

Triumph of the Heart

A PRIESTLY NATION

Family of Mary

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St. Peter the Apostle writes:

*“But you are a ‘chosen race,
a royal priesthood, a holy nation,
a people of his own.’”*

1 Peter 2:9

A Priestly Nation

*For many, the expressions “priestly nation” or “priestly people”
are vague and have little meaning for their faith life.*

*Yet since this topic pertains to all Catholics, actually to all Christians,
we felt it is important, and at the same time a joy,
in this issue of Triumph of the Heart, to deepen, together with you, dear readers,
our identity and vocation as a priestly people.*

*E*ven though during the ordination to the priesthood a deacon is marked with an indelible seal when the bishop imposes his hands, and the sacramental priesthood is by the will of God reserved only for men, all people made in the likeness of God—men, women, children, teenagers, sick and elderly—should receive a profoundly priestly heart. Anyone may draw from the infinite riches of the high priestly heart of Jesus. Wherever the love and surrender of God is answered with love and surrender, wherever one gives himself to God and neighbor, *Christian* life will become a happy, *priestly* life. Beautiful examples from saints and testimonies from our day illustrate this on the following pages.

“Priestly people” does not undermine the unique dignity and authority of the sacramental priesthood to which it will always be reserved

to anoint the sick, absolve from sins and speak the divine words of consecration over bread and wine. Strengthened by sacramental graces, a priestly person also begins to make a gift of oneself to God and neighbor—through works of mercy, prayer or sacrifice made in love. In the end, this priestly behavior benefits the ordained priest who feels supported, carried or counseled by the faithful.

St. John Eudes, the French founder of a religious order and an untiring missionary, dared to formulate this fact in the following manner: *“The sacramental priesthood is so great, so divine, that it seems there is nothing greater or more divine. Yet there is a priesthood which, in a certain way, surpasses that of the priest—it is the vocation to work for the sanctification of priests in which the rescuer*

is rescued and the shepherd is led to pasture, in which one obtains light for those who are the light of the world and sanctifies those who are the sanctification of the Church.”

It is very much in this sense that Pope St. John Paul II thankfully recalls his father, who was never a priest, but who was a profoundly priestly soul and lived completely from God and for God: *“I think about how from the time I was a toddler, I learned in my family how to pray and entrust myself to God. After the death of my mother and then with my brother’s pass-*

ing away, I was left alone with my father, a deeply religious man. I observed his daily life, which was ... dignified ... and became a life of constant prayer. It happened that I sometimes awoke during the night and found my father kneeling on the ground, just as I always saw him kneeling in church. I marveled at my father ... through the hard strokes of fate an immeasurable depth had opened up in him. His suffering transformed into prayer. The simple fact that I saw him kneeling had a decisive influence on my younger years.

Translated from:
Fürchtet euch nicht, André Frossard im Gespräch
mit Johannes Paul II., 1982.
Geschenk und Geheimnis - Zum 50. Jahr meiner
Priesterweihe, Johannes Paul II., 1996

Saying Yes Together is a Blessing

Without ever becoming a priest or a monk, God led the Swiss farmer, judge and father of ten children, Nicholas from Flue (1417-1487) in a priestly way—unique in Church history. Contemporaries rightly called the mystic, a man of prayer and fasting, the “living saint”.

He lived as a hermit in the Ranft, a gorge about 15 minutes from his sizable farm. For the last two decades of his life, his only nourishment was the Holy Eucharist. Common people, priests, politicians, scholars and royal emissaries from home and abroad sought and found enlightened advice from “Brother Klaus” who was famous throughout Europe.

Even after 500 years, this saint is as attractive as he ever was. Along with numerous pilgrims, the church in Sachseln also draws many

Protestants to the glass shrine of his earthly remains. The inscription above his tomb reads “pater patriae”, “Father of the Fatherland”. None other than the recently canonized Pope John Paul II, during his 1984 visit to Switzerland, knelt at the tomb of the Patron Saint of Switzerland and prayed: *“My Lord and my God ... thanks to your guidance ... his marriage and family in the Flue became a place of faith and prayer. Thanks to your kind providence, Brother Klaus found an understanding wife in Dorothy, who struggled and prayed with him for the strength to obey your divine will. You called Dorothy to take over her husband’s responsibility for the family, house and farm so that the way of the saint be clear for a life in the Ranft—free for prayer, free for his task*

to be a peacemaker. God, you fount of peace ... let us see always more with Brother Klaus and his holy wife Dorothy that true reconciliation and lasting peace comes from you alone."

It is interesting that precisely this future saint of peace, whom Switzerland has to thank for its unique protection during World War II (see *Triumph of the Heart* #51), despite his happy family life and great political notoriety suffered from such a painful restlessness. The inner pressure and struggle that God placed in him weighed heavily on Nicholas and made him distant.

At the age of 47, he resigned from his various positions and sought to be ever closer to God through silent prayer. One day he heard from a cloud the words, "*Surrender to the will of God. ... Be ready for what God wants to work in you!*"

*F*or Nicholas it then became similar to Peter to whom Jesus said, "*Someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.*" As the 50-year-old, with the approval of his family, set off on the feast of the Swiss saint Gallus in 1467 to continue to serve God in a new way, his youngest child Klaus, who would later become a priest, was only three months old.

To this day, some people are critical and do

not understand Nicholas' conduct, but his departure was in no way irresponsible eccentricity or a selfish act of "bailing out". It was a hard fought response to God's call. Brother Klaus never would have taken this step twenty years after saying his first yes in marriage, without the decisive second yes of his wife Dorothy. She carried the vocation of her husband and made the sacrifice with him and for him, although her heart and mind could not fathom it. Klaus always described the agreement of his Dorothy as one of the three great graces that God gave him in his life.

The extraordinary miracle of living solely from the Holy Eucharist, along with the greatness of the blessing with which he worked, prove how much this unprecedented decision corresponded to the will of God. The whole world sought the one who had left the world. Many found conversion and healing.

His wife Dorothy, they say, sought counsel on occasion from the "living saint", participated with him at Holy Mass and occasionally provided food for his visitors. Dorothy would not have done any of this had the Ranft not become for her, like for her husband, a place of peace so that as she attended to the 70-year-old saint on his deathbed with her loved ones, she must have agreed with his enlightened words, "*Peace is always in God because God is peace.*"

The man of God adored the Lord for hours on end through a little screened window on the right side of the adjoining chapel. Only then did he turn to the left window, which opened to the "world", with a joyful face for the intentions of those waiting. If there were many people, he went outside to those seeking counsel and help, affably shook everybody's hand and said, "May God grant you a good and blessed morning, you dear friends and beloved people!"

Saints Do Not Fall from Heaven

*Even future saints receive their first deep impressions in the family.
In St. Thérèse of Lisieux's case, it was her model parents,
Louis (1823-1894) and Zélie (1831-1877) Martin,
whose canonization will be later this year,
who raised their daughter "for heaven".*

Marie-Zélie Guerin, the daughter of a federal police officer, grew up in Normandy in the north of France. Strong tempered, yet sickly and very sensitive, she soon felt drawn to consecrated life so that she could serve the sick and the poor. When she sought acceptance by the Vincentians in Alençon, France, the superior responded unhesitatingly, *"It is not God's will."* So, the girl made a simple request of God, *"Then I will marry in order to fulfill your will. I ask you, however, to give me many children, and may they all be consecrated to you."*

Zélie, very beautiful and talented, then learned the artistic trade of making famous Alençon lace, and at the age of 22, she opened her own shop and her goods were sought from as far away as Paris. On a bridge four years later, she met a young man whose kind face impressed her, and Zélie heard an inner voice, *"This is the man whom I have chosen for you."*

The stranger was watchmaker Louis-Joseph Martin, a 35-year-old son of a deeply faithful military officer. A friend of nature and literature, his extraordinary love for God called him to the monastery as well at the age of 22. Yet his acceptance by the Augustinians at the Great St. Bernard Abbey also failed because of his poor Latin skills. He led a nearly monastic life for eight years at his watchmaking and jewelry

shop in Alençon. He was so fulfilled interiorly that he never even considered marrying, until Providence intervened, and he met Zélie. Only three months later, their hearts were in such unison that they said, "I do" before God on July 13, 1858.

Although both of them had always had the desire to live in a convent or monastery, they came with the help of their confessor to a deep understanding of Christian parenthood: giving of themselves to God should now be realized exteriorly by giving him children. Zélie took the following recommendation of a priest to heart:

"A young mother should ... immerse her soul completely in God whose creature, image and possession she is carrying and nourishing. She should be nothing other than a shrine, an altar, a tabernacle for the life forming in her. Let her live an active sacramental life that ... sanctifies her in order to draw from it natural and supernatural beauties ... and pass them on to the child whom she will bear." In her whole being, Zélie was oriented toward giving selflessly as a mother. She later wrote, *"After we had our children, we lived only for them; they were our whole joy. ... That is why I wanted to have many, so that I could raise them for heaven."*

Zélie's greatest wish, offering God a son as a priest, would never be realized. She had to give back to God two sons in a row within a few months of their birth, sons for whom she had prayed so earnestly to conceive. In ten years, Zélie experienced the joy of pregnancy eight times, but she also had to watch four of the "little angels" die in her arms. Nevertheless, she learned through this to unite herself ever more deeply with God's will and accept everything without the slightest doubt in his goodness.

Her only desire was continually to lead her loved ones to God. *"Four of my children are already in good hands, and the others, well, they will also come to heaven but with more merit because they will have had more time to prove themselves."*

In all their trials, her husband's inner fortitude and supernatural outlook supported Zélie and this in turn unveiled the greatness of her soul and her courageousness. She did the work of three people and still understood how to master the daily challenges with witty serenity and a pinch of fine humor.

Louis was a big help for his wife in her strenuous job as a lace maker. They both considered the lucrative business, however, to be merely the means of securing a good education and dowry for their daughters. Since God was at the center of their lives, the couple used a portion of their resources to provide shelter for the poor and to help the underprivileged. Living charity gave the two of them access to the dying for some of whom they were able to arrange the Sacraments. The whole family persistently prayed for the unrepentant, and many times, they were able to celebrate with childlike joy "victories" of conversion.

The deep affection and unity of the couple's souls, which found a perfect balance between strictness and tender love in the education of their children, ruled life in the Martin home. They often let their heroic example speak for itself when it came to leading their daughters in daily life to make Jesus happy and giving him "pearls for his crown" through little acts of self-denial out of love.

God was the most important; Louis and Zélie usually began the day with Holy Mass at 5:30 a.m. The first thing the neighbors heard in the morning was the closing of the Martin's front door, to which they said, *"That's the holy Martin couple going to church. There is still time to sleep."*

In the evening, they prayed together before a statue of Our Lady, read aloud from books on the lives of the saints and according to the liturgical season, cheerfully spoke about spiritual things. Despite their intense Christian family life, the couple on occasion withdrew individually to a monastery to be alone with God.

Louis was the rock, the patriarch of the family, and, at the same time, goodness itself. *"My husband is holy,"* Zélie declared thankfully, *"I'd wish every woman one like him."*

Louis' piety knew neither compromise nor fear of others. A truly ascetic life grew from his great love for the Holy Eucharist and contemplating the Lord's suffering: *"If we may often receive the loving God, should we not practice self-denial?"*

In 1864, the 32-year-old mother showed the first signs of a serious illness. Eight years later, Zélie and her concerned husband still decided for a ninth child, and on January 2, 1873, at the age of 41, gave birth to Thérèse who soon became the sunshine of the family.

Just four years later they received the dreadful diagnosis—inoperable breast cancer! The family was shaken. Zélie bravely accepted the trial and decided, *"I will make use of the days I have been given."* With an iron will, she overcame herself to do her work and tried, despite the increasing pain, to remain joyful.

Quietly she hoped for healing for the sake of her loved ones. Yet at the same time, she prepared for her departure and thought often, with great readiness to give her life, about her third child who had a difficult character: *"If the sacrifice of my life is enough to make a saint out of Léonie, I would give it with all my heart."*

After painful suffering, Zélie Martin died peacefully in her sleep at the age of 45 on the

night of August 28, 1877, her beloved Louis at her side. The next day, the 54-year-old widower led his just four and a half year old daughter Thérèse to the deathbed of her mother. The saint later described this farewell herself: *“He took me in his arms and said to me, ‘Come and kiss your poor mother one last time.’ And I, without saying a word, pressed my lips to the forehead of my beloved mom.”*

*A*fter 19 happy years of marriage, Louis’ world collapsed. They moved to Lisieux, and he dedicated himself completely to raising his daughters with the help of the oldest, 17-year-old Marie. The wonderful spiritual fruits of his marriage with Zélie were to be seen

by him alone, as one girl after the next found her vocation to religious life.

Marie and Pauline joined the Carmelites in Lisieux. Saying goodbye to his merely 15-year-old “little queen” Thérèse, hit the 64-year-old particularly hard: *“Only God can ask such a sacrifice ... yet my heart is overjoyed!”* Even Léonie became a nun in the Order of the Visitation.

When then his fifth, Céline, entrusted her wish to him to become a Carmelite, he exclaimed, *“Come, let’s go to the Blessed Sacrament to thank the Lord for the grace he has shown to our family. ... It is a very great honor for me that the good Lord desires all my children. Had I anything better, I would hurry to offer it to him.”*

*“Had I, with the dispositions I had,
been raised by parents without virtues
or even been spoiled, I would have become
very bad and may even have been lost.”*

St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus

*The daughters wrote from the cloister:
“You greatest of all fathers, who, without keeping count,
give God the whole hope of your age ...
how we will praise you when we
get to heaven!”*

Louis entrusted to his daughters that once, in light of all the graces and goodness he had received, he prayed the following prayer: *“My God, it is too much; yes, I am too happy. It is impossible to go to heaven this way; I want to suffer something for you.”* And I offered myself to him.” Thérèse remembered, *“He murmured the word ‘offered’, he did not dare to say it in front of us, but we understood.”*

In 1888, Louis Martin donated 10,000 Francs for a new high altar in their cathedral. Such generosity, which he had tried to keep strictly secret, was thought exaggerated even by his good-hearted father-in-law who was somewhat displeased when he found out. Little Thérèse defended her father however, *“After he has given all of us to the Lord, it is completely natural that he donate an altar on which he can offer up all of us and himself as a sacrifice.”*

*B*efore fulfilling her wish, however, Céline took care of her father until the end of his life. In fact, Louis suffered a real passion due to several strokes: his understanding grew increasingly hazy and he fell more frequently into unpredictable conditions of confusion, even hallucination, so that he had to be placed in a psychiatric clinic for more than three years.

That what God allowed devastated his daughters, and yet they understood that these torments, which they patiently endured together, “*were suitable for making saints out of us.*” Louis had once said that such a humiliating fate

was, “*the hardest trial one can be given.*”

Phases of mental clarity continually offered him the possibility to consciously, “*drink the bitterest and most humiliating chalice,*” as Thérèse put it, and to offer it willingly to God.

Finally, after two more years in a wheelchair, Louis followed his wife Zélie on July 29, 1894, in the 71st year of his life. They did not generate the desired priest son and missionary, but instead the Patroness of the World Missions and Doctor of the Church, St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus.

Translated from:
Stéphane-Joseph Piat,
Geschichte einer Familie,
Johannes-Verlag Leutesdorf

Your Mission is to Save Souls

*The priesthood, in its truest and deepest sense, is to be a sacrifice of love.
To give the world such priests, however, God begins with mothers.
One of them is the Servant of God María Concepción Cabrera de Armida,
better known as Conchita of Mexico (1862-1937).*

*T*his down-to-earth, practical housewife and mother of nine wonderfully understood, in lovingly being centered on Jesus, how to simply and joyfully lead her whole family on a way of Christian perfection in their daily life. In addition, a great mystic and founder of more than one religious order, she left the Church five compilations, about 60,000 pages, of writings inspired by Jesus about the rich inheritance of her motherhood for priests. “*In heaven, you will continue your mission for priests,*” Jesus promised near the end of 74-year-old Conchita’s life, which she had already freely offered to him with everything that was precious and dear to her for the renewal of the Church and a “new Pentecost”. She drew the strength for each new

sacrifice of love from the Holy Eucharist and Mary, for therein lay hidden the saint’s deepest happiness. Everyone can imitate her Eucharistic-Marian attitude; she desired only to become “*a priestly, hidden saint*”.

Conchita spent her joyful childhood and adolescence on a hacienda, the large farm of her generous and devout Christian parents. She was temperamental and sensitive at the same time. Despite all the work at home, she loved to go swimming, diving, canoeing and riding the wildest, fastest horses with siblings and friends. More than anything, the beautiful girl liked music. She often played her own compositions on the piano and sang to them with her rich voice.

At the same time, God’s grace working in

her was visible from her earliest childhood. *“My mother poured the love for Our Lady and the Holy Eucharist into my soul. I made my First Holy Communion on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception 1872, on my tenth birthday. ... Due to my tepidity ... I remember nothing other than my indescribable joy of being able to wear a white dress. However, from this day forward, my love for the Eucharist continually deepened. ... And when I was 15 or 16 years old, I was allowed to go to Holy Mass every day. I was so happy that I could go to Holy Communion. Sometimes, as I was riding along the road, I meditated slowly, word for word, prayers to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin. My childlike heart found an indescribable joy in doing so.”*

Conchita also loved the balls and the exciting parties at her father’s hacienda. Half of the village usually came and she, often surrounded by more than twenty young men, was a sought-after dance partner. *“I dressed beautifully and elegantly o please,”* she said, *“but in the depths of my soul, I experienced a great longing for prayer. ... When I went to bed, I took the cross in my hand. ... An unspeakable love gripped me, and my heart was completely submersed in him. Jesus drew me to himself ... and filled me with his bliss. Then this impression disappeared again, and I returned to my life of lukewarmness, vanity and arrogance. Yet in the midst of the world of flattery and distraction ... it was as if an inner voice told me, ‘Your happiness is elsewhere!’*

“I experienced a dreadful emptiness which I believed I could fill with married life. Whenever I received the Blessed Sacrament or paid him a visit, I said to Jesus: ‘Lord, I feel so incapable of loving you; therefore, I want to marry. Give me many children so that they can love you more than I.’”

Conchita was engaged to her Pancho for nine years. They wrote to one another constantly and Conchita later recounted, *“I made myself pretty for him, went to the theater to see him, but I did not forget God. From the very first letter, I tried to lead Pancho to God, wrote to him ... about loving Our Lady and pushed him to*

receive the Sacraments as often as possible.”

*W*hen Conchita married at the age of 21, she asked two things of her husband at the celebration on their wedding night: that she may go daily to Holy Mass and that he not be jealous because there will never be a reason.

“From the morning of our wedding until his death, he let me go to Holy Communion every day. He kept his promise and took care of the children until I came home. Even later when he was very ill, he told me, ‘Go to Holy Communion!’”

Conchita drew from the Eucharistic Lord the necessary strength to treat her husband with much patience and love. Although tender and polite and a wonderful father for their nine children, he *“nevertheless had an extremely strong temper; like gunpowder.”*

Within a few years, though, he had changed completely, to the astonishment of all his relatives. Only Conchita knew the reason behind it: *“It was the work of grace, but also my personal effort. Often, when the weight of my obligations and a thousand worries break over me ... when passions revolt, when self-love and sensitivity want to take charge of me ... then I go like a wounded animal to the altar and let the poison ... run out. I say that I am ready to let myself be healed by the Divine Physician ... and I humbly beg from Jesus the strength and the victory ... because I love him.”*

Thus, the couple’s mutual love, nourished by the Sacraments and a life of prayer together, grew in depth and strength. One day, Conchita entrusted to her diary, *“My love for my husband, which was full of tenderness, never hindered me from loving God. I loved my husband with great simplicity. My love for him was completely enwrapped in my love for Jesus.”* Since only God can fill a soul, Conchita also had to experience that, *“in spite of my husband’s goodness, I drew always closer to God in order to seek in him what I was lacking because the inner emptiness increased, despite my happy marriage, despite the worldly joys.”*

When in 1901, after sixteen years of marriage, Pancho died unexpectedly, his just 39-year-old widow, whose “heart attached so quickly and deeply to people and things, fled in those days to the tabernacle to find support and to draw strength. Oh, had I not been held! Only when I prayed, ‘thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ did I feel the strength ... to carry this terrible blow.”

Jesus, however, finally entrusted Conchita with a new spiritual task, one for which he had already prepared her for years: “It will be your mission to rescue souls. Your sublime mission on earth is to make a sacrifice of yourself for my Church, especially for her

shepherds. I want you to be my host ... and offer yourself with me day and night, as often as possible, on all the patens of the world.”

On the outside, Mother Conchita stayed with her family, where for 35 years, “closed in the inner shrine of her soul,” she suffered in hiddenness for the sanctification of the priests. Jesus explained to her: “There are souls who received priestly anointing through consecration. Nevertheless, there are ... just as priestly souls who, even though they have neither the dignity nor the anointing of a priest, have a priestly sending. They offer themselves united with me. ... These souls help the Church very powerfully in a spiritual sense.”

“Forget everything, especially yourself...
You have received the highest mission,
the sending of a priest ...
not to hold me in your hand,
but in your heart.”

Jesus to Conchita of Mexico

The Secret of Marthe Robin

It is a mystery of God how the simple French farm girl Marthe Robin (1902-1981), paralyzed, with the stigmata on her body and suffering through the Passion every week, blind and without food or drink, could live from only the Holy Eucharist for 50 years.

Just as great a mystery is how she, whose eyes shed tears of blood on a daily basis, had the inner strength and courage to open wide the door of her darkened room to a never-ending stream

of people. The stigmatic, until she died at the age of 78, received more than 100,000 visitors.

People of all races and nationalities found counsel, conversion and hope with her: students and ministers, nobility, philosophers and scientists, journalists and actors, as well as cardinals, bishops, abbots, theologians and more than 600 priests. She became a spiritual mother for them all. This would have never been possible had she not lived so priestly herself!

Since Marthe had a distinctly joyful nature and loved to sing, dance, laugh and work energetically on the farm, she had to struggle fiercely for ten years to accept her suffering in surrender. For the 16-year-old, who was the only one in the Robin Family that practiced her Faith and had a wonderful, trusting relationship to Our Lady, it was a hard, inner struggle as the suffering increased to the point of being paralyzed and not being able to leave her bed.

Many diary pages speak of deep darkness. In 1929, she had to give up her pastime of sewing and needlepoint due to the laming of her arms, but she did not remove the thimble from her finger for another week. It took her that long to find the strength to make this sacrifice too. Finally, she permitted her mother, “*You can remove it now.*”

At the end of 1930, when Jesus asked the 28-year-old, “*Marthe, do you want to be like me?*”, she gave him her joyful yes. A short time later, through a particular grace, she became very similar to her pierced groom through the stigmata and the weekly suffering of his Passion. She said, “*My life is a continual Mass. I never have the feeling that my bed is a bed; it is an altar; it is the Cross. ... Yet through suffering one learns charity, self-offering to God, letting go. In suffering, one learns to see and understand. In suffering, one learns to encourage those who suffer; to feel with them, to console them.*”

*R*edeeming with Jesus, she suffered for others: “*O Redeemer, worthy to be adored ... accept the sacrifice I bring you in silence ... to the benefit of so many millions of people*

who do not know you and do not love you, for the conversion of sinners, for the return of the erring and the non-believers, for the sanctification and the apostolate of all your beloved priests.” The latter received her special motherly love. Nobody knew as many priests as Marthe, who said, already at the age of ten, “*I found God ... especially in the priests. The sight of them always moved me to prayer. I was always touched by the sight of priests.*”

Marthe was often credited with spectacular healings; she obtained the grace that many women were able to conceive. Many who came oppressed went away renewed or found their way to the Sacraments through just a word, a look or a smile from this God-loving woman. Still others received a new priestly attitude toward suffering. “*Marthe tore the veils that blinded me,*” one woman said, “*because she let me see that we, like him, should take up our burden, because for Christ, the step to paradise went through the crucifixion. Since then I have accustomed myself to offering God my suffering and concerns ... which is certainly a battle from day to day ... but Marthe taught me to accept my trials and offer them up. That is the greatest grace she could have obtained for me. ... She gave me an ardent desire to pray every day. Yes, through her intercession, my return to God quietly took place, without much hassle or hesitation.*”

It is no surprise, because Marthe was well aware, “*More than ever before, it is my beautiful sending of love and special vocation to pray for everybody, but especially for priestly souls, for priests, missionaries and religious.*”

“It has been said that the greatest mission is done by the saint who lives closed up in his four tiny walls.”

Marthe Robin

With sensitive discretion, Marthe also helped some priests find a new priestly identity, an understanding of what the priesthood really is. One of them was a talented Belgian priest, renowned worldwide for speaking on retreats, radio shows and homilies. When a heavy statue of St. Joseph fell on his foot one day while cleaning the church, it made his life very difficult, both physically and psychologically. He had to cancel months of retreats. He came to Marthe to complain about all this, but before he could say a word, she said with a smile, “*Father, with your foot you are doing much more for the kingdom of God than you have done your whole life with your mouth!*” He understood! Suffering offered up in love leads to union with God—and that is the decisive power over hearts.

Another retreat master, who had worked in his diocese for 33 years with adults and youth, met Marthe about 30 times. He recounted, “*On one Good Friday, as I was in Marthe’s room with a few other priests and she was suffering the crucifixion, Fr. Finet used a flashlight to show us the wounds on her head, the bloody tears on her cheeks and on the cloth that was laid over her chest. As I heard Marthe’s continual sighs, I wept because my sins.*”

Yes, Marthe carried the priests with all their weaknesses with her prayer, and she never judged those who had left their vocation: “*For me, there are no fallen priests, only wounded, hurting priests.*”

Marthe was famous for her “trips” around the world and her knowledge of events, places and times. “*I ‘travel’ in God who brings me where he wills,*” she explained with a playful smile about her bilocations. She did not hide

from her spiritual director the fact that she was with Pope Pius XII, praying alongside him at the hour of his death.

Another time, as Fr. Renirkens, a missionary to China who spent 14 months in prison, was telling her about it, she interrupted him. “*Very gently she added precise and specific details and episodes to my report, things too painful ... which I had not yet revealed to anybody. Perplexed, I asked her, ‘But Marthe, you weren’t with me in prison! How do you know about the Chinese landscape, churches and hospitals which nobody in Europe knows?’ She simply gave me the unexpected response, ‘Well, you know, Jesus is so often in China!’*”

Despite the many visitors, Marthe remained human until the end. She, who lived without eating, rejoiced when from time to time somebody set a bowl of mandarins or fresh strawberries to smell at her bedside. She, though blind, loved blooming plants. She especially like orchids, which she had people describe to her in detail.

With an attentive ear, she enjoyed the sound of children laughing or the ticking of a clock. She was also visibly excited to pet the down of a chick or the fur of a young rabbit. Yet, at the same time, Marthe had to say, “*I suffered continuously, day and night ... one goes and goes without knowing where the loving God is leading her. ... Be praised, Jesus, that you carried me so tenderly on the long journey.*”

In this disposition, Marthe Robin prayed looking forward to the “*new Pentecost of love*”, which she saw coming for the whole Church. She offered her life for it.

Translated from:
Theresia Westerhorstmann, *Passion für die Priester*,
Be&Be-Verlag Heiligenkreuz, 2012
Bernard Peyrous, *Das Leben der Mystikerin*
Marthe Robin, Parvis Verlag 2008

Jesus made use of Marthe’s vocation to realize the “great work of his love”, the so-called “Foyer de Charité”, “to spread out his reign in the whole Church and for the renewal of the whole world”—a community of active laity who under the direction of a priest “will shine throughout the world.” As Jesus said, “It should become a refuge for people’s great needs, to draw consolation and hope. Countless sinners will come from all sides—drawn by my Mother and by me.” Every member renews the consecration to Mary every day.

Life is Wonderful

Pope St. John Paul II declared Italian Carla Ronci (1936-1970) venerable on July 7, 1997. She is a radiant example of a young woman who, through her enthusiasm and joy with priestly self-offering, led countless people to God.

As most young people in Torre Pedrera, close to Rimini, Italy, the pretty and lively, yet strong willed girl spent most of her time at the beach sunbathing and swimming. She loved romantic novels and going to movies, but her true passion was dancing. She showed up with her parents at every dance. She was the pride of her father, and admired and courted by her peers. Later, she would recall, "Until I was 14, I ran breathlessly after anything I believed could fill my heart's emptiness and restlessness. I tried to numb myself with one indulgence after another, but to no avail."

In 1950, the Ursulines opened a kindergarten close by, and Carla saw the sisters joyfully going to Holy Mass every morning, rain or shine. For the first time she realized that life might have a deeper meaning, and a radical change took place in her young life: "One eve-

ning, as I was leaning on a window in the dance hall, my imagination was enlightened and I saw the outline of a face with a smiling glance like I had never seen before. I heard a voice and an invitation in my heart. I was disgusted with myself. As I looked back over my previous 14 years, I saw nothing which actually made me happy and my whole future was hanging over a deep abyss."

She could not stop thinking about that smiling face the rest of the night. She had no doubt that it was Jesus. In the morning, she broke out in tears and promised him that she would not dance for a whole year. This was the beginning of her love story with the Lord and a thoroughly joyful and fulfilled life. "Just the thought that I have the Lord makes me so happy that I cannot express it in words. I am happy to be so loved by him."

Fruitful work in the parish

From now on, she put her natural gifts at the Lord's disposal. She joined "Catholic Action" and took care of children and youth from the parish. "The Lord needs witnesses today who through their own life and example, rather than through preaching, make it possible to experience him."

She was very attentive of how she looked and dressed, because "I want the others to have a good impression of you, Lord, through me." Her life became more and more centered

on enflaming in souls a love for the Lord. She pleaded with him, "You have to reveal yourself to others through my ordinary life." Jesus obviously had heard her. "I remember exactly, as if it were yesterday, how souls really started to follow me."

Although she, like a good shepherdess alongside her pastor, could see the unbelievably fruitful apostolate in her parish, she had a growing desire to withdraw to a convent and leave the world behind her. Her friendship with the sis-

ters in the parish led her to the Ursulines, but her father was adamantly opposed to her decision. His visits and threats were so persistent, that

22-year-old Carla obeyed her superior and returned home. *"For you, Jesus, and for souls,"* was her painful response.

True joy makes us generous

*I*t was obvious that God had a different plan for Carla, but what? With her whole heart, she dedicated anew her very limited free time to the activities of the parish, founded a sort of pre-seminary to promote vocations to consecrated life, opened a little movie theater where wholesome films were shown, taught classes for engaged couples and took care of a library and spread religious literature. *"I believe,"* she wrote, *"that in order to help our young people, we have to love them a lot. We have to show them much trust and listen to them tirelessly and not be offended by what they say. We have to show them that we are interested even in the most trivial things."* She learned this method, not in some book, but by looking to Jesus. She brought him everyone who was entrusted to her: *"I entrust them all to you. Our children have to become good, they have to become holy."*

Carla was so charming because she had such a tremendous joy for life. *"The soul which remains in God's grace lives life joyfully because everything helps it give itself, to love, to make amends and to give thanks."* This true joy was the fruit of many little decisions that made her soul strong and energetic.

From her diary, we can imagine how she struggled to live this joy every day: *"Do not complain: the place where you are is where you belong because it is the place which God in his providence has chosen and prepared for you. God wants you there; you possess all the graces you need to become holy. You would not have them elsewhere."*

Carla's life was anything but easy. After Holy Mass in the morning, she worked at her mother's vegetable stand. In the evening, she sewed, helped the sick and the poor with the

little money she made and took care of the youth from the parish, which was strenuous and unnering. She often told them, *"Life is beautiful, and when you love, it is amazing!"*

She always wanted to give herself completely to Jesus through a religious vow. When she met the secular institute "Servants of the Mother of Mercy" at the age of 25, her heart's desire became reality. She made her vow on January 6, 1963, and offered Jesus her life for the sanctification of the priests. Now she was finally a bride of Christ! *"For him alone I strive to be a living testimony, wherever I am and whatever I am doing. I receive Jesus in Holy Communion to let him live in me and through me."* One of the teenagers she cared for testified, *"For us, Carla was a living Gospel. She was not afraid of suffering. She accepted any difficulty which crossed her path with joy."*

*T*hrough her zeal and self-offering, Carla matured to the point that she could even smile when she was diagnosed with lung cancer. *"The loving God tested me with an illness which I am convinced was decisive for my mission. I have my crucified Lord before my eyes, and when I look at him, everything becomes easy. I am ready for anything. I know that suffering does not come from him, joy, on the other hand, very much so, and I have so much of it that the rest does not matter. I have the impression that Jesus comes down from the Cross to give me his place. I believe that he really wants me crucified because he knows that suffering with him makes me happy. ... My motto has always been: for Jesus and for souls. What power this motivation and this unity have! Even when I am very scared, I have at the same time a deep desire*

to give, to sacrifice, to love and, in spite of everything, I feel that life is wonderful.”

On April 2, 1970, a few days after Carla’s 34th birthday, the cancer extinguished her earth-

ly life because her task here had been fulfilled. With her last strength, she whispered, “*There he is! The Lord is coming and smiling at me. See you in heaven!*”

Source: F. Lanfranchi, Carla Ronci, Edizioni Il Ponte 2004

A few weeks before her death, she wrote from the hospital in Bologna:

“*Lord, I have only one heart, and it is full of you, the eternal God. My heart, my whole life, I offer you for the priests if you need a sacrifice of expiation for their falls, for their infidelity, for what they do not do but should and for what they do but should not. Lord, I give myself to you as a sacrifice of expiation for them. I am ready for anything, everything, but do not deprive us of your sacrament because the priest is your sacrament. Grant that he be pure and chaste, as you wanted him to be.*”

Sacrifice of Love for Priests

God entrusted a rare vocation to the Italian Carmelite brother Venerable Fra Immacolato Brienza (1922-1989).

Although he was not a priest, he offered himself without reservation in expiation for the salvation and sanctification of priests and consecrated souls.

*J*une 27, 1938, began like any other day at the Brienza house in Campobasso, Italy. Lorenza prepared breakfast for her husband and their seven children, but 15-year-old Aldo kept complaining that day about a shooting pain in his left foot. “*It is like a nail,*” he groaned, “*going straight through my foot.*” A short time later, the boy had a high fever.

The diagnosis was Osteomyelitis, an incurable bone marrow infection that would restrain Aldo to his bed for 51 years. As the illness pro-

gressed, the young man soon could only move his arms and lift his head and chest a little; his legs were lame. He was tormented by an open wound on his leg, and he had pain throughout his body.

It was not easy to carry these numerous crosses, but trusting in Our Lady, as Aldo had done since his childhood, he desired to endure it all patiently. At first, he hoped with all his heart that he would be healed because the Blessed Mother had shown him in a dream that he was

to become a Carmelite. When the symptoms of his illness intensified, however, Aldo started to recognize his election more clearly: *“My calling is to offer and suffer in order to obtain holy priests for the world.”* In addition to his bodily pains came interior darkness and demonic attacks, but also profound supernatural consolation. The Lord, Our Lady and several saints appeared to him to encourage him in his mission. Jesus was the one to explain his vocation to him:

“Love me; let me suffer in you so that I may pour into you what those who are consecrated to me refuse: the crosses, which are gifts of my election. I want to carry away those consecrated to me with a divine current. What miracles of grace I would work in them if only they allowed me! I would like to continue my suffering life in you. Do not be afraid of the workings of a God of love who destroys what is merely human and builds up what is divine.”

With an exception granted by Pope Pius XII, unique in the history of the Carmelites, Aldo was permitted to make his perpetual vows as a Carmelite in the hands of the provincial superior from his bed on May 11, 1948, and soon after received the name that Our Lady had chosen for him: “Fra Immacolato Joseph of Jesus”.

Those who entered his room came into an atmosphere of purity and peace, and they could not resist opening their souls. With his virtuous, open expression and his benevolent smile, Fra Immacolato welcomed his visitors and gave everyone the impression that they were deeply loved.

Increasingly, people came to him looking for counsel and help. He passed on serious intentions to convents so that they could help him save souls. He wrote, for example, to the superior of a convent, *“Dear Mother Giuseppa, I wish to entrust a priest to you who shared with me his firm resolution either to do perverse things or take his life on the Feast of Our Lady.”*

Nothing was too much for Fra Immacolato: *“I want my life to be completely consumed, completely sacrificed for the holy cause of the Catholic priesthood. I would be so happy if with my sacrifice I am able to give Jesus just a single holy priest.”*

He wrote to his spiritual director Fr. Ruccia, *“When I have fulfilled my little mission of love and reparation here on earth, I want to continue it in heaven, so that for all eternity, I may be a humble host to the glory of God.”* There are still many devotees of Fra Immacolato who turn to him today with their needs.

Translated from:
Giuseppe Biscotti, Fra Immacolato Brienza,
Edizioni OCD Rom 2009

Every month, the Bishop of Campobasso Giancarlo Bregantini meets with the seminarians and future consecrated souls of his diocese at the house of the Servant of God for prayer and spiritual reflection.

In the Time without Priests

The darker the persecution during the 70 years of the Communist Regime, the brighter the Christians' rock solid faith shined. From the Ukraine, over the Ural Mountains to Siberia and to the furthest eastern parts of Kazakhstan, from Caucasus in the south to nearly the Arctic Circle on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea, men, women and even children prove that nothing and nobody could tear the love of God from their hearts.

During a 2007 homily in the Salzburg Cathedral in Austria, Bishop Joseph Werth S.J. of Novosibirsk recalled how his Russian homeland was thankfully rebuilt on the foundation of countless witnesses who had shed their blood for the Faith.

“How poor we would be today in Russia, if we did not have those who went before us, these martyrs and witness of the 20th Century! Our faithful often have a picture of their pastor hanging next to the saints on their walls. One may have been shot, another may have disappeared or been imprisoned and a third may have cracked under torture and lost his mind.

“In the 1930's, when the priests sensed that they were going to be taken away, they admonished believers in their remaining sermons to stay faithful to Catholic Church, even under persecution, and to live the Faith even in a time without priests. They reminded the believers how to baptize in an emergency, the way to perform a wedding without a priest, what is necessary for a Christian burial and what kind of service to hold on Sunday. Shortly thereafter, they were arrested and thrown in prison.

“Today's generation of seminarians, our young priests and the majority of the faithful never saw these martyrs with their own eyes, since more than 50 years have passed. Nevertheless, many of us have encountered such witnesses to the Faith who, though they did not suffer martyrdom, suffered very greatly for their beliefs.

“In Karaganda, Kazakhstan where I was born ... there were many concentration camps in Stalin's time. After the dictator's death, they gradually opened and the prisoners were released. In the middle of the 1950's, many priests came to us, men who often had spent ten years or more behind barbed wire fences for their Faith. These courageous confessors revived and strengthened anew the Catholics' faith. An old man once told me, *'We had already given up all hope; we did not believe that we would ever again see a priest and participate in Holy Mass or receive the Sacraments. Then all of a sudden, maybe even in the middle of the night, someone would say, "There is a priest here; the Holy Mass will be celebrated in a few minutes." How happy we were; how we cried!'* I still knew the priest well.... It was not only men—bishops and priests—who went before us, there were women as well.” On another occasion, Bishop Werth told the following touching story about a courageous woman of strong faith: “Aunt Rose had not seen a priest or received the Sacraments for 60 years. When she finally found a priest, she admitted to him, *'On the major feast days of the Church, my desire for the Holy Eucharist was so great that I took a piece of bread, dipped it in wine and ate it remembering the words of Jesus, "Do this in memory of me!"'*” As she told this story, she kept repeating, *'If I did something wrong, may our dear God forgive me!'* There were tears in the eyes of the priest who was listening.”

My Mother - The priest of the "house church"

When Bishop Werth came to our parish St. Peter's in Talmenka, Siberia on our patron's feast, June 29, 2014, for Confirmation, we missionaries asked him if there were praying mothers in his life who had played a decisive role in his faith. Without hesitation, Bishop Werth answered: "My own mother was such a praying mother. During Communism, she was like the *'priest of the house church'*. (Note: due to persecution, the faithful would often meet secretly for prayer or the Sacraments, if a priest was present, in a family home which was designated for that purpose. It was known by the faithful as a "house church".) When I had barely learned to talk, my mother taught me to answer the question, *'Who are you?'* with the answer, *'I'm a Catholic.'* She also prepared me to receive the Sacraments. Before we left for school, she gathered us together to pray and then again regularly every evening. Wise and clever, she always found the right measure for us, about 12

minutes. Since our mother knew the liturgical year so well, she weaved in other prayers during the Lenten or Christmas seasons so that prayer was never rigid or monotonous. Sometimes on Sunday, the Communist persecution was particularly intense and the faith community could not gather for prayer even in secret; then the believers all prayed in their own families.

"In our home, mother, naturally, led the prayers. We children were always happy and proud of her because she was really the best at it. Mother often made pilgrimages 'in spirit' since there was no church anywhere near us where she could physically go. Yes, in many ways mother led a very rich spiritual life. In the wintertime, for example, when it was dark early and we older children were doing our homework, she would often disappear suddenly. We would find her in her bedroom, completely alone, immersed in prayer."

Carrying Christ into a godless world

Before Fr. Thomas Hohle, a diocesan priest from Berlin, Germany, and we missionaries came to the parish of Talmenka in Siberia in 1993, a family mother named Zita Dechand (1908 – 2009) had already worked there for decades in an especially blessed way. This well-respected German-Russian "Prayer Leader" helped countless people during Communism to take their first steps into the "house church".

Bishop Werth stopped in at Aunt Zita's, the oldest member of his diocese, whenever he made a pastoral visit to that parish. He asked questions and listened attentively with emotion as Aunt Zita described the situation of the Church in the time of persecution. Bishop Werth is personally convinced, *"Aunt Zita is a holy woman, a piece of history with a good memory. She is a living history book of the last 90 years.*

She knew better than anybody the Catholic traditions, the liturgical prayers and the religious songs in Latin and German."

Zita was born in 1908 in Graf, Russia along the Volga River where a German Catholic colony was founded in 1766. Her parents were Christian and her uncle Fr. Alois Fondrau made a deep religious impression on the family. When she was only five years old, she had to leave with her parents, due to lack of food, for a long, inconsistent life, wandering to Georgia, the Black Sea and back to the Volga; and so she was never able to attend school. She taught herself only later how to read and write, so that she could follow the "holy treasures", the Holy Mass and her uncle's prayer books. In Siberian exile, Zita was considered a brave Christian who knew the Faith in detail and could explain it very well. She knew

by heart, even in her old age, long passages of the Gospel and numerous songs.

As a child, Zita experienced up close and personal the 1917 October Revolution and the subsequent pressure of Communism on the Church. Then in 1941, the time had come: "In a matter of days we had to leave our home and animals behind. The harvest was ready in our fields and had never been so plentiful. With just a few belongings we were deported from the Volga to Siberia."

The 33-year-old Zita found shelter for herself and her four little children with a Russian woman; her husband died in a work camp. "We were so poor! But with nothing, God kept us alive! Since I was too ashamed to beg, I took any job that I was offered, and therefore I often had to leave the little ones behind unattended. They often cried during the night because they were so hungry, and I cried as well, because I was so worried that I could not give them more to eat. Once, the Russian woman came over from an adjoining room to talk to me. She listened to me pour my heart out. Afterwards, she said, *'Go outside and look at all the other houses around here! You will see a cross over each house, and perhaps you will realize that yours is the smallest of them all.'* You cannot imagine how these words consoled me!" She realized that others were suffering as well. Zita trusted even more in the Lord and was soon a believer who encouraged, strengthened, consoled and inspired the others to trust.

The dispersed Catholics were, like Aunt Zita, left to fend for themselves spiritually from 1935 to 1993, without churches and permanent pastors, without Holy Mass and the Sacraments, without priestly guidance and under continual persecution. Zita called believers to secret prayer meetings and to "Silent Masses" (Liturgy of the Word celebrations) and led the singing with her pretty alto voice. She entrusted the reading of the Gospel to proven family fathers and often let

the other faithful perform the baptisms. Many times throughout the decades, however, Zita was called to the sick and dying with whom she prayed and whom she often accompanied day and night in their agony. Afterwards, she held the wake and most of the time conducted the burial ceremony. For many others, like those who died in the camps without a funeral, she often sang requiem songs years later specifically for them.

She had long since learned to permeate her own suffering with love. When Aunt Zita was nearly 100 years old, we often heard her repeat, *"The Cross is my refuge. I carry everything to the foot of the Cross; that is the best place for it. I sacrifice my whole life there, everything that I am and have. True, it is not easy when you sit in constant pain, but my cross was never too heavy. I could carry everything silently because everything remained still at the foot of the Cross. I have thanked God for everything in my life. He has been so merciful to me."*

"If only I can pray until my last breath," was Aunt Zita's sole wish when she was old. And God heard her. Nearly blind and sitting on her bed the whole day, she became personified prayer. Her daily prayer quota of 14 to 18 Rosaries and other prayers were offered for the Church, the Pope, the religious and seminarians, families, deceased and last but not least, her loved ones so that they would not lose their faith.

*W*hen we missionaries paid a visit to this gentle grandmother, she advised us, "It is good that you are taking care of the Russians and non-believers. Our people (the German Russians) have left, but those who are here have to learn to know and love our God!" Aunt Zita prayed for 20 years for a good death and chose St. Joseph as her helper in this regard. And he did not let her down, bringing her home to God on March 18, 2009, on a Wednesday, the week-day dedicated to St. Joseph, and she was buried the next day on the Solemnity of St. Joseph.

John Andreevitch Petrov (23), a great grandchild of Aunt Zita, graduated with honors in economics and still likes to serve at Sunday Mass in Talmenka. "My great grandmother radiated goodness and love. She was a true Catholic. She influenced hundreds here in Russia and was a symbol of the Faith, for me too. Above all, she left the desire in my heart to be a Christian with all my being. All my acts, all my words should be directed by God's will and with a deep respect for my fellow man."

We Thank God!

Last fall, Karl and Andrea Wachter from Tyrol, Austria, the proud parents of five children, accompanied their son Simon to the seminary of our spiritual family in Rome, Italy.

Andrea: “We’re doing this with quiet pain and at the same time great joy because we’re giving our Simon to God, we’re not losing him. He’s staying ‘in the family’ so to say, in our spiritual family. He’s in a different place, but it is ‘only’ an eight hour drive away. When our first son, Daniel, was born 21 years ago, my husband Karl experienced a deep conversion through Our Lady, and then, as a young married couple, we met the Family of Mary. Rooted in this community, we had the grace and the strength to raise and give a Christian education to our four children and then our fifth when little Lisa-Maria came 11 years later. Of course, our faith life had its highs and lows, and was often not understood by those around us. Those who have several children know how unsettled and what a battle it can be to pray the Rosary faithfully every evening! Yet I think that precisely prayer, at least somebody from the family going to Holy Mass

each day and Holy Confession are to thank that, to this day, we are still all faith-filled Catholics. Since Simon graduated from high school with excellent grades and, on top of that, is a very talented musician, some people were quite surprised about his move to Rome. Others, including some who are just acquaintances, said, ‘*This boy is special, he’ll end up doing something different someday.*’ This really touched me as a mother, because I had always felt that Our Lady preserved Simon’s heart in a special way.”

Karl: “My silent prayer as a father was always that God would call at least one member of our family to religious life. Yet now that it is happening, my only wish is that our Simon become a Marian priest. We often prayed as parents that our children would clearly recognize the path that God has chosen for them, and that they would feel free in their decision. We are happy that he feels that God is calling him, even though we will terribly miss his sensitive, understanding and helpful presence.”

Andrea: “We trust that God himself will take Simon’s place here at home.”

Giving God the First Place

Just as God entrusts the spiritual direction and formation of his parish family to priests, so he also gives Christian parents the vocation to root their families in faith and in love of God. Another Austrian family living near Kitzbuhel shows how much blessing the correspondence of a praying couple can have on their children and grandchildren.

Matthias Danzl (father): My parents and in-laws were strong believers. On our farm, we

prayed the Rosary every day, and as a boy, I knelt every evening before a painting of St. Ursula

and prayed to her for a good wife. The painting once belonged to my faithful Aunt Ursula who died of Leukemia when she was 19. My family is indebted to the prayer and sacrifice of her life. Incidentally, my hidden prayers to St. Ursula were answered in a very special way, when at the age of 30 I met “my” Ursula, my future wife. To this day, we venerate the painting of St. Ursula in our farmhouse, which now belongs to our second oldest daughter who runs the farm with her family. I often think to myself, St. Ursula is surely the patron saint of our family.

Theresia (daughter): I was one of five sisters, and we grew up very naturally with the Faith. Now we practice it in our own families; there is no question about it! As far as God goes, I already had my “own way” at age 16, and it hurt me when at parties or the theater people made jokes or even spoke badly about God. Granted, the 25-minute family Rosary every evening did seem a little long at times, but I did not want to miss it. There was one thing I was sure of: I wanted to live my life with God, and if I married one day, my future husband had to share the Faith with me. The most beautiful example was the happy marriage of our good parents. On top of that, my mother succeeded in transmitting a very natural love for Mary to us.

I met Hubert when I was twenty. A Christian only by name, he said to me one Sunday, *“I know I haven’t been to Holy Mass in a long time, but the weather is so nice today, I’d rather go hiking.”* I answered kindly, but very clearly, *“Hubert, rain or shine, I go to Holy Mass every Sunday. That’s final!”* For my sake certainly, he joined me for Mass a couple of times without commenting. With Easter approaching, I reminded him, *“You know, without Holy Confession, you cannot really experience Easter. How long has it been since you went to Confession?”* *“Since high school.”* I took it upon myself to provide him with a number of texts to help him prepare. Yet when the day for confessions arrived, Hubert said, *“Don’t be mad, but I just can’t go!”* – *“Good,”* I responded calmly, *“but then that is it for the two of us. I think you have to look for somebody else because my Faith means*

too much to me.”

Although I liked Hubert and we always had a nice time together, we went our separate ways. Somehow, I was even relieved. There were so many great groups where I was happy to be involved: youth group, folk dance, theater and choir.

Hubert: When it suddenly ended, I didn’t take it so seriously at first: *“That’s impossible that we’re breaking up just because of religion,”* I said to Theresia. *“Yes, it’s really possible,”* she responded with conviction. *“But we are great together”* – *“Maybe, but with your attitude towards the Faith it is not going to work.”* So, I had to accept her decision.

I could not get this fine, lively girl out of my head though. Finally, after more than a year, I passed by the dairy where Theresia worked, carrying a bouquet of flowers. *“How’s it going?”* I asked her. *“I’m doing fine,”* she smiled, *“How are you?”* – *“Not so good.”* – *“Are you sick?”* – *“No, I just miss you.”* Interestingly enough, she was not opposed to going out on another date. So we went to the Farmers’ Ball, danced and talked a lot and soon came to know each other better.

Theresia: Only then did I find out that Hubert was working at a farm which, unlike our harmonic, joyful family, was not easy.

I immediately began to “bombard” Hubert with my prayers. I gave them all to him: my morning prayer, midday prayer, evening prayer, the prayer to the guardian angels, the prayer to the Holy Spirit, for a good spouse and the Rosary. I even wrote down the prayers for him and said, *“Hubert, either we pray now together, or we have to break up once and for all. Do not do it for me! You have to want it yourself, before God, because you cannot love something you do not know nor live.”* So we started praying every time we were together, sometimes in a chapel and often at my house. If he happened to be there, Hubert stayed for the Rosary, which impressed my parents. We even went to Holy Mass together.

Hubert: Since we hardly ever prayed at home and my parents were occasional Christians, regular prayer with Theresia was difficult for me in the beginning. I am the kind of guy

who works with his hands; I didn't know where to start with all the religious stuff. It didn't do anything for me and seemed to be pretty senseless. I made a sincere effort though, I have to say. Slowly, almost without noticing, I found my way to a personal trust in Jesus; and I asked him from my heart to help me and to introduce me to the mysteries of the Faith. It didn't happen, however, from one day to the next; it took years! It had seemed to me that everything went well without praying, and so I never saw a reason to turn to prayer.

Theresia: My parents always accompanied my four sisters and me with their prayer, but they never pushed us to marry or join a religious order. Each of us felt deep in our conscience what God wanted for us. I learned over the years to cherish Hubert, his calm, pleasant, dependable style. One winter day, when I was 25, I asked him bluntly, *"What's going to happen with the two of us?"* Then Hubert asked me to marry him and said, *"Theresia, you don't have to worry. The three of us will make it."* – *"Who are you talking about?"* – *"The three of us: you, Jesus and I."* This was the decisive phrase assuring me, *"Hubert is really the right one!"*

Hubert: As regards the Faith, there were

certainly still a few things even in our marriage for me to overcome. Yet, thanks be to God, my wife Theresia simply and stubbornly pulled us forward with our Faith. I needed that. It was certainly the right way. Otherwise, I would definitely have fallen back into a spiritual complacency.

Theresia: The source of strength for our marriage and our children, for the work on the farm and for the guests we take care of has always been prayer that, especially in sorrowful situations, has united us even more deeply. When my mother-in-law, for example, had a serious stroke at the age of 60 in 1997, we had been married for only five years and I was pregnant. Since then, she has needed constant care, and I am convinced that she, who can do nothing on her own and who does not know why or how long she is going to suffer, is the most priestly person in our family. When our priest friend Fr. Florian asks her, *"Lisi, could you offer your suffering and your serious illness for us priests and for the families?"* she humbly nods each time in complete surrender.

Yes, our mother has become a vessel of grace, a blessing in our midst. She is undoubtedly the closest of us all to Jesus whom she really came to know and love in suffering.

*My Lord and my God,
take from me everything that distances me from You.
My Lord and my God,
give me everything that brings me closer to You.
My Lord and my God,
detach me from myself to give my all to You."*

Prayer of St. Nicholas of Flue