Columns
Horizons
Spirituality

Social Service Srs. Michele Walsh, Carol Pack, Nodelyn Abayan and Fr. Joel Henson at the formation house in February 2003. (Courtesy of Nodelyn Abayan)

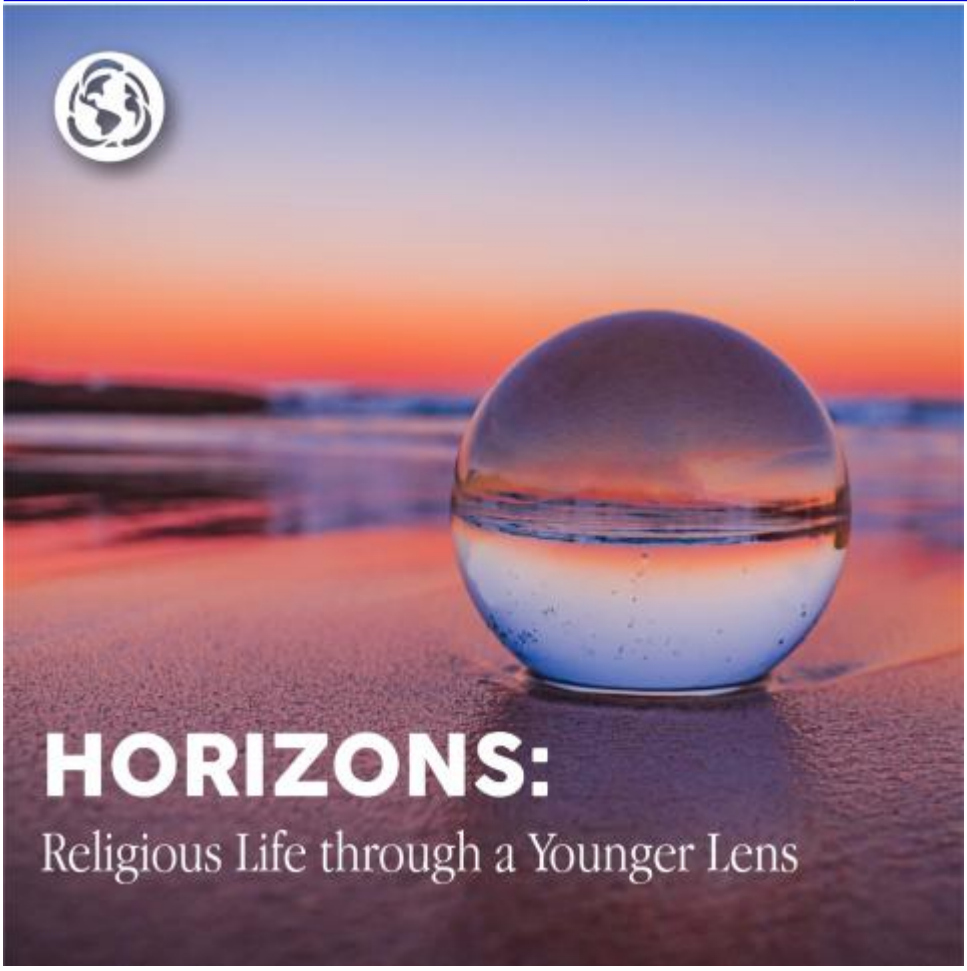
by Nodelyn Abayan

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

December 13, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint



Many of us have experienced a moment of encountering beauty so profound that we instinctively reach for our phone to snap a picture. We yearn to capture that fleeting moment, to freeze time. Personally, I do this often because I want to keep savoring the breathtaking experience, longing to remain immersed in that "awe-inspiring beauty" forever.

It reminds me of the three apostles during the Transfiguration. They were so captivated by the scene that they suggested to Jesus they build tents to preserve the moment's wonder.

But the truth is, everything in life passes, and nature is ever fleeting. Yet, there is profound beauty in this impermanence. This reality is beautifully captured in the Japanese concept of ichigo ichie, meaning "one time, one meeting." Rooted in the understanding that each encounter and shared moment is unrepeatable, ichigo ichie invites us to embrace the present with all its imperfections and uniqueness. After all, this is the only moment we truly have.

This sentiment resonates deeply with the words of Jesus: "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Mt 6:34). Jesus calls us to embrace the gift of the present moment — to love, serve and praise him fully in the now.

Advertisement

The week I reflected on this, my former novice director, Social Service Sr. Carol Pack, passed away. Fittingly, she died on the 98th anniversary of the founding of the Sisters of Social Service in Los Angeles — a profoundly meaningful day for her departure. Sister Carol deeply loved her vocation as a Sister of Social Service. She radiated the "sanctifying love of the Holy Spirit," the heart of our mission, through her abundant joy and positivity. Anyone who knew her would speak of her sparkle and her ever-present smile.

As I reflect on her passing, I find myself holding tightly to the sacredness of the moments we shared. These moments, vivid and precious, can never truly be relived — only remembered, celebrated and carried forward as blessings to others.

I will never forget how much we both cherished meditating together. We took the little house behind our formation house and transformed it into a tiny chapel — a sort of zendo (Japanese for "meditation hall" with "zen" referring to meditation and "do" meaning hall or way). It became a sacred space where, every morning at 5:30 a.m., we would sit on our cushions in silence, side by side. That little chapel wasn't just a room; it was a sanctuary, where our spirits found stillness, peace and communion with God and each other.

Every time I returned from my ministry, she was always there, waiting with open ears and a compassionate heart. She would listen intently as I shared my stories of encounters with patients during my volunteer work as a hospital chaplain. Her presence grounded me, reminding me of the holiness in both silence and shared connection.

Social Service Srs. Nodelyn Abayan and Carol Pack during Abayan's first profession in 2005. (Courtesy of Nodelyn Abayan)

But what I hold most dear is something even deeper: Sister Carol taught me how to say, "I love you." I wasn't raised in a culture where love was expressed openly or in words. For me, such vulnerability felt foreign and uncomfortable. Yet, through her warmth, patience and example, she gently showed me how to embrace the power of those words. She never rushed me or made me feel inadequate for my hesitance. Instead, she embodied love in such a way that I could feel its transformative strength in her every word and gesture. Over time, I found myself able to say those three simple words — not just to her, but to others in my life.

In teaching me to say, "I love you," Sister Carol gave me one of the greatest gifts of my life: the courage to express love and gratitude, to acknowledge the beauty and connection that exist in each fleeting moment. Even now, her lessons linger in my heart, reminding me to love openly, live deeply and honor the sacredness of every encounter.

Sister Carol, with her wisdom and grace, revealed a profound truth: every encounter is sacred — a one-of-a-kind moment filled with the possibility of transformation. Like Jesus, who blessed those he met with tenderness and healing, hope and love, Sister Carol embodied ichigo ichie through her ability to be fully present and to see the divine in every person.

Her passing has become a reminder to me not only of the preciousness of time but also of the responsibility to carry her legacy and love forward: to bless others as she blessed me, knowing that each moment is a gift never to come again.

> "Sister Carol, with her wisdom and grace, revealed a profound truth: every encounter is sacred — a one-of-a-kind moment filled with the possibility of transformation": Sr. Nodelyn Abayan
>
> Tweet this

I am deeply grateful that I had the chance to be with Sister Carol just a week before she passed. It was a sacred moment, standing with her on the threshold between the here and now and the eternal embrace of her God. Seeing how much her physical body had changed was difficult, but her spirit remained as vibrant and strong as ever.

During our time together, I shared with her how I had kept all the reflection papers and journals she had asked me to write during my formation. Those writings, and the lessons they represent, have shaped me into the Sister of Social Service I am today.

Sister Carol's life remains a profound source of inspiration to me. Her unwavering joy and boundless love challenge me to live with the same conviction and grace. I am determined to carry forward her legacy by radiating the sanctifying love of the Holy Spirit in every encounter.

For this is the one life I have, a life fleeting yet gifted with so many sacred moments. Ichigo ichie — one time, one meeting — cherish each moment and make every encounter a reflection of God's love.