

At the threshold: Why I left the ordination process

by [Martha-Lynn Corner](#) in the [June 8, 2016](#) issue



A couple of years ago, I attended a discernment retreat in my Episcopal diocese, a special weekend for those discerning a call to ordained ministry. Since then I've followed on Facebook as the cohort from that retreat has packed up and moved to seminary. From selfies at farewell parish potlucks to pictures of moving trucks with status updates like "Jesus take the wheel," every single person with whom I established a social media relationship that weekend has started down the path that, the Lord and the standing committee willing, will end in their ordination to the priesthood. I will not be among them.

Like them, I embarked on the long road of meetings, tests (physical and psychological), spiritual autobiographies, and interviews that ends in admittance to postulancy for holy orders. Becoming a postulant is both a huge relief and a doorway to other, deeper challenges: three years of seminary, followed by more meetings and tests and interviews before candidacy for holy orders, followed by ordination. The Holy Spirit may blow where she will, but the church tries to keep her on Doppler radar.

That's as it should be. This arduous process is a good one, though its ambition borders on the impossible: to peek into the very core of a person's relationship with God, as it is uniquely and sometimes inexplicably experienced, to mine for deposits of spiritual integrity, leadership, gentleness, and joy. Discovered in the right balance and with the right external supports—an agreeable family, a plan for the financial burdens of seminary—the church affirms that this vocational path is the right one.

I thought I'd answered Mary Oliver's question, thought I knew what to do with my "one wild and precious life." In the beginning stages of discernment, I wrote a lot of sweeping and grandiose things about being called to make a place for doubt in the church. But when doubt sidled in to make its place in my own plans, I panicked. What a terribly common thing, to set off to accomplish one thing in life and realize it was the wrong thing after all. What a terribly terrible thing when it happens to you.

As confusion set in, I took inventory. I knew that for a long time, I'd had a pure, sweet passion for Jesus and all the imperfect people I'd met trying to bump on down the road with him. I loved the Eucharist, the way the tangible realities of bread and wine meet the intangible reality of Christ. I felt drawn to the mysteries priests proclaim and to the realities of priestly ministry.

I also knew that my husband loved me but hated the idea of being married to a priest, with all the moving and uncertainty that would entail, and that the growing strain on our relationship was a serious problem. I knew that while I enjoyed my job as a lay minister at a large and vibrant church, the hours and stress made me a less than vibrant mother and were taking their toll on my health. And I learned that some of the priests I encountered at various points along my discernment journey shone brightly in public but were barely functioning in their private lives.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing I recognized was this: the closer I moved on my journey to the altar as one who would stand behind it, the farther I felt I was from the ebb and flow of the community of people who knelt in front of it.

Had all these bits of truth come rushing in at once I might have drowned, which would have been one sort of crisis. Someone from my family or from one of the loving communities to which I belonged would have noticed and come to my aid, and I would have started over from there. Instead, this clarity came to me drop by drop. I could have reached out to my discernment committee, that group of folks who had rearranged their summer calendars to sit with me in hushed silence and listen for the beat of the Holy Spirit's wings. I could have, but I did not. There was just so much contrast between the delicate sweetness of the movement we all thought we sensed in various members' living rooms and the violent rushes of doubt it seemed only I could detect.

So, with a pernicious stubbornness I recognize daily in my children, I ignored prevailing conditions and bent double to walk in the storm. I focused on external

seals of approval—from the bishop, from my presenting priest—and clung to this postulancy thing as if it could save me. I forgot the gift of my own internal weather vane, and I neglected to seek advice.

What, exactly, was my problem? I felt haunted by an image from our discernment retreat reading: a priest and a layperson standing shoulder to shoulder in the threshold of a church. The priest faces inward, toward liturgy, the sacraments, and a challenging but ordered way to lead and serve. The layperson faces outward, toward everything else—everything. All things bright and beautiful, in fact, but in my confusion that abundance felt like chaos. The choice to become a priest was, in fact, a way to avoid making the choices I most needed to make.

Jesus says simply “Follow me,” not “Follow me into one specific overarching vocational destiny.” But the tugs I’d felt before toward different kinds of work—writing, working with children, working with books, serving and loving others and my family and myself—all seemed too unfocused, even too mundane to qualify for true discipleship. I got so tangled up in this idea of self-as-priest that self-as-self—as I was so wondrously created—paled in comparison to this unrealized me. So I clung to the doorjamb of the church, to the threshold of the rest of my life, immobile in the gale-force winds of the Spirit.

God tried something different. One exhausted Saturday, unable to pray and still unable to reach out for help, I picked up a book that a discernment committee member had given me. In Nora Gallagher’s *Things Seen and Unseen* I discovered a kindred spirit, someone to whom the community of faith meant as much as it did to me, and a seeker’s voice I craved. Her companion volume, *Practicing Resurrection*, helped even more. It was as if Jesus himself called out to me from the pages as Gallagher discerned a call to the priesthood, became a postulant, and then paused—sensing a call to “remain in the middle for a while, between clergy and laity, a hybrid, a crossbreed, not the one and not the other. An inhabitant of the borderlands, in order to inform not only myself but the church, too.”

Gallagher’s words gave shape to my threshold reality, though pausing there served her in a way it did not serve me. Her ability to name this borderland place gave me the courage I needed to give voice to its storms in a conversation with my spiritual director. “Some places in the Psalms speak of God bringing us out into an open place,” she said after I’d unburdened myself. “I wonder—what is that open place for you?”

I found it by asking the bishop to release me from postulancy. I found it by doing the good, hard work of prayer and self-examination, embracing the crazily varied possibilities of the layperson's path and the particular ways my gifts can help build up God's kingdom. I found it by reflection and meditation on the source of my life in the church community and the key to the Christian map: baptism.

When I was just four months old, in a church still freezing cold from a recent power outage, a priest sprinkled my forehead and prayed these words: "Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon this your servant the forgiveness of sin, and have raised her to the new life of grace. . . . Give her an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and persevere, a spirit to know and love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works."

Songs were sung; there was a reception with cake. When all was said and done the priest turned back inside toward the altar while my parents carried me out the door and into absolutely everything else—into beautiful possibility, an open place, and innumerable ways to serve Christ and make him known.

As it turns out, I crossed the threshold of the church a long time ago. It just took me some time to figure that out.