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February 23, 1958

(To Mr. and Mrs. Richard Halliday -
From Sister Gregory, Rosary College, River Forest, Illinois)

My dears:

What wonderful news! I'd read you were considering the Trapp story but had no idea anything was settled. It should make enchanting theatre. I found the book delightful and thoroughly enjoyed the family in concert.

You are right, it seems to me, in believing that Maria's struggle to know her vocation in life is very much the heart of the matter. However, I sense that you are a little afraid of the material. You mustn't be!

If you trust it honestly and artistically it is bound to be good theatre. For many reasons there will be a temptation to hedge a bit or to sentimentalize -- please don't! That would result in a Bells of Saint Mary's, Heaven Knows Mr. Allison sort of thing that is dishonest, inartistic, and (for me at least) slightly nauseating. It is understandable that you should be a bit wary about handling the convent angle because most people - Catholics and non-Catholics alike - are more or less confused about the subject. You realize, too, that no matter how you treat it there will be a certain amount of criticism - but that would be true about almost any subject you might choose. You are persons of integrity as well as sensitive artists, if you are true to yourselves, Maria will emerge a flesh and blood woman, radiating simplicity, warmth, generosity, tenderness and humor.

The whole purpose of life, it seems to me, is pin-pointed in Maria's struggle to choose between two vocations. Like every adult human being, she must find the answer to the question: "What does God want me to do with my life? How does He wish me to spend my love?"

Many people believe one is attracted to the religious vocation because he or she is either afraid of life or incapable of love. Actually, the majority are drawn to it because they keenly appreciate the gift of life and have a tremendous capacity to love. The center of that love is God, and from that center it flows out into all areas of life. Most of us (we lucky ones, at least), were born of love and found great happiness and security in the family of which we were a part. We know from long experience the joy of that particular vocation, and it is natural and right that the majority should choose it because it promises the greatest human happiness this side of paradise. However, for some few, the feeling will persist that another vocation might offer greater scope for the love they feel. In time, such a person usually decides to settle the question by giving religious life a try, and if she is a woman, will enter the religious community that attracts her and for which she is most fitted. Although religious throughout the world are identical in the basic

purpose of their existence, they differ greatly in rules, customs, dress, work, and manner of living.

At first, the girl becomes a postulant, which simply means that for a time she will be observing convent life from the inside, without actually being a part of it. She usually wears a uniform of sorts and, although there is no hard and fast rule about it, this uniform usually differs from the habit of the community. The postulant is a completely human person and brings into the convent all the characteristics and personality traits she has developed throughout the years. She tries to determine she is compatible with religious life, or, if through training, she can be made so. Usually she finds she must change herself a bit, and if she dislikes the idea, is always free to leave.

After about a year, the postulant and the superiors who have been in charge of her, determine whether or not she should go on. In our community, at the end of the year, the postulant is sent home on a vacation - wearing secular clothes, of course - and is urged to take up her old life, do all the things that formerly delighted her, weigh the old freedom against the the life she has seen in the convent, and then decide whether or not she wishes to return.

If the postulant still desires to embrace the religious life, and her superiors agree she has the potential, she becomes a novice. This means that she is formally given the habit of the community, assumes a religious name, and begins the life of the Sisters. However, she does not take the vows of religion. The novitiate is a time of testing, and the novice is completely cut off from her old life (few letters, no visitors, etc.), and is subjected to intense discipline. She rises, breathes, prays, works, sleeps, and plays by the bell! However, if at any time she feels she's had it, she is free to leave at once; or if her superiors discover that for any of a number of reasons she would not make a good religious, she is sent away. From about a third to one half of those who decide to try the life either leave or are sent away before the end of the novitiate.

If, however, a person has discovered that her love for God is the very core of her life, and if she is approved by the community, she finally becomes a true member of the religious by taking the three vows, but only for a limited number of years. The number differs from group to group, but is usually from three to ten. It is the vows, I think, that are most misunderstood by outsiders.

The first vow one takes is that of Poverty - and by it, one renounces the right of ownership, not because he feels material things are not good, but simply because he feels he can work and move more freely in the service of God. Anything he needs for himself or for his work, he simply asks for and receives; the kind and amount depending on the type of work he does.

For example: In my studio are innumerable books, records, a radio, record-player, TV set, and so forth, because my particular work as a teacher demands them. However, if tomorrow my superiors were to decide I could serve better in another capacity, I would be ready to leave Rosary in a few hours, taking

with me only strictly personal articles, no more than would fit in my trunk and traveling bags. The Vow of Poverty does not mean living without things we need or like, but rather using them in a detached sort of way and being able to give them up cheerfully on a moment's notice, if asked to do so.

The second vow is that of Chastity - and by it one offers his or her body to God and dedicates it to His service, rather than using it as a channel of love for husband, wife or family. A religious is neither afraid of sex nor disgusted with it, but rather recognizes it as one of God's greatest gifts, and therefore, in consecrating it to His service, one reflects the measure of one's love. Certainly one would not offer as a gift something he considered shoddy!

The third vow is that of Obedience - and by it one offers his freedom of action to God. It is by far the most difficult of the three, because one says, in effect, "I will obey my religious superior because in those commands I see reflected God's will for me." Because we are human beings who differ from one another in many ways, there can be definite personality conflicts between superiors and subjects, but because all are at least trying to live in affection and concord, there is actually very little friction.

After one has lived under the vows for a given number of years, a nun is again given the opportunity to leave if she wishes. In fact, some communities never allow their Sisters to take permanent vows, but they must renew them from time to time. In most cases, however, after one has lived under vows for from three to ten years, one is allowed to take them for life. However, if with the passage of time a Sister feels she would rather live outside the convent, she can apply for a dispensation from the vows and in a matter of a few months would be perfectly free to leave. At no time in the life of a religious is it necessary "to leap over the wall" -- the door is always open.

That is a brief (and thoroughly inadequate) explanation of the machinery of the religious life. When Maria Trapp entered the convent as a postulant, she was a perfectly normal girl, bringing with her the impulses and attitudes of any healthy young person. By observing life in the convent (and by experiencing its discipline) she was attempting to determine whether or not it was the life she was intended to live. From the book I gather that she was a bit immature and not yet sure of the meaning of life and love. Certainly, she had no realization of romantic love. By the way, no vow is valid unless a person completely understands what he or she is doing; that is why most communities prefer candidates who have enjoyed life and thoroughly understand it, because they are perfectly aware of what they are leaving and what they are getting in exchange. Although Maria had a deep love for God, her superior recognized her immaturity - she was more child than woman, and therefore not

ready to make a choice that would ultimately involve the emotions of an adult woman. That is probably why she was sent to the Von Trapp home - a way of marking time - because while there, she was not actually a postulant.

The very generosity and capacity for love that had attracted her to the religious life in the first place, began to deepen and expand. For the first timer, perhaps, she knew a man as a friend, and slowly began to be attracted to him, perhaps began to love him.

In other words, she began to mature, and because the experience was new and a little frightening, she ran back to the place that symbolized peace and security for her.

Now Maria was in a position to make an honest choice, because she could understand the power of human love as well as spiritual love. This was the moment her superior had been waiting for, because now Maria could answer the question: "How does God wish me to use my capacity to love?" And her answer was: to spend it in the heart of the Von Trapp family, in fact to become the heart of the Trapp family. There was no stigma attached to the choice. It was not a declaration that she loved God less and people more, but rather, a recognition of the road she was meant to travel from the very beginning. That sure knowledge was the core of her life from that moment on, and helped her to develop into the magnificent woman she was. Mary will be particularly equipped to understand and project her, because she, too, has a special capacity to love.

You will need someone to clarify technical points for you, but not to determine how Maria should be portrayed. It would seem that a priest would be of much more help to you than a sister, because we would tend to look at the thing from our own particular point of view, and in the light of our individual experience.

Also, most nuns are pretty reticent about discussing themselves or their lives with strangers. For example: I could no more have written this letter to Mr. Crouse, let us say, than you could discuss the intimacy of your love for one another with the person who happened to sit next to you on a train. Because we are friends and I have learned to trust you and love you, it is possible for me to share with you, at least to a degree, the most important thing in my life.

A priest, on the other hand, has observed different communities of sisters doing many types of work and living under a variety of rules and regulations. He knows the reactions of people toward them and would have more freedom in working with you than would a nun. For example, he could meet with you at times and in places that would be impossible for one of us. Most important of all, he would have his finger on the pulse of important ecclesiastics in the New York area. You will have no problem in representing the Church accurately, because the Church, believe it or not, is amazingly liberal and tolerant; it is rather certain individuals within the Church who constitute the problem.

I do have what might be called a "fraternal twin", a Dominican like myself. About sixteen years ago, I audited a course in Principles of Drama taught by Father Brendan Larnen, and was tremendously impressed with his keen mind and careful scholarship. Although I haven't seen him since, from time to time I've read articles and book reviews he has written, and we have many mutual friends. Father Larnen has a deep interest in and knowledge of the arts, theatre included. In fact, I've heard he has attempted a play or two, but as a mutual friend confided, "He always gives the line to the wrong character." He is a gentle, balanced person, who possesses a sense of humor and is one with whom you could freely discuss any problem. Since he is a trained theologian, he would know the answers to your questions, or at least know where to find them. However, if you feel you would rather work with a sister, I'll try to locate one for you. Sisters with theatre training, ironically enough, are much easier to find in the other sections of the country - although few and far between everywhere, they are much more so in the East. In case you are interested, Father Larnen's address is:

Reverend Brendan Larnen, O.P.
St. Vincent Ferrer Priory
869 Lexington Avenue
New York City, New York

It would seem that most of the South Pacific crowd is involved in this new project, plus the gifted lindsay and Crouse. You know, I hope, that if I can be of assistance to you ever, you need only ask. However, I am equipped to give little but my prayers and those, very fervent ones, are yours daily. Your happiness and success are dear to me. God bless and keep you.

Your devoted,

/s/ Sister Gregory