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Dear Friends,

Several drafts down the line and I begin again. This time on small paper as a reminder to myself (Catrin is typing it up and sending it to you; she said she enjoyed reading it). If at the end of reading you think you'll want another dose, if you got this in an envelope you will need to send her another with your address on as she doesn't have a list.

The girls are being wonderfully supportive and loving. They also find they are being wonderfully supported and loved ☺ - one said "it's not how you (she) expected at all and shapes seem to grow and sparkle and it's astonishing and exciting." AND she thinks I'm 'basically sane' – and she wrote 'I think good things happen around her and things she gets involved in' ☺☺

Catrin is now mobile – she inherited my car. Mair on the other hand is now paying for my phone calls on a chargecard. This must be a reversal of natural law! I was thrilled her letter to me was described as her "home letter"... and she'd put everything of importance in it. What more could I ask? Catrin is allegedly preparing for finals but in fact has been helping produce a dance show – all went well. Mair went to a Quaker gathering right in the Spanish mountains with bike – glorious views and muscles like bricks.

I *think* my father is beginning to believe he really will see me (far more often than he could if I weren't here because I'd be in Lincoln, working) and I can and do phone regularly. Well, irregularly, but frequently. But it's not his choice of environment really. However he is already looking at the just-being-built M&S food department, ready for when I come & stay with him!

As for me – I decided if you want to know about the Religious Life per se, the best I can suggest is The Choice, by Sister Kirsty – a Sister of this community. If you want to read it, the girls would organise it – it's out of print (or there are several with friends). Please don't borrow their own copies as I want them to have them. NB. It was written in the 70s, the Community was 5 times the size and now no longer has houses overseas although we still have connections – Mother is at present in South Africa. But the spirit is the same. And I can write my letters in my cell!

If you want an illustrated copy, Catrin has pictures – of this convent, not the branch houses. It is a massive Victorian purpose built building with wings and cells...but...polished and shiny and above all very very quiet. Full of space and beauty. Space to encounter God (that's what guests come for) and grow in Him.

I'm now a Postulant. 11^{1/2} months from 'screw' to Postulant of the CSMV. My first postulant's retreat address (sermon) started "Lizzie you have waited seven years for this door to open..." Indeed, in March 1999 it was the present Novice Guardian I came to see. At that time I had been an oblate (lay member) of this community for some years and she was the Oblate Sister!

I came in fear and trembling to discuss a completely sudden and unexpected call to the Religious Life. I was in a job I loved (on night duty), divorced with two splendid girls and a lovely home. And a Quaker to boot. I still am all those things except the first.

So, would you find me different? Inside, no. A halo did not drop onto my head as I walked through the door. Becoming a Postulant meant I have been accepted to test my vocation in the Community (instead of just aspiring to do so) and meant I moved into choir to sing the Offices (services) – 5 a day plus the Eucharist. I also get to the brief daily conference and to the reading of the Rule – which like all Community Rules is about living together in love and unity, about becoming Christlike (I know, I know – a long way to go). Oblates are also committed to a Rule, about love and prayer, and also a 'spiritual discipline' of the Divine Office, Silence, Retreats etc. The 'motto' hasn't changed – 'Let it be to me according to your Word' (word in the deepest sense of course).

So as was said 'aspiring nuns are not all sweetness and light!!' I'm still prickly, and abrasive, also sensitive and compassionate – usually. But outwardly, sure, I was joining over 60 people. They can't all change so I did, to fit in. Besides, we process out of chapel in step with our partner – we're all ages, sizes and states of mobility so I'm looking demurely down... at my partner's feet!

And it is very hard to shut doors silently at speed. So of course I've adapted. Revd Mother commented it's not the first time I've started again. I said I find it rather rejuvenating – in a nice sort of way.

Surprises? In general terms I've been very thoroughly prayed for (thank you) and also very carefully prepared. And I've always said my job at the prison was great preparation. In 1996 at the PS Training College I made a decision that if I was asked to do something, so long as it didn't actually harm anybody, I would do it with a smile. And I tried to do that always, invaluable training. The biggest surprise is they have really taken me seriously, and weren't expecting me to pack my cases immediately. Mother only accepted me in December, she wouldn't look at me before I was clear of work and I couldn't risk leaving knowing she might well not accept me. Then...thank you L&P, I left and then there was a mad rush because of community business. And now every single day one is trying to discern a continuing Vocation to the Religious Life, and a vocation to this community – and the answer is often 'no'. One novice has gone since I have been here. Currently we are four in the Novitiate and two Sisters under promise (the stage, not in The Choice, prior to full profession). The idea is to surrender to God sufficiently that if they think it is not right, you leave cheerfully. Alas, I've not got to that yet!

My timetable runs from 6am (by which time I'm supposed to be tidy, in chapel and awake, but don't have far to commute) until 9pm and is basically the overtly religious: Offices, Mass, private prayer (2 hrs) and spiritual reading. 7 days a week. The Office is based on the psalms and, as anyone who reads them thoughtfully knows, that means work, prayer, insight and self awareness to use these wonderful poetic writings of an aggressive tribe, to whom God was a daily reality, in a way that leads to holiness and compassion rather than vengeance, WITHOUT denying these unpleasant emotions are within us and have to be part of our prayer in some way. Books on praying the psalms abound so I'll say no more. All interspersed with departmental work (for me, kitchens, laundry, library, Guest Wing and – wait for it – Reception! Bit different though), 6 days a week. All in a hush, and everything, worship or ironing, done carefully, meticulously and with attention. I've learned of two kinds of cleaning: A full clean, where everything is cleaned and the place left perfect, and a quick clean where everything is cleaned and the place left perfect, only it has to be done quickly – and I'm not supposed to read the books I'm covering!

Making Community is a continuous work, from the moment you wake up. There are guidelines (no exclusive friendships) and practices – daily gatherings and informal teas etc and training in general awareness and sensitivity, both informal, here, daily, and formal – my first inter-novitiate conference included a workshop on relationships focusing on projecting our hang ups onto the group. It's total exposure, you may not be aware of deeper feelings but everyone else will – and the state of your underwear (shared laundry)! We also meet as a Novitiate on a twice daily (or more) basis for different things.

Someone wrote “the Religious works, sleeps and eats like everyone else but all that (s)he does is centred on prayer.” Well, in my experience that applies to all of us on the spiritual journey. It's a very intense life, fully living, but so it was before. Perhaps when people routinely entered communities very young there was a difference but that no longer happens much. At any rate, I am on the same journey, towards surrender to God (definitely not arrived!) deeper & deeper into God and enabling it to bear fruit. (No idea what ministry is in store for me here – but I'm glad to find people do still talk to me, and I'm still trying to 'walk cheerfully across the world answering that of God in everyone' (QF&P is in the library!)).

I've been saying the Divine Office for about 20 years and I became a Novice Oblate in 1992. I went to the jail every day on a diet of silence and psalms, and tried to put God at the centre. Much like many of you, on the same journey. The means are different. The input is fantastic, all enfolded in an attentive silence, a rich, full, *expectant* silence. Books, books and more books, deep, imaginative, meditative books on every kind of prayer, mysticism, world religions & interfaith, liturgy, social issues, ecumenism, specific prayers – I read two totally different ones on the Anima Christi, one, by a Religious (Poor Clares, who will be on television in The Convent soon, a sequel to last year's 'The Monastery'). The book was deep beyond imagining, wrung out of her. Church papers and Community journals and journals of every kind of enterprise. A sister who works in a jail has written her doctoral thesis on 'Restorative Justice'. A daily sermon culled over the last 1500 years (today's by Rowan Williams) to go with the lectionary 'Long Reading' (we get daily newspapers too). Then there's the rich liturgical diet, and paintings, sculptures, icons, space, colour, weavings, photos, music, flowers, poetry. And of course preached sermons – preached to Sisters who've been at it all day every day for up to 60 years.. enough food for thought for me then!

We do follow the church's year – using everything that helps – colour, liturgy.. in Lent first the colours changed, the candles and flowers went, silence deepened. At the end, Good Friday, the silence was profound – even the guests, and no outsiders came in, no bells, they even stopped the clock. No food either! A bare altar, no glorias or alleluias then Easter – *wham* – Chocolate biscuits, bells, silver and colour. And it speaks to the parts words don't reach. 'By love He may be caught and held, by thought, never'. In general the Worship is what I call 'plain high'. There is all the tradition, but somehow with simplicity (so the one, visiting in exception, stands out and I apply my prison maxim... 'it doesn't harm...')

But parallel to all that and just as deep is internalising it all, Quaker style, so that *every* day is Christmas, we hope to give birth to love; Good Friday as in a million little deaths we try to die to self, including self-will, self-ishness, self empowerment and self anything else, even self-salvation in the narrow 'eternal pension plan' kind of thing, and Easter as we try to live Christ's risen life.

And it was here from this main library (one of 7 I've found so far) I got a book I'd been looking for for 20 years (last October actually, so that copy is in Lincoln) *Knowing Jesus* by James Allison. The English is heavy and awkward, but the message, ah...

I arrived at the beginning of Lent and really didn't 'do' Lent, but I was in choir for Holy Week. Layer upon layer of meaning, Stations of the Cross, created for the hour, liturgy, symbols... very powerful, and at every Station a clear American voice stating a horrific statistic, executions, child soldiers. Exonerated executed prisoners, species dying out. The whole place is absolutely *not* about me, but all of us, everywhere. It's about creating space for an encounter with God and then for nourishing the results of that. For sharing in the world's suffering and bringing God's love into it somehow. At the last Station... crash, a mirror used (to reflect us) earlier crashed to the ground and smashed. No comment, if you know your bible.

Then there was Tenebrae – a long late evening service which I wasn't looking forward to (bits of fasting and night vigils - “can you not wait with Me one hour? So we did – in the middle). It was mind blowing. Apart from learning to sing (plainsong) a couple of repeated bits, I was (deliberately by the Music Sister) totally unprepared. And then a young sister with a haunting boyish voice sang three passages from Lamentations, plainsong pure and plaintive, various other readings, lots of psalms – which we all sang, bits of Julian of Norwich, then *total* darkness. And out of that darkness pairs of Sisters singing all around me in turn. Two novices singing wonderful Kyries with the swelling and ebbing away of the plainsong, a solo voice, then silence. BANG, right behind me, Mother banging her books. The Singing Mistress, not for the first time, had put the Postulant right in front of her. Did I jump!! Then we had to get out, in the dark. Fortunately, the long cloister has a ballet barre down one side. Well, I don't think it's meant for battements tendus but it was certainly useful!! (I get two singing lessons a week, one with the community and one all to myself!)

A good friend, an Oblate, was here for Easter so we were in the courtyard at 5am. A robin was there before us. Now my father and sister and husband have had, I hope, a happy visit – at any rate he said he enjoyed it. Coming in Easter week was a good move, cake for tea – High church has very practical sides – St George is 'cake-for-tea' but no lie in, St Mark however gives me half an hour extra in bed, a talking afternoon (except it was too busy) and cake for tea! Oh, and honey for breakfast too, Yum! And the Annunciation meant all the above, plus talking elevenses with choccie biscuits, and this year it fell in Lent! Also an ace sermon... Oops, that halo rolling away into a corner?! My girls also timed it on a cake-for-tea day ☺

So, although this is coming to many folk, you're all individual friends to me, much thought of. I'm very grateful for your support for us all, and love to hear your news. Those that belong to groups – prison, church, Q Meeting, ballet, MU, JM, please share this with those who want to hear it.

And love to you all,
Lizzie.

¹Quote: George Fox, in Quaker Faith & Practice