

I come from Passos, a city located in the southern part of Brazil. Born in 1982, into a Christian family, I am the second of three girls. My parents, simple people, attached to tradition, but not regular Church-goers, always insisted that we have a Catholic education. From my first year of catechism classes, I felt drawn to the Church, experiencing a great happiness in being able to pray, to sing, and to go to recite the rosary in different homes. I was fortunate enough to belong to a lively parish and so it was quite natural that, around 12 years old, I became the coordinator of our neighborhood, inviting residents to prayer meetings. At 14, I joined a very active youth group in the parish, where I seemed to find a second home.

We got together every Sunday. I learned so much during our faith sharings about God, Jesus, life, and vocation. That same year, in the town library, there was a forum organized on religious congregations. Up to then, I would often walk by the high walls of a Carmelite monastery and didn't know anything about them. However, it does occur to me that one day, as I was passing by the convent, I was possessed to put a cloth on my head resembling a veil and, all happy, began to yell at the top of my lungs, "I am a nun."

As time went by, a friend and I went to visit every congregation around ---- there were almost 40 of them ---asking all kinds of questions, listening, and looking at photos and other material. That's how I met the first Oblate of the Assumption, Sr. Luisa Drago. Several months later I encountered them again as I entered fully into a vocational discernment and heard about their work in the Amazon, which blew me away. I joined a vocational group and was receiving spiritual direction from a Carmelite sister.

Between the ages of 16 and 18, I took advantage of my school holidays to attend various vocational camps organized by the Oblates six hours by bus from my home. In the end a missionary call took root in me. I came to that decision with the help of my Carmelite director, who never tried to influence me but who, to the contrary, assured me not to be afraid to follow God's call.

After high school, I chose to suspend my studies to begin an experience with the Oblates. Right off the bat, I loved the simplicity and the family spirit which characterized them. I hardly knew them and yet I felt at home. It felt like we had so much in common. When I told my parents of my wish to enter, my mother, even though she had never been out of the loop, kept asking me, “But why? What have they done to you? Did a boyfriend break up with you? Why not get married?” It’s strange but it was my father, a man of great authority, who said that I should be allowed to follow my vocation. In any case, my desire was so strong that nothing was going to stop or upset me. It seems to me that if I had been told no, I would have run off!

All of my initial formation up to my first vows took place in Andradas, north of *São* Paulo, and during my postulancy year I began nursing studies. My apostolic experience during my novitiate took place in the Amazon. Everything there was new to me --- the scenery, the culture, and the way one lives one’s faith. Those six months really taught me how to put things in life into perspective. I learned that one can be truly happy living a lot more simply, without being weighed down with all the technological baggage we have in the south of Brazil.

After my first profession, I worked with young people in difficulty in a *favella* (slum, in Portuguese). They went to school part of the day and we gave them classes to make up what they didn’t get there: computer, music, and art courses as well as support groups. I also had some work at the local Assumptionist parish: liturgy, choir, Scripture sharing group, and youth ministry.

I particularly loved my work in the Amazon. For a whole year, I worked on a project with teenagers who were sexually exploited by their fathers or uncles. We took turns going off to visit the interior of the Amazon forest. They were 15-day excursions during which we visited families and tried to get a handle on what was happening. We prayed together and celebrated the Eucharist. You should be aware that these people saw a priest only twice a year. We would give them a brief preparation before Penance, Communion, Eucharist, Confirmation, and marriage would be celebrated. We would teach them prayers and hymns as well.

Once back in Andradas, I worked both as a visiting home nurse and at a medical center. In 2009 I had to leave this position that I enjoyed a lot to go to France for what is called my “probation” year, a time of preparation before final vows when one is given the opportunity to drink from the wellspring of our Congregation, to walk in the footsteps of our founder! I was leaving my country for the first time and I discovered internationality with all its riches, but also all its barriers (language, different cultures, etc). All of my different experiences in Brazil had

prepared me to welcome these obstacles as so many graces…..

Since February 2010 I have been back in Brazil and work in a center with children and teenagers, the sons and daughters of prostitutes and themselves the victims of sexual exploitation. On October 12, the feast of Our Lady of Aparecida, I made my final vows. This consecration seemed to be a real gift. Celebrating the bicentennial of Fr. d'Alzon's birth and pronouncing my definitive "yes" ---- this was a sign that encouraged me to move ahead.

Today, I look back. From my childhood up to these days with the Oblates, I have continued to grow. All the aspects of my life ---- human, Christian, spiritual, and ecclesial --- have matured. I have met a lot of obstacles during this journey, but, thanks to God, I have been able to overcome them. And each time I encountered one, even though I could sense my frailty, a certain trust took root in me ---- my life has no meaning outside of religious life. I have chosen two passages to accompany me throughout my life: Is 43:1, "Fear not; I have called you by name: you are mine" and "Lord, you seduced me and I let myself be seduced." These texts speak to me of the patience of God. They speak to me of a God who never abandons those he has called, even if they are weak.

Today, God entrusts me with a mission. He asks me to give myself to his Work. Yes. But how? By living in religious life; by trying to forget myself in order to become a sister for others. Working to hasten the Kingdom is the goal that Fr. d'Alzon gave us, opening a path himself by such a full life and one poured out for others. Thy Kingdom come! Here I am, send me!

By Sr. Marisa, Oblate of the Assumption