In our hyper-rush culture, we have learned to guard our time closely. It is, after all, *our* time—it belongs to us. We get indignant if someone wastes it or imposes on it without our consent, because once our time has been wasted, it can't be recouped. It is a limited, expendable resource, and in a very real sense our time is a commodity. The less we have of it—the more it is in demand—the more it is worth.

Time in the convent is conceptualized somewhat differently. Time isn't money for the Sisters, but it *is* precious. It's precious precisely because it does *not* belong to us but to God. Indeed, extracting oneself from this 'worldly' temporal plane and relinquishing this false sense of time ownership is one of the first and often one of the hardest tasks young women must master when they enter the nunnery. They must come to understand that this illusory perception of time significantly hinders the experience of God, since it privileges human management of time and agency over the divine orchestration of human existence. The ideal in the nunnery, then, is what Spinoza characterizes as 'liv[ing] under the aspect of eternity' (Spinoza, 1910 [1677])—that is, to experience time in its genuine, eternal fullness, rather than as filtered through human distinctions.

This article is about how coming to inhabit a new phenomenology of time functions as a key element in the religious training of young women entering a convent in Mexico. Specifically, I suggest that learning to navigate two temporal frames—to, in effect, *read the self* across both contexts simultaneously—helps to affect a change in subjectivity for these women as they progress

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through their first stage of Religious Formation. The new nuns learn to construct an understanding of their selves as continuous across different temporal spheres, alongside (and perhaps *in spite of*) certain experiences of discontinuity that are purposefully imposed by the nunnery such as separating from one's family and wearing the convent uniform instead of street clothes. In other words, a fundamental part of the formation process is learning how to negotiate these tensions between continuity and discontinuity, and developing an experience of self that embraces both. In developing this argument, I consider what happens in the convent as both reminiscent of and characteristically different from millenarian and fundamentalist forms of Christianity.

The broader project from which this essay is drawn is concerned with the specifics of this larger developmental process, which hinges on certain intersections of gender, religion, and modernity in the Postulants' own understandings of their transformation. I argue that the process is composed of seven contingent stages that facilitate the working through of a collection of metaphysical problematics of the self—problematics which are explicitly associated in the Congregation's philosophy with larger social and political concerns. These seven stages are Brokenness, Belonging, Containment, Regimentation, Internal Critique, Surrender, and Recollection. The present essay is concerned with the final stage in this process—the re-collecting and rearranging of one's personal history into a new narrative of self that is based in a dual temporality through which that self is read and experienced.

The time(s) of our lives: negotiating temporalities

The commodification and personalization of time as a possession, and the ways we learn to barter with it in our everyday relationships, is one of the key elements many theorists—including Habermas (1987), Harvey (1990), Gergen (2000), and Giddens (1991)—point to when distinguishing so-called 'modern' and 'postmodern' ways of being from more 'traditional' forms. In the crudest and simplest of terms, we can say that this temporality of modernity is standardized, linear and progressive. It becomes a private possession, something under our personal control. This is contrasted to the more fluid, cyclical and inter-referential models of time reckoning associated within more traditional contexts, such as within bounded religious communities.

This difference in temporal framing has commonly been described by scholars of religion as 'profane' or 'ordinary' human time versus 'sacred' or 'mythic' religious time (see Berger, 1990; Bloch, 1977; Eliade, 1959; Otto, 1958). These two temporal systems can and do operate simultaneously within cultures or groups, overlapping and intersecting in complex ways. And people often look to religious experts for guidance in how to effectively and legitimately manage these two accountings of time. Religious practitioners themselves must become skilled in navigating between sacred and profane times. Scholars from Durkheim (1995 [1915]) to Levi-Strauss (1963) to Weber (1963) to Turner (1967) to Csordas (1997) have worked to document the complexities of this process.

Recently, some ethnographic material seems to suggest that this distinction between sacred and profane (or cyclical and linear) time not only is *not* helpful in some cases, but may, in fact, lead us to significantly misunderstand the beliefs, practices, and experiences of the people with whom we work. Robbins, for example, takes up these issues in his work with the Urapmin of Papua New

Guinea, who, following a Christian Revival movement in 1977, consider themselves to be a Christian group and actively anticipate Jesus' imminent return (Robbins, 2001:532). Robbins presents the problematic of the Urapmin expecting 'the end' to come at any moment, while at the same time continuing with mundane daily tasks that seem to contradict this expectation, such as planting food for the next harvest. Such 'everyday millenarianism', Robbins argues—where people simultaneously expect the end of the world as they know it and continue to invest meaningfully in the continuation of that world—is not unique to the Urapmin but appears throughout history and in many different contexts (Robbins, 2001:526), suggesting that there is more to such apparently internally inconsistent beliefs than meets the eye. Indeed, the perception of a fundamental contradiction in these practices comes, Robbins says, not from the beliefs themselves, but from our own cultural models of time, which are so naturalized within social scientific theories of human behavior and experience that they impair our abilities to understand alternative models of temporality as legitimate.

As noted, traditional Western notions of temporality hold that time is infinite, linear, continuous, and irreversible. There is, according to this model, a past, which is 'behind' us and potentially knowable. There is also a present, within which we go about the business of living. And there is a future, which may not be predictable in the strict sense but which is believed to follow more or less logically from the present, so that contingencies can largely be anticipated and planned for. But Robbins notes that for the Urapmin, as with other millenarian groups (see, for example, Ammerman, 1987; Boone, 1989; Boyer, 1992; Brummett, 1991; Harding, 1994, 2000; Thrupp, 1970; Weber, 1987; Wuthnow and Lawson, 1994), time not only begins, but also ends and then perhaps begins again (Robbins, 2001:530). In this way, time is punctuated with a series of discontinuities or ruptures, with the future not necessarily following predictably or logically from the past. The effect, Robbins argues, is an orientation to time that is radically different from traditional western understandings. Extending the kind of model Robbins constructs, we can say that if time is discontinuous, cyclical, and even reversible, expectations of an imminent end-of-days are not necessarily delegitimated by attending to what we might view as 'future oriented' tasks such as storing food for the winter and planning a wedding. When 'future' and 'past' are no longer vectors heading off in opposite directions but are bent and woven together, the relationships between 'beginnings' and 'endings' is no longer necessarily oppositional.

The formulation of time in the convent, like that among the Urapmin described by Robbins, is not easily parceled out into 'sacred' and 'profane' time, or even 'linear' and 'cyclical' time, but is understood as being simultaneously linear, cyclical, progressive, *and* regressive. But unlike the Urapmin and other millenarian groups, the focus in the convent is on the *continuity* of time rather than on its discontinuity. Specifically, although ruptures, breaks, and discontinuity are believed to be important and necessary components of self-discovery in the convent, they are understood to be *subjective reorientations* to an otherwise continuous and meaningful temporal system.

For example, the experience of rupture or discontinuity a girl experiences when she first leaves home and comes to live in the convent is acknowledged and validated as personally painful but is then quickly reframed as a parallel to the experience Mary must have had when she left her family to marry Joseph. The newcomer learns that God has chosen her, just as he chose Mary, for a special purpose. Her feeling of disjuncture, then, is recast as simply the growing pains of

recognizing her true calling, which God had set out for her since the beginning of time. Gradually, this continual naming of such experiences of rupture and discontinuity in conjunction with their reframing as spiritually and temporally continuous with God's plan for her persuades the new nun to move toward an alternate experience of self. She learns how to navigate between temporal realities and, with increasing skill, to use this process instrumentally to achieve a change in the subjective experience of the self. In this way, I suggest that coming to inhabit a new phenomenology of time helps the new nuns I worked with to integrate and personalize the various elements of Religious Formation they encountered over the course of the first year.

Religious (trans)formation

I spent eighteen months with an incoming group of Postulants in an active-life congregation of Roman Catholic nuns in the city of Puebla, Mexico. I wanted to get a feel for what goes on emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually with these young women as they try to decide if they should pledge themselves, body and soul, to Christ for all eternity. From my readings of historical accounts of convent life, I expected to find fasting nuns who wished to escape their bodies, disciplined women who saw their materiality as an impediment to saintliness and who felt the clear and constant call of God. But what I found was something else.

I was surprised to learn that the sense of 'the call' is usually far from clear to these women as they enter the nunnery. They have a general feeling that God wants them there, but they are unsure, nervous, and acutely aware that something besides God could be propelling them toward the Religious Life. Challenging, questioning, and refining these feelings of Religious Vocation is a lengthy and difficult process, and it is one that requires careful guidance and care by those who have gone through it themselves.

In their first year, the Postulants are mentored through a shift in self-interpretation that serves as the foundation for their subsequent religious training. They learn to incorporate into their daily experience a new story of who they are and what their purpose is—one that reorders and restructures their understandings of their own personal histories, while at the same time situating these new understandings within a temporal frame that is different from that on the 'outside'. By the end of this first stage of training, the Postulants had learned to reframe their experiences of The Call to the Religious Life not as a discrete event but as a *developmental process* that spans their whole lives.

The congregation

The congregation I worked with was established in Mexico in 1885 by Father Juan Diego de Muro y Cuesta.¹ Born in 1851, he was heir to the War of Independence from Spain and the Mexican-American War. He was also witness to a no-holds-barred project of modernization and the resulting social and economic upheaval that eventually led Mexico to bloody revolution in 1910. He saw the emergence of a new social class, a disenfranchised urban poor, who seemed to be left behind in the march of progress. Father Muro founded the Congregation—which he called

¹ All names used are pseudonyms.

The Siervas, or Servants—with the specific mission of helping this poor, forgotten, and suffering group of people to reclaim their ‘traditional’ (Mexican) values and dignify themselves as human beings against the ‘dehumanizing’ and ‘evil’ effects of modernization. He directed his critique at what we might call the *subjectivity* produced and cultivated through the forces of industrial capitalism and modernization and bolstered by the Protestant ethic. This modern subjectivity took on an added dimension for Father Muro when viewed through his particular theological lens. It assumed a gender.

Father Muro came to locate the decay of Mexican values and identity with mothers who had been ‘masculinized’ by capitalist development. He also believed that young women are, by the grace of God, the only possible saviors of a world in crisis, and a concern for the ‘proper’ formation of young women came to eclipse the other works of the Congregation. In the founder’s understanding, this non-modern subjectivity—this particular way of knowing, experiencing, being in, and relating to the world—is purposefully and undeniably female, Mexican and Catholic, as defined *against* the ‘masculine’ and ‘Protestant’ values perceived to be foundational to American-style ‘modernity’.

Today, almost 100 years after his death, the Sisters believe their founder’s mission to have radically new importance as Mexico grapples with the contravening tensions of globalization on the one hand and the preservation of a sense of national and cultural integrity on the other. They view their mission as nuns as nothing less than providing a moral compass by which Mexicans can see their way through the perils posed by these social and cultural conflicts. And they set out to do this by inhabiting an alternative orientation to the world as Brides of Christ and Mothers of the Poor. The process of Religious Formation is designed to cultivate in newcomers to the convent the attitudes and dispositions necessary for the development of this internal constellation.

Formation, then, involves not merely a spiritual commitment but a political and social one. Women who enter the Congregation with only a vague sense of Vocation must come to believe that God wants them in this particular congregation, at this particular time, to engage actively these particular issues. During the first year of training, the Postulants slowly begin to master the tools and techniques necessary for this transformation.

Religious vocation as a story of the self

To understand how this works, we need to look at the experience of Religious Vocation (‘the call’ to the Religious Life) not just as a spiritual or psychological event but as a *story of the self*—a ‘narrative identity’ in Ricoeur’s (1992) sense of the term, a cohesive account of the self that follows a particular trajectory and that is intelligible only in retrospect. Narrative identity in this sense is not necessarily a consciously devised presentation of self, though this may sometimes be the case. Rather, Ricoeur suggests that it is a function of trying to make sense of two radically different experiences of self—the diverse experiences we have of ourselves at different points in our lives (‘selfhood’) and the sense that there is some essential kernel of self that can be traced through these various permutations (‘sameness’). He argues that our subjective sense of who we are is continually produced and reproduced through a dialectical relationship between these modes of experience. What narrative identity does, then, is to

provide an arena for the integration of these different temporal modes of self-experience in a way that has meaning in a particular context. For Ricoeur, this story of the self is primarily an explanatory exercise for making sense of ‘how did I get here’ (wherever ‘here’ is for the narrator) that reflects multiple layers of experience and interpretation. As the ‘here’ changes, the story, too, is altered to accommodate the new direction. This narrative implicitly appeals to a certain kind of temporal organization (Ricoeur, 1985). Time is understood to unfold along a linear trajectory, with the present firmly ensconced between the past (known) and the future (imagined).

But in the convent, we see something a little different. Newcomers are guided in how to tell a new story of themselves—to construct a particular type of linear, narrative identity that resituates all life experience, past, present *and future*, within a temporal framework that favors the *circularity* of time and draws meaning from it. The essential elements of one’s human life story are worked into a larger narrative with a different temporal frame of reference. This new temporal lens is both timeless and cyclical: it enfolds both the notion of eternity (that time and existence have no beginning and no end) and of the shaping of time according to certain meaningful patterns, which find expression in various religious beliefs and observances. Just as Moses led the Jews out of bondage in Egypt and into the Promised Land, for example, so it is believed that Jesus lead the faithful out of the bondage of sin and into Eternal Life. The lambs’ blood on the Jews’ doorpost caused the Angel of Death to pass over their homes, just as Jesus’ blood—as the Lamb of God—protects his followers from sin and therefore from death. Sinful, disobedient, carnal Eve brought about the Fall of humankind, but this Fall is repaired by the obedience and chastity of a woman who herself is free of original sin. There is, in other words, a cycling and overlapping through time, repeated and varied enactments of key themes such as bondage and freedom, sin and redemption.

These cross-temporal correlates—and many, many others—are woven into the celebrations that make up the Liturgical year, which begins with the Annunciation to Mary, continues through Jesus’ birth at Christmas, and culminates with his crucifixion and resurrection at Easter. The entire year is structured to parallel the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which itself is understood to parallel the creation, fall, and redemption of humankind. The rhythm of convent life is modeled on this cycle on various levels, with the days of the month, the progression of the week, and even the hours of the day organized to replicate this pattern. It is within this temporal frame that the Postulants learn to understand their Vocations and their decisions to enter the nunnery not simply as one young woman’s desire to unite with Jesus but as part of an awesome, divine plan of salvation.

So how might this happen? As noted, most of the Postulants were initially unsure if they had really been called by God. They anxiously looked for any sign—no matter how small—that their Vocation was genuine. The Postulants learn, in fact, that it is certainly possible to *have* a genuine Vocation and not know it, or to believe falsely that one has been called to the Religious Life when this isn’t the case. They tended to view Vocation as something they did or didn’t have, and it was not clear to them how to tell the difference. They are wary of their own senses of calling, and rely on outside validation from their superiors as to whether or not their experiences were ‘real.’ As Carlota (a 19-year-old Postulant) told me, ‘I just wanted someone to tell me, “Yes, you have a Vocation”, or, “No you don’t”’. ‘But it’s not that easy. No one can tell you for sure if you have a Vocation or not. This is between you and Christ.’

One way the Postulants begin to engage critically their motivations for joining the convent is by learning new ways of thinking about themselves as flesh-and-blood actors within the material world, while at the same time continually (re)interpreting their embodied experience as evidencing important things about their spiritual state. They must come to situate and reinterpret their mundane daily activities within both ‘worldly’ (linear) time *and* ‘sacred’ (eternal, cyclical) time, and to attach meaning to their actions that bridges both domains.

The ritualization of everyday life

The crux here seems to be development of an alternate experience of daily practice as ritual activity, or what we might call a *dual movement* with regards to action, time, and experience. Specifically, daily life in the convent becomes an arena for the negotiating of these temporal frames by simultaneously regulating the Sisters’ every waking and sleeping moment *and* highlighting the illusory nature of these temporal distinctions.

We can understand this approach more clearly if we think of the convent as a ritual space, in Bell’s (1992) sense of the term, which operates with its own game rules and generates its own ritual activities and meanings. The protective and isolative nature of the convent creates a bounded realm of sacred experience, where daily life becomes alive with the presence of the otherworldly. For the believer, the power of God is palpable and infuses every aspect of the Sisters’ lives. The Sisters are never ‘outside’ of ritual, in the anthropological sense of the term. They feel that they are constantly communicating with the divine in a powerful and direct way, whether in the chapel praying or doing the laundry. In this way, everyday activities take on new meaning and new significances. Washing the floor, for example, is no longer simply utilitarian. It is a tribute to God and a test of one’s Vocation. Peeling vegetables and preparing meals is not merely a duty but a manifestation of humility and enlightened servility. Studying for courses is an act of gratitude to God for one’s intellect. Bathing is a reminder of one’s pledged purity of both body and spirit. Eating reminds one of the frailty of the flesh and the eternal nourishment of the soul to be had in heaven.

In other words, the Postulants are guided in how to experience their every action, no matter how small, as an articulation of their spiritual relationship with God, and as an opportunity for them to feel his presence and follow his will. As opposed to the outside world, where the drudgeries and chores involved in keeping things running are often seen as distractions or burdens which draw us away from ‘quality time’ or ‘down time’ these tasks become for the nuns a means of experiencing God on a deeply intimate level. As Amelia (a 22-year-old Postulant) told me, ‘I used to hate to do chores when I lived at home. I’d do them if I had to, but I resented it because they got in the way. I wanted to go hang out with my friends or do something fun. But we learn here that washing the pots and pans and things can be a way of praying, a way of loving God. It’s still not exactly what I’d call “fun”, but if you offer your work up to God, it’s a way of being with him and showing him how much you love him. It can actually be a beautiful experience.’ In other words, the recasting of daily activities as drawing their significances from a sacred temporal reference *as well as* a mundane one, allows the Sisters to engage them as tools in their personal and spiritual transformation. Learning how to analyze their inclinations and actions along these lines—and to internalize them as the Word of God—is the primary skill the Postulants must master during that first year.

Reading the future in the past

But this altered relationship to in-the-world action is not limited to the confines of the nunnery, or even to the here and now. After all, the present, as James (1950) characterizes it, is ‘specious’. It contains part of the past as well as part of the future. Our ‘selves’ involve judgments about past events and experiences as articulated through actions and emotions in our present and are given meaning through our imaginings of what our future selves will be like. The Postulants learn not only how to monitor their present behaviors and inclinations but also how to project these interpretations into the past. And it is here that the question of temporality most explicitly leans on the subjective experience of self.

The Postulants are taught that, if they really do have a Vocation to the Religious Life, it is because God has chosen them specifically for this path before they were born. In fact, they are told, God selected them to be his Brides since *the dawn of creation* and wants them to fulfill this Vocation regardless of their weaknesses, faults and personal histories.

If a woman believes she has been called to Christ from beginning of creation, this means that, whether she realized it or not, each and every thing that she has done or experienced since her birth occurred in the context of that calling. Whether she realized it or not, God had chosen her to become his bride and was gently guiding her toward this path. And whether she realized it or not, God was communicating with her—and she with him—even as she went about her daily business. It didn’t matter if her family wasn’t religious or if she didn’t start going to church until she was thirteen. It didn’t matter that she went through a rebellious stage and would sneak out of the house to meet her boyfriend. It didn’t matter that she had planned to go to veterinary school and spent her afternoons at the vet hospital instead of at catechism. The Postulants learn that spiritual communion with God not only is possible but can be *pervasive* in our daily lives, if we cultivate it. ‘There are so many things in my life I didn’t give any importance to’, Carmen (a 29-year-old Postulant) told me, ‘but now I can see that it was the Lord trying to get my attention. Good thing for me the Lord is patient!’

In the course of their first year in the convent, then, the Postulants are guided in reconceptualizing their whole lives as a series of events indicating a divinely directed transformation, a progressive unfolding of self in particular image. This self is eternal, yet embodied in the here and now. It has been singled out by God for special grace but risks eternal damnation by virtue of its incarnation in human flesh. It is an agent in the world and is endowed with free will, yet is constantly guided and persuaded by God in ways beyond its awareness.

And they learn to view their bodies as the domain of negotiation between these temporal frames, a negotiation that proceeds in fleshy, concrete ways. In a May retreat on the Virgin Mary, for example, one month before they were to enter the Novitiate, Mother Veronica observed to the group that the ten months of the Postulancy are like the months of pregnancy—that the Postulants were, in a very real spiritual sense, gestating Jesus in their own wombs. They had become, in other words, simultaneously the daughters, brides, *and* mothers of Christ, orienting toward a spiritual rather than a physical model of female reproduction. Learning to construct a meaningful narrative of self that embraces—rather than denies—such paradoxes as they develop and change over time sits at the heart of the transformation these women undergo in their first year.

To see how these issues play out, let us look closely at narratives related to me by three of the Postulants, describing their understandings of ‘the Call’ and their own processes in answering it. These accounts are transcribed from taped interactions.

Vocation narratives

Abby, age 19

My Vocation emerged when I was four years old. Yes, four years old. I didn't do much about it at the time, of course. I do remember playing nun with my friends, tying a towel around my head like a veil. But I did all the normal things—I played, went to school, got into trouble. When I was in middle school I joined a group called Youth Missionary League. They're dedicated to going on missions, where you go outside of the country and missionize. Everything about the group is dedicated to missions. But for young people. And, well, that's how I started to get a little more involved in religious things, because of this group. I was enamored with the idea of working on missions—I really think it's so important, working with the poor.

Eventually, I went on my first mission. We don't start off going to faraway places like Africa. Eventually, you can get there. But we start closer to home. There are so many people right here in the State of Puebla that need help! So I started out in *el campo* here in Puebla. And ay, no! It's amazingly beautiful, because the people are so simple. But they are *so poor*, so poor—materially as well as spiritually. And you say to yourself, 'And me, having everything!' Because I didn't lack anything—the love and care of my parents, everything. I had everything. And I thought, 'Ay, no, my God! I have to do something, no?' But I didn't realize that God was asking something of me. No, at this point it was nothing more than, 'Ay! I have to do something! I have to do something!' But I had no idea what.

So I started to go on more missions, I traveled a lot, went out of the region. I met young people from all over Mexico. And I kept liking it more and more. And I got to know priests and some foreigners who came from Peru and missionaries who came from all over and told us their experiences as missionaries and everything. Ah! I loved it!

And eventually, I said to myself, 'Well, it's time, to do something, no?' But I was very, very afraid. So I thought, 'Ay, no, no, no. How?' I thought, if God is asking me to do something, then yes! But I didn't know *where* or *when* or anything. So I decided, 'Well, I'm going to start to investigate my possibilities. I'm going to start to look for what I want to do.'

So I started to look. I went to retreats, I got to know various congregations. I got to know people called 'laicos comprometidos'—lay people who take vows similar to ours but who live wholly in the world. And I evaluated it all. I would say to myself, 'This one is good, this one no, no WAY on that one.' And I did this for a long time, for almost two years. During this time, I continued with my normal life. I kept going out with my boyfriend and everything. But I kept this other side private, knowing I was looking for something more.

Finally, one day I said, 'Enough! I've had enough!' Even with everything I had I wasn't satisfied. Not anymore! Something was missing. *Something*. But something *spiritual*, something very, very profound. Not something superficial. And this is when I went to a conference in Monterrey. And it was *beautiful*, beautiful, because it is there that my vocation started to become clear to me. And I said, 'That's it. The religious life. That is where God wants me. And I want to give myself to him completely. OK.'

So then I began to investigate. Sometimes I would think, 'A nun? What am I thinking?' But it's true—I kept coming back to the feeling that *yes*, there was something, something telling me that I was to become a nun. I was surprised, because I had always envisioned being a missionary. But there was something not quite complete about that for me. I didn't quite find

what I was looking for. But when I *did* find it, I thought, ‘Well, here it is! *Here* it is! Absolutely, positively, here it is.’

And, well, I met the Siervas. My parents’ house is close to the Novitiate, and my little brothers and sisters go to the Sierva’s preschool. But all that is relatively new, so I hadn’t spent much time there myself. But I started to visit, and before I knew it was going by almost every day, staying and talking with the Sisters. Finally, I decided to attend the vocational retreats, and it was there that I decided it was time to enter. I thought about entering with the Sisters of Guadalupe, but in the end, it was the Siervas that felt right to me.

And thanks be to God that I’m here! I entered the Postulancy. It hurts so much to let go of everything outside. Yes, it hurts. But it something that goes away eventually. It’s that you’re full of the things of the world, and you have to let them go. But when you come to the religious life, all of this starts to leave you, leave you, leave you. You scrub everything out, and then new things come, like grace, like the love of God. It’s when you feel *universal* love that you know. And when you realize that you’ve been filled with it, you say, ‘Ay! No, no no, no! It can’t be!’ But it is. You can’t believe it because it’s so beautiful because you are so happy! And outside you can be happy ... but only in *parts*. You’re kind of half-way happy. You feel happy and you live in the moment, but inside, no. Here in the convent you know what true happiness is. You give everything to others and you think, ‘I’m exhausted, but I’m happy! And the more I give, the more I receive! And in the end, I’m going to receive the ultimate prize—eternal life!’ Well, anyway, this is what happened to me. I would say to myself, ‘I exist because of the love of God. Everything I do is for the love of God.’

Yes, I’m here inside a convent, and perhaps I should think, ‘No! I’m incarcerated!’ But it’s something, I don’t know. People on the outside view it differently. They think, ‘how can you stand being incarcerated?’ I’m not incarcerated! I feel *free*. *Free*. Absolutely free. There are so many things I’ve let go of, worldly things that were weighing me down. And now I feel so *light*, as we say. Free.

Celeste, age 19

My Vocation ... well, I feel it began when I was small, since I was very young. More than anything, when I was young I dreamed of becoming a priest and of giving mass [laughs]. I told my parents I wanted to be a nun, and finally, when I was nine years old, my parents sent me to stay at Father Muro’s school. It was hard, because I was only nine years old, and the other girls there were fifteen, sixteen. I was bored, and I missed my mom a lot. But I really was curious about what the Sisters did—there was something about it that kept calling my attention. When I was at school, I missed my mom. But when I was home, I would miss the Sisters and the school and couldn’t wait to go back.

This was the first stage of my Vocation—first wanting to be a priest, and then at the school. But at this age, one doesn’t understand, no? As I got older, into middle school, I began to help at the retreats—youth retreats, seminary retreats, retreats for all the congregations in the city. And I became even more curious. I really liked the atmosphere, everyone laughing, everyone treating one another with friendship.

So it was in middle school that I started to look more seriously, trying to discover if I was really meant for the Religious Life or not. I knew I liked it a lot. I felt very satisfied in the

retreats, and it was never the same leaving a retreat and returning to the world, to school, sports—the things I did on the outside that didn't fill me up, didn't satisfy me. And I realize this, that each time I went to the retreats, I felt full, complete.

I spoke with Mother Josephine, the Vocations Director, about this, and told her I thought I might want to enter the Religious Life. She was supportive, but told me I was much too young to decide yet, that I should take at least three years, finish school, and then see where God wanted me. I was disappointed, but she was right.

Something else happened on that particular retreat that changed things. When I was little, I suffered two rape attempts. This really influenced how I thought about things. At the time, I didn't know how to think about what had happened. During that retreat, one of my friends told me that something similar had happened to her. Because it had happened to me, too, I was able to tell her, 'Don't worry—I've overcome it, you can, too.' But in truth, remembering what had happened to me hurt a lot—it uncovered something in me, and afterwards I didn't want to have anything to do with nuns or vocation or anything. No thank you. I decided it wasn't for me.

When I returned to school it was very difficult, no? Because I had decided I didn't want that life. I closed myself off to it. I stopped going to mass, I didn't like going to school. But I did keep going to retreats. I think even then something inside me knew that I would come back to God.

Anyway, I finished middle school, went on to high school. And all the while, I felt this kind of disequilibrium, as if I was trying to figure out who I was and what I wanted to do with my life. I guess this is normal at this age—we all try to figure out our personalities. And not just whether we are aggressive or sensitive. I started to feel drawn again to the Religious Life. But still, those two rape attempts affected me. As I got more involved in religious things, my spiritual director pointed out to me that maybe I was looking for some sort of compensation, some kind of affective compensation in the religious life for what had happened to me. So I started questioning myself all over again. What if it was true? If that's what was motivating me, she said, then I shouldn't enter the Religious Life.

So I threw myself into sports. Sports get out all the negative energy, you know? I played a lot of sports, and I spent a lot of time writing and reading, trying to figure out what I really wanted and why. I got interested in psychology and philosophy, and threw myself into my studies. I did this until my last year of high school, and then I had to decide if I was going to have a career or what I was going to choose to do.

But, then, I had my boyfriend, and he could always support me [laughs]. My boyfriend was very important to me because it was a way for me to test myself, to see if I really was looking for compensation for what had happened to me, if I really could redo my life so to speak. Because after something like that happens to you, you feel like dirt, and you don't even know sometimes if you're really alive or not. That's how I felt. So for me, having my boyfriend was very important. And I was very upfront with him. I told him, 'I want to be a nun.' I don't think he believed me, but he accompanied me on retreats.

At school, I had a spiritual director and went to confession every week. I also had an academic advisor (the psychology teacher). We received communion every day, and this was very helpful to me. And through all of this, I always felt ... I had this *inquietud* here inside, no? And I still felt that the Lord was calling me. I felt it more strongly every day.

I went to more and more retreats. I broke up with my boyfriend. But Mother Josephine thought I should wait longer. I was impatient, so I went and joined another congregation. I felt the call so strongly, you know? And I wanted to turn myself over completely to God. So I entered with the Dominicans. My parents didn't approve at all. I was there for a week. Just a week. I was miserable. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I got sick. I remember crying and crying, thinking that I just couldn't stay in that congregation. The sisters were so kind to me, but I knew it wasn't right.

But I still felt that the Lord was really calling me. So I went back *again* to Mother Josephine, and I told her, 'I feel that the Lord is calling me.' 'Fine, come back to the retreats,' she told me. So I went through the vocational retreats again. I went to visit one of the Sierva's houses in Huajuapán. Mother Josephine thought this would be a good way to see if I really wanted to enter.

I loved the experience in Huajuapán, and when I returned, I wanted to give myself to the Lord more than ever. Not so much for the work itself, but to really *give* myself to the Lord.

Oh, the day I entered the Congregation I was so happy!! Ayyyyy! For me it was ... well, all of us were so excited! And in here, I really began to see how I feel about things. You truly surrender yourself to God, and I love it. The Postulancy has been a really beautiful experience for me. The only thing you carry with you is the Call. You renounce yourself, join with your Sisters. So many things you used to think were important just don't matter anymore. Outside, in the world, you limit yourself. But not anymore. And what's more, you know what you're committing to here, no? So if sometimes you feel discouraged, you can think, 'Well, the Lord is with me. What do I have to fear?' And here you continue to clarify your Vocation, because here you realize that you can be a contemplative in action, right?

And you become aware of your miseries. It's as if the Lord is saying to you, 'Do not worry, I am with you, be at peace.' For example, here you know that every act you do is an act for the love of God. And I love this. Because every step you take, every word you say is something very special—everything you do is out of love for God. And if you forget something, this is because you're lacking Love. For example, if I forget to chop the fruit for lunch, this is a lack of love. So everything must be done for the love of God.

... But as I was saying, the rape attempts in my childhood marked my life, and so even today I wonder, 'Am I doing this as a compensation?' I'm happy here—who wouldn't be happy being close to the Lord in a place like this? It is beautiful, beautiful. But you start to wonder, 'Is this really where God wants me?' Not just whether or not it's where *I* want to be, but if it's where *God* wants me to be. You have to make yourself completely available to God—what the Lord wants, I want. It's like what Mother Veronica told us, 'I don't want the outcome to be more or less or better than what He wants.' So one should be docile, try to see everything with eyes of faith.

So this is how I've come to think about everything that's happened to me. And it's helped me a lot. You remember that Father Muro says that to live with the poor it is first necessary to *become like* the poor? Well, because of what I've been through, I can help young girls that have had similar experiences. And who better to help someone who's traumatized, than someone who has been through trauma herself, like me? How can you understand their experience unless you've been through it yourself? But coming through a trauma is one thing. Coming through

it and being able to help someone else is a different thing all together. I think the Religious Life is helping me know how to do this.

Each Vocation is very particular. The Lord takes hold of each of us in a special way. Frankly, this whole experience in the convent has fascinated me. Everything just fills me up. It is a beautiful, beautiful thing to abandon yourself into the hands of God.

Amelia, age 22

Well, my Vocation began when I was very young. Ever since I can remember, since I had the use of reason, I used to tell my aunts that I wanted to stay with them: they were cloistered nuns. So whenever we would go visit them, I would always tell them that I wanted to stay with them, that I didn't want to leave. Well, they would laugh and tell me that I just had to grow up, and then I could go there.

That's how it was. In my childhood it was always that way. I made my first Communion. I was so excited! My aunt made my little dress for my first communion. It was so pretty. She made my dress for my *quinienera*, also.

But when I got to be fifteen years old, I ... well, actually, it was from when I was about twelve years old, I no longer wanted to enter a congregation, that is, to be a nun. I hung out at school and with my friends (I usually played with boys rather than girls). And that's how I spent my time. The funny thing is that whenever my friends would make me angry or something, I would tell them that I was going to enter a convent. I would always tell them this as way of getting out of a problem or out of anger or something.

I remember that on one occasion we were playing, and they left. They were gone for an hour, and I was waiting for them. They didn't come. So I got really mad and I told them ... well, they came to see me at my house and they said to me, 'Why didn't you wait for us?' And I said, 'I did wait for you, but then I left.' 'But why?' they asked. And I said, 'I shouldn't spend too much time out of my house because I'm going to enter a convent!' So from that point on I felt that, how should I put it? After I had gone something like four years without mentioning the convent, I started talking about it again. It was during this time that I started to say a lot that I was going to enter a convent. And from there this idea practically never left me. Always, in different situations, this idea would come to me. It was constant.

So I went to high school. I didn't like it. I left. But always with this idea that I would someday become a nun. But, how should I put it? It was if had hadn't yet assimilated it, or rather, like there was something inside that said, 'You are going to be a nun, you have to be a nun, you can be a nun.' But I would say, 'No, I don't want to.' It's difficult to explain because it's a feeling that moves you, a kind of an inclination, but at the same time you yourself refuse it, reject it. It's like ... it's like your spirit, no? Your spirit calls you one way—let's say, to perfection. It wants you to attend to this. But you, you say no, because it requires sacrifices, it will be too hard. In other words, renunciation. So with the simple word 'nun,' I said, 'no, no!'

I was out of school for three years. And then some musicians came to town and asked me, 'Don't you think you might want to study music?' And I did. So they took me to see Father Bruno, and I went back to school so I could study music.

For the next three years I went on missions with the school, and I liked it more and more. I talked to the director about becoming a nun, but he said he thought I was more excited about

the music than about the religious aspect of the missions. So on that third mission, he didn't let me play any music at all, but made me stay in the chapel the whole time. I hated it.

I finished school. I didn't like being at home and started to look for a band to play with. And then—who knows what got into me—I went to talk with a priest who was about to be ordained. And I told him *everything*—all my *inquietudes*, what had been happening, how I had experienced my Vocation. And he told me, 'Well, look. I don't know many congregations. But of the few I know, and from what you've told me, I think you'd fit well with the Siervas.' He gave me their address and told me to go talk to Mother Josephine.

But I didn't go see her. He gave me the address in December, and it wasn't until the following Easter that I thought about it again. Easter was coming, and I knew I didn't want to just stay home. So I decided I would go somewhere, but I didn't know where to go. That's when I dug out the address of Mother Josephine—I figured she would know of somewhere to go. I expected her to be big and fat, at least sixty years old or so. To me, all nuns were like that.

The curious thing is that I arrived at the central office of the diocese—that was the address the father had given me. But when I got there, well, I'm a little timid, so when the secretary said Mother Josephine wasn't there, I didn't tell her whether I was going to wait or leave. I just kind of sat in a chair. When she realized I was still there, it had been four hours! I was waiting there four hours to see this Mother Josephine. 'I'll call Mother Josephine right now,' the secretary told me, and she did. She told her that there was a girl who had been waiting to see her for four hours. Mother Josephine told her to put me in a taxi and send me to the Central House right away. I arrived at the Central House and met Mother Josephine. She was nothing like what I had expected. We talked for a long time, and she told me I should attend the Vocational retreats.

After this, I started attending the Aspirant retreats. I spent some time at one of the Congregation's houses. I was trying to decide what to do. I couldn't decide if I wanted to enter the convent or enroll in the university. I talked to Mother Josephine. 'Look, it's your decision,' she told me. 'Enter the congregation or enter the university. But if you enter the university, you should stay until you've finished. Understand? No dropping out early.' It was interesting, though. Because as soon as she said, 'Choose the congregation or your career', I thought '*the congregation!*'

This was at the beginning of August. I went home and told my mom what I wanted to do. 'Are you sure?' she asked. 'Yes!' I told her. So I got all my papers together quickly. I think I was the last one to turn in my application letter. And then one day they called me on the phone. I answered, and Mother Josephine said, 'Amelia, guess what?' 'What, Mother?' I asked. And she said, 'They accepted you.' And I just stood there for a minute. 'What?' I asked. And she said, 'Yes! They've accepted you into the Congregation!' And I started to laugh. I couldn't believe it. 'Now what do I do?' I thought. I didn't have any of the clothes I needed, nothing. But I got my things together, and I entered.

When I entered the Congregation, I thought, 'Well, let's see what happens.' I had only been here two weeks when Mother Veronica wheeled out the piano, and I played it. She told me she thought I should continue studying music, and I was thrilled. I always thought that when I became a nun I would have to say goodbye to music, goodbye to everything. But now that I'm here, the Congregation teaches us that the Lord works through us in all sorts of ways, and that music is one way He works through me. So for me this is something, how shall I say it? A very

nice surprise. Because bit by bit—there are so many things that I experienced before and now that I'm here ... there are so many surprises that come, that now I see that this is my place. This is my place! And not before, not later, but right here in this moment.

There are so many things. Our charism is that of reparation, and our patron saints here are the same ones that were mine outside! There are so many coincidences! I have always had a special devotion to Saint Joseph and to the Sacred Heart and to the Virgin. And they have all that here as well. There are so many things that it's a little bit spooky. And you're not doing anything—it just happens. Sometimes you feel like a boat, drifting here and there, almost turning over in the storm. But from somewhere outside, the Lord guides you, saying, 'Over here, come this way.' And everything that happens to you helps to reaffirm this. To be more generous in your *entrega* [surrender/sacrifice] and everything. And although we're not always perfect, we always try to get there, no?

As we can see, in recounting their Vocations, Abby, Celeste, and Amelia go back through their lives, giving significance to things in ways they themselves admit they hadn't before (Amelia not wanting to leave convent, Abby playing nun, Celeste playing priest). They resituate these elements within a larger trajectory, a story that takes 'the call' as something that existed throughout their lives, whether or not they were aware of it. They talk about their Vocations as the gradual realization of their true place in the world. This realization did not come in a flash of insight, though (as in Celeste's case) it was sometimes punctuated by specific, identifiable events. Rather, the recognition of Vocation was for these women more a gradual accumulation of feelings, with lots of fits and starts and doubts along the way. Throughout this process, the constant motivating force they all describe is the deeply felt sense that something wasn't right, that something crucial and fundamental was missing in their lives. Each of these women sought out alternative ways to be happy (Abby with her boyfriend, Amelia with her music, Celeste with sports). But despite a superficial satisfaction, they all describe an eventual realization that the void they felt was only met through their spirituality. And not just any spirituality, but rather an all-embracing, all-engulfing sense of intimacy with God.

Over time, and through different ways, each of these women came to understand her feelings of emptiness in the 'outside world' as the call to enter to Religious Life. But more than this, they came to understand this call as directing them to the Siervas in particular. In separate conversations, Abby, Celeste, and Amelia (along with many of the other Postulants) told me that they had originally planned to enter with another order—the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Paulinas. Some of them actually spent time in other congregations before leaving and seeking out the Siervas. All talked about the focus on cultural integrity and social justice—the reclamation of women and the affirmation of Mexican values—as being key things about the Congregation that appealed to them, though most of the Postulants did not become truly acquainted with this dimension of the Congregation's teachings until after they had entered. Like the sense of Vocation, then, the Postulants learned to read these political commitments back through their lives, giving new meanings to their experiences as specifically preparing them for the life of a Sierva.

Celeste's story is perhaps the most explicit in terms of the reinterpretation of past experiences through an altered framework in the 'recollecting' of Vocation. She talks about the trauma she suffered as a child, a victim of two separate rape attempts by different individuals. She acknowledges—both in this particular narrative and in many other conversations we had about

these events—that they shook her to the core. She told me that she lost faith in God for a long time after the second attack. ‘I thought, ‘How could there be a God who lets things like this happen?’ And I know I’m not the only one—it happens to girls all the time. I just couldn’t imagine a God who would permit that.’ It is perhaps striking, then, that by the end of her first year in the convent, Celeste had come to see her traumatic experiences as, ironically, one of the ways God had worked through her. She does not in any sense believe God ‘wanted’ her to be traumatized, or that it was necessarily part of His plan for her that she be raped. Rather, she told me, she feels now that he did *permit* the attacks to take place. Not to punish her for some kind of personal failing, as she has sometimes thought in the past, but rather, as she explained it to me, because he knew she had the strength and the character to ‘handle it,’ to transform her experiences into something that would help others.

She sees her calling to the Siervas in particular as relating to this in a specific way. ‘Father Muro talked about the exploitation and abuse of women,’ she told me one day as we walked in the convent garden. ‘He believed that this comes from a devaluing of women, from not valuing women for the special qualities that they have *as women* in this world—the care, the tenderness, the *entrega* we give to others. He believed strongly in the *regeneration* of women, of helping women to know their own worth so that they can perform the roles God assigned to them. I think what I went through gave me a special kind of understanding about what he meant.’

We can see, then, how the Postulants learn to incorporate into their daily experience a new story of who they are and what their purpose is that reorders and restructures their understandings of their own personal histories, while at the same time situating these new understandings within a temporal frame that is different yet not wholly separable from that on the ‘outside’. They learn to tell new stories of their lives that are more than a simple recountings of facts and that move back and forth between temporal frames—between ‘worldly’ and ‘eternal’ domains of reference—overlying them, drawing correspondences and parallels. This shift in self-interpretation serves as the foundation for their subsequent religious training by teaching them to experience their own bodies—their working, praying, eating, studying, playing, cleaning bodies—as the domain of negotiation between temporal worlds.

Evangelizing the self: (un)certainty and the temporal contours of salvation

At least in part, then, this transformation in the convent seems to hinge on a rhetorical reformulation of the self similar to what Harding describes in her exploration of American evangelicalism (Harding, 2000). In considering the persuasiveness of fundamentalist Baptist rhetoric, Harding characterizes conversion (being ‘born again’ or ‘saved’) as ‘an inner transformation which quickens the supernatural imagination as it places new believers within the central storied sequence of the Christian Bible’ and develops in the newly faithful ‘the wherewithal to narrate one’s life in Christian terms’ (Harding, 2000:34). Specifically, she argues that the language and performances of fundamentalist Baptist gospel teaching work as a rhetoric of conversion, (re)constituting both the speaker and the listener through the language of salvation. Over time, Harding maintains, the newly saved come to adopt new Bible-based interpretive practices that enable them to conceptualize and experience their own lives, as well as current political and social events, in radically new terms (Harding, 2000:34–35).

This reframing of one's life story within Fundamentalist Baptist discourse is similar to what I observed in the convent, as the Postulants learned to reinterpret and reexperience their selves across both 'worldly' and 'sacred' temporal frames simultaneously. But there are some important differences between these two groups. Here, I will consider only the two that most directly lean on questions of temporality and the experience of religious transformation.

First, though both groups are Christian, the 'point' of conversion is not the same in each. In the Baptist context, the direct aim and consequence of conversion is salvation, which is predicated on being 'born again' through a new baptism in the Holy Spirit. It is, in other words, a future-directed process built around the kinds of ruptures and discontinuities Robbins (2001) describes as characteristically millenarian. Such elements as achieving a *new birth*, preparing for the *second coming* of Christ, becoming saved before the *impending apocalypse* effectively construct the experience of rupture as, perhaps paradoxically, part of the progressive path towards salvation. In the convent, however, salvation is understood to be granted in one's baptism in infancy. There is, then, no need to be 'born again'; rather, one is called to comply with the original baptismal sacrament, to recommit to a covenant already made between the person and God. Consequently, conversion in the convent is not geared toward achieving an elusive salvation since one is already saved, but rather toward submitting one's personal will to that of God.

Following from this, conversion enfolds a different sort of process in the two groups. In the Baptist context, where 'conversion' means being born again through a new baptism by the Holy Spirit and the ensuring of salvation, it is taken as an absolute certainty that God wants the conversion of all people, that everyone can be 'saved,' and that this is the ultimate goal for all participants. Conversion, then, follows a predictable path, with the 'success' of the conversion process measured in large part by the certainty that one has found salvation in Jesus. Hence the importance of the kinds of rhetorical strategies and performances described by Harding. In the convent, however, the process of conversion has an uncertain outcome. For the nuns, conversion depends not on specific supernatural events or on public evidence of personal salvation, but rather comes through the gradual *process* of learning to relinquish the self and submit one's personal will to that of God, whatever that is determined to be. This means that a woman must be open to the possibility that God is not calling her to the Religious Life and that she should leave the convent all together.

Conversion in the convent, then, is not about moving along the kind of predictable, linear model of development with a clear and certain end point that Harding describes among fundamentalist Baptists (which, I would argue, holds true despite the rhetorical emphasis on rupture and circularity) but rather about *letting go* of this certainty and opening the self to God. In other words, what may seem to be consistent forms of rhetoric and practice across different Christian groups can in fact enfold radically different understandings of the subject and his or her relationship to both the mundane world and to the divine.

Concluding thoughts

To sum up: I suggest that the experience of navigating two temporal frames in the convent leads to fundamental changes in the three key areas:

1. The Postulants learn to recognize the existence of two temporal systems, one that constructs time as a personal possession and one that recognizes time as belonging only to God, and to value the former as illusory and the latter as genuine.
2. They become increasingly adept at navigating these two arenas through the reframing of daily practice as ritual acts. In this way, the worldly notion of time as a limited commodity that can be wasted or maximized loses its hold, and the distinction between mundane and sacred time (ideally) falls away.
3. This recasting of mundane activities is projected back over the life course, and past events and experiences are reinterpreted as articulations of one's Vocation. This reinterpretation then permits a young woman to construct a coherent narrative of her life that validates her decision to enter the convent as inevitable.

Successful Formation, then, relies on the resituating of the story of self within this new temporal reference—not only in the way Ricoeur suggests, where the narrative identity mediates between immediate and continuous experiences of self, but in a way that rests on an particular understanding of time, action, and agency in a context in which, for the Sisters, there *is* an ultimate Truth.

The ideas presented here constitute just one small piece of what the Postulants told me of their experiences of Vocation and the changes they were undergoing during their first year of religious training. But these issues of temporality and self-understanding highlight, I think, some of the complexities of thinking through the issues of subjectivity and personal transformation within the context of religious or spiritual commitment. Though, as I have noted, they share some important parallels with other Christian groups such as the Urapmin of New Guinea and American Evangelicals, the Catholic sisters I worked with engage questions of temporality and the self in ways that not only differ doctrinally from these Protestant models but also carry additional significances within the modern Mexican context. This would seem to suggest that one concern of a nascent 'anthropology of Christianity' should be the ways in which local (re)formulations of 'history' and 'culture' articulate (or perhaps resist) religious models of time, agency, and salvation, and how individual people learn to make sense of their own lives within these systems.

One way to understand the 'work' of religion in its various permutations, then, might be to see it as an arena of *becoming*, that is, of developing a permissible and valued self in a given context. Religious systems invest culturally shaped categories of legitimate/illegitimate identities with moral force, provide believers with the tools for integrating the key elements of these identities into (or removing them from) their subjective experiences of themselves and the world, and detail clear and solid signs for knowing if the project of self-transformation is working. For the Sisters, this comes, at least in part, in the acceptance of a new narrative of the self that casts them not only as young women struggling to find purpose in their lives but also as Brides of Christ from the beginning of creation to the end of time.

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