

Triumph of the Heart

O HOLY NIGHT

Family of Mary

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Unexpected Christmas Graces

Many of us know the pain, especially at Christmas time, of not being able to share the Christian joy over the Lord's birth with those who are closest to us because they no longer have faith.

Yet we should be filled with deep hope for our loved ones when we now look to the very surprising conversion experiences of two great souls who in the same country, in the same year, yes, even on the same Christmas Day experienced the grace of their inner change.

Selfless love conquered my heart

*S*t. Therese of Lisieux is one of the youngest saints in the history of the Church, who in no time through her life and her writing became a spiritual guide and a favorite saint of countless souls. However, this world renowned Doctor of the Church and Patroness of the Missions also needed a radical transformation in her youth for her soul's balance.

At the age of four, namely, this lively girl lost her light-heartedness with the death of her mother. Becoming over-sensitive, scrupulous and fearful, Therese suffered over the years from the phenomena of what seemed to be every possible illness before, at the age of 14, she received the grace on Christmas which freed her, completely changing her life.

“God worked this long-desired miracle on Christmas Day, 1886, this inestimable grace of complete conversion. I knew that when we reached home after Midnight Mass I should find my shoes in the chimney-corner, filled with presents, just as when I was a little child, which proves that my sisters still treated me as a baby... But the time had come when Our Lord wished to free me from childhood's failings, and even withdraw me from its innocent pleasures. On this occasion, instead of indulging me as he generally did, Papa seemed vexed, and on my way upstairs I heard him

say: ‘Really all this is too babyish for a big girl like Therese, and I hope it is the last year it will happen.’ His words cut me to the quick. Celine, knowing how sensitive I was, whispered: ‘Don’t go downstairs just yet--wait a little, you would cry too much if you looked at your presents before Papa.’ But Therese was no longer the same - Jesus had changed her heart.

*C*hoking back my tears, I ran down to the dining-room, and, though my heart beat fast, I picked up my shoes, and gaily pulled out all the things, looking as happy as a queen. Papa laughed, and did not show any trace of displeasure, and Celine thought she must be dreaming. But happily it was a reality; little Therese had regained, once for all, the strength of mind which she had lost at the age of four and a half.

*O*n that blessed night the sweet Infant Jesus, scarce an hour old, filled the darkness of my soul with floods of light. By becoming weak and little, for love of me, He made me strong and brave; He put His own weapons into my hands, so that I went from victory to victory, beginning, if I may say so, ‘to run as a giant.’

On this night of grace, the third period of my life began--the most beautiful of all, the one most filled with heavenly favors. In an instant Our Lord, satisfied with my good will, accomplished the work I had not been able to do during all these years. Like the Apostle I could say: 'Master, we have labored all night, and have taken nothing.'

More merciful to me even than to His beloved disciples, Our Lord Himself took the net, cast it, and drew it out full of fishes. He made me a fisher of men. Love and a spirit of

self-forgetfulness took possession of me, and from that time I was perfectly happy."

The newly converted Therese was soon to help others with their conversion because she did not lose any more time staring vainly at her own weakness and mistakes.

Incredibly attentive, creative and sympathetic she turned toward Jesus and her neighbor with a heart where selfless love now dwelled. This was the secret of her success as a worldwide missionary.

Source: The Story of Soul by St. Therese of Lisieux

During the Singing of the Magnificat

Therese of Lisieux was not the only one to be spiritually reborn on that significant Christmas in 1886. Something similar happened to a fellow countryman in Paris, Paul Claudel (1868 – 1955), only four years her elder. Raised in a religiously indifferent family, Paul's First Holy Communion was both the climax and the end of his religious practices. He definitively lost his faith as a teenager, influenced and strengthened by liberal teachers in high school. Like the Little Flower; however, his eyes and heart were suddenly opened in the Church of Notre Dame.

Twenty-seven years later, Paul Claudel, surely the greatest poet and writer of the "Renouveau catholique"—the Catholic renewal movement in France—wrote "My Conversion" in 1913: a brief witness to his faith describing the hour of grace that changed the course of his life.

"When I was 18, I believed what the majority of the so-called educated people of that time believed ... I believed that everything is subjected to laws and that this world is a chain of causes and effects which science will be able to unravel in no time at all. I actually found that all very sad and boring. ...

In addition, I led an immoral life and gradually fell into a state of despair. The death of my grandfather, whom I watched waste away for months with stomach cancer, was a big shock for me; I never stopped thinking about death after that. ... I had completely lost my faith. The first glimmer of truth broke through to me through the books of a great poet to whom I will forever be indebted. Arthur Rimbaud played a paramount role in the formation of my thought. ... For the first time, a breach was made in my material way of thinking ... but my usual condition of just wasting away and despair remained.

So was the state of the unhappy child who went to Notre-Dame-de-Paris on December 25, 1886 to attend Holy Mass on Christmas. I had started writing back then and had the idea that in Catholic ceremonies, which I looked upon with conceited ignorance, I would find the appropriate stimulants and material for a couple of decadent works.

With this attitude, shoved and squashed by the crowd, I attended the solemn Mass with moderate pleasure. Then, since I didn't have anything better to do, I returned for Vespers. The boys' choir was singing at that moment in their white vestments and the students from the minorseminary Saint Nicolas-du-Chardonnet who were by their side had just intoned, as I later found out, the 'Magnificat'. I was standing under the group close to the second pillar at the beginning of the choir, to the right on the side of the sacristy.

Then the event took place which would determine the rest of my life. In an instance, my heart was seized, I believed. I believed with such a powerful inner consent, my whole being was lifted to the highest heights. I believed with such a strong conviction, with such indescribable certainty that there was no room for even the slightest doubt that from that day forward no book, no wise words, no coincidences of my active life could shake my Faith, nor even touch it. I suddenly had the intense feeling of innocence, of God's eternal childhood, an unspeakable revelation.

In an effort, which I have often undertaken, to reconstruct the minutes that followed this extraordinary moment, I run into a series of elements which form a single flash, a single weapon which Divine Providence used to finally strike the heart of a poor, desperate child and allow him to enter—how lucky are the people who have Faith! If only that were really true!

*It is true! God exists, he is here. He is somebody; he is just as personal a being as I am. He loves me; he calls me. Tears and sobbing overcame me, and the lovely singing of *Adeste Fidelis* just added to my shock. It was a very sweet shock, which nevertheless gave the feeling of a shudder, yes nearly a fright!*

My philosophical convictions remained untouched. God did not pay attention to them and left them to their fate; I did not see any reason to change them; for me the Catholic faith continued to seem to be a collection of foolish anecdotes; the same resistance towards the priests and the faithful still ran through me, rising to the point of hate, even disgust. The edifice of my opinions and recognitions did not collapse; I did not find any failure in them. One thing alone had happened, I stepped out of it. A new, mighty Being with outrageous expectations for the young person and artist, which I was, had revealed himself; yet I did not understand how to bring it into harmony with anything that was around me. The condition of a man who is torn out of his skin in a single yank and planted in a foreign body in the middle of an unknown world is the only comparison which even comes close to illustrating my condition of complete bewilderment."

The newly infused certainty of Faith which had removed every doubt of God's existence in Paul Claudel incited a hard inner struggle. It took him four painful years to give up his spiritual resistance, his former philosophical convictions and opinions. Looking back he wrote, "Young people, who throw away their faith so lightly do not know how much it costs to get it back, the torments they have to pay for it. I was held back especially by the idea of hell and also the thought of having, in my opinion, to sacrifice all the beauty and pleasures which returning to the truth imposed on me. ... I didn't know any priests and I didn't have a single Catholic friend."

Returning to communion

Nobody around this young man had any idea about his inner fight. Exterio­rly, Paul studied law and political science; for himself, however, he silently explored and tested the Catholic faith and the teachings of the Church with intensity and great interest. *“Yet the great book that opened for me and the place where I actually received my lessons,”* he wrote, *“was the Church. Praised be forever this great, majestic Mother, at whose feet I learned everything! I spent every Sunday at Notre Dame and also went there as often as possible during the week. Before me—since until that point I knew as little about my Faith as I did about Buddhism—a holy drama suddenly unfolded with a magnificence that surpassed all my expectations. ... How envious I was of the happy believers who I saw going to Communion! ... My objection grew weaker with each passing day ... and how oddly! In this time, a full awakening took place in my soul and my poetic abilities matured, my prejudices slowly disappeared and my childish fears came to an end.”*

On December 25, 1890, four years to the day after his Christmas conversion, Paul Claudel received in Notre Dame, after a good preparation, Holy Communion for the second time in his life. This convert seriously considered joining a religious order, but then began a political career and finally started a family.

For 43 years, until he retired, Claudel conscientiously worked as a consul in the USA, China, former Czechoslovakia and Germany, as a diplomat in Brazil and Denmark and as the French ambassador to Japan, the USA and Belgium. Contemporaneously, his full-time profession was accompanied by extensive literary achievements which made him one of the greatest Catholic authors of the 20th century, a member of the famous Académie Française and a highly respected personality whom even Pope Pius XII publicly distinguished.

After attending early morning Mass, being the deeply Eucharistic man that he was, Claudel dedicated the first hour of each work day to writing. In the afternoon, he returned to church a second time to pray before the tabernacle for a longer period of time in silent adoration.

Zealous, but not always successful, the humble convert tried to win over friends and acquaintances to the Catholic faith. In one of his letters to Louis Massignon, a well-known 20th century Orientalist, Claudel wrote, *“On the day we met, I ... vividly felt the band of brotherly love which binds Christians together. ... But I feel this band just as strong every morning in my village church where I receive Holy Communion with two old nuns at my side and a twelve-year-old girl with bulky shoes on her feet, silent as a lamb. How close I feel to these simple souls, and how good is God that he gave us brothers and sisters everywhere.”*

Claudel spent the last years of his life in the solitude of the country or in Paris; he dedicated his time only to the study and poetic interpretation of Holy Scriptures. Of this he said, *“One should read Holy Scripture on his knees, as if one would hear God speaking. The Bible is where I was born as a Christian, where I lived and where I continue to live. For nearly 20 years all my efforts have culminated in spreading love for this Book since the learned have managed nothing other than making it contemptuous.”*

On February 23, 1955, 86-year-old Claudel lay on his deathbed, surrounded by his wife, his daughter and his son. When the priest came for Last Rites, Paul welcomed him with a smile despite his great pain, *“Oh, I’ve been waiting for you.”*

With exemplary humility and simplicity he made

his Confession, and he received Communion with such a depth of soul that the priest later said, "I felt envious before such piety."

Paul Claudel was completely at peace when he finally asked his loved ones to leave him alone: "Let me die in peace. I am not afraid."

*"It is midday. Church I see open.
I have to enter.*

*Mother of Christ, I am not coming to pray.
I have nothing to offer nor to ask.*

*I come, Mother, only to see you ...
to cry for joy to know
that I am your son and you are here...*

*Since you are here forever
simply because you are Mary*

*very simply because you exist
Mother of Jesus Christ
May you be thanked!"*

Ambassador Paul Claudel

A Blessed Christmas to You All!

*During his Christmas address on December 23, 1859,
Don Bosco, an apostle of the youth, gave a recommendation
to his boys in the oratory which is something that we could even do today.
The true beauty of Christmas comes year to year especially
through the sacramental life: through a well prepared Holy Confession
and through a loving Holy Communion during Christmas Mass.
So why not express our grateful love to our aging parents, for example,
or to our spouse, particularly in this fast-paced world of internet and e-mails,
with a genuine, hand-written Christmas card?
This gift would surely be treasured and perhaps bring even more joy
than some material surprise!*

I want you to be happy, actually very happy, during the Christmas season. The Heavenly Child to be born in these days and who wants to be born every year anew in your hearts is expecting something special from you.

You have heard in homilies what Jesus did for us. Many Fathers of the Church tell us that the Lord would have been born and died the same way as he did, even if there was only one person to save. What he suffered for everybody, therefore, he suffered for each one of us. So everybody may say, *'This Child is born and died just for me; for me he suffered so much! How can I show him the thankfulness he deserves?'*

Yes, this dear Child is awaiting something from us, a special gift. What are you going to give him? There are two things I advise you: first of all a good Confession and a good Communion, with the promise always to be faithful to him.

And second: if you have not done so already, write a nice letter to your parents as a Christian son. Wish them a joyous Christmas, assure them that you are praying for them, thank them for the sacrifices they are making for you, ask them for forgiveness for the occasions when you were lacking in respect towards them, promise that you will always be obedient children, greet them in my name and wish them a wonderful feast and a good start to the new year from me.

If you write like this, you will bring them great consolation and that also makes Jesus very happy because you are honoring your father and mother with this letter.

*D*o not forget your benefactors or your pastor either because they will notice that you are good young people whom you can't help but like, grateful and polite. And at the end I wish a blessed Christmas to you all."

A Holy Russian Monk

Dear readers, do not be surprised that in this Christmas issue we are writing about the time of communist persecution in Russia, Siberia and Kazakhstan. We are doing this not least of all because of our many missionaries working in these countries who are thankfully aware, despite the many difficulties, what a privilege it is draw from the spiritual inheritance amassed by the suffering of countless martyrs and those persecuted for the Faith.

Altogether, 600 bishops, 4,000 priests and 120,000 Russian monks and nuns died in Soviet concentration and labor camps. Nobody has ever heard of most of them, but they all became that living “grain of wheat” that quietly and willingly fell to the ground and died, trusting that fruit would surely grow forth from it.

That was the case for a holy Polish priest—known and highly respected by Pope John Paul II—Father Ladislaus Bukowinski (1904 – 1974), who did pastoral work in Kazakhstan for decades under life-threatening conditions and with tremendous commitment. Another example is an Orthodox monk, Father Arseny Streltsoff (1893 – 1974), whose life represents the sorrowful fate of countless other monks and priests.

Father Arseny suffered for more than 20 years in prison camps where he radiated Christ in miracu-

lous ways because in all these places of dread and violence, this exceptional man of prayer made the tender love of the Redeemer visible, living and tangible. The Lord alone knows how many wounded souls without hope he was able to console and encourage.

Peter Andreyevitch Streltsoff, his civil name, studied at the University of Moscow and graduated with a degree in the history of sacral art. Later, as a monk and priest, he received the name Father Arseny. He was locked up for his priestly activities for the first time in 1933 and then again in 1939. During the reign of Stalin, he survived several prison camps before he was finally released in 1958. Father Arseny died in 1973; by then he had become the spiritual father of hundreds of spiritual children who lived spread throughout the Soviet Union.

Father Arseny and Alexei the student

During one of the winters, a young man was assigned to Father Arseny’s barracks. Aged 23, he was a student and had been sentenced to twenty years in the camp. He had no experience of camp life because he had been sent to this special camp directly from the strict Butirki Prison in Moscow. Still young, he did not fully understand what lay ahead for him. As soon as he entered the death camp, he encountered the

criminals. His clothing was still good for he had only been in prison a few months. The criminals, led by Ivan the Brown, decided to get hold of the young man’s apparel. They proposed a card game with clothing at stake. Everybody knew that this lad would soon be naked, but no one could do anything about it because the camp rule was that “*whoever interfered would be killed.*” Those who had been in camp for a while knew

only too well that if the criminals decided to play for your rags, to resist would be the end of you. Ivan the Brown won all the young man's clothes. Ivan approached him and said, *"Take everything off, my friend."*

At that point things started to go sour. The young man, whose name was Alexei, thought that the game had been for fun and refused to hand over his clothing. Ivan the Brown decided to make an exhibition of it. He began with mocking kindness; then he started beating him. Alexei tried to resist, to fight back, but by now the whole barracks knew that he would be beaten until he could no longer move, or even to death. Everyone sat still and watched as Ivan bashed Alexei. He bled from the mouth and face and was swaying. Some criminals mockingly urged him to fight.

*F*ather Arseny had not seen the beginnings of the fight; he had been piling up logs near a stove at the other end of the barracks. He suddenly saw what was happening. Ivan was going to kill Alexei. By now Alexei could only cover his face with his hands. Father Arseny silently put the logs down near the stove, calmly walked over to the fight and, before the amazed eyes of the whole barracks, grabbed the arm of Ivan the Brown. Ivan looked surprised, shocked! The priest had interfered in a fight. This meant he must die. Ivan hated Father Arseny. He had never dared touch him for fear of the rest of the barracks, but now he had a true reason to kill him. Ivan stopped beating Alexei and pronounced,

"Okay Pop, it's the end for both of you. First the student, then you." A knife appeared in his hands and he lunged toward Alexei. Suddenly, the gentle and weak Arseny straightened himself up and slammed Ivan on the arm so hard that the knife fell from his hand. Then he pushed Ivan away from Alexei. Ivan stumbled, fell, and hit the corner of a bunk with his face.

Father Arseny went to Alexei and said to him, *"Go, Alyosha, wash your face, no one will hit you anymore."* Then, as if nothing had happened, he went back to his work.

Everyone was taken aback. Ivan the Brown stood up. The criminals did not say a word. They understood that Ivan had lost face in front of the whole barracks. Somebody discreetly wiped the blood from the floor with his foot. Alyosha's face was completely smashed up, his ear was torn, one eye was closed, and the other one was dark red. Everyone was completely silent. They knew that it was all over now for both Father Arseny and Alexei. The criminals would kill them both.

But in fact things turned out differently; the criminals looked upon Father Arseny's actions as bold and brave. Even though everyone feared Ivan, Father Arseny had not faltered when Ivan the Brown had held a knife, and they respected a man who showed no fear. They already knew Father Arseny for his kindness and his unusual ways; now they respected him for his courage. Ivan retreated to his bunk and whispered with his friends, but he realized that they did not really support him.

The line up

*T*he night passed. In the morning everyone went to work; Father Arseny was busy tending the stoves, cleaning up and scraping dirt off the floor. In the evening the prisoners returned from their labor and suddenly, just before the barracks was locked for the night, the supervisor ran in with several guards. *"Attention!"* he shouted. All

the men jumped down from their bunks. They stood motionless while the supervisor walked along the line of men. When he came to Father Arseny he began to beat him. Meanwhile Alexei was dragged from his place in line by the guards. *"P18376 and P281 to punishment cell No. 1, for 48 hours, without food or water, for breaking*

camp rules, for fighting,” shouted the officer.

Ivan had reported them to the authorities. To do so was considered by the criminals to be the lowest and most despicable act possible.

Punishment cell No. 1 was a tiny house that stood by the entrance of the camp. In this house were several rooms for solitary confinement; there was also one for two people which held a narrow board instead of a bed. This board was less than 20 inches wide. The floor and walls were covered with sheets of metal. The whole room was not wider than three quarters of a yard and two yards long.

Outside it was -22° F and windy, so that it was hard to breathe. You had only to step outside to become immediately numb. The occupants of the barracks understood what this meant: certain death. Father Arseny and Alexei would be frozen within two hours. No one had ever been sent to

that cell in such cold. Occasionally, someone was sent to it when the temperature reached -21° or -22° F, but this only for 24 hours. The only ones who stayed alive were those who could jump up and down the whole 24 hours to keep their blood from freezing. If you stopped jumping, you froze. And here it was -22° F, Father Arseny was an old man, Alexei had just been beaten up, and both men were exhausted.

The supervisors seized them both and started dragging them out of the barracks. Avsenkov and Sazikov, two of the inmates, dared to come out of the line and said to the officer, *“Comrade Officer, they will freeze to death in this weather. You can’t send them to that cell!”* The supervisor slammed them both so hard that they flew dazed against the barracks wall.

Ivan the Brown lowered his head. Fear gripped him as he realized that his own people in the barracks would kill him for this.

Assured to freeze to death

Father Arseny and Alexei were dragged to the punishment cell and shoved inside. They both fell, cracking their heads against the wall. It was pitch black inside. Father Arseny stood up and said, *“So, here we are. God has brought us together. It is cold, Alyosha, and there is metal all around.”*

They heard the outer door close, the locks click, the voices and the steps of the guards fade away. The cold seized them and constricted their chests. Through the small window with iron bars the moon shone its milky light into the cell.

“We are going to freeze, Father Arseny,” moaned Alexei. *“It is because of me that we are going to freeze. We are both going to die. We need to keep moving, to jump up and*

down, but it is impossible to keep that up for 48 hours. I already feel so weak, so battered. My feet are already frozen. There is no room here, we cannot even move. Father Arseny, we are going to die. They are inhuman, it would be better to be shot!” Father Arseny was silent. Alexei tried to jump, but it did not warm him up. It was hopeless to try to resist such cold.

“Why don’t you say anything, Father Arseny?” Alexei shouted.

As if from somewhere very far away Father Arseny’s voice answered, *“I am praying to God, Alexei!”*

“What’s there to pray about when we are going to freeze?” Alexei muttered.

“We are here all alone, Alexei; for two days no one will come. We will pray. For the first time God has allowed us to pray aloud in this

camp, with our full voice. We will pray and the rest is God's will!"

The cold was gradually conquering Alexei and he was sure that Father Arseny was losing his mind. Making the sign of the cross and quietly pronouncing some words, Father Arseny stood in the ray of moonlight. Alexei's hands and feet were numbed by the cold; he had no strength in his limbs. He was freezing and no longer cared.

Father Arseny was silent now, and suddenly Alexei heard Father Arseny's words clearly, and understood that this was a prayer. Alexei had been in church only once, out of curiosity. Although his grandmother had baptized him when he was a child, his family did not believe in God. They simply had no interest in religious matters. They did not know what faith really was. Alexei himself was a student, a member of the Komsomol, a communist youth organization. How could he believe?

Through the numbness and the pain from the blows he had received, Alexei could clearly hear the words that Father Arseny was saying: *"O Lord God, have mercy on us sinners! Ever-merciful God! Lord Jesus Christ who because of Thy love became man to save us all. Through Thine unspeakable mercy save us, have mercy on us and lead us away from this cruel death, because we do believe in Thee, Thou our God and our Creator."* And so the words of prayer poured forth, and in each of these words lay the deepest love and trust in God's mercy, and unconditional faith in Him.

*A*lexei started listening to the words of the prayer. At first he was perplexed, but gradually he began to comprehend. The prayer calmed his soul, took away the fear of death, and united him with the old man standing beside him.

"O, Lord our God, Jesus Christ! Thou didst say with Thy purest lips that if two or three agree to ask for the same thing, then Thy Heavenly Father will grant their prayer because, as Thou didst say, 'When two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them.'" Alexei was repeating these words after Father Arseny.

The cold had taken over Alexei completely; his entire body was numb. He no longer knew whether he was standing, sitting or lying down. But suddenly the cell, the cold, the numbness of his whole body, his pain from the blows he had received and his fear all disappeared. Father Arseny's voice filled the cell, but was it a cell? Alexei turned to Father Arseny and was stunned. Everything around had been transformed. An awful thought came: *"I am losing my mind, this is the end, I am dying."*

The cell had grown wider, the ray of moonlight had disappeared. There was a bright light and Father Arseny, dressed in brilliant white vestments, his hands lifted up, was praying aloud. The clothing on Father Arseny was the same as on the priest Alexei had once seen in church.

*T*he words Father Arseny spoke were now easy to understand, they had become familiar—they entered directly into Alexei's soul. He felt no more anxiety, no more suffering, no more fear, only the desire to become one with these words, to understand them, to remember them for the rest of his life. There was no more cell: now they were in a church. How had they gotten here? And why was there someone else here with them? Alexei saw with surprise that there were two men assisting Father Arseny. Both were dressed in the same bright vestments and both shone with an undefinable white light. Alexei did not see their faces, but sensed that they were beautiful.

*O Lord God, have mercy on us sinners!
Ever-merciful God!*

A heavenly liturgy

Prayer filled Alexei's being. He stood up and started praying together with Father Arseny. It was warm and easy to breathe, and happiness filled his soul. Alexei repeated everything Father Arseny was saying, yet he was not simply repeating, but praying together with him. It seemed that Father Arseny had become one with the words of his prayer, but Alexei understood that Father Arseny had not forgotten him and was helping him all the while, helping him to pray.

The certainty that God existed, that He was with them, came to Alexei. He saw God with his soul. At times Alexei thought that perhaps they were both already dead, but the firm voice of Father Arseny and his presence kept bringing him back to reality.

How much time had passed he did not know, but Father Arseny turned to him and said, *"Go, Alyosha! Lie down, you are tired. I will keep praying, you will hear me."* Alexei lay down on the metal-covered floor, closed his eyes, and kept on praying. The words of prayer filled his whole being: *"...will agree to ask anything, it will be given to them by my Heavenly Father..."* In thousands of ways his heart responded to these words: *"gathered in my name..."* *"Yes, yes! We are not alone,"* thought Alexei from time to time as he continued to pray.

All was peaceful and warm. Suddenly out of nowhere his mother appeared. She covered him

with something warm. Her hands took his head, and she pressed him to her heart. He wanted to speak to her, *"Mama, can you hear, can you hear how Father Arseny is praying? I've learned that God exists. I believe in Him."*

As if she had heard him speak, she answered him, *"Alyoshenka! When they took you, I also found God. This is what has given me the strength to live."*

Everything that was awful had disappeared, his mother and Father Arseny were near him. Words of prayer which had been unknown to him now rekindled and warmed his soul. It was important not to forget these words, to remember them all his life. *"I never want to be far from Father Arseny, I want always to be with him,"* thought Alexei.

Lying on the floor at Father Arseny's feet, Alexei listened, half-asleep to the beautiful words of the prayer. Father Arseny prayed, and the two others in bright garments prayed with him and served him. They seemed amazed at how Father Arseny could pray. Father Arseny no longer asked for anything, he only glorified God and thanked Him. How long all this lasted no one could say.

The only things that remained in Alexei's memory were the words of the prayer, a warming and joyful light. Father Arseny praying, the two others in clothes of light, and an enormous, incomparable feeling of inner renewing warmth.

God saved us!

Somebody struck the door, the frozen lock squealed, and voices could be heard from the outside of the cell. Alexei opened his eyes.

Father Arseny was still praying. The two in garments of light blessed him and Alexei and slowly left. The blinding light was fading and the cell at

last became dark and, as before, cold and gloomy. *“Get up, Alexei! They have come for us,”* said Father Arseny.

Alexei rose. The head of the camp, the doctor, the main head of the special sector, and the Major were coming in. Somebody behind the door was saying, *“This is inexcusable—someone could report this to Moscow. Who knows how they will look at this. Frozen cadavers—this is not the modern way.”*

In the cell stood an old man in a patched up vest and a young one in torn clothes with a bruised face. Their faces were calm and their clothing was covered with a thick layer of frost.

“They’re alive?” the Major asked in amazement. *“How did they survive here for two days?”* *“We are alive, sir,”* said Father Arseny. All looked at each other in amazement. *“Search them.”*

“Come out!” shouted one of the supervisors. Father Arseny and Alexei walked out of the cell. The supervisors removed their gloves and started frisking them. The doctor also removed a glove, put it under Father Arseny’s and then Alexei’s clothing and, to nobody in particular, said, *“Amazing! How could they have survived?”*

It’s true, though; they’re warm.” The doctor walked into the cell, looked around it and asked, *“What kept you warm?”*

“Our faith in God, and prayer,” Father Arseny answered.

“They are simply fanatics. Send them back to the barracks right away,” said one of the supervisors in an irritated voice.

As he was walking away, Alexei heard somebody say, *“It’s amazing. In this cold they should have lived no more than four or five hours. It’s unbelievable, considering that it’s -22° F out. You supervisors sure got lucky. There could have been some unpleasantness in store for you.”*

The barracks met them as if they had risen from the dead.

Everyone asked, *“What saved you?”* They both answered, *“God saved us.”*

Alexei became a new man, as if he had been reborn. He followed Father Arseny whenever he was able to and asked everyone he could about God and the Faith. This story was told by Alexei and confirmed by several witnesses who lived in the barracks at that time. Alexei later became a priest and, as a spiritual son of Father Arseny, his successor.

The boots

In 1966, Andreyenkov, a prisoner from one of the special camps, told about one of Father Arseny’s acts of merciful love:

“I remember everything. It has been told thousands of times: the interrogations, the sentence, the camp, hunger, beatings, criminals, death always on your doorstep and the constant longing for your loved ones. ... Death was so near that you could almost touch it with your hand. ...

“I shared this fate with hundreds of thousands of others like myself. ... It is difficult for someone

who never was in a prison camp to understand what constitutes a ‘feat’ in camp—how it compares to the heroic deed of a soldier. ...

Believe me, the biggest heroic feat of all is to give help to others under such inhuman circumstances, when you yourself are tired, cold and dying of hunger. It is a heroic feat to give away a part of your own ration under these conditions, to do a difficult job for someone else when you yourself are half dead. You have to believe me, I have led soldiers to the attack, I have saved friends from fire, people have saved me, but I knew in what

name I was doing all this. In camp in what name would you do all this? We were all condemned to die anyway.

Father Arseny saved many of us. He did it in the name of God and of His people. He never took pity on himself. This is a heroic feat in the name of love for others. He didn't expect any reward for all of this. O Lord, if only all people could be like Father Arseny!

I met Father Arseny one winter because of... well, because of felt boots. In the winter the most

important thing is to keep your feet dry. There in camp, however, your boots are always wet, your feet freeze, they hurt and are covered with sores. You cannot dry your boots during the night—if you leave them on one of the stoves, you can be sure they will be stolen. You can't dry them in the evening, because that is the time the criminals dry their boots! In the course of that winter my feet were frost-bitten and I just was no longer able to work ... because I had fallen into a little stream.

I stumbled into the barracks, unable to take my boots off; I fell onto my bunk and thought, here it is, tomorrow I am going to croak."

An act of mercy

*"*Here I am, lying down unable to move and suddenly I feel that somebody is taking my boots off of me. My thought was that they have probably decided that I am dying and want to take my boots, but at this point I don't care.

This somebody took off one boot, then the other, removed the cloths that were wrapped around my feet, and started massaging them. I was unable to react, but I understood everything that was happening. He restored the circulation in my feet, covered me up and left. A terrible thought came to me: he has taken my boots and my foot bindings and wants to keep them. But why then did he massage my feet and put some kind of balm on my wounds? My feet still hurt, but less now, and I fell asleep.

In the morning the prisoner in charge boxed my ear and asked, *'Why are you not getting up?'* I had overslept. I jumped up, my feet were bare, I looked around and I saw that the old man was bringing my boots and my bindings back and everything was dry. I was confused, but I got dressed and went to work. In the evening the old man took my things again and dried them again; he did this several times. That is what saved my

life. I kept an eye on him, I finally started talking to him, and I just got used to him.

*D*o you want to know how he got my boots dry? He put them on the stove and stood by all night watching over them. Of course he worked like everybody else during the day. This is what I call a real feat!

So that is how I met Father Arseny. I watched him in camp: he helped so many people and we, looking at him, helped others. I just looked at the way he lived and behaved and, what can you do? I became a believer.

Once, I was very depressed because I thought that I would die there without ever seeing my family again. Father Arseny simply told me, *'Everything will be all right with you and your family. You will get out of this camp soon and you will see your relatives.'* I really don't know why, but as he said it I believed it absolutely.

I was in fact released a year or so afterwards. They had arrested me in 1952, and ... at the end of 1955 they unexpectedly released me, returned all my rights and gave me my job back, and my

relatives were indeed alive and well.” Father Arseny, on the other hand, was only allowed to leave three years later in 1958 as one of the last prisoners.

Now, every six months or so I go to visit Father Arseny: I arrive with an empty soul, deeply tired. He meets with me, talks with me, hears my confession, removes the froth from my soul. I come

to life and impatiently await my next visit with him. I return to Novosibirsk carrying with me the parcel of warmth and of faith which I receive from Father Arseny and I spend this treasure gradually. I am both a Communist and at the same time a Christian; nobody there knows that I’m Christian. I have a responsible job, but I try never to get involved with any work which has to do with atheism or with antireligious propaganda.”

Maryam is Like a Golden Thread

During the Easter season last year a few brothers and sisters from our community made a fascinating pilgrimage to the Holy Land with a group from Germany and Switzerland. Tracing the footsteps of Jesus became an unforgettable experience thanks to the historical and cultural knowledge, as well as the spiritual depth of our guides, a married couple by the names of Louisa and Karl-Heinz Fleckenstein. Louisa and Karl-Heinz were especially pleased to show us the famous Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem where they have lived for a number of years.

Full of anticipation, we stood at the entrance and waited patiently for our group’s turn to descend the stairs into the grotto of the Nativity amid the crowds of people wanting to visit the place where our Redeemer was born.

All of a sudden a group of Muslim girls met up and kindly greeted us. When our tour guide Mr. Fleckenstein saw our surprised and puzzled faces he took advantage of our wait to explain a little to us why numerous Muslim faithful also like to visit this place of grace in Bethlehem.

The Muslims, in fact, have a very special veneration for Maryam (the Arabic form for Mary or Miriam), who according to Islam was the virgin mother of the prophet Issa (Jesus), particularly

chosen by God and therefore an example for all Muslim women. Maryam is a treasured saint for the Muslims. In the Koran there is even a whole chapter, the 19th sura, dedicated to her—something which does not exist for any other woman—bearing her name and, among other things, telling of Jesus’ virginal conception.

The majority of our group knew very little or nothing at all about any of this. Karl-Heinz Fleckenstein pointed out to us a precious silver icon on the wall and told us the following event which took place three years earlier in the Basilica of the Nativity.

Muna und Fatmeh

“An eleven-year-old Muslim girl, Muna from Bethlehem, had suffered since her earliest childhood years from a terrible rash. The little girl’s whole body was covered with red spots, and Muna’s classmates avoided her because they were afraid it might be contagious.

The child distanced herself more and more from the others isolating herself in her own world. Muna was often teased and laughed at, and she became a loner. Her grades dropped and as soon as she came home from school she hid in her bed. At least there she could cover up her ‘shameful spots’. How this soul suffered!

Her parents became desperate. They had brought their child to countless dermatologists, even to the renowned ‘Hadassah University Clinic’ in Jerusalem. Yet like everywhere else, they just shrugged their shoulders at a loss for an explanation. Some thought, ‘*Maybe the troublesome pimples will disappear during puberty,*’ but none of the specialists could promise it. The doctors prescribed every possible cream, medication and even a therapy in the Dead Sea, but nothing helped.

Fatmeh, Muna’s mother, did not know what else to do. One Friday, the Muslim feast day of the week, she came across the 19th sura while reading the Koran. As if inspired from on high, she let her thoughts run: ‘*Maryam, you are so full of grace from God. You are the mother of the prophet Issa whom we call “God’s Word”. I now take refuge in you to heal my child!*’ Then she called out to her daughter, ‘*Muna, come my child, put on your feast day dress! We have a*

very important visit to make.’

She took her little daughter by the hand and the two of them hurried off to the Basilica of the Nativity. Before the entrance leading down into the grotto is a silver icon of Mary with the Child Jesus in her arms. Fatmah and her daughter knelt down with tears in their eyes. ‘*Maryam,*’ she sobbed, ‘*behold my daughter Muna. She is a virgin just like you. Help my child! Make her clean from this rash on her body. Thank you that you have heard me.*’ The candle that they lit together was as large as the girl.

When Muna woke up the next day, she could not believe her eyes. ‘*Mamma,*’ she called excitedly. ‘*Just look! My body is free of that ugly pox!*’ Crying for joy, mother and child ran into one another’s arms. Since then, you see Fatmeh and Muna once a month in front of the Marian icon close to the grotto of the Nativity, where they light a candle in thanksgiving because this is what they promised Maryam on the day she was healed.”

The miraculous healing of the Muslim girl Muna from Bethlehem made us brothers and sisters remember what the Mother of All Nations promised in Amsterdam: “*I will give consolation. Nations, your Mother knows life, your Mother knows sorrow, your Mother knows the Cross. Everything you go through in this life is a passage that your Mother, the Lady of All Nations, went before you.*” In the Holy Land, therefore, we were strengthened anew in our conviction that it is really Mary who proves herself to be the mother also of the Muslims. She will one day unite all peoples.

Since Muna’s miraculous healing, an increasing number of Muslim girls, women and mothers come from all around to visit the precious icon of Mary in the Basilica of the Nativity. They entrust their intentions to Maryam and also ask in the grotto for help when they have been unable to conceive, for complications during pregnancy, for a good birth or for a blessing for their children.