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LIFESTYLE LIFE & RELATIONSHIPS RELIGION

'I felt the calling aged three': The women who devote their lives to God

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They take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, but the lives of nuns or religious sisters tend to be a mystery to many of us on the outside. How do they give up love, passion and having children for something a significant number of us aren't too sure even exists?

Sister Moira O'Sullivan, congregational historian for the Sisters of Charity, the Catholic Church's longest-serving women's religious order in Australia (here since 1838), understands the confusion. She explains that because there is no real reason for religious life, except the conviction that God is offering a special relationship, it's hard for anyone without strong faith to find value in it.

"In spite of thinking before entering the convent that we were doing something for God, by giving up marriage and children, we find that instead, God has lavished more on us and we have to keep thanking God for the privilege," she says. "It's unfortunate if anyone looks at us and thinks we've missed out."

Far from missing out, active religious sisters are out in force, demonstrating the love of God through their work in health and aged care, education, social services and issues of social justice. Here are three of their stories.

"MY LIFE IS FULL OF LOVE"

Sister Christine Henry, 64, has long been known as "the nun in the bush" thanks to her tireless work with drought-stricken families and communities.

"When I was growing up in the Darling Downs, I had three childhood dreams: the first was to become a nurse, the second was to bring babies into the world, and the third was to get married and have half a dozen children – just like my parents.

I did my nursing and midwifery training and delivered over 20 babies, but just as I met a handsome man and we began discussing marriage and babies of our own, I began to feel that I was being called to devote myself to a religious life. It was a confusing and unsettling time.

Saying goodbye to the "usual" way of life isn't something taken lightly. When I contacted Sisters of Charity, I took temporary vows of chastity, poverty and obedience and the fourth vow of service of the poor, renewed them three years later, and took final vows a couple of years



Sister Christine Henry, the "nun in the bush" cares for farmers.

after that. My parents initially had reservations about the path I was on, but when they saw how happy I was, they ended up becoming my biggest supporters.

Rural Australia has never left my heart. I'd worked in St Vincent's hospitals and aged-care facilities for over 30 years when I began noticing the hardship that friends and family in the bush were enduring, and thought this is what I was being called to do.

In 2007, I established the Downs and West Drought Appeal to raise money for farmers. I thought it would be a six-month project. Two years later, we changed the name to Downs & West Community Support (DWCS) and today we're still on the road, visiting drought-affected families, providing food supplies, petrol vouchers, paying medical bills and helping farmers pay for stock feed where possible.

What I've learnt over the years is that people are often too proud to ask for help, so I never wait for an invitation. I simply turn up in my van with my dog, Prince Harry, by my side to break the ice. I tell them why I'm there and leave them vouchers and offers of further assistance. There have only been a couple of farmers who haven't taken well to a visit; it's difficult to understand how hard our farmers have it until you're out there walking in their shoes. Most are just happy to see a friendly face.

I'm currently pouring my energies into helping the women of the outback. We run free wellness days where ladies are treated to everything from massages and beauty therapies to sessions with a psychologist and motivational speakers. Mammograms and pap smears are also organised for them. A lot of women wear so many hats – they're farmers, mothers, wives, taxi drivers, vets and cooks – that they always put themselves last.

Life is good and full of love and I'm striving to keep driving those country roads for quite a few years yet."

"MY DECISION SHOCKED EVERYONE"

Sister Cathy Meese, 78, has long been involved in the prison ministry, working as an advocate, educator and pastoral carer for those walking what she calls "an often lonely path".

"It's funny when I say it now but I surprised everyone in my family when I decided to become a nun. Even though I'm the youngest of seven in a large Catholic family, and had a brother who was a Dominican priest and a sister who was also a Sister of Charity before she left the order and married, my decision was a shock. I'd always been such a tomboy. I guess the best way to describe it is that the desire to devote myself to religious community was stronger than my desire to get married and have children.

I wouldn't say I chose the prison ministry, more that it was chosen for me. In the early 1970s, I was in education and was sent to Tasmania to teach because I could drive a car. I was given the role of driving one of the sisters to Risdon Prison where she visited prisoners every Saturday morning. I remember being terrified the first time I walked in through the gates – police with guns guarded us and I had no idea what to expect with the prisoners – but that fearful feeling passed far quicker than I'd anticipated.

During the four years I spent at Risdon, I taught some of the prisoners to read and provided a listening ear, I grew to understand that each prisoner had their own



Sister Cathy Meese found her calling in the prison ministry.

story and not to judge the person. I was quite a different woman at the end of the four years.

Over the years I've worked in all sorts of roles, from helping the homeless to working as a principal in one of our schools, but in recent times I've ventured back to prison ministry going in with the pastoral care team at St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne.

Here, I visit prisoners and have acted as an advocate and supporter for many of them. My day-to-day could involve anything from going to court as a character witness, asking the superior officer to take off chains that tether patients to their beds while their parents are visiting, or working to get inmates who are leaving into drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs.

I never ask what people are in for or whether they're guilty; everyone's entitled to their privacy and I think every one of us does wrong in life – there are just different types of wrong.

A big part of what we do is love all of God's children, and this is essential in my role. Have I ever been threatened? On the contrary, I've always been treated with respect. To this day, I've probably only met three or four people where I've felt frightened in their presence. In any case, I'm not here to judge, but love – particularly in situations when so many others have walked away."

"I FELT THE CALLING AGED THREE"

Sister Jacinta Fong, 83, is one of the last remaining nuns at St Vincent's Hospital in Darlinghurst, Sydney, to wear a habit. The garment has been known to calm patients as she works her rounds.

"I was three years old when I felt the calling that was to set me on the path to dedicating my life to doing God's work. One of my brothers told me about the nuns at his school and once I realised these women had dedicated their lives to God, looking after God's people and doing charitable work, I knew that was the life for me.

I initially thought about joining the Carmelites, which is an enclosed order, but my family didn't approve. Such an order is very strict; they don't receive visitors often – not even family – and life is based around praying and solitude. My family were happy with the idea of active charity work, however, and I joined Sisters of Charity with my parents' permission when I was just 16 years old.

I spent the first few decades focused on nursing work, overseeing a gynaecology and urology unit for a number of years before moving into radiotherapy. Now that I'm older, I can't do much practical work, so I work in St Vincent's Hospital's emergency department, where I support the doctors and nurses.

I live in a convent right by the hospital and I do daily rounds of the ward. So many people who wind up here – particularly those with mental health issues or those suffering cardiac problems – are terrified and just need reassurance and a calming presence.

The effect my habit has on patients has been a topic of conversation for a number of years; no matter how aggressive or distressed a patient is, the habit is a sign of trust. When they see it, they know intuitively they can trust me and calm down immediately.

We all used to wear a habit back in the day and although things have changed, I'm too old to be bothered to change the way I dress. Also, I can't help but wonder if I would have the same effect on patients without it.



Sister Jacinta Fong works in a hospital's emergency department.

Much of the work I do is with the homeless, helping to get them cleaned up and dressed in clothes that have been donated. Sometimes I have to bribe them with new tracksuits just to get them in the shower.

From everything I see, the effect that the drug ice has on people is by far the worst. I've seen doctors get their teeth knocked out and the superhuman strength that it takes six staff to contain.

If you love God, you love all of God's people – that's how it works. The lives of nuns have changed over the years, but more the practicalities rather than the work we do and what we stand for. We don't earn a salary, but people kindly donate food and I feel like I have everything I could ever need. I'm doing what it is I was put here to do."

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