Growing up in communist Romania, especially in its last years of “glory”, was a long series of hardships. Freedom of speech was non-existent, practicing the faith was an act of bravery, achievement through hard work and using one’s brain was not pleasing to the authorities, resulting in many of “the elite” of the country being arrested, tortured and starved to death in the communist prisons. There was a shortage of everything: food was scarce and rationed, the wood for the fire was also very scarce, electricity was turned on for two or three hours a day - when the Party decided, the same with the running water, as Ceausescu was sending a lot of goods to the export, tightening the rope more and more. Under the circumstances, bringing up a family, whether large or small, was a great challenge for parents, who were working hard, day in day out and sometimes for very little money.

However, living in the countryside was a blessing. It meant a garden around the house, where families could grow their own fruit and vegetables. A cow in the shed meant milk and homemade yoghurt and cheese, one or two pigs in the piggery meant meat, and a few hens around the house meant eggs and … chicken. Sadly for many families, a lot of these home-grown products had to be “donated” to the Party. Despite the bleakness of the situation, as children, not aware of the scale of the awful state of affairs, we were able to enjoy life, we were happy, at home, in school and in the street while playing games with our friends, after finishing the homework and the chores around the house.

Faith was passed on in the family from one generation to the next, so we inherited it from our parents, who taught us what sacrifice, hardworking, respect of one another, sharing, acceptance, tolerance, helping each other and our neighbours in need were all about. Although religious practice was forbidden, in our part of the country we were able to go to catechism classes in church and to attend weekly, even daily Mass. They could not take that from us. My mother was a great example in this respect, taking part in Mass almost daily and encouraging us to do the same. Religious life had almost been wiped out by the communist regime, or so they thought. However, God was in the midst of it all and he was still calling, and people were still answering the call, and Religious life had to go and survive underground.

The events immediately previous to Romania gaining its freedom from the communist regime, in December 1989, had a great impact on me. I was still a teenager at the time, but I learnt a lesson never to forget, that victory cannot be achieved without huge sacrifice, as hundreds of lives, especially young, were lost across the country in the confrontations between the peaceful protesters and the armed forces. I was still in high school at the time, but the lesson has stayed with me ever since… no victory / no gain / no achievement / no fulfilment without sacrifice!

When I heard the call to follow Christ in Religious life, at first I thought that my mind was playing tricks, and I asked God, “Who? Me? Why? What merits do I have? None! I am not worthy of such a call! Please go and knock on another door…” But God insisted and knocked again … once, twice, three times. The last time was a very gentle invitation to “Come and see”, words spoken by a former school colleague who had joined the Sisters a few months previously. I just knew I couldn’t play hide and seek with God anymore, I knew that if I wanted to have a happy life, I would have to say “YES”, which I did. Leaving home was not at all easy, the hardest part was having to leave behind my family, my friends, my familiar surroundings, and having to start all anew with people I did not know, with people somebody else chose as my companions. But all along the way, God has been there, because He gives us the grace that goes with the calling, if we are open. Otherwise, it cannot happen. God’s grace is the one that keeps us alive, that keeps us going and keeps us growing. I firmly believe that God prepared me for my vocation since the beginning, by choosing the country I was to live in, at a time when we needed to fully rely on Him and to really hold on to our faith, by picking the family I grew up in – a way of living in community, by giving me the experience of having to care for my younger siblings, my nieces and nephews – a taste of my future ministry, as a teacher.

Life in community has its ups and downs, like with any group of people coming to live together under the same roof, each one with a different background, their own way of thinking and attitude to life. There has to be give and take, compromising, stepping on each other’s toes, coming out of the comfort zone, authentic dialogue, all of whom leading to growth, fulfillment and happiness.

Our commitment to the Lord is constant, as we renew our “Yes” daily. We pray individually and as a community, we spend quality time together. With faith and trust in the Lord, with gratitude for his goodness to us, and with the awareness that we owe it all to Him, we serve the Lord in his brothers and sisters of all walks of life, but especially those who find themselves in the greatest need, and we do it with humility, love, joy and a generous heart.

Our way of life is a happy way of life, that has been part of the Church from its beginnings. If you feel that God is calling you, you could give it a go. There is nothing to lose.

Sr. Cecilia