

Triumph of the Heart

PRAYER: THE KEY TO GOD'S HEART

PDF - Family of Mary

2011 (IV)

Nr. 58

*“As far as the Pope is concerned, he too is a simple beggar
before God even more than all other people....”*

*I then talk with the dear Lord also, begging, for the most
part, but also in thanksgiving – or quite simply being joyful.”*

Pope Benedict XVI

Ask, and You Shall Receive

Dear friends and benefactors, since prayer is essential to a living Christian faith, in this issue of Triumph of the Heart we want to share some experiences in prayer from people of all walks of life. May the examples be a source of encouragement to a renewed trust in the great yet often underestimated power of prayer.

Trust is especially important when we are challenged with difficult situations in our daily life, when it is hard to pray because of bodily weakness perhaps, suffering from constant distraction, feeling so far away from God because of a spiritual dryness or inner abandonment that one does not find a single word with which to turn to God. This is the instant, however, that faithful, deep prayer is just as vital for the soul as food is for the body.

The happy future of a family, and even entire races and nations, should be founded on deep prayer. In his time, St. Padre Pio, a holy and experienced spiritual director, had to ascertain with dismay, “The present society doesn’t pray, and therefore it is heading for ruin.” The state of affairs in the world today confirms this!

The earthquake in Haiti, the ash from the volcano in Iceland, the burning forests in Russia and the thousand-year floods in Pakistan during the so-called “Year of Disasters” in 2010 have nearly

been forgotten in light of the dramatic events in the first half of this year. Consider the revolutions of the Muslim nations in North Africa with the never-ending stream of refugees, the continuing battles in Libya or the greatest drama of all in Fukushima which unfolded before the eyes of the world following the devastating earthquake and tsunami.

All this should really make us think and, above all, lead us to trust more in prayer. Considering all the catastrophes and man’s helplessness, the words of the Mother of All Nations automatically come to mind:

“The world no longer knows where to turn.... Every day ... you shall think of the prayer which the Lady of All Nations gave to this world in this time. You, nations of this time, know that you are under the protection of the Lady of All Nations. Invoke her as Advocate; ask her to stave off all disasters. Ask her to banish degeneration from this world. From degeneration comes disaster. From degeneration comes war. Through my prayer you shall ask that this be staved off from the world. You do not know how great and how important this prayer is before God. He will hear His Mother, as she wants to be your Advocate.”
(May 31, 1955)

“This prayer has been given for the redemption of the world. This prayer has been given for the conversion of the world. Pray this prayer in all that you do ... that the world may be delivered from degeneration, disaster and war.” (Dec. 31, 1951)

Since the Mother of All Nations explicitly gave us her prayer for this difficult time and God has given it such power, we would like to encourage

you once again to continue to spread this prayer and to pray it every day so that the Holy Spirit, divine love and peace, might come.

We all know the daily battle of faithfulness in prayer. It is a matter of breaking through an invisible wall of indolence, indifference or resistance and overcoming the excuse of not having any time by simply beginning to pray whether we feel something or not.

Mother Marie-Alphonsine of the Holy Rosary

*It was a joyous occasion as
Sultaneh Mariam Danil Ghattas (1843-1927),
the founder of the Rosary Sisters, was beatified in the
Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth on October 22, 2009.
Christians in the Holy Land had never before experienced
such a liturgical celebration.*

An Arabic daughter of Jerusalem

Until now, Bl. Marie-Alphonsine has been unknown in our part of the world. Yet even in her days, she remained modestly in the background so that her own sisters did not know about her rich interior life, her visions and her intimate relationship with Our Lady. Even the mother superior, her sibling Hanna, had not the faintest idea before the death of Sr. Alphonsine that she was actually the founder of the congregation. It was, in fact, the vocation of this very pleasant saint to joyfully offer herself in silence for her community, which today has papal recognition. Born in 1843 into the wealthy Arab-Christian family Danil Ghattas in Jerusalem, Sultaneh Mariam followed Jesus' call when she was

just 14 by joining the Sisters of St. Joseph. When she received the habit in 1860 at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on Calvary, this Palestinian received the name Sr. Marie-Alphonsine. Two years later, in this same holy place of Jesus' suffering and death, she made her temporary vows at the age of 19. Sr. Alphonsine immediately began teaching catechism with great enthusiasm to the girls in Jerusalem's parochial school. Inflamed by her great love for Our Lady, the children soon flocked to the Marian congregation which she founded and from which the first Rosary Sisters later came. After a few years of very blessed work, Sr. Alphonsine went to teach in Bethlehem.

Here, wondrous things began to happen to the unsuspecting 30-year-old nun when on January 6, 1874 while praying the Rosary, Our Lady appeared to her for the first time. Sr. Alphonsine suddenly saw the Queen of the Rosary standing in a bright light, her arms spread out, in her hands a large Rosary which hung down to her feet, and her head encircled with 15 stars. The vision left an indescribable peace and a burning desire to work for God and for souls.

As Sr. Alphonsine was praying in the grotto of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem exactly one year later, January 6, 1875, Mary came again and bathed the praying sister in a bright light. "A ray of light emanating from Our Lady pierced me through and wounded me with her love." From that moment she was accompanied by a marvelous star which always shone whether bright or dim, whether near to her or at a distance. She could see Our Lady continuously in this radiant star, similar to Bl. Anna Maria Taigi from Rome who a century earlier was accompanied for 47 years by a sun of light in which she could see present and future events. That same evening, Our Lady appeared again, surrounded by a group of joyful girls, and over them was written, "The Congregation of the Rosary".

In further visions throughout the year, Sr. Alphonsine saw the future Rosary Convent and all the Rosary Sisters who would live there. Mary described in detail the daily program and the rule they were to follow. To encourage Sr. Alphonsine who was hesitant about the new foundation, Our Lady touched her lightly with her Rosary and said, "The Rosary is your

treasure. Trust in my mercy and the goodness of Almighty God."

She was supported by the well-known stigmatized mystic Bl. Mariam Baouardy, from the Carmelite convent in Bethlehem, "Start the work; God wants it! It will succeed."

Since founding a congregation was indeed no easy task, Our Lady answered Sr. Alphonsine's prayers and put her very talented sister Hanna (1858-1931) at her side. Above all, however, she gave her a wise priest and spiritual director, Fr. Joseph Tannous from Nazareth, for the realization of the foundation.

Sr. Alphonsine, who had worked with the Sisters of St. Joseph for 20 years, had to ask—just like Mother Teresa 66 years later—for a papal dispensation to leave her order, which Pope Leo XIII granted in 1880. She was now free to join the first five Palestinian girls who were very poor but happy.

As the first members of the new congregation, they lived together in a small apartment which Fr. Tannous had found for them. On March 7, 1885, Sr. Marie-Alphonsine of the Rosary joyfully made her vows before the Patriarch of Jerusalem with eight other novices.

Other sisters were given the positions of leadership for the young community, but Fr. Tannous, who was the only one who knew who was hidden in this quiet and by him highly respected Sr. Alphonsine, often sought from her council and support for direction of the order and asked her to write down everything she experienced in her visions.

Nousseira and the miracle at the cistern

During her 42 years in the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters, the great mystic Sr. Alphonsine showed herself to be extremely practical. She was a woman of action who, at the same time, never put down her Rosary. She was always ready to move from one place to another to found convents, schools for the education of

Arabian youth and orphanages, be it in Salt, Jordan where she also cared for the Bedouins or in the Holy Land.

Just a few months after their vows, the young sisters would be sent out, always in pairs. So Sr. Alphonsine set out for Jaffa, Galilee in July 1885, accompanied by another sister and her spiritual

director Fr. Joseph Tannous. Her first “convent” and her first “school” initially consisted of two miserable makeshift rooms, the larger of which served as a classroom for 35 girls and the second one barely having space for two beds.

During the day, one of the beds had to give way to a desk. The two Rosary Sisters endured this situation for almost a year before the superior of the Poor Clares in Nazareth gave them a little money with which they set up two more rooms. Four weeks before the inauguration ceremony, on April 14, 1886, a spectacular miracle took place which was recorded by a number of eye witnesses.

On this day, Nousseira Habib el’ Id el Issa, a 12-year-old Greek Orthodox girl, had volunteered to help the sisters clean the stone floor in their house’s addition. When she went to draw water, she fell into the 25 foot deep cistern. Sr. Catherine screamed for help, but it took ten minutes before a few men arrived with a rope. Although the girl floated twice to the surface, she was already unconscious and therefore did not reach for the rope.

The villagers who had rushed to the scene started yelling at the sisters, blaming them for everything that had happened, and the girl’s relatives tore their clothes in desperation. The villagers immediately declared that the sisters would pay dearly for her death.

Without defending herself, Sr. Alphonsine accepted the accusations and hurried with a few children into the church where she started praying the Rosary before the Blessed Sacrament. She returned to the scene of the accident with the Rosary still in her hand, and one of the angry Arabs yelled, “You should burn with your Rosary and your Hail Marys!” He then shoved her so hard that she fell to the ground. She stood up quickly, pushed her way through the crowd and tossed her Rosary into the cistern. She called out, “Queen of the Rosary, save the child, and help us in our great need!”

Those around her started laughing and mocked her saying, “Your Mary can’t help you any more in this situation. The girl has drowned; she sunk to the bottom almost an hour ago.”

Sr. Alphonsine was not deterred, however, and returned to the church with the group of children and continued with the Rosary. Meanwhile, Sr. Catherine stayed at the well and lowered a bucket down to the bottom. Suddenly the rope moved. As the sister pulled up the bucket with the help of one of the Arabs, a head suddenly appeared and then, to the great surprise of the people, Nousseira was standing in the bucket with the Rosary around her neck.

As if nothing had happened, she hugged the teacher and told her, “While I was under water, I felt the bright, shining Rosary fall on me and come to rest on my hands and neck. The whole cistern was filled with light. I felt perfectly relaxed in the water, like lying on a lounge chair. I saw many people at the opening of the cistern and heard a voice call out to me, ‘Grab the rope!’ I took hold of it and came out safe and sound.”

Sr. Catherine hurried to the church and re-ported the miraculous rescue to Sr. Alphonsine who was still praying. As Sr. Alphonsine walked out of the church, Nousseira joyfully ran up to her unable to hide her excitement, “I am so happy about what I saw in the cistern, brightly illuminated by the Rosary. I am sad that they pulled me up so quickly.”

The effects of the miracle were unprecedented: The girl and her family converted from the Orthodox Faith to Catholicism, as did the local Protestant teacher, her mother and a number of students. The Protestant school was closed and the sisters’ classrooms quickly became too small. Nousseira prayed the Rosary every day with the sisters, and even years after the accident, she was more than willing to recount the miraculous rescue and her thankfulness to anybody who was interested.

Heavenly fruit

In June 1893, Sr. Alphonsine moved with another sister to Bethlehem where she built an orphanage for girls with a school and a workshop, the last wish of her spiritual director. She worked there very successfully as the superior for 15 years despite the most difficult conditions because the number of children, students and unemployed seeking help and protection grew continuously. They had to move to a bigger house almost every year; the only thing that remained the same was the bitter poverty.

Shortly before the Feast of St. Joseph in 1904, they found that their pantries were empty again. In their great need, the sisters turned to St. Joseph by praying a novena. The ninth day arrived, but they were still waiting for help. Sr. Alphonsine encouraged everybody to trust, "Let us pray to St. Joseph. He will not abandon us!"

It had already grown dark and it was pouring rain. Suddenly, the sisters heard a soft knock at the door. A stranger was standing outside. Motioning gently to the heavy load on his back, he said kindly, "This is for the orphans."

The surprised sisters let in the friendly man and took the load off his back. It was a Bedouin mantle full of fruit and vegetables. It was amazing that despite the rain the produce, the mantle and even the stranger's long robe were completely dry! "Who sent you, the brothers from Tantur or the sisters from Hortas?" the sisters asked. He answered only, "I don't know." At that moment, the orphans came running up and marveled at the various types of fruit and vegetables which the silent stranger had brought.

They carried the precious gift together into the kitchen, and after they had unpacked everything, Sr. Franziska folded up the mantle. Only then did she notice the unusual beauty of the yellow-gold mantle. It was new and did not have any creases. "Actually, it is kind of a pity to wrap produce in such a magnificent new cape," she thought to herself. Moreover, the mantle did not have a single spot or stain since all the fruit

and vegetables were meticulously washed and polished.

Without saying anything to one another, Mother Alphonsine stayed with the stranger, captivated by the sight of this tall, slender man with defined facial features and beautiful, kind eyes. He had a fair complexion, and the long, clean robe, woven through with blue stripes, was held by a wide, bright blue belt.

In the meantime, Sr. Franziska came to return the mantle, handing it to the stranger. He did not put it back on, as one might expect with the pouring rain outside, but rather draped it over his arm. When they asked him if they could pay him something, he simply answered, "No thank you," and said good-bye politely to the sisters and children before disappearing into the night.

As soon as the door was closed behind him, the sisters looked at one another astounded and said simultaneously, "That was St. Joseph!" The next day, they asked all their benefactors if any of them had sent such wonderful fruit and vegetables, but they all had to admit that they had not.

The sisters and the children thankfully ate from the abundant gifts for a whole week, and Mother Alphonsine often repeated with a smile, "Eat, children, from the fruits of paradise which St. Joseph brought us!" Sr. Franziska recounted about a light green, potato-like fruit with a sweet taste, something which does not exist in Palestine and which she had never seen before or after this visit. It tasted delicious raw or cooked.

Mother Alphonsine experienced the Queen of the Rosary's remarkable help in her apostolate. When she went once to visit Hanna Issa el Kat-tan, for example, a neighbor of theirs who was blind, she was moved with compassion and asked for a glass of water into which she dipped her Rosary and let the drops of water trickle over her eyes. Then she prayed 15 Hail Marys with those present. Although the doctors had given up, the blindness healed completely in just a few

days. Hanna could go unaided to church to offer her thanks to God.

Another time, the Rosary Sisters were called to the death bed of Gabriel Dabdoub who died of typhoid fever shortly after they arrived. In accordance with the oriental custom, the relatives began wailing and mourning loudly. Mother Alphonsine remained calm and encouraged the desperate family to trust in Jesus and the

Queen of the Rosary. Here too she asked for a glass of water, again dipped her Rosary in it and let a few drops dribble into the dead man's mouth. Gabriel miraculously swallowed and to everyone's amazement asked for something to eat. Love for the Queen of the Rosary and the prayer of the Rosary spread rapidly among the simple country folk.

Valuable books

In 1909, after decades of hard pastoral work, Mother Alphonsine was called back to the Motherhouse in Jerusalem. There, she stood by her sister Hanna, who was in her second term as mother general, for eight years, offering her help and advice. The 66-year-old Sr. Alphonsine cleverly hid her extraordinary gifts and virtues. Not even her diary betrays anything about the last 20 years of her life.

Every now and again, the otherwise silent sister modestly mentioned to the other sisters what Our Lady had asked of her earlier in a vision, "Our Blessed Mother would be very happy if we prayed a perpetual Rosary in our convent." Since her request fell only on deaf ears, she just did her best to give a good example.

Even though she was 74 years old, in 1917, obedience called the elderly sister to give all she had for one final mission. Mother Alphonsine gladly offered her last strength to transform her family's country home in Ain Karem, where John the Baptist was born and where she spent her vacations as a child, into an orphanage.

She would also die here 10 years later on March 25, 1927. On this day, Our Lady fulfilled the promise she had made years earlier, "When you have achieved God's will and mine as well, and when you have done what you see and what I ask of you, then you may go with me." Mother Alphonsine Danil Ghattas shut her eyes forever as she was praying the fourth glorious mystery, the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, at the age of 84. She died with the words on her lips: "pray

for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." Only afterwards did Sr. Hanna, following Mother Alphonsine's instructions, discover the two hand-written notebooks containing the valuable visions, dreams and descriptions which the blessed had written down in obedience

When the Rosary Sisters found out that the inconspicuous Sr. Alphonsine had received such extraordinary graces and that she was the soul of the foundation, most of them could not believe it at first. Yet the more they thought about it, the more they agreed, "She was a saint. It is proof enough that she put up with us, that she never talked back and that she never complained about us or said anything negative about us; although, she never had time to since she was always praying her Rosary."

Today, the 260 sisters of the pontifically approved congregation work mostly in parishes as well as in the numerous schools and preschools for the education of young Arabs. They have 60 such places in the Holy Land and in Lebanon, Kuwait, Egypt, Syria and the United Arab Emirates. They also work in retirement homes, hospitals and lead Marian congregations for girls and women.

The sisters pray the perpetual Rosary which Our Lady asked for every month before the Blessed Sacrament with all the students, patients and elderly. In order to fulfill Our Lady's request

within the congregation, despite their strenuous apostolate, each sister receives one mystery of the Rosary each year which she should pray

every day in this intention in addition to her normal Rosary. In this way, every day the order prays the four Rosaries roughly 13 times.

New Hope through Prayer

“If I pray I am never alone,” wrote Pope Benedict XVI in “Spes Salvi”, his encyclical on Christian hope, and remembering Cardinal Van Thuan: “In a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness, the fact that he could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope.” It is unlikely that any of us has spent time in prison or solitary confinement, but we have all at one time or another experienced an inability to pray like Cardinal Van Thuan. In the Year of the Great Jubilee 2000, Pope John Paul II humbly and thankfully attended the spiritual schooling of this Vietnamese cardinal when he held the Lenten retreat for the Pope and the Roman Curia and revealed some very personal things from his life:

I am standing here before you today as a poor, former convict who spent more than 13 years in prison, nine of them in solitary confinement. On August 15, 1975 ... I was arrested. With a Rosary in my pocket, I left home, and on the way to prison I realized that I was losing everything. Without warning, I was expected—also on God’s part—to return to the essentials.

When I was released, many said, “Father, you had a lot of time to pray in prison.” It is not as easy as they think though. The Lord allowed me to feel my total weakness, my bodily and spiritual frailty. In prison, time passes slowly, especially in solitary confinement. Imagine a week, a month, two months of silence ... they are terribly long. But when this becomes years, it turns into an eternity. There were days when I—worn out from exhaustion and illness—was unable to speak a single prayer.

When I was unable to pray in this condition, I usually turned to Our Lady and said, “Mother, you see that I am at my wits’ end. I cannot even offer a single prayer. I will simply say ‘Hail Mary’ with my whole, love-filled heart. By placing everything in your hands I want to repeat ‘Hail

Mary’. I ask you, let this prayer reach all those who need it in the Church and in my diocese.”

During my time in solitary confinement, I was supervised by five guards. They took turns watching me; two of them were always with me. Their supervisors said to them, “We will change the group of guards every two weeks so that you will not be swayed by this dangerous bishop.” They later decided, “We are not going to swap you out any more, otherwise this bishop is going to sway all the officers.”

In the beginning, the guards did not say a word to me ... I thought a lot about it and prayed for inspiration on how to break through this wall of silence. Then one night I thought, “Francois, you are still very rich, you have Christ’s love in your heart; love them like Jesus loved you.” The next day I started to love them more, to love Jesus in them with a smile and a friendly word. I began ... telling them about my trips out of the country ... about science, freedom, technology. This sparked their interest and brought them to ask me many questions. Slowly we became friends. They wanted to learn foreign languages ... and so my guards became my students.

One day, one of them asked me, “Can you teach me a song in Latin?”

“Yes, but there are so many and one is more beautiful than the other.”

“Sing them for me, I will listen and choose one of them.”

So I sang Ave Maris Stella, Salve Mater, Veni Creator ... and he chose Veni Creator—Come Holy Spirit.

I never believed that an Atheist police officer would learn this whole hymn by heart, and even less that he would intone it every morning when

he went down the wooden stairs to go exercise in the garden and take his bath. He sang the whole song several times through... And when he had returned to his room and finished getting dressed, he finished with the words, “in saecula saeculorum. Amen.”

I was very surprised about it in the beginning, but I slowly realized that it was the Holy Spirit making use of a Communist police officer to help an imprisoned bishop pray who was so weak and down that he was incapable of doing it himself.

Unheard Novenas

Similar to Cardinal Van Thuan, a Salesian priest from Slovakia, Fr. Anton Srholec, also suffered under the Communist regime.

A look at his life and prayer should strengthen our trust that God answers our prayers instantly and in the best possible way, even when it greatly differs from what we desired, prayed for and expected.

Anton Srholec, born in 1929, grew up in a very pious family with many children on a farm in Skalica, Slovakia. In 1946, at the age of 17, he joined the Salesians in Hronsky Benadik. Their ideal fit him very well because, since he was 14, he wanted to become a priest and teacher for poor, neglected youth. Nevertheless, after just three years in the community, his life changed dramatically. “On my way to the priesthood a huge disappointment hit me when we had to leave the theology schools in April 1950, and back then I ... was interned only because I had decided to consecrate my life to God.”

Although the young Salesians were released shortly thereafter, there was no visible chance of them being ordained to the priesthood in their homeland. Anton tried illegally to go to Turin, Italy to continue his theological studies. The would-be refugee was caught at the border though and, as a result, sentenced to 12 years in prison.

In the notorious Leopoldov Prison, Anton was put in solitary confinement. Alone in a tiny cell, he recalled what the father of his order St. John Bosco once said, “Whoever prays a novena to the Blessed Virgin Mary can count on a miracle.” So he started to pray, one novena and then a second. It was unsuccessful. Why didn’t God intervene? Had he not prayed well? So he prayed a third novena in the morning between two Rosaries. “Just to be sure, I always repeated it a second time. I had plenty of time. Just be faithful, conscientious and obedient. I had never prayed with greater recollection. Hungry and emaciated, I forgot everything around me. When I finished the novena, still nothing happened. The door didn’t even open. In my soul, however, I found a deep peace; I was almost happy to be living in these conditions. And I suddenly understood that when I have God, it doesn’t matter if I am imprisoned or free, healthy or sick, rich or poor, successful or a failure.”

The miracle did happen, and so much so that Anton, despite the brutal interrogations and harassment, could always testify as a faithful man of prayer in the many years to follow, “I held the source of peace, joy and happiness within me.”

After a few months, the prisoner was transferred to the concentration camp in Jachymov, north of Prague, Czechoslovakia. The 23-year-old seminarian remained there for ten years until his amnesty in 1960, doing forced labor under inhumane conditions in a nearby uranium mine. Among the camp secrets were the clandestine Holy Masses deep in the mine and the “living Rosary” which Anton Srholec started. Men in eight groups, so-called “roses”, secretly took turns praying 15 decades of the Rosary each day. When Anton was betrayed one day by an informant, he used the 14-day punishment in solitary confinement to intensify his prayer. He said, “I came to the point where I didn’t think

any more about anything. I experienced myself only filled with love and peace, as unemotional as a statue, happy that God loves me. He was in me, and I was in him.”

In 1960, after his early release, Anton went to work in a factory and studied theology secretly. “It wasn’t until 1969, that the situation lightened. I finished studying and, as if by a miracle, in May 1970, I was ordained a priest by Pope Paul VI in Rome.” They continued to persecute him until the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

Today, Fr. Srholec is 82 years old. We visited him in March in Bratislava where he told us about the 50 homeless people he cares for with the help of others. “They have lost their homes and need somebody who has an open house and heart for them. I celebrate Holy Mass for those who want to come, but it is hard to pray with them. The best they can do is the Our Father. Nevertheless, I believe they thankfully feel that prayer has become a part of my life.”

The Gospel is my Guiding Star

The Swiss nun Maria Bernarda Butler (1848-1924) put her life under this motto. She lived as a cloistered nun with the Capuchins for more than 20 years in Altstatten, Switzerland, and reformed the convent. At the age of 40, her missionary zeal for souls led her to South America. Pope Benedict XVI canonized this great mystic and founder in Rome on October 12, 2008.

Verena Butler was born on May 28, 1848 in Auw, Switzerland, the fourth of eight children in a deeply faithful family. In her childhood, God drew her to himself with extraordinary mystical graces. She soon desired nothing more than to spend her life in a convent where she could give herself entirely to God. After a few obstacles, she joined the Capuchin convent “Mary Help of Christians” in Altstatten, Switzerland in 1867 at the age of 19. She received the name Maria Bernarda of the Holy Heart of Mary.

Those who saw this joyful novice, who was always ready to make a sacrifice, might have thought that she must be blessed with great graces which she continually felt. Yet in her heart she was very homesick and, as she described once, suffered from “inner dryness and abandonment by God”. Her greatest consolation and favorite place to pray was outside surrounded by nature. She spent all her free time out in the garden or on the small hill of the convent until one day a sister confided to her, “You’d be better off going

to Our Savior in the tabernacle, you are much closer to him there.”

Bernarda admitted, “Those words became flames for me.” Although she liked to pray and had prayed a lot up to that moment, only now did she understand the value of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. She began to visit Jesus in the tabernacle whenever she could. Here she revealed her worries, here she understood that all work brings a blessing only when it is carried in prayer, here she also recognized the shortcomings that had to be eliminated for convent life and here she prayed deeply for the renewal of her order.

When she was unanimously elected superior on October 18, 1880, she immediately began with the reformation of their convent life—poverty, life in a spirit of penance and above all prayer and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament 24 hours a day.

In 1887, the Capuchin provincial, Fr. Bonaventura Frey, visited the sisters in Altstatten and told them about the great need of the Catholic souls in the Americas. This report bothered Mother Bernarda. In prayer and with the help of her confessor she understood that God wanted her to give up her beloved cloister and go on mission to bring the Gospel to those who do not yet know God’s love. With six sisters, the 40-year-old superior left Switzerland on July 19, 1888 for Ecuador where she founded the new congregation Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Sinners four years later. In Chone, her first mission station, she was able to live Franciscan poverty better than before. She wrote to the sisters in Switzerland, “We are so happy, utterly poor without a cent to our name and without furniture.”

God repaid their great trust in his divine

providence and never left them in need. The natives brought the sisters whatever they needed. Since they lived strictly according to the original rule of St. Clare, they only ate twice a day, never ate meat and slept on bare boards; they worked hard in the house and garden and, above all, were faithful to the times of prayer, including Matins which they prayed at midnight.

They often had unwanted visitors who, attracted by the light, came into their simple chapel, namely mosquitoes, all sorts of bugs and little animals. On the floor they found poisonous scorpions and potentially lethal snakes. Mother Bernarda attributed the fact that none of the sisters were ever bitten to the loving protection of God who hears the prayers of his chosen ones. When a violent persecution broke out in 1895, Mother Bernarda decided not to remain any longer in Ecuador with her 15 sisters. “Our dear God desires sacrifice. He wishes that our hearts are not attached to anything. We trust in him! He will never abandon us as long as we abide by the holy rule, especially the vow of poverty.”

On the Feast of the Portiuncula, the sisters arrived in Colombia, in the bishop’s city Cartagena, where 300 years earlier the holy Jesuit priest Peter Claver had worked for 38 years as an untiring teacher, pastor and father for the slaves. Here the congregation visibly grew.

The sisters took over the Obra Pia Hospital and the public school for girls; they opened filial branches in Mompos (Colombia), Brazil and in their original homeland, Switzerland.

Following a yellow fever epidemic in 1900, Mother Bernarda had to struggle with frail health the rest of her life. From then on, she supported her spiritual daughters especially through offering up her many illnesses and inner suffering and with her trusting prayer.

Trusting prayer surpasses all limits

One day, Mother Bernarda was again feeling so exhausted and miserable. Jesus appeared to

her and ordered her, “Stretch out your arms in spirit.” She wrote, “I saw in a spiritual image,

how my arms flew me to heaven and forced their way in. Jesus continued, 'Now stretch your arms out the full length and breadth.' And they spread out around the whole world. Jesus spoke again, 'Now reach with your arms into the depths.' And they pushed through the layers of the earth and through the water to the lowest depths of purgatory.

"I was amazed by this spiritual image, but I could not understand it in the least. A short time later, Jesus taught me what it meant. 'I showed this to the eyes of your soul so that your zeal to pray never diminishes and that you never forget to pray. With arms of the spirit, you must rise up continually to heaven and force your way in with the glow of a holy zeal and holy love, to compel divine justice to be conquered and incline to the highest mercy. At the same time, call on all the inhabitants of heaven, the angels and the saints to intercede. I will pour out a rain of grace over mankind which is so poor and recessed, and the many souls will be moved to repentance and conversion. With your spirit, you have to courageously embrace the whole length and breadth of the earth; you cannot exclude a single soul from your prayer. ... Pray, pray and remember that I would have saved the two great cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had I found only ten just souls."

When Mother Bernarda responded to the Lord

that she as a "miserable sinner" could not even be counted as one of the ten just souls and that she desperately needed the prayers of the others, the Lord consoled her with words that would apply to all of us, "Even if you were flawed with still other weaknesses and wretchedness, I would expect nevertheless that you pray with such trust as though my grace alone is enough for you to accomplish everything. ... Pray, pray always better and stronger; pray with a full and completely undefeatable trust. ... When the time comes, you will see the victory you obtained with this trust."

Mother Bernarda had led her congregation for 32 years when she died on May 19, 1924 at the age of 76. The news of her death spread quickly, and in the Cathedral of Cartagena the pastor proclaimed, "A saint died in our city this morning, the venerable Mother Bernarda." Her grave soon became a beloved pilgrimage site and a place of prayer. In 1926, her remains were transferred from the cemetery to the "Obra Pia" Motherhouse chapel and 30 years later to the chapel at the Biffi College in Cartagena. The order founded by Mother Bernarda today numbers around 840 sisters from various nations working in several countries of South America and Africa, in Italy and Austria as well as in Liechtenstein and Switzerland.

"I am merely a poor brother who prays"

St. Padre Pio

The Capuchins used to have the custom of taking a brother with them to parish missions whose only job was to accompany the work of the priest with his prayer. While his priestly brother was preaching from the pulpit, the lay brother was praying beneath it.

Padre Pio did something similar. Fr. Pellegrino from San Giovanni Rotondo, who lived with the saint and carefully documented numerous

events from his life, recounted that Padre Pio very often requested the prayer of a simple lay brother, Constantino. The prayer of the mendicant brother, who went from door to door for years begging for alms to support his Capuchin brothers, assisted especially in the pastoral work of Padre Pio in the confessional. Padre Pio explained once to Fr. Pellegrino: "Our Br. Constantino is old and sick and seems

to be good for nothing. But as an obedient son of the Church who understands how to hold the Rosary in his hand and pray to Our Lady, he is more useful than you and me. Do you know why he has such a peace in his heart? Because he has placed all his trust in the Blessed Virgin and took as little interest as possible in the worldly problems which you think are so important. His sense of prayer and his veneration of the Blessed Virgin are virtues which wash clean all mistakes and human weaknesses and, if it is possible, could even extinguish the flames of hell. He draws Our Lady's attention, and we have his prayers to thank for the salvation of many souls. "You think that the people who come to Confession will be drawn by my charisma. I tell you, however, that it is these hidden prayers that move them to conversion. I do not say this with false modesty. It is the truth! How is it possible that people change their hearts and minds? Because of the confessor's reputation? If that is what you think, then you really don't understand much. Our Lady listens to these faithful children of the Church and comes down to earth. I would almost say that she strengthens her intercessory power especially with the prayers of such people

whom you consider to be useless."

A lady from the southernmost part of Italy came to San Giovanni Rotondo with three great intentions. In the confessional, she entrusted Padre Pio first her poor health, and he briefly responded, "Pray".

Surprised about the short answer she complained about her other two problems. Again he said shortly, "Pray".

The lady thought silently to herself, "I expected more from Padre Pio, that he would ask me some questions, show more interest, intercede more before God. Instead, three times just, 'Pray'. I didn't have to come all the way here for that."

Nevertheless, during her journey home she could not forget the three-fold demand. She finally said, "I have time, so I will just start to pray."

Amazingly, she realized how her body strengthened with each Hail Mary, despite the strain of traveling. She disembarked the train when she arrived home as if she had never been in poor health to start with. Besides that, she noticed at home how God had solved her other two problems in the best possible way, and she thankfully understood, "Padre Pio could not have given any better advice than, 'Pray'".

The Prayer of a Champion

Success was certain for every national and Olympic volleyball team on which Kirk Kilgour (1947-2002) from California played.

The world class athlete was the most celebrated volleyball player of his time in both America and Europe. An accident abruptly ended the career of the "blond angel", but his unbroken fighting spirit and his relationship to God helped him to courageously rise again.

This is testified to by his life and the spiritual witness he left behind in a humble prayer which became a message of hope for many who suffer.

In 2001, one year before his death, the 53-year-old wrote his memoirs:

In February 2000 my friend is explaining that the Vatican wants to pay for me to come to Italy, where I lived for three years, to be part of a

celebration. Not being Roman Catholic, I know nothing of the celebration he's talking about, but Belinda, my partner, and I start making plans to

leave for Rome right away.

On Friday morning February 11, 2000 we leave the hotel to attend the open-air Mass. When we enter the street, we're stunned by the size of the crowd moving toward Vatican City. With the help of an official and the man responsible for bringing me to Italy, we work our way to where we are to sit. I don't know for certain what my involvement will be, so I am surprised when we keep moving through the crowd and up a large ramp, closer and closer to where the pope will be sitting.

When we finally stop, we are only a few feet to the right of the massive doors of St. Peter's Basilica, just behind the seated College of Cardinals. Filling St. Peter's Square is a moving sea of more than 150,000 people from around the world, including thousands of people with disabilities. February of the Jubilee Year has been dedicated to the sick, people with disabilities and those who are dedicated to their care.

The doors of the Basilica open and the crowd is silenced as Pope John Paul II makes his way forward, followed by cardinals, bishops, priests and others who take their positions to begin the Mass. At one point during the Mass people are brought to the pontiff to be blessed. People in wheelchairs who can't walk and people who are too ill to get out of bed are carried upstairs from the audience to receive the papal blessing. As we watch in person, millions of others are watching a live television broadcast.

A television camera is pointed at me and Belinda, who is sitting at my feet. A picture of a poem I have written is superimposed over the scene of us with the pope. Overwhelming! How did this amazing moment ever come about?

Beginning in the late '60s, I was a member of the U.S. Olympic volleyball team for eight years, and for three years I played and coached professional volleyball for a team in Rome. Our team had won the Italian championship, and in 1975 I was chosen the league's most valuable player and coach of the year.

On my return to Italy in 1976, our team was again in first place when the league took a break so the Italian Olympic team could practice together for an Olympic qualifying tournament.

The federation had asked me to help coach the team and I agreed. During the first practice on the evening of January 8, 1976 while we were warming up, the net broke, so I suggested we do some gymnastic agility drills using a vaulting horse and a springboard.

We took turns running, jumping on the springboard onto the horse and then doing simulated spiking or blocking moves. While in the air, I decided to flip before landing. When I got halfway around, I knew I wouldn't make it, so I extended my hands and tucked my head to my chest to roll when I landed. I had done the same maneuver 1,000 times, but 1,001 was one too many. As I hit the mat I heard a loud pop and couldn't move. I had dislocated my fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae, leaving me paralyzed from the neck down.

Since that day I have returned to Italy every few years to attend a volleyball tournament they hold in my honor. It was during a return trip in 1985 that a friend asked about my philosophy regarding my injury and my life, specifically how I had kept my strength of spirit. He suggested I write down my thoughts. What came of that exchange was a short poem written in Italian. When I returned to Rome three years later, the poem had been distributed to schools and organizations throughout Italy and had become well known. About five years later I learned the Vatican had decided to use the poem on a prayer card sent to Catholics around the world. I didn't know the impact of any of this until I arrived for the three days of the Jubilee. Nothing could have prepared me for what was about to take place.

After the Mass, dozens of people came to me, to talk, to shake my hand, to touch me, to have their picture taken with me, or to have a copy of the poem autographed. People came up to me crying and telling me how much I meant to them and their families and how much I had inspired them through their illness or disability. I felt humbled, honored and overwhelmed.

I started out achieving fame in Italy as an athlete—a fame that I sought and thoroughly relished. Ironically, I became even more famous for an injury that I did not choose and for a

philosophy that I adopted as a means to live with my disability. I did not write the poem to impress or instruct anyone else. I was simply relating my personal feelings to my friends. I had no plan for my words to touch so many lives. I had no way of knowing that my words and my disability would perhaps be even more meaningful beyond the disabled community, to those who are struggling with the universal problem—how to live a meaningful life.

It's Saturday night in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall, artists from all over the world have donated their talent to a television program as part of the Jubilee month of February 2000. At the midpoint of the show, my poem is read by Terence Hill, a famous Italian actor. Just before going offstage, I fight back tears.

With all we've seen and felt over the last three days, it is impossible to expect more as we pack to leave. When we return from dinner, though, there's a message that a representative from the Vatican has called; the pope has requested to see me.

Sunday we drive into the Vatican; there are about 12 of us in all. Everyone remains quiet, despite the mounting excitement. The pope enters, dressed in white vestments, holding a staff with a golden ornament on the top, walking slowly, somewhat hunched over and assisted by two cardinals. One by one we are called forward to be blessed and to be given a small box with the papal seal on the cover. The boxes contain beautiful rosaries. I am motioned up third, with Belinda by my side. The pope gives me a blessing and starts to hand me the box. Belinda politely reaches out and takes it from his trembling hand.

When the last of the guests have passed through, the pope slowly rises from his chair using his staff and the arms of the cardinals at his side. This man, who entered the papacy 20 years ago as a strong, still young man, is clearly very ill. I expect him to turn and leave. Instead, as he stands, I am motioned forward a second time from the small group. I roll toward him look in his eyes and feel the strength and serenity of this truly incredible man. The pope gives me a special blessing and says a few quiet kind words to me in English. I thank him and back away,

with a feeling I will never forget.

He then turns and slowly moves through the door. We all begin to exit the room. Belinda and I take an extra moment to allow everyone to pass when a man who could best be described as the pope's valet approaches us carrying a copy of the painting with my poem. He says the pontiff has asked if I would sign it for him. As I put the pen in my mouth, this is almost more than I can bear.

On the long flight back to Los Angeles, it all seems unreal. After all, what would a non-Catholic ex-surfer raised on the beaches of Southern California be doing meeting the pope? If I didn't have the pictures to prove it, I would swear it was all a crazy dream.

After a year of heavy suffering, the former volleyball champion Kirk Kilgour died at the age of 54 on July 10, 2002 in Denver, Colorado.

"I asked God to let me be strong to accomplish grandiose projects: and He made me weak to keep me humble.

I asked God to make me healthy to realize imposing enterprises: and He gave me pain to better understand.

I asked Him for wealth to possess everything: and He left me poor not to be selfish.

I asked Him for power to be needed by others: and He gave me humiliation so that I would need them.

I asked God everything to enjoy life: and He gave me life so that I could enjoy everything.

Lord, I didn't get everything I needed almost against my will. The prayers I didn't pray were granted.

Be praised, God.

Among all men no one possesses more than I possess."

Our New Life

Our Irish priest, Fr. Patrick Cahill, who is based in Rome travels often to his homeland on the green island where he visits prayer groups and has a special youth apostolate in a number of schools— giving talks, listening to the students' confessions and celebrating Holy Mass. Following a very unusual encounter in February 2010, Fr. Patrick has been amazed in witnessing the powerful effects of prayer in a young family.

Fr. Patrick: Before the Saturday evening mass, I was speaking to a few ladies in front of the church in Mitchelstown, County Cork when a Harley Davidson turned the corner and entered the churchyard. I presumed he was lost and thought, "The bars are on the main street, not here." Strangely, he parked his bike and removed his helmet. To my surprise I noticed that he too was walking towards the church. He seemed to be about 30 years old.

After mass, I again noticed the shaven-headed, leather-clad biker. I simply had to satisfy my curiosity and go over to speak with him.

"I'm Fr. Patrick. Pleased to meet you."

"How are you Father? My name is Fridge."

"Excuse me?"

"Everyone calls me Fridge. When I was young I wanted to be cool so that's what they called me. My real name is Patrick but nobody calls me that! I was always a bit of a hand full. I ran away from home a few times when I was a child, just down to the village, but I came back as soon as I got hungry. I caused my parents a few problems but I've changed a lot in the last years"

"May I ask why?"

"My wife Veronica was diagnosed with cancer two years ago right after the birth of our daughter Ellamai. I had to leave my job to take care of her during chemo. It was a tough time; she had a tumor the size of an orange. The tumor has decreased in size but the doctors have told us that unless she has surgery, unless she has a total pelvic clear out, she will not live long."

He told me all of this with such impressive

serenity and calmness that I had to inquire:

"Do you mind me asking, you have a real peace about you. How is that possible considering everything you have just said?"

"Since she got sick, we started praying together. It's not God's fault that she is sick. He will get us through this. Veronica's cancer has brought us closer together. I am here at Mass because of it. We go to a Youth 2000 prayer meeting and have found a new life; a prayer life that I never had before. I pray that she will be healed. I believe she will ... and if not, we will meet in a much better place."

I was almost speechless at the profound and heartfelt answer of a biker whom I did not know an hour earlier. What a truthful testimony to the sense of suffering and the value of prayer. It was the beginning of a deep friendship. The very next day Fridge and Veronica O'Meara invited me over to their house. During this and many other visits, Veronica told me about herself and the "new life" of her family.

Veronica: After going from one doctor to the next, I was diagnosed in October 2009 with cervical cancer. I was just 31 years old and it crushed me to think about my husband Fridge (37) and our two-year-old daughter Ellamai. An immediate chemotherapy and radiation treatment did not bring the expected results, and the treatment was stopped in March 2010 when the doctor said, "Mrs. O'Meara, go home and enjoy your family for the time you have left." Back home, Fridge and I cried inconsolably for

two days. Neither one of us had any faith in God, although we both grew up in Catholic families and, as children, were used to pray the family Rosary every night. After these 48 horrible hours, I suddenly had a surprising thought, “One person told me that I would die soon. But there is another one who is more powerful and who has everything in the hand.”

This calmed and consoled me even though at that time God was far away and meaningless in my life. I did not even go to church on Christmas or Easter. However, God openly intervened in our lives.

It was then that somebody who knew the trouble we were in advised us to spend a little time in silence before the Blessed Sacrament. We gave it a try although my husband and I, who at this time were only Catholic on our baptismal certificates, did not really know what the Blessed Sacrament was.

Shortly before Easter, interestingly, several people offered me the image of Jesus of Divine Mercy and the novena which Jesus revealed to St. Faustina. Even though I had never heard of it, in my need I prayed this novena—with Fridge of course. We also started praying the Chaplet of Mercy, without great emotion and against all odds, but with the quiet hope of being healed. Although these first prayers did not heal me, it was nevertheless the beginning of our conversions. With time we came to know and treasure the incredibly consoling message of Divine Mercy, and soon the Rosary and the Chaplet of Mercy

belonged as much to our everyday life as did adoration. After going back and forth for a long time and two failed attempts, I was finally able to bring myself to go to Confession. It had been 20 years!

Thanks be to God, the priest helped me because I had not seen the inside of a confessional since my Confirmation when I was 13 years old. Afterwards, I felt as light as a feather, as if somebody had taken a heavy load off my shoulders. It was the same for my Fridge who willingly took this crucial step in the spiritual life, as he had taken every other step with me.

I can really say that in no time Jesus and Mary became very living for Fridge, and also for me. Never before could we have imagined that. We have never missed our “old life” and we would not want it back for a second. We finally had peace, something which we had never had before. Our family life changed completely. Fridge, a truck driver and a plumber, gave up his rough language and I quit watching television. Some nice religious pictures have been hung up in our home.

The most joyful change, however, was most definitely praying as a family. For us, who in all our years of marriage never would have had the idea to pray together, this was an indescribably beautiful experience of unity and peaceful security. Our little Ellamai participates as the third member of our group.

A new zeal for the Faith

There were still many unanswered questions for us in our new-found life of faith. To this day there are so many things for us to discover and learn in the spiritual world. I had to start doing chemotherapy again in February 2011 and one night, for example, I was in such terrible pain that Fridge and I were desperate to know, “If God is our Father and loves us, why does he allow this great suffering? We too love our

three-year-old Ellamai and would do whatever we could to keep her from suffering.” We did not want to rebel, but the question really plagued us. We started praying the Chaplet of Mercy out loud, and slowly peace returned to our hearts. We apologized to Jesus for our doubt since he knows what is best for us!

In great bodily suffering, when I am no longer able to verbalize a prayer, I have accustomed

myself to offering these pains to Jesus by the hour: one hour for the Holy Father, the next one for a priest that I know, the third one for somebody else... My day has many such hours which wear me out, but they have meaning when I offer them up. Yes, the desire to offer my suffering even without words has helped me.

That was also the case on February 22 during my chemotherapy at the hospital. I gave Jesus all my fears and all the hardships for a cancer patient next to me who was far away from the faith and, at the same time, so visibly close to death. She was a gynecologist who was the same age as me and she reminded me of the time before my conversion; I was full of compassion for her. Perhaps she would still allow her heart to be touched by God.

Through our new zeal for the faith, my family has also found their way back to Holy Mass and some of my sisters have discovered anew the beauty of the Rosary. Even some of our friends have caught our joy in faith. My friend Colette, for example, was a Reiki master. She saw the

big change in me and has started coming to our prayer meetings now as well. The nicest thing is that she has found the strength to give up everything that has to do with Reiki.

I was also very touched recently by an offer from my friend Noreen, who just in the last few months has found her way back to God. She prayed, "Jesus, let me take one of Veronica's sleepless nights." Her two-year-old and four-year-old sons, as a matter of fact, made it impossible for her to sleep that night.

I, on the other hand, slept exceptionally well. Later on, Noreen told me with a smirk, "At 5 o'clock I was exhausted, and I finally said to Jesus, 'now you have to wake Veronica up, I can't take it anymore!'"

"I took the "I can't take it anymore!" very well. Nevertheless, today I am far enough along that I can thank God for the cancer, because through this illness we have found our way as a couple back to prayer and to faith, and we have started a new life.

Peter and Claudia

*We just read about a married couple
who learned how to carry their truly heavy cross with prayer.
When we hear how this next young and prayerful couple lives a seemingly easy life,
the question may arise, even in view of our own marriage or family,
"Both couples pray and love God; why does one family suffer so much
and the other have such an undimmed happiness?"
Our Faith tells us that all the painful situations we experience in our lives
are enveloped in God's merciful love, and that he guides everything
for the greater good of those who entrust themselves to him.
The suffering we carry with his grace can become a blessing,
not only for us but for others as well.*

Claudia: When I was a girl, I liked going to the meetings of our village's Christian youth group, and whenever there was an outing or some other activity, I always participated enthusiastically.

At the same time, it was important for my friends and me to go regularly to Holy Mass and to pray together. On top of that, our parish priest Fr. Frantisek often reminded us to pray now

for our future partner. “There is plenty of time still for that,” I used to think. It didn’t take long, however, before I too more frequently included the request for a good husband in my personal prayers, and I considered everything that I would like him to be.

This went on for about six years before my heart increasingly began to desire something else—I wanted to become a missionary in the Family of Mary like my older sister. I met with Fr. Paul, the spiritual director of the missionary community, when he came to the Motherhouse in Stara Halic, Slovakia in June 2006, and prayed with him for clarity. I was given the inner certainty that I should love God in my future husband and children—at home in daily life and not as a religious sister in a foreign country.

Although my vocation to become a family mother turned all my future plans upside down, knowing that I would be then doing God’s will in my life made me very happy. One thing was clear to me—God always desires that which will make me the happiest.

Naturally, I consciously prayed much more for my future boyfriend and husband. “But where should I look for this young man?” I asked Fr. Paul once, and he answered me, “You don’t have to look for him. Pray with trust, and God will guide everything.” And, as a matter of fact, God didn’t make me wait long. Who would have thought that just one month later my prayers would be answered?

Peter: Yes, I met Claudia in Stara Halic at the end of August 2006. And I met her in the most beautiful place—in church. Just as she had never had a boyfriend before me, I too had never had a serious girlfriend because I had always thought, “God will lead you the right way.” Therefore, at the age of 19 and 20, I was also very open for a vocation to the priesthood and prayed a lot about it. With time, however, my soul was filled with a peaceful sureness that one day I would marry. For six years I prayed to Our Lady—very often by an image from Fatima on the outskirts of my village Tuhar—to send me a good girl, especially one with whom I could pray. That was the most important thing for me. Only such a girl came

into consideration as my future wife, one with whom I could start a family. There were several whom I liked, but I never found the right one. This was always made apparent, especially when I asked in a fitting moment, “What would you think about praying something together? Would you like to?” The clueless or embarrassed look always said it all.

Claudia: When we meet for the first time in the summer of 2006, Peter was 26 and had finished his training as a forester at the vocational school in Zvolen, followed by studies at the police academy in Bratislava. I still remember the exact day—it was Monday, August 29th. Holy Mass in my parish had already begun when Peter walked in. I turned around, saw him briefly and from that moment on, I couldn’t concentrate any more on what was going on at Mass; it was love at first sight.

Peter: I also knew right away, “There she is! She’s the right one for me.” And to this day I am convinced that Our Lady had hid and practically locked up this girl I saw sitting in the church pew for me alone. I will never be able to thank Our Lady enough for this gift, for this answer to my prayers!

Claudia: Exactly one week later, Peter invited me to go for a hike. After a while in the car, I asked him, “Shall we pray a decade of the Rosary together?”

Peter: I answered happily, “Sure, but then in this joy let us pray all the Joyful Mysteries, if that is okay with you.”

Claudia: And so we both received the clear confirmation that we were really meant for one another. It didn’t even take two weeks before Peter proposed to me, and he repeated it at least 50 times in many different ways.

Peter: That’s right! In just 14 days I was so sure, that I asked Claudia to be my wife. She gave me a radiant yes and we set the wedding date immediately. As far as I was concerned, we

could have been married already in October, but Claudia absolutely wanted to have the wedding in May, the Month of Mary and the Month of Love.

Claudia: Shortly after celebrating our engagement in November, I began looking for a dress. I couldn't contain my joy and secretly opened the ring box every day to try on my wedding band. It was a beautiful period. At the same time, however, this half-year engagement brought with it a real challenge for Peter and me. We could only be together on Saturday and Sunday because during the week Peter lived three hours away from Stara Halic in Bratislava where he worked as a police officer which, by the way, I always thought would be a dream job. Being apart was so difficult for both of us, and I cried every Sunday night when we had to say good-bye. Of course we talked every day on the phone and sent each other as many as 20 text messages a day. I wrote Peter love poems and learned from this experience what is hidden behind the innocent word 'desire'. The thing that helped me the most to survive the very long week was praying together every day on the telephone.

Peter: Yeah, we prayed a decade of the Rosary every day together on our cell phones. In addition, Claudia and I agreed that we would both go to Holy Mass each day wherever we were. We felt how both prayer and the Holy Eucharist gave us the necessary strength to renounce one another and to preserve our purity, like a precious pearl, until our wedding. We knew that by renouncing one another, a blessing would come down on our marriage.

Claudia: Our time as newlyweds passed by so quickly. Four years have come and gone since our dream wedding. We have two healthy children

who make us very happy, and we are hoping for more.

Peter: Claudia and I feel a great responsibility as parents to live for our children. Nobody knows what the future will bring, so we want to save up for them through our prayers, building up an "account in heaven".

Claudia: Of course we experience our own limits and weaknesses when it comes to our marriage and family life. Even though we try as much as possible to resolve difficulties and problems with the Rosary in the hand, sometimes it seems we just don't have time to fit prayer into our many daily obligations. On top of that, our surroundings always seem to say to us, "Why go to church? The children are at home, and there is so much to do." Nevertheless, one of us tries to make it to Holy Mass every day, as we agreed on our wedding day. That should not change, even if the others look at us strange or laugh and mockingly call us "holy".

Peter: Sometimes it is demanding and really hard to remain faithful to prayer. It is worth it, however, despite the occasional failure because through prayer we remain in grace and under God's protection. And Jesus gives us, sooner or later, whatever we ask for if it is good for us.

Claudia: Fr. Paul posed the question once during a retreat for families, "Do you love your spouse more than on your wedding day? This is the way it should be actually because love grows. It develops and becomes always deeper." These words touched me; therefore, I never forget to pray that Peter and I love one another more each day.

*"We were overjoyed on our wedding day,
but we were also aware that
a good marriage is a threesome:
the two of us and God."*

An Unusual Rosary

*God has thousands of ways of gathering his children close,
and yet our Sr. Terezia Turicova never thought that God
would make use of her hospital stay as a mission of prayer.*

In August 2009, I had several cysts surgically removed at a hospital in Hall, Austria. During my recovery, I was put in a hospital room with Heidi Erhardt, a 40-year-old family mother from Salzburg, and Iris Amort-Kloiber, who was only 30 years old, from Hall and also married. And, as it usually goes in the hospital, we soon asked one another about illness, families and jobs. Now my two roommates, as might be expected, were quite surprised when they discovered that I am a young sister.

The two of them were very interested and bombarded me with questions about my community, our mission and spirituality. I just couldn't tell them enough and so I asked one of our sisters for a couple issues of our missionary magazine and our music CDs. Iris immediately asked her husband to bring the laptop so that she could listen to the music. Heidi on the other hand read several issues of *Triumph of the Heart* straight through, from cover to cover. They were both very taken and touched by the many new and beautiful things they had experienced.

Yet they both caught me entirely by surprise when already that first morning they asked me if we could pray together. I just wasn't expecting that. I impulsively thought of the Rosary, and so I explained to them how well one can meditate on the lives of Jesus and Mary, precisely with this prayer. Heidi and Iris agreed. The best was yet to come however. I started to pray the first mystery of the Rosary out loud. I prayed the first part and ... the two of them were silent. Then I prayed the second part and neither of them said a word.

And in this way, the 50 beads of the Rosary slid through my fingers. I prayed all five mysteries of the Rosary out loud and alone. It was dead

silent in the room, and I was not sure—are they asleep? Are they listening at all? What is going on in them?

I received the surprising answer in the afternoon during our second Rosary when a nurse walked in the room and I prayed silently for a moment. The two ladies I was allegedly praying with immediately turned to the nurse and said, "Could you please come a little bit later, we are praying right now." We prayed two or three Rosaries in this unusual way "together" every day—one in the morning, a second in the afternoon and the last one in the evening. Afterwards, I was the one who finally wished for a little silence while the two of them continued to listen to the CDs.

After one of our Rosaries, Iris, who tended more towards Asian meditation, said, "You know, this praying brings so much peace and quiet to my heart. I feel how close this lady, Mary, is." And Heidi openly entrusted to me, "When I pray the Rosary, all the beautiful memories come back from my childhood when I prayed as a little girl with my grandma. The Faith unfortunately disappeared from my life later on."

So our time together in the hospital was full of peace. After four days, when I was the first one allowed to go home, my two new friends almost did not let me go, and we promised one another to stay in touch. How I rejoiced then on Christmas Eve one year later when I received an e-mail from Heidi in my mission station in the Czech Republic, the Monastery of Mercy. As I read her words, I could only thank God for his greatness because I felt so weak and dependent on him in the hospital.

I just read your Christmas card and I was beside

myself with joy. I've just been through a very stressful time, and therefore I am really looking forward now to Christmas. I often think back on our wonderful time together. Yeah, I am so thankful for everything I received during our stay together at the hospital. I really see our being sick as divine providence because now I have found my Faith again and really enjoy going to church. I always find peace there. Our son Chris was confirmed in April and, guess

what, I helped prepare him and his three best friends. I wouldn't have dared to do it if I hadn't met you. I thank you with all my heart.

Tonight, on Christmas Eve, when we finish eating our soup and pray the Rosary, I will think deeply about you and how beautiful our Rosaries were. I wish you the very best, and may God always accompany you on your way. With greetings from sunny Pinzgau, Austria! Your thankful Heidi.

Love Me in the Least Brother

In October, it already becomes very cold here close to the border of China.

People around Ust Kamenogorsk are busy preparing themselves for the upcoming winter, a season which can be life-threatening.

We only have to look back at last winter when a racking cold of -40°F was the normal temperature in much of Kazakhstan.

It is also the reason that we are turning to you today, dear friends and benefactors.

We are asking for your help for the homeless and beggars who, every year, start seeking refuge with us when the cold arrives. Last winter as well, some of the poorest people in the city came by every day looking for a little relief for their greatest needs through a meal, medicine, clothing or even having their wounds dressed.

When it is especially difficult for me...

In the hard winter months of 2009, we began offering a meal, instead of the usual tea and sandwiches, to the poor and homeless, many of who came from the countries bordering us. We made meals stew, cream of wheat, or noodles with hot dogs.

Yet we were surprised one day when two poor Kazakhs were also standing in line for the modest lunch. It was very unusual because one of the nice characteristics of the Kazakh people is that the extended families stick together. It is simply an obligation to help one another or take somebody in when they are in need. For whatever

reason, this was not the case with Dushanbek and Begbulat. These two men spent their icy nights the whole winter long sleeping under a bridge on top of heating pipes which came out of the ground in that location and offered them some warmth. When the temperature dropped to 43°F and Begbulat caught a fever, Dushanbek came to us for medicine and some things with which to take care of his friend.

Like everybody who knocks on our door, we gave them an image of the Lady of All Nations, which they thankfully accepted even though they are Muslim.

Often young men come looking for help too. Many of them grew up in orphanages and could not make the transition into society because of problems with alcohol. It is very hard to sit by and watch as after a certain amount of time on the streets they give up all hope for a better life. Most of the time, they lose their will to fight, and it all goes downhill from there.

Dima was such a case. It was -42°F one day as he rang our doorbell. His dirty clothes were frozen to his body. Shivering, he recounted to us how that morning when he woke up in the basement of an apartment building where he had spent the night, he lost his footing in the dark and fell into stinky sewage. By the time Dima reached our place, his clothes had frozen. We took him right away to our small, provisional caritas house, which is really only two rooms. We store for distribution the clothing and shoes which we receive from you dear benefactors. Dima also found something that fit him.

Since his fingers were stiff from the cold and pain, we had to help him a little to wash up and change. In the meantime, he told us a bit about his sorrowful life. One of us sisters finally asked him, “Do you think about God sometimes or about a better life with God?” He answered quietly, “I think about him often, and when it is especially difficult for me, I think only about him.”

We met Alex three years ago. In the beginning, he was always clean and properly dressed, and it was not immediately obvious that he lived on the streets. As time went on, however, he looked

more and more neglected when he came to us. One day he eventually complained he felt sick and miserable. It broke our hearts that we could not do more for him, even though we gave him everything he needed. Since it seemed to us that the Lord would soon call Alex to himself, we began praying the Chaplet of Mercy for his soul every day. We did it trusting that in the moment of death, when he would meet Jesus face to face, he would be able to accept and offer up his past suffering and his hard life in order to finally find a homeland above. One day, Alex never returned, but we have always had fond memories of him.

Most of the homeless are not only humiliated by having to beg, but they are truly humble. Babushka Luba (Love), for example, because of her calm, polite manner received permission “from good people”, as she told us, to spend the night in the stairwell. Luba came to us when she could no longer withstand the hunger or needed clothing. Several times we offered to help her be admitted to a homeless shelter, but strangely enough, she never wanted that.

One day we received a hand-written note from her that one of her legs had frozen during the night and the whole leg had to be amputated. How thankful we were that we could bring crutches, which dear benefactors had sent us, when we went to visit Luba. Sad, but at peace as she always was, she told us that after her hospital stay she would go to stay in the homeless shelter. We visited Luba there with young people from our parish, and we saw how through her thankful heart and her love she brought a lot of joy to this miserable place.

When I speak alone with God or with our Blessed Mother,

I feel more like a child than an adult.

May the Rosary, this simple and easy prayer,

help me to become a child and not to be ashamed of it.

Pope John Paul I