

I WORK FOR GOD

What would make a woman in the '90s vow to live a life of celibacy, isolation, and silent prayer? Lisa Hiller finds three women for whom heaven can't wait.

Sister Peta-Marie Discalced Carmelite nun

When Sister Peta-Marie first entered the strictest order of cloistered, Catholic nuns in Australia two years ago, she discovered the Carmelite lifestyle wasn't what she'd imagined. "I thought it would be very stern and sombre, but the nuns are actually quite a rowdy bunch," she reveals. "There is a lot of fun and laughter."

Despite that, days are spent in silent prayer. From September to Easter each year, the nuns fast – and, unless ill, will spend their lives behind the monastery walls.

"A lot of [those] things people wouldn't understand or appreciate because, if you don't know the meanings behind the customs and the rituals, you might take a very superficial view of them, and it would be wrong," says Sister Peta-Marie.

It was the strictness of the life and the nuns' dedication to tradition and prayer that attracted her to the order, choosing it over a finished Medical Science degree.

Earlier this year, Sister Peta-Marie, 23, was officially professed in a ceremony that took in the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. "I've really been trying to live these vows since I entered the monastery two years ago," she says, "but, now that I've made the vows to God, there's that binding responsibility to fulfil them".

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Sister Linda Yuen
Taoist priestess

"I prayed to one of my favourite goddesses, Tin Hau, the Goddess of Sea and Heaven who guides travellers, that I'd make the right decision," says Sister Linda Yuen of her move to Australia. In 1991, she was asked by the spiritual leader of the Taoist church if she would leave Hong Kong to oversee the establishment of a new Australian temple.

"It was a big decision for me," she says. "I had visited Australia twice before, but I did not speak English very well." Plus, there were family considerations – disrupting her young son's schooling and leaving her ageing mother.

Sister Linda has now been the Head Priestess at the Evergreen Taoist Temple in Brisbane for six years and says Tin Hau answered her prayers. "My mother now lives with me, and I love the life here and my work in the temple."

The Taoist life is simple, meditative and in harmony with nature, the appeal of which became apparent to Sister Linda in her early 20s. "I would attend classes at the temple, and once I met a Taoist brother. We talked, and I began to understand that what I'd wanted for a long time I could find within the temple," she explains. "It's our duty to give service to people and encourage others to do the same. Since becoming a priestess, my life has not changed very much, except that I now feel very relaxed and peaceful."



Reverend Anne vanGend
Anglican priest

Four years ago, Anne vanGend, 31, was working as an English teacher in Africa when she felt called to the Anglican priesthood. "I wasn't even an Anglican at the time, and I'd never considered becoming a priest," she says.

Being in Cape Town during the lead-up to South Africa's first free elections inspired Anne to make her life-changing decision to enter the church. "My uncle had started a school in Zambia, so I went over and taught there for three years. [Then] I was involved with the Cape Town Cathedral, where [Archbishop] Tutu is based," Anne recalls. "I began to realise what an influence the church could have in a country, both in changing the [social] structures and the people."

When Anne returned to Australia, she decided to enter the priesthood. But, first, she had to become an Anglican. "I did that on the way to college," she laughs. "I packed the car, drove into town, the Bishop confirmed me in the Cathedral, then I got back in the car and drove away."

After studying theology, Anne will be ordained this month and is as passionate as ever about her vocation. "As a priest, you're with people at the crucial moments of their lives. It's such a privilege."