My parents and catechism class taught me the meaning of life is to know, love, and serve God. I saw God as a heavenly Father as I participated in my First Holy Communion. I went to the public school several blocks away from my house and spent time helping my mother keep the household any way I could as I was the fourth of nine children. I wanted to be good and do the right things because I saw how important it was in the family for anything to go smoothly. I was very introverted and and didn’t have much of an opinion. I respectfully went to Catechism class and never questioned the teachings of the Church.

Throughout high school I added more and more to my schedule and résumé. I played several sports and as a freshman was playing at the varsity level as goalkeeper for the school’s soccer team and my days were filled with extracurricular activities back to back. I trained myself to put so much emphasis on being a hard worker and thought that emotions were showing weakness. Within those high school years I lost my identity as a daughter of God. Though I went to Mass I thought being a good Catholic meant just being a good person with not more depth than that. I also learned how to please others as I grew in social skills. I had various part-time jobs around town and continued to grow in independence. By my senior year of high school I was successful in academics, soccer, I was a hard worker and was being recruited to play at several universities.

At the start of my freshman year at Minnesota State University-Moorhead my soccer team became my family away from home. During the first campout bonding trip we played games around the fire and it was an eye opening time to what lustful activities each of my teammates underwent in search of love. I played everything down to try fitting in as best I could. By halfway through the season I earned the starter goalkeeper spot – surpassing the other freshman and junior goalkeepers who had better training to start with. I also observed the life of the team and cared for my teammates in their nights partying as I sought to find friendship and belonging.

For a spring break trip my soccer team went to play in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and with playing a few games against some teams and touring a few stadiums it was an experience idolizing soccer as the center. I roomed with two teammates that were dating each other at the time. I felt free to go out on the town with everyone and we were treated like VIPs at a club we ended up at. I wanted to be loved and the club and dancing was freeing. Surprising to my teammates, I was one of the last of the girls to get back to our hotel that night.

My junior year of college I had a cousin that gave a Varsity Catholic missionary my phone number. That missionary then called me to invite me to attend her athlete Bible study. That semester I had 18 credits, two part-time jobs, and soccer practice daily, causing me to stay up until 2am most days to do homework. I didn’t want to full-out say ‘no’ so I thought I would go once and just not go again. That semester one of my teammates was a borderline alcoholic and I had a hockey player friend that went to a neighboring college so I drove both of them to that Bible study.

The missionary study leader promoted the 2010 Made for More FOCUS national conference in Orlando, Florida, and kept inviting me personally several times. I registered mostly to get her off my case yet that conference impacted me so deeply with the talks and the genuine dynamic Catholics that witnessed their relationship with Christ as if He were their best friend. In that weeklong experience I realized I needed to deepen my relationship with the person of Jesus through prayer, confession, and Mass. With a few new faith resolutions, I flew to England to start my spring semester studying abroad at the University of Lincoln in central England.

I was one of the three young Catholic students in the small city that I was aware of. I found a Catholic church about a 20 minute walk away from my apartment and I also found they had Eucharistic Adoration on Fridays. There were a few elderly people that prayed and they liked my accent so at 3pm they would have me lead the Divine Mercy Chaplet.

Therefore, I quickly learned and was absorbed in that devotion, having a greater awareness of the Lord’s mercy and love that I needed and to open my heart to receive it more. Every week sitting there I would ask Jesus to reveal Himself to me in the Eucharist. Every Sunday I took notes during the homily at mass, I went to confession once a month and saw how I was starting to break away from the culture I was so desensitized to.

While I was transitioning to life in England I played for their women’s soccer team, as they needed a goalkeeper. So with that I found an even more liberal and ‘if it feels good do it’ culture as the team clubbed on Wednesdays and the weekends. More women on the team were openly same-sex attracted and the campus explicitly promoted propaganda to not be homophobic.

Throughout my time abroad I fell into the merciful and loving arms of the Lord countless times just as a toddler learns to walk. I slowly started to form my identity in the Lord and let go of the social scene I wanted to cling to with a few different crowds of my peers in England.

My senior year back in America I found that those friends I had clung to previously were not as mature and exciting as I saw they once were to me. At that time another missionary shared with me something I’ll never forget. He said, “The end of the world could happen tomorrow, and I don’t want to be standing in front of the gates of heaven waiting to get in and my best friends in front of me turn around and say, ‘Why didn’t you tell me about heaven? Now its too late for me to get in.”

I realized for the first time that if I truly loved my friends I would have conversations with them that at the time I couldn’t even dream about having. I didn’t know how to go about that at all, so I thought maybe FOCUS could teach me.

A month later I interviewed and was offered a position and as I said ‘yes’ a huge wave of peace came over me and even though I didn’t really understand what being a missionary meant I knew it was what God was calling me to do and I was filled with consolation and a happiness that lasted for months.

I was sent to serve at a rival campus in Minnesota and it was there where I jumped into the mission of inviting college students into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church, inspiring and equipping them for a lifetime of Christ-centered evangelization, discipleship and friendship in which they lead others to do the same.

God is blessing Varsity Catholic with many conversion stories of students. Here is one story of a student I worked with my first two years as a missionary:  
  
Erika was a division I hockey player that was raised in a lukewarm family. She grew up in the hockey culture and had been in a serious relationship that was immoral. After investing time in building up a friendship with her, she started confiding in me and slowly saw the beauty of finding her identity as a daughter of God. I was her outlet for choosing goodness. We grew in our relationships with the Lord together as she invested in her interior life of prayer and the sacraments. I would drive Erika to daily mass, invite her to come to Bible study, pray in adoration, and go on retreats with me. Eventually she opened her heart to the idea of going on mission since she saw the need and had a heart for the dark world she had experienced within athletics. Last year she answered the Lord’s call to become a missionary and is currently serving and reaching out to other athletes.

Thank you for this opportunity and I am excited to share with you that I will be entering Religious Life with the Handmaids of the Heart of Jesus, a diocesan community in Minnesota in this year of Consecrated life. Through my time with Varsity Catholic, the formation, support, and opportunities opened the door to discerning my vocation and being open to hear the invitation of Jesus Christ in the silence of my heart to devote my whole life to Him. Thank you and God bless.