

YOU DID NOT CHOOSE ME; NO, I CHOSE YOU!

Jn 15:16



These are the words that came to me during my retreat in *Holy Week* before I joined religious life. And as I travel back along the river of my life, I can't help feeling that God's call was planted in my heart right from the moment of my conception. I was born on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14th, and named *Venizia* which means 'victory' (victory over suffering).

My birth, after two boys, brought joy to the family, and, later, a third younger brother was born. We lived with our parents in a rather cramped *chawl* system in Worli, Mumbai, where, like the other neighbouring families, we creatively partitioned our allotted space into areas for cooking, sleeping, storage and other activities. What my parents especially paid attention to was that we had a sacred space set apart for the altar.

The faith of my parents, their hard work, and our prayer-life as a family - the Angelus, Rosary, Devotions to the Sacred Heart, St. Anthony, Wednesday Novenas, and regular Mass on Sundays sustained us and helped us cope with the continued ill-health of my father and the many other difficulties we had to face along the way. To name a few, when I was just twelve, my mother was forced to support the family by taking up employment away from home because my father's company often went on strike/lockdown. At the same time, my younger brother was injured in a car accident, and one of the older ones was badly affected by the stress at home and in college.

However, in spite of all the ups and downs, the Lord helped me complete my schooling at the Sacred Heart High School, Worli Village. I then joined Sophia College, run by the Religious of the Sacred Heart (RSCJ) whom I had never met before, and I became a sister of the Sacred Heart. As a child, I used to say, *I will marry Jesus*. And, now, He had brought me straight to His Heart!

Later on, I learned that St. Madeleine Sophie, foundress of the congregation, used to say '*I knew nothing, I foresaw nothing; I accepted all*'. In my life, I have also experienced this. I am happy to belong to this wonderful little Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Just as a river keeps flowing to the sea, in spite of obstacles it might meet on the way, I see myself moving towards Jesus, facing life with His courage, and with complete confidence in His love, even though the ups and downs continued. For example, at the beginning of my religious life, I fell and fractured my right arm while practising cycling. My youngest brother had both legs amputated in a train accident; at that time I remember feeling that, maybe, I ought to go home and help the family. Later, both he and my eldest brother passed away, followed by father in 2015. Presently, my mother stays alone, since my third brother has had to relocate.

But, again, through all these trials, my own search has always been to discover God's plan and purpose in my life. After my graduation and the B.Ed, I was asked to teach for three years, and then sent for a "Formators' programme" in preparation for my new ministry.

I now help in the "Initial Formation" ministry of candidates and novices in our province. It's both demanding and challenging; being with the young also keeps me young at heart. There is much joy in seeing each one flourishing, and in accompanying the overall development of each person. My journey continues till I fulfil the mission entrusted to me, and meet Him, the real source, as Jesus.

I experience inner peace and strength as I recall the following words of St Francis de Sales, which inspired and strengthened me during my last retreat:

A call for me to totally surrender myself to God in trust

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