

A Vocation Story: the winding ways of how God called me

Inez, FCJ

“I will not think about Him.....then in my heart there was something like a fire burning, imprisoned in my bones. I wore myself out trying to restrain it but I was not able to.” Jeremiah 20:9

Many have asked how I recognized God’s call, so I want to share my experience with you all. It all began with something very simple, something that didn’t seem important. Yet that was the way God called me. The complaints and sighs of Jeremiah, above, well represent the struggle of my heart in listening to, understanding and finally obeying the will of God. To get to being able to say “YES” to God’s call to be His faithful companion, I went through many twists and turns in my spiritual journey. The road had its ups and downs, its light and darkness; yet, if I look back over it all, its beauty is beyond anything I can describe. Perfect. I hope that this sharing of mine may help young people who are searching for the will of God.

With friendly greetings,
Sr. Inez fcj (Indonesia)

I wasn’t brought up a Catholic because my father and mother were followers of **Kejawen, a traditional Javanese religion**. Even though I was brought up in a family tradition that was full of noble human values, religious education wasn’t a priority. My father’s extended family were all Protestants, while on my mother’s side they were Muslims of strict observance. In one of the villages where I was brought up (for we often moved house) Islam was the only religion that I knew. At least, that was what I learned in elementary school.



Inez after a performance of traditional Javanese dance.
Several FCJ Sisters attended and supported her

When I got to class five of elementary school I **began to do sholat (Islamic prayer)** and to fast in the same way as the other children, without anyone telling me or guiding me. I learned from an Islamic prayer book I borrowed from a friend, and I still remember the peace in my heart when doing the ritual hand washing before sholat. I think that was **the first seed of my deep desire to be in relationship with God the Creator**.

After graduating from elementary school I continued my studies in the city of Solo. My elder sister, who had already become a Catholic, enrolled me as a catholic student. **So I found myself in the group of catholic students without having the slightest idea about the catholic religion**. That was alarming. I remember how frightened I was when I first joined the catholic religion class, especially at the time of prayer. It wasn’t the prayer itself that was frightening, but taking turns to lead the prayer. When the others made the sign of the cross, what arose spontaneously in my heart was “Bismillah”.

As time passed, **God was more and more serious about awakening my faith**. Without anyone telling me or pushing me, just as previously I had begun to study Islam, now I decided to join the catechumenate in the parish of Purbayan, Solo, nearest parish to my boarding house. The teacher was a Franciscan sister (OSF). That was **my first close encounter with a religious sister**. For one year I attended the class for catechumens, and finally I was baptised when I was in class 3 of junior high school. **Now I was really a Catholic**.

I was quite faithful to praying novenas, the rosary and occasionally reading the Bible. But as for experience of God, what that was I didn’t know. I was diligent in attending the religious education classes in school. I **“knew” who God was but I didn’t feel the experience of the living God** as was taught in our lessons. To become a sister? That was far from my thoughts. I wanted to work outside Java, to get a lot of money and visit new and

faraway places. I liked travelling. Later, however, it was as a sister that I went beyond the borders of home and got to know the culture of other nations.

After graduating from senior high school I continued my studies at the Institute of Agriculture in the city of Bogor. **It was at this tertiary educational institution that the history of my vocation began. Two important events were the starting point.**

The first one happened in my final year at the Bogor Institute of Agriculture, in semester seven. I felt my studies were shortly coming to an end; my status as a student was approaching the expiry date. What next? Thinking about this set my heart fluttering. I was anxious. Then a particular question became very significant in determining what happened next. One evening I came out onto the terrace at the side of my boarding house. While gazing at the bright and clear sky of Bogor and the green world of nature around me, **I asked in my heart, "Lord, why did you create me? If life has a purpose, what is it? If this life is your will and has a purpose, how must I fill my life to make it meaningful?"** Long afterwards I realised that every person, at a certain moment, comes to a question of this kind. These questions are basic because they are connected to the meaning of life. I had no idea how to find the answer. Seemingly, at that time I didn't yet know God, even though I claimed to have faith. **This was the stage of the young Samuel who, although he lived in the Temple, did not yet know God.**

The **second important event** took place when I was attending Mass on vocation Sunday in Bogor cathedral. The Mass was celebrated by a Franciscan priest. At the end of his homily he posed this question: **"God is calling. Who will respond if we don't?"** After coming out from Mass, while walking around in the Bogor botanical gardens, I was aware of that question still echoing in my heart and mind. Finally, that question was not just for other people but for me personally. The question changed to become: **"God is calling. Who will respond if I don't?"** Heroic, that's how I felt. There was an urging to answer the call, to sacrifice and live in a different way for God. I began to dream: what will happen if I respond to this?

It was those two events which gave rise to **the idea of becoming a sister**. After that time, I faithfully attended morning Mass in the chapel of the Good Shepherd sisters. As it happened, that chapel was close to my boarding house. I found joy in listening to the sisters praying together before Mass began. When the morning was still dark and most creatures were still sound asleep, the sisters got up and made the world holy. I felt peace and calm when listening to them praying. Later I knew that this was the divine office, the prayer of the Church. I began to think about the possibility that I might become one of these sisters. Ah, how that thought began to arise more often! When it came to mind, this perhaps was **the moment when God – in a serious way – began to disturb my mind and heart.**

This disturbance pressed on my soul. Confusing. Disturbing. Worrying. I wanted to make it disappear but I couldn't do so. "I wore myself out trying to restrain it but I was not able to." God led me step by step as a teacher leads a student. How did I respond to this confusion?

I graduated from university and then went to Kalimantan (Borneo). **My main purpose was to consider my calling in life: whether or not to become a sister.** I spent 18 months pondering and weighing. My base camp was the parish of Tenggarong, in East Kutai. I helped with parish work and it was there that I first **discussed my longing with an SVD priest.**

From the church directory I knew there were very many religious congregations. But at the time the only congregation I had any acquaintance with was a Franciscan one. My thought at that time was, **"Is there really any difference between congregations? Don't they all wear a habit and not get married?"** **How naïve I was!** **Later I learned that each congregation has its own charism and spirituality.** The reason I chose to apply to the Franciscan congregation was because it was that of my teacher who prepared me for baptism. Even though I didn't yet know them personally, still I sent a letter to Semarang. A reply arrived from the sister who was the director of novices. Her words were encouraging and her handwriting beautiful. My heart felt gladdened in an extraordinary way. **The story of my vocation had begun in reality.** In hesitation and anxiety about the rightness of my choice, **I knocked on the door of the convent.** I was well aware that there wouldn't be a sign or a sure answer in this searching, but what I did know was **that I was following the deepest urging of my heart and for sure God would guide me. My first calling was to be a Franciscan sister.** This happened in 1989, two years after graduation

For three years I went through the education program of postulancy and novitiate. At that time I felt I began to know God in my life. God made himself known to me in an intensive way and I responded to Him wholeheartedly. He is not beyond the reach of human hearts. There were moments when I sighed to him with St. Augustine: *“Lord, late have I known you. Had I known it was like this, I would not have wasted so much time in so many places.”* **Like a teacher educating his pupil, God make himself known to me personally. Have you ever felt a love that you were not able to describe, that made other things in the world seem of little value?** This was my experience of God; and how very much God spoiled me with an experience like this.

At that time I was surrounded and helped by the best formators. I was taught how to know myself and to know God, to mend what was wounded as well as embrace weakness. Some teachers were priests from the Society of Jesus. From them I got **to know Ignatian spirituality and the spirit of “magis”** – to be more. I learned about serving-honoring-glorifying God in the simplest of daily activities: for example cleaning the toilet, watering the plants, wiping the table, in singing as well as in prayer – in short, in everything. The keyword was self-denial – to learn to overcome self. Any activity, however trivial, then became very meaningful when placed in the context of praise and service. Community life, though not easy, still – it must be acknowledged – brought great joy. Indeed this was an amazing time and I am full of gratitude for it.

My first vows were in 1992. My journey went on, as I continued to learn and began to teach, for another four years. But in 1996 my time of joy as a Franciscan sister came to an end. **I was not accepted for renewal of vows.** This meant I had to leave the congregation which all this time had been my mother and teacher. Great darkness – that’s my description of that time.

When I reflect back on that event, I’m aware that it was both the lowest point and **the turning point in my life.** It took a long time for me to realize that this was the moment when I was born again in a new way. The Franciscan congregation I left behind was only a temporary stopping place, a place where I was moulded in a foundational spiritual education. **God, who knew me so well, was going to lead me to a new place – the place that he wanted.** At that time I wasn’t able to understand the purpose of his heart and so I complained, repeatedly, with all my strength. And I reached an indescribable peak of anger. With whom? With many people but finally it was directed to one above all: to God.

In the book of Exodus in the Bible, the story is told of the people of Israel coming out of Egypt across the Red Sea and entering the desert. The exodus from Egypt towards the Promised Land, that’s my image for the three following years. That was my time in the desert. While trying to find meaning in what I had just experienced, I planned a new life. I went to Jakarta, worked and continued my studies. Those three years were really a very hard time. **Just like the people of Israel who were angry, fed up, weary, grumbling, complaining, demanding and following their own will, which too was what happened in me. I had many questions and not even one was answered. Often I cried out for help, but God seemed totally silent. I grew in a feeling of despair. And anger.**

Until one day I felt a strong urging to go to the chapel. (There was a chapel in the institution where I was working.) When I sat down I immediately asked, “What is it? What do you want to say?” **It seemed that, after a long time of being silent, God began to speak. He clarified everything and my heart did not only understand but burned within me. My tears flowed at the end of the conversation. I experienced a new relationship with God.** *“Only from the words of others did I hear about You, but now my own eyes have seen You. Because of this I take back all I have said and repenting I sit down in dust and ashes.”* Job 42:5-6

GOD’S TIME TO SPEAK

Build your house on rock

When in 2006 an earthquake struck Bantul (on the southern edge of the city of Yogyakarta in central Java, Indonesia) the FCJ sisters supported the efforts to help people rebuild their homes. Some materials from the devastated houses could be used again, some had to be thrown away, and some new materials were added. Foundations and supporting pillars were rebuilt in a new way, hopefully better able to withstand any future earthquakes. **This, too, was what God did for me: helped me to rebuild my life again with some old**

materials that were in ruins but still usable; helped me to rebuild on a firmer foundation. If the strong wind blew I would be ready – my building might sway but at least it wouldn't collapse or be uprooted.

After a two year process of rebuilding, I found the new building to be more beautiful than the old. The process wasn't easy. Yet now, if I look back, I can say how beautiful it was. That *"God was in everything, even in the time of destruction and darkness"* was really true. Yet at the time when I was in the darkness and didn't know the way to go, I journeyed in anger and sometimes in despair. My **keywords were: "Always journey on and don't let me stop because of despair."** That was the beginning of my new life. **I re-wove my relationship with God and at the same time I was healed and restored by Him.** My faith became simpler, and for sure God and I were more able to be honest with each other.

As my studies came to an end and I was working on my final assignments, I began to turn my eyes towards various places where I might find work. **A dream began to form.** It already seemed clear that I was going to live my life as a single woman. From the time I began to make plans for my life, God began to press upon my soul, urging me to live my life in response to His call. It wasn't a matter of deciding whether to be single or not, but something deeper, namely that God was questioning my way of making a decision: one-sided; without including God.

That sense of God's urging was so powerful that I went to see a spiritual director, a Jesuit priest. He said to me, *"That restless feeling you have, that lack of peace, is perhaps because you are in the wrong place."* He it was who gave me a card with the name of the **congregation of Sisters FCJ.** Of course, I didn't immediately accept it. I felt fear and worry at the thought of entering the same world for the second time. I put it off for a long time – I delayed until finally **I had a dream,** not just once but three times in almost the same form.

In that dream I seemed to be entering an unknown city accompanied by someone I didn't recognise yet someone close to my heart. The city was small and not very busy. I walked through the city and stopped at a house built in Javanese style with a beautiful garden. The gate was closed. The atmosphere was peaceful and brought a feeling of warmth to my heart. Then a conversation took place between me and the person who was accompanying me: "Do you know the owner of that house?" "No. I don't want to." "Why? What's the reason you don't want to? After all, you won't be forced to stay, and if you are asked to stay but you don't want to, it doesn't matter! No-one is going to force you. There is nothing to lose, but on the contrary you can make a new friend."

That was the broad outline of my dream, vivid and strong enough to occur three times. It motivated me to write and send a letter introducing myself to Sister Barbara FCJ in Yogyakarta. The FCJ house in Soropadan, Yogyakarta, was built very beautifully, with the central living area opening onto an inner garden. I was impressed with my first sight of this, but at the same time my heart was engulfed with a feeling of great anxiety. Also, I felt small and humble. I had been in another congregation – what would the sisters say about this?

For two years I went to and fro between Yogyakarta and Jakarta – joining together with others in the d'Houet group, a group named after the FCJ foundress, Marie Madeleine d'Houet, for young women who were interested to know about FCJ. My enthusiasm and interest went up and down. One year after my first visit, I was invited to become a postulant along with my three companions in the d'Houet group. I backed off, giving the reason that I hadn't yet finished my studies. Two more years passed, still without the courage to make a decision. My openness of heart became less and less; I even began to consider going back to my original choice: to live as a celibate laywoman ... period.

While I still wasn't able to be sure about that, Sister Marion asked me if **I was ready to become a postulant.** **After considering for a few moments, I answered, "Yes."** When I look back, I still don't understand why that time I said yes. I didn't find sufficient reason to say no. That night on my journey back to Jakarta (a 12 hour train journey) my heart felt full of worry. But every time I went into the deepest centre of my heart, I felt calmness. Peace. That peace became the sign that this was the right decision. I threw myself into the mystery called faith, because there wasn't any natural human reasoning that could support this decision. **How could I explain the feeling of peace that was really present yet overlaid with apprehension and uncertainty about the future?**

I resigned from my place of work and got ready to head for Yogyakarta. But I took a detour through Toraja and Lombok. I was still hoping for a sign to let me know about any mistake in this decision. One evening I was in Batutumonga, Toraja, a beautiful, misty, highland place; as far as the eye could see stretched a very green valley. I said, inside my heart, **“Lord, give me a sign!”** At that moment I could still recapture my old desire supposing that God didn’t want me to be an FCJ. The day to go to Yogyakarta was coming ever nearer. I felt short of breath. I cried out with all my strength. There was no clear sign except the feeling of peace deep in my heart and the invitation to trust Him.

From Toraja I left for Lombok, still in the mindset of searching for a sign. I climbed Mount Rinjani. I felt any sign given to me until then was still vague, shadowy, and I wanted to make it clearer, firmer – was this choice and decision of mine in accordance with God’s will? That question became a mantra that I repeated over and over as I climbed. On the second night of my climb, in prayer God answered: **“You will not be given a sign. Now ask your own self. What do you most desire from your life? What do you hope from your life? Whatever you choose will have my blessing.”** Apparently God was weary, too, of following all my anxious wavering and doubt. Finally I found that the true sign lay in the innermost depths of my heart – in the sense of calm and peace that I wasn’t able to express in words. After this I no longer asked for a sign.

I felt as if invited to follow an unknown path along which I could see only one step ahead of me. All I had to do was to trust completely in God’s guidance. I accepted wholeheartedly the risk involved in the decision that I was making. I was aware of the limitations of my inner strength – my human capacity to weigh and make a decision. But if I made a mistake in my decision, **I knew I was still in the hands of god. The sense of calm and peace – that was the sign I held on to.**

When I joined the FCJs, I felt far more ready than when I entered my first convent. I had experienced that through God’s grace I could come through the darkest moments and events of my life. All of my past – especially the dark time – was of great value because it had formed me to become like this. Like a ball that is thrown – the harder it is thrown the higher it can bounce. Being sent out from my first congregation was like falling into a deep and rocky valley, yet this too was what empowered me to bounce high, higher than before. So finally, why should I be afraid of suffering if this turns out to be the means of making me into a human being of greater faith?



Inez fcJ made her final profession of vows in the same celebration as two of her FCJ Sisters.

I made my final vows on January 3, 2010, happy and proud to be an FCJ sister. God’s way of teaching and entering a heart is beyond our understanding. My journey to this point had many twists and turns, but its beauty is indescribable.