

Put your gifts to greatest use.... National Vocations Week 2007

During National Vocations Week, the Loreto Sisters are highlighting the fulfilment and enrichment that comes from choosing your vocation in life – with confidence, passion and aspiration – whatever this choice may be. The most important thing is to choose the vocation that is best for you and in which you can put your gifts to greatest use.

Sr Janet Palafox, aged 42, feels she has done just that by choosing a religious life with the Loreto Sisters. With degrees in Communication Arts and Human Resources and a Masters in Development Studies almost completed, Janet feels that her gifts are being put to greatest use in an environment where she can make a difference to the lives of others while being close with God.

Janet feels she has come a long way since her radical student days rallying for social change in the 80's in the Philippines. "I thought I'd seen hardship and battle for justice before. I thought I knew about these things. But my experience with Loreto Sisters... the places I have been to, the people I have met, the stories I have shared... have enriched and changed my life forever."

Joining the Loreto Sisters has allowed her to pursue her passion and drive for social justice. One of her early roles as a Loreto Sister was Pastoral Associate with St Joseph's parish in Collingwood where she worked with people mainly from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds. She says she was humbled by their openness and trust. "They allowed me to journey with them and share their experiences. Their trust and acceptance of me was gracious and I realised how blessed I was in life and how privileged I was to have worked with them."

Her next role was as Research Assistant within the social policy research unit at the Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services in Melbourne. She undertook research and co-wrote a report on a "no interest loan scheme" project. The project, aimed at capacity building, involved loaning money to people on very low income to primarily pay for much needed white goods.

She was amazed at what the loans did for people's self worth and confidence. "It wasn't just about buying a refrigerator", she says. "Paying back the loans gave the people a feeling of empowerment, it made them believe in themselves. 'I did it myself' was a phrase they could say with pride, a phrase they had probably never said before and a strength they had never felt before."

Janet is currently a member of the Loreto Sisters Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Committee, a group of men and women who advocate on important social issues and provide a voice for the vulnerable. "This is my passion" she says with a glimmer in her eye. "I was stoked when I was invited to join the committee." She feels it is where she can do the most – here her gifts and talents can be put to the greatest use to help others in need.

She is also excited about her new role ahead as Executive Officer of Mary Ward International – the Loreto Sisters' fund raising program that supports justice and sustainable development projects around the world, and provides an opportunity for others to become involved in whatever way they can.



Photo: Sr Janet and Sr Pauline (East Africa)

She has so much going on in her life right now that she says a challenge of religious life is not to get caught up with being too busy in life that you miss out on time with God and with person.

She identifies one of her greatest experiences with the Loreto Sisters as being her recent trip to Africa to meet fellow Loreto Sisters and to attend the World Social Forum. "I was energised by the vibrancy, commitment to community living and daily community prayer; and the ministries of our East African sisters. I feel like I have joined a large, warm and welcoming global family. I came back with this incredible sense of identity and belonging."

The excerpt below is from Janet's written reflection on her time in Africa.

I was amazed and uplifted by the faith of the people. I experienced this in my daily encounter with the students, children and adults. Their Sunday masses are vibrant, joyful and packed with people of all ages. No one leaves after communion even though it takes about an hour and a half and that's the short version! In most places mass is then followed by meetings of different Basic Christian Communities or children's catechises. No chance for a footie or cricket game on a Sunday!

In my conversations with a support group of women who are HIV/AIDS positive, it is evident how much their faith in God enables them to continue to have hopes despite their illnesses and poverty. Some HIV positive women I met were also suffering from tuberculosis. Clemenciah Nyakambi IBVM organised these groups of men and women to meet; supported and trained them in beads craft (making jewellery, pens, badge, etc) and provided small loans to start their business. These women and men who previously have lost hope and were like 'walking dead' (as one worker describes them), have found strength, courage and self confidence in their support groups and their faith. The women introduced themselves to me as "women living positively" – and their voices echo their positive approach to their lives despite the real hardships that they face daily.

Nothing however affected me most than my first visit to the slum neighbourhood of Mukuru. Mary Kamotho IBVM is in charge of a clinic in the community of Reuben in Mukuru founded by the Christian Brothers (funded by their Australian province and schools). The clinic provides various medical treatments including maternal and children clinics and provision of anti-retroviral drugs to HIV/AIDS infected people for free. They also provide various medical testing (mainly HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis) and drugs for malaria and tuberculosis for a minimal fee. I went with Mary to visit some patients who have been too ill to come to the clinic. We walked through the neighbourhood – dirt roads, mud, open sewers, rubbish and plastic bags everywhere – but nothing prepared me for the standard of the houses they lived in. As we opened the door of the first home (situated near an open sewer), mosquitoes flew out and it was so dark I needed time to adjust my eyes to see my way through. Most of the houses do not have a window and there is room only for a bed and a few chairs. This is where they cook, eat, sleep and sometimes wash their clothes. They have to pay to use the outside communal pit latrines and showers. They do not have electricity and with no windows, it is hot and humid inside. No wonder most of the people were out on the streets. Little wonder too that tuberculosis and malaria is almost of epidemic proportion. And yet the determination to live and have some hope in a better future was so evident. If I felt God absent in the depressing poverty of the surroundings, God was truly present in the people.

I was encouraged and given much hope by the number of young people I met at the World Social Forum – learning, educating, and making their voices heard. It was also reassuring to know that there are thousands of people who are also questioning the current state of our society and working towards "another world." I attended workshops on fair trade, women's rights, exploitative migration (trafficking, smuggling, undocumented migrants), eradication of Female Genital Mutilation (run by Ephigenia Gachiri IBVM) and common good (environment). It was disturbing to realise the extent of human tragedy we now face and inevitably one finds that the root cause is greed - uncontrolled capitalism and consumerism. And yet I realised that not only is "another world possible," but another world is needed for our survival.

The speakers invited us to educate ourselves not just about the issues but the systems and structures (yes politics and economy) that operate in our world. If we really want to change the world, we need to

research and analyse the issues and find the root causes, otherwise our solutions will be “band aids.” We were challenged not to give in to the paranoia and become walls but instead to be bridges of new understanding. We need to be aware that each one of us has the power to do something (writing petitions, letters, praying, etc) and together with other congregations and organisations we can imagine and work for another world.

I have always believed that our current lifestyle is unsustainable, in Nairobi however I realised just how much my life is tied up to others. In Kenya they believe that “I am because you are.” For me the question now is, am I willing to change my lifestyle so that it will be possible for others to live as God intended? Because it will cost and it will not happen without me willing to pay the price.

Janet reflects on all that she has had the privilege to experience and the places she has travelled to and thinks about her life working in a major bank in Sydney not too long ago. “I felt unfulfilled and wanted more out of life”, she says. A trip to Cape York on behalf of the bank, to set up a family income savings scheme, is what she thinks set her on the path to find out more about herself, her drive, her passion, her gifts, where her heart truly lay and where she could make a difference.

She had always been drawn to Ignatian spirituality and began to make enquiries with the Loreto Sisters in 2000. She felt an instant connection with the life and spirit of Mary Ward, the founder of the Loreto Sisters. She felt awe and admiration for a woman who despite so much oppression persevered to stand up for what she believed in. In 2002 Janet entered the Loreto Sisters novitiate program and has this advice for others considering a religious life,

“If the thought keeps coming back, just do it - follow your heart's call. The moment of absolute certainty might never come. There will be doubts but I feel that if this is not where God calls you to be, you or someone around you will know.”

For further information about the Loreto Sisters and how you can make a difference please visit www.loreto.org.au.