

Sr. Kress: 'It started with a sense of admiration'

Sr. Jill Kress, IHM, is a novice at the IHM Motherhouse in Monroe. Originally from Pennsylvania, she came to Detroit as a Jesuit volunteer nine years ago and ended up here again after graduate school, including as the campus minister at University of Detroit-Mercy, all the while keeping in touch with the IHMs. She is still discerning her ministry.

Q How did you know you were being called to this life?

A Being called to the IHM community wasn't a sudden flash of insight, but rather a gradual knowing, living into it. My first encounter with IHM Sisters was as colleague — after college, I joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps because I wanted to explore some sort of meaningful work. My placement was at a social service agency in Detroit, and I worked there with an IHM sister. And as I got to know her and other IHMs, I thought, "Wow, there are some cool women here." So it started with a sense of admiration, and then a gradual coming to realize that maybe, possibly the IHM life made sense for me, too.

Q What would you suggest to someone now discerning the call?

A Listen. Notice. Pray. Listen to yourself, and that sometimes

means having another, such as a spiritual director to reflect back at you what they're hearing. Notice what feelings, ideas emerge from this. Does a certain theme keep coming back? And pray — in solitude, in community, in whatever ways work for

you, hold your desires in prayer and see what happens. It's a pretty simple formula. It's helpful to have some way to track inner feelings.

Q What role does your own desire play when it comes to discerning your vocation? Would God call you to a life that you're not comfortable with?

A This might not make much sense, but I would say that my own desire has everything and nothing to do with my vocation. I say it has everything to do with it because I can't imagine wanting anything else ... and yet, it's not really my desire, I believe it comes from God.

And yes, I do think that God calls us to a life we're not necessarily comfortable with. It's not about suffering for the sake of suffering; I am not at all advocating that. I think of this more as a "holy longing," or like the Jesuit principle of "magis," always



Sr. Kress

seeking the more. The cofounders of the IHM community, Fr. Louis Florent Gillet (a Redemptorist) and Sr. Theresa Maxis (formerly general superior of the Oblates), were always seeking out how to better serve God. As Louis Gillet once wrote,

"I desire to be everywhere when I see so many needs." To IHMs today, that speaks of a sense of discomfort with the way things are in the world — dissatisfaction with injustice, violence and poverty, in the world, and acting out of that holy longing for peace, wholeness, reconciliation. There is a certain amount of unsettledness with being a seeker, and to the extent that God calls us to see with new eyes the injustices, but also the beauty of the world and to continual conversion.

Q What account in the Bible do you think best speaks to someone discerning their vocation?

A The one that resonates with me is Elijah's story in 1 Kings 19. Elijah was already a prophet at this point, and he hit upon some bad times and tried to hide from God, but God persisted and sought him out. God is not in the wind.

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Decision, ultimately, is 'between me and God'

nor the earthquake, nor the fire, but in the quiet whisper. Elijah's story has to do with God's call and our response to it. God speaks to us from within: From within our desires, and from within the response to those desires. The trick is to cultivate the ability to discern it.

Q Why do you think God called you?

A How does God call each of us to our true vocation, to what Thomas Merton calls our true selves? We all have a calling, and to figure out what we are called to has to do with living in such a way that we can hear that message in our lives.

Q How did people support you on your way? Did you encounter anyone who tried to dissuade you?

A I really felt supported by my parish, Gesu in Detroit. I was heard, and affirmed by the community there. When I left in July to move to Monroe for my novitiate, I was commissioned by the entire parish. It was as if I was

embraced by the entire congregation that Sunday.

And I've also had people in my life who have tried to dissuade me. This has been difficult because my tendency is to want to please others, and knowing that people who are close to me were unsupportive of my call to the IHMs was hard to take. But ultimately, it's between me and God and no one else.

Vocations information offered online

The Archdiocese of Detroit's Office of Vocations has materials online for National Vocation Awareness Week, Jan. 11-17. From the Web site www.vocationsdetroit.org, click on "promoting vocations" on the right-hand banner. By clicking on "Promoting vocations in grades 5-8," teachers and religious education directors can access the printable version of a vocations lesson plan for religion classes, which highlights four people called to the faith and how their contributions affected others. Other tools, such as a guide for parents and prayers for vocations, are also accessible from that site.