

NO HALF MEASURES:

THE STORY OF HAVING BEEN A NUN

by Vida de Voss • photographs Contributed

YOU NEED NOT BE IN THERESIA NEPOLO'S COMPANY FOR LONG TO REALISE YOU ARE IN THE PRESENCE OF SOMEONE EXCEPTIONAL. YOU SOON REALISE YOUR SENSE OF THERESIA BEING FORMIDABLE IS INFORMED BY YOU RECOGNISING THE RARITY OF WHOLE-HEARTED COMMITMENT. THIS CLAIM MAY SEEM IRONIC BUT IT IS NONETHELESS TRUE ONCE YOU KNOW THE FULL STORY. SISTER NAMIBIA SPOKE TO THIS ENGLISH LECTURER WHO USED TO BE A NUN.

Speaking to Theresia Nepolo you find she looks you straight in the eye and nods her head in understanding as if you are confessing to her. Her favourite word, “exactly” finds double emphasis when her sonorous voice goes a pitch higher each time she gets excited about the topic under discussion.

Theresia is one of nineteen children. Her parents have each made their distinct mark on her life. Her mother has a large non-judgemental heart

of caring. Theresia's mother swore she would never make a child in her house feel like they didn't belong or were unwelcome – the way she was made to feel growing up. It is for this reason that Theresia has a “twin” brother from another mother whom her mother breastfed the same time she breastfed Theresia. When villagers had much to say about her father's long absences from home (he worked at Oranjemund) or their children's behaviour, Meme Gwayakopo (as she is

fondly known as) responded that she would take care of her business and they need not be concerned. Like her mother, Theresia is not fazed by the comments of others and has a deep love for the youth.

From her father she got her work ethic, which comes down to the simple rule that you don't sleep unless the work is done. As school-going children they were not exempted from working in the mahangu field. This was, nonetheless, no excuse for them not to do their school-

work. During the planting and harvesting seasons the children easily stayed home for as long as a week to work in the fields. They woke early to meet their classmates in the afternoon to copy summaries and get the homework. In the evenings, after they returned from the fields, they would do their homework under the supervision of mostly their mother. The next morning before starting work in the fields they would give their classmates their homework to take to the teacher. In this way

there was no excuse to get behind with their schoolwork. Even today, Theresia gets the work done of two people because she does not believe in sleeping until the work is done.

Growing up in a Catholic home Theresia was exposed to numerous facets of Catholicism and felt deeply attracted to a simple and devout life. She loved the rules and ceremonies. The guidelines of this group brought alive the notion that a person ought to be a carrier of the light and that you should be helpful. Parallel to this exposure and attraction, Theresia was one of seven children at school who were always competing for the four top positions. A group of adults wanted to give these village kids a better chance in life by sending them to a good school at Ruacana. Theresia decided she would not take the opportunity since her older siblings turned out fine although they did not have such an opportunity. Plus, why should she be privileged above her younger siblings who would probably not be given the chance to go to a better school? In the end, only one of the five pupils who did go, managed to complete Grade 10. Three of the girls fell pregnant and dropped out because the bus/taxi drivers took advantage of them. Theresia was immensely grateful to God for having spared her. Although she proceeded to Grades 11 and 12 at the nearest secondary school, her gratitude for having escaped the Ruacana fiasco developed in her a longing to tangibly thank God. The desire to become a Catholic nun grew stronger during her final years at school so that she couldn't wait to complete school to become a novice (a trainee nun). Spending more time on extracurricular activities in church and at school eventu-

ally resulted in Theresia failing Grade 12.

People might have said, "Shame, Theresia had so much potential..." But Theresia was just too happy to be able to pack up and start "formation," which would take four years of training for her to become a nun. During these four years she proceeded to improve her grades at Namcol and eventually enrolled at the University of Namibia as a 26-year-old. Theresia's academic drive got ignited during her studies at Unam.

As a nun she loved her work with the youth and therefore the education profession suited her perfectly. Theresia also got to travel a great deal during this time, be it for training to places such as Gibeon, Okatana and Swakopmund or to Indonesia and Australia for World Youth days.

The process of becoming a nun is very thorough. Over a period of six years women are given ample opportunity to walk away or become absolutely certain of choosing the way of life of a nun. Nuns are expected to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience for only one year at a time over a period of five years. The final vows, which would be for life, only become possible in the sixth year. Thereafter there are only three possibilities for exiting. It was before her final vows that Theresia started having doubts but thought of what people would say – especially the young trainees who had joined, in part because of her inspiration. She eventually took the vows. Not long thereafter she, however, realised she needed to be brave to be honest. Pleasing others was not going to cut it. She figured she would rather disgrace herself but save her soul. She was not going to break her vows and pretend before people. She was prepared for the judgement she

would get. Ultimately her vow was to always serve God.

Theresia studied the Canon law and its regulations. She learned there were only three ways to exit. She had to denounce Jesus or the Catholic faith, both of which she was unwilling to do. Theresia chose the third exit strategy. Thus she left the religious life. People's reactions to her decision suggest they considered her as having failed and that she consequently deserves pity or ridicule. For Theresia, it became necessary to maintain an honest relationship with God and for this reason she would heed the advice of St Paul in 1 Corinthians 7.

Theresia's leaving the religious life was more internal than external. Although she went on to do her master's degree in English after she completed the honours, she

returned to serve in the church as a Biblical and catechetical instructor. Her teaching and lecturing also meant she has never lost contact with the youth, simply serving them in a different capacity.

Since leaving the convent, Theresia had gotten married and given birth to a daughter. She has thus merely transitioned from being a Catholic religious sister to being a married Catholic woman. The same girl who wanted to devote all her time to serve God and carry his light is continuing to do so outside the convent in the world. The same girl who failed Grade 12 is the woman currently enrolled for her PhD and working hard to publish as much as possible to become a lecturer par excellence in order to attain her professorship. ♀

