

Giving Ourselves Totally in Undivided Love

Interview with Mother Mary Tomasella, SDSH, Superior General of the Sisters of the Society Devoted to the Sacred Heart

By VOCATIONS AND PRAYER STAFF

I entered the Society Devoted to the Sacred Heart at the age of nineteen, desiring to be of service to God and his people. I quickly realized that to serve well, one must love God first and love learning about his love and his way of approaching people. As my 50th Jubilee nears, it is a great joy to realize the many gifts and blessings of God during my entire life. I have had the privilege to serve my Sisters in a variety of roles and currently as Superior General. As a novice director, I personally witnessed young women willing to give their life to God and the joy they experienced as they deepened in their prayer life and their desire to follow Christ. God is truly a God who can do all things and transforms when we allow him to do so. It is a gift to be part of the process. I have found this to be true as I served as vocation director, local house superior, and in my apostolic roles as Director of Religious Education, RCIA Director and Coordinator of First Communion and Confirmation programs. I have served in a variety of parishes as Director of Religious Education, RCIA director, Confirmation and First Communion coordinator.

Describe the origin and charism of your Congregation

Through the experience of our foundress, Servant of God Ida Peterfy, I would like to share a reflection on the origin of our Congregation. After attending a silent retreat, seventeen-year-old Ida Peterfy realized that Jesus, who is the Lord, loved her totally, personally! She understood with great clarity that the Lord knew her and that God had a heart for her. With that she realized that God was counting on her, not just counting on the Church, but counting on her personally to let people know about him, about his Father and the Holy Spirit. This realization changed her life and the lives of many others forever. Her realization of God as a personal, loving God stayed with her throughout her life and led to the sharing of a charism to give oneself totally in undivided love to pro-



Photo by SDSH

claim the Good News of Our Lord Jesus Christ in an appealing, dynamic and personal way. These thoughts are still relevant for today. Sister Ida Peterfy secretly professed vows on her eighteenth birthday in 1940 in Kassa. After Nazi occupation followed by communist oppression, she was forced to escape from behind the Iron Curtain in Hungary (1949), and eventually came to the United States (1956).

What is your Congregation's mission?

We are blessed to have as our primary apostolate the work of evangelization and catechesis reaching people of all ages in a variety of settings, including parish religious education programs, RCIA, Sacramental retreats for children and adults, family retreat camps, summer camps, leadership formation and catechesis

through media.

Where is your Congregation present around the world?

The Society Devoted to the Sacred Heart now has its Motherhouse, Novitiate and five other convents in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, with additional convents in the Dioceses of Orange and San Bernardino, the Archdiocese of Taipei, and the Archdiocese of Esztergom-Budapest.

How are the activities of the pastoral care for vocations organized in your Congregation?

Vocation work is joyful as it is primarily a personal witness of our consecrated religious life.



At the same time, it also can be a long and arduous task, one that needs constant attention and vigilance (“laborers in the harvest”). Ideally one Sister would be assigned full time to this work, but since this is not possible, we have a team of Sisters to promote the work of vocations.

Are you seeing an increased interest in vocation to religious life in your Congregation around the world? If so, is it mostly young people who are considering a vocation?

This year, even amid a pandemic one, a young woman courageously chose to enter the Community and is currently a postulant. The Community celebrated our 80th anniversary; the 60th and 50th Jubilee of three Sisters; and, also are preparing for the renewal of vows of two temporary professed Sisters.

In the years long past, one experienced a “call” from God to follow him, often through the example of other faithful religious, a direct invitation from a religious, and their own prayer, etc. We have seen a great change over the years. Today a major difficulty and hindrance is that young women seem to want an assurance that they indeed are being called to religious life and the certainty that they are entering the correct Community for them.

In many cases, this results in years of discernment, often ending with the thinking that they do not have a vocation after all. “How can I know for sure if I should enter religious life?” The invitation of Christ to “come and see,” to at least glimpse religious life, is not accepted, even on a temporary basis. In my years as a novice director it was so edifying to witness the Lord at work in the hearts of those who respond to his call, who open their hearts to formation. God showed them the way and clarified for them his path, some to become Sacred Heart Sisters, some to realize it wasn’t his call, but he was guiding them forward.

What about vocations to religious life in your Congregation?

Many young people of today seem fearful to make lasting decisions leading to fewer responding in faith to the invitation of Jesus, “follow me.” In our vocation work as a Community, we have always found it to be the greatest help to create opportunities for young people to encounter the living God. Once they do, they experience the joy of responding to His call and become more confident in offering themselves joyfully and willingly in wholehearted love.

According to your experience and charism, what are the main points for an effective

pastoral care for vocations to religious life today?

Over the years, and especially now, our vocation work is most effective when done through personal contact with young women, praying and working together. We travel to various conferences, such as Seek/Focus, Religious Education Congress, and other vocation events (though now this is not possible during the pandemic). Most helpful is our one-on-one interaction with young women; meeting with them in small groups and working together at our Sacred Heart Retreat Camp, Girls’ Camp and Family Camp, in our catechetical ministry. These opportunities allow them to experience our life in many dimensions, as well as knowing the joy of serving and bringing God to others through our apostolic works, seeing how God can touch lives through loving witness. Now, amid the pandemic, we continue our vocation work on Zoom through various gatherings and online retreats—nothing can stop the Word of God reaching his people.

We look forward to the time when we can again gather with young people who are truly seeking to know God and the possibility of following him, leading others to the Father through the Heart of Jesus.