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Zero Gravity, where God was waiting

by Sr. Rose Pacatte



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Aug. 5 was the 42nd anniversary of my entering the religious community of the Daughters of St. Paul. My religious journey really began on July 4, 1967, right after lunch, at the Del Mar County Fair in San Diego.

It seems funny, I know, to be able to name the date and time when I felt God's call, because spiritual directors always tell you God doesn't, like, call you on the phone and say, "Come, follow me." True enough. He didn't call me on the phone, which would have been very normal for me because I was always on the phone. Instead, God, was waiting for me at the Zero Gravity carnival ride.

It was a hot and dusty day. My Girl Scout troop had spent the morning pinning nametags on kids. Then we had lunch and started in on the rides. Zero Gravity was the second one, if I recall well. One of us had to stay behind to watch all our gear, so I volunteered. It was so much fun watching my friends spinning and screaming with delight. But as I gazed on them, I felt something sink inside of me. I thought, "I am so happy now. This is so great. But it isn't going to last. There's tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. This will be gone and I will be looking for the next exciting thing again and again. How will I be happy??" Then it came to me: God. God is the only one that lasts, the one who is always there, who makes me

happy. A wave of peace came over me.

When I got home, I told my mom that I thought God was calling me to be a nun. It wasn't as if I had not thought of religious life before. We had talked about it together, casually. When I was 11, I checked out a book from our parish library with stories by mothers whose daughters became nuns. I was fascinated. I went to CCD classes at the parish. I remember my confirmation as one of the most spiritual moments of my life. I felt the Spirit in me; I felt connected. I made parish missions and Our Lady of Perpetual Help novenas and went to Benediction and was envious of the Catholic schoolgirls who got to crown Mary in May. I loved "The Song of Bernadette" movie. That year "The Trouble With Angels" came out and the Hayley Mills character resonated with my own journey and search for meaning. I was going into my junior year of high school. I was a Girl Scout, a candy striper, babysitter, bossy big sister to seven siblings, book-loving teenager, competitive swimmer for my high school team (which was rather a joke but I tried) who had just gotten my learner's permit.

My encounter with "zero gravity" happened during the escalation of the Vietnam War, when everyone was singing "Up with People," "We Shall Overcome" and Sebastian Temple's "Prayer of St. Francis." Bob Dylan had been singing "The Times They Are A- Changing" for a while. Of them all it was Dionne Warwick's 1965 song, "What the World Needs Now Is Love" that summed it up for me.

Then came the Fourth of July. Zero Gravity brought it all together. God called.

My mother stood in the kitchen and looked at me. She didn't look shocked, but paused and asked, "What should we do then?" (My Protestant dad and grandmother's reactions were an entirely different matter.) "Don't you want to wait until after high school?"

"Mom, I want to enter the convent now. I don't want to wait." Another public school girl like me had received a scholarship for Catholic high school and after her freshman year entered the high school aspirancy of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The possibility of this played on my mind as well.

The next day Mom called the director of religious education at St. Rita's Parish, who knew that the Daughters of St. Paul had a Catholic bookstore in San Diego and that they had a high school aspirancy program in Boston. It just so happened that the sisters were having a day of recollection in a couple of weeks. I called Sr. M. Thecla and told her I would like to come.

On that Sunday my mom drove me downtown after Mass. We rang the doorbell. Sr. M. Margaret answered but in the background I heard this tap-tap-tap of footfalls as one of the sisters rushed down the stairs. Happy feet. I was smitten.

Zero gravity.

Within a few weeks I entered the convent and began an adventure, an expedition, a pilgrimage, with all the joys, sacrifices and challenges, some quite hard, that any vocation brings with it.

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One of my sister-friends from another community recently told me that the facilitator of a provincial meeting asked the sisters to write on a piece of paper the reason why they had entered religious life. Ninety-nine percent wrote down one word: God. A few mentioned ministry, which, of course, is like saying the same thing.

God calls different people in different ways to different ministries. For years I didn't understand much about my own motivations for entering. I learned about the Pauline apostolate of communicating Christ through the media when I entered. But I was in free fall, following God. That's all that mattered then; it is all that matters now.

I was also a kid and had a lot of maturing to do. The thing is, grace, that unfathomable, gratuitous gift of God that calls, sustains, reveals, forgives, transforms and energizes, makes human and spiritual growth possible. Even when it's hard and requires more sacrifices than I thought possible. Grace is zero gravity.

The one characteristic of our Pauline life that grounds me is a sense of belonging to something bigger than me, a thought that generates so much joy and transcends life's pettiness and my own individualism to give of myself totally. Knowing that with more than 2,500 women around the globe I am working to make a difference in people's lives and in societies by living and communicating Christ in our Catholic church through the media is the best reason in the world for me to get out of bed in the morning.

As July 4 comes round and as I fall now quite literally because of the "gift" of multiple sclerosis that came my way 30 years after I entered the community, I think back to that day at the Del Mar Fair. I think back with love on all the people who helped me on the way: the director of religious education at my parish; my Girl Scout leader, who was a huge influence and taught me so much about community service; my family; my public school teachers and friends; CCD teachers; and the older nuns of the community, many of whom have gone before us. I feel surrounded by grace, free-falling, zero gravity. Falling free.

A regular contributor to NCR on popular culture, Daughter of St. Paul Sr. Rose Pacatte is the founding director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles. She has been a member of the Daughters of St. Paul since 1967.

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