

Triumph of the Heart

CONVERT AND BELIEVE IN THE GOSPEL

PDF - Family of Mary

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*“We are grateful to the martyrs, because they did not submit
to the power of evil, and now they stand before us
like lights shining in a dark night”*

Pope Benedict XVI concluded his visit to Poland on May 28, 2006, with a visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp where he spoke personally with survivors of the Holocaust.

*“A grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies
...bears much fruit.”*

*Jesus uses these words to describe the essence of true love,
a love which is willing to sacrifice itself for the benefit of others.
Good parents understand this because the daily sacrifices which they accept
and offer up are what truly make them a father or mother for their children.
The fruitfulness of these “sacrifices of love” is visible not only in biological parents
but in anyone who makes their “daily offering out of love”.
Frail, elderly, cancer patients, or even a child like Jacinta from Fatima,
can all become grains of wheat which bear fruit, even to the point of conversion.
We would like to tell you about a religious sister and a young man
who both suffered from the Communist regime of the last century.
One gave her life for those who persecuted and killed her;
the other his life for those whom he persecuted and killed.*

Sr. Zdenka

December 24, 1916 - July 31, 1955

At home in Kriva

Born on Christmas Eve 1916, in the north Slovakian town of Kriva, Cecilia Schelingova was a well-liked, joyful girl. When the first Sisters of the Holy Cross arrived in her village in 1929, 13-year-old Cecilia gladly participated in their catechism classes. After finishing

school two years later, she wanted to join their religious family. They accepted her at the age of 15, and she continued her studies in caring for girls and the ill. She joyously professed her first vows as Sr. Zdenka at the age of 18. She worked as a nurse in various locations until

she was called to Bratislava in 1942 to work in the radiology department. She worked there for

10 years, until her arrest in 1952.

An amiable character

With her cheery disposition and, moreover, her silent, loving company, the young sister quickly drew the attention of the hospital staff and especially the patients. A coworker remarked, “Sr. Zdenka does not speak much, and when she does only softly. ... The patients noticed her ... because her eyes and whole countenance were unbelievably pleasant and had a mysterious radiance, something that you could not help but notice.” Sr. Zdenka was known as the “charismatic nurse” and Sr. Viridiana put it aptly when she testified, “Zdenka was not indifferent to anyone in the hospital. ... Always ready to make a sacrifice, she hurried from one patient to the next. ... If someone called her, she immediately stopped what she was doing and went to their side.” The late Bishop Paul Maria Hnilica, a seminarian for the Jesuits at the time, also met Zdenka once: “It was 1948 or 1949. I had to go to the hospital of the Sisters of the Holy Cross in Bratislava for an examination. It was under Communist direction, having been already nationalized, but there were still religious sisters there for whom they had not yet found replacements. One of them working

at the reception radiated such goodness and a spirit of sacrifice that I thought to myself, ‘This is an exemplary sister!’ I had several opportunities to speak with her, but it was not until her beatification in Slovakia in 2003 that I recognized her among the Blessed!” Sr. Zdenka’s diary is a valuable source of information about her interior life. Over the years, she composed her own prayers, meditations and personal resolutions like, “I must continue the sacrifice of the altar everywhere, without fear and full of joy.” Sr. Zdenka had a remarkably well-balanced soul and inner tranquility. Her tender, modest smile was a significant trait. She wrote at the beginning of her diary,

“With a smile, I pick the little roses of pain,

With a smile I speak

With a smile I help

With a smile I accept injustice

With a smile I endure the lies...

With a smile I hide what hurts...

With a smile I climb Golgotha.

There you will find he who knows every lie, every evil, every falsity, every human error much better than you.”

Persecution

The political situation in Czechoslovakia took a dramatic turn for the worse in 1950. In April, with the intention of destroying the Church, the Communists dissolved all monasteries, then all diocesan and religious seminaries and finally all convents. At the time, there were a total of 10,660 nuns in 720 convents, and only those working as nurses were allowed to continue their public

service. Among them was Sr. Zdenka who, together with 160 sisters and 30 novices from her congregation, was working at the hospital in Bratislava. When the sisters learned in 1950 that the secret police had arrested their provincial superior and a number of other sisters, their fears grew and they were convinced, “The same thing will soon happen to us!”

Inexhaustible helpfulness

From 1950 to 1952, hundreds of phony trials against bishops, priests, religious and laity were held at the Federal Courthouse in Bratislava. The trials were preceded by incessant, gruesome interrogations and brutal tortures to extort an admittance of guilt from the accused. However, before the abused defendants could be brought before the public court somebody was forced to “make them presentable”, and so they were brought to the national hospital in Bratislava. Each prisoner had his own supervisor and any contact with the prisoners was strictly forbidden.

In this terrifying time, gentle Sr. Zdenka showed that she was a courageous, valiant woman whose uncompromising actions were guided by

love alone, even though she clearly knew what danger she was in.

On one occasion, a 34-year-old Salesian prisoner named Stefan Sandtner, who was suffering from a serious heart condition told her, “I would be so happy if I could celebrate Holy Mass, but nobody should find out, only the two of us.”

Without hesitation, Sr. Zdenka proposed to Fr. Stefan, “You can celebrate in my room. It is small, but it would be sufficient.”

“It was sufficient indeed,” he later recalled smiling, “because I celebrated Holy Mass in that dark corner almost every day for four months!”

A different patient once overheard Sr. Zdenka say, “I don’t know what I would give to save at least one priest.”

The arrest

On February 20, 1952 the hospital alarm sounded unexpectedly and the building was searched from top to bottom. The previous night a patient had escaped—the tortured and severely abused Fr. Stefan Kostial. The police even burst into the chapel where the sisters were attending Holy Mass. Sr. Zdenka who had helped the priest escape thought to herself, “The time has come; now I will have to go too.” Yet nobody suspected the inconspicuous, silent sister.

Only nine days later, on February 29th, the 35-year-old nun was finally arrested. She had prepared another escape for three priests and

three seminarians, but her plan was discovered. Four months of cruel interrogations followed in prison. Repeatedly, Sr. Zdenka was cruelly tortured and then, bleeding and bruised, dragged back to her cell. It was as though Sr. Zdenka had foreseen her suffering and had prepared for it. The thoughts which she had written down in her diary beforehand testify: “We are not afraid to suffer. God always gives us the necessary courage. ... and when suffering increases, he also gives us more grace. With courageous self-offering to his will, I will persist until my death in looking at him, the celestial sun.”

Forgiveness is supreme

The hearing took place in a closed session at the federal courthouse in Bratislava on June 17, 1952. The young sister, who had been starved to

skin and bones, was so weak that she could only whisper the answers to Judge Paul Korbuly’s questions.

The escape was busted by a supervisor who had offered Sr. Zdenka his help, but who was in reality an informer for the secret police. The court imposed the maximum sentence of twelve years in prison. Sr. Zdenka, however, would only live for three more years.

She testified before the court, "I do not feel guilty. I admit the act ... but deny the intention of high treason. I acted on the words of the supervisor who said that all the priests would be brought to Russia for execution. Therefore, I had compassion for the priests and wanted to help, blindly believing the supervisor's words."

For the next three years, Sr. Zdenka was transferred from one prison to the next without ever being able to receive Holy Communion.

Once, she had the opportunity to secretly write one of her sisters. In her letter dated November 23, 1952, her closing words were her deep desire, "I ask for Jesus, for 20 hosts, wrapped individually in paper."

Vlasta Kucerova, an inmate with her in Rimavska Sabota, remembers well walking with Zdenka:

"We didn't dare speak loudly and just whispered to one another, 'we're suffering, we're suffering.' Zdenka nodded and stroked me as if she wanted thereby to lessen my pain.

"She didn't hesitate, however, also to ask for help, 'Pray for me, I need many graces from the Lord to survive everything.'"

One time, when she was nearly beaten to death, she whispered to a fellow inmate, "Forgiveness is supreme."

Shortly thereafter, Sr. Zdenka was transferred to the feared Pardubice Prison. She was in such bad health though, that she was sent to the prisoners'

ward at the hospital in Brno from August 1953 until December 1954. In a letter she wrote, "Don't worry about me! ... I am here alone with my malicious illness, alone with my sadness, alone with my pain. How many sleepless nights it has cost me, but I have submitted myself to everything and am at peace. The tuberculosis makes my eyes throb so it is difficult to write. My chest is okay, no metastasis. We'll see." Unfortunately, her hopes were not fulfilled; she had to undergo a breast cancer operation.

One day, Sr. Zdenka gently began to share a little with Helena. She told her how she had helped Fr. Stefan Kostial to escape. "When I was working as a nurse at the hospital in Bratislava, I saw an unknown patient, a convict. He was lying on the bed like a corpse. I didn't know at the time that he was a priest. I immediately began to dress his wounds, change his bandages and try to bring him something substantial to eat. When he had recovered a little from his critical condition, he recounted to me how he had helped somebody flee to the West. The secret police later arrested him in his parish with the words, 'We were just about to hang the other guy. Now you'll hang in his place!' When our ward was informed, 'The prisoner will be picked up tomorrow,' I decided to act... I prepared some tea, added a sleeping drug and offered it to the supervisor on duty that evening. The drink worked and the supervisor fell asleep. After the priest fled, I ran to the hospital chapel, knelt down under the cross and prayed to the Heavenly Father, 'God, I offer my life for his! Help him to stay alive and make it to safety.'"

Suffering for those who have suffered

Gradually Sr. Zdenka gave more and more details about the time of her suffering. "Helena, I want to tell you something that I have not told anybody until now and will never tell anyone again. You alone will know the horrible suffering I went through. He, Jesus, always helped me

because my sacrifice was for his sake. He gave me a certain amount of time on earth to fulfill my promise: to suffer for those who have suffered, and to give my life for theirs.

"The promise which I made in the chapel before the crucifix had to be fulfilled. Only then would

my life be deeply meaningful.

“Following my arrest, the first interrogation began with kicking. Then they threw me fully dressed in a trough of cold water. Shoved backwards into the water, a terrible pain shot through my gut as a man’s huge foot sunk my body to the bottom of the trough. I nearly drowned. This merciless man seemed to enjoy watching the horrified expression on my face as it cramped up for lack of air. He jerked my head out for a moment so I wouldn’t drown. Then he immediately pinned my body back to the bottom of the trough with all his weight. I lost consciousness.

“I awoke on the concrete floor of a dark room. My body was shivering from the cold. I don’t know how long I had been laying there. I lost all sense of time. I was freezing from the heavy, wet, clinging clothes. Yet, I was still alive.

“Suddenly the door swung open and two men dragged me by my hair into the next room. They tore the clothes from my body, bound my hands together with a thick cord and yanked me up with a pulley. Naked, they hung me on a hook which was fastened to the ceiling. Three more men came into the room and stood under me as I was hanging in the air. They were roaring like animals and wanted to force me to betray who had helped me free the priest.

“I always gave the same, resolute answer, ‘Nobody, nobody, nobody helped me!’ They began beating me with rubber clubs. They struck

and struck and struck until I was unconscious. I don’t know how long they left me hanging there. “When I came to, I was laying on the concrete floor, wrapped in a canvas bag which they probably used to drag me out of the torture room... I don’t know how much time passed before they hung me back up on the hook. This time I lost consciousness with the first blow of the club. My body no longer had the strength to defend itself.

“I awoke again on the concrete, wrapped in the canvas bag... My body was one big wound and I was hovering between life and death. Semi-conscious, I perceived how some men approached me and screamed, ‘Tell us who helped you commit this crime! Tell us or we will kill you!’ I repeated unwavering, ‘Nobody, nobody helped me!’ Then they pressed my head hard against the wall. When they saw that I wasn’t going to change my answer, they stuck me in solitary confinement. They wanted to cover up any mark of torture so that they wouldn’t have to show me to the world in this pitiful condition.”

Shocked, Helena interrupted Sr. Zdenka, “But why haven’t you told anybody until now? You could have died without anybody ever knowing this!”

Sr. Zdenka continued, “I couldn’t tell anybody, not even those closest to me. I couldn’t tell my sisters either because I would have diminished the value of this sacrifice.”

The final days

When the Communist judicial authorities saw that Zdenka was deathly ill as a result of the brutal tortures and the three and half years in five prisons, they decided to conditionally release her on April 16, 1955. The government did not want at any price for her to be seen as a martyr. The released prisoner arrived in Bratislava a few days later, and the first place she visited with two of her sisters was the hospital. As Zdenka walked through her former ward, she began to cry and mumbled nearly inaudibly, “If I only knew what

happened to him.” She was thinking about Fr. Stefan Kostial, whom she had helped escape.

The weakening sister spent the last three months in the cancer ward in Trnava where she prayed a great deal, despite intense pain. She radiated a deep peace, and did not want to speak to anyone about the previous years of suffering.

Shortly before she died, visitors came from home. Sr. Consolatrix witnessed this encounter. “I was in Trnava where Zdenka was being treated. Her mother and her sister Rose came too... When

she saw her mother, she cried, ‘My dearest mommy!’ They hugged one another and cried and cried.” In the night between Saturday and Sunday, July 31, 1955, her condition worsened and feeling that the end of her life was drawing

near, she asked early in the morning for Holy Communion. Calm and silent, Sr. Zdenka died at age 38 while Holy Mass was being celebrated in the chapel.

Her judge's conversion

Once Helena was asked what impressed her most about Sr. Zdenka. She spoke about the love which Zdenka had toward those who tortured and unjustly condemned her. Helena had to admit, “I was incapable of forgiving. The Communist secret police destroyed my whole family, exterminated them. I hated the persecutors. Only with Sr. Zdenka’s help did I learn what it meant to forgive. Thanks to her, I was able to cope with the most difficult days of my life.”

An extraordinary fruit of Zdenka’s silent suffering and forgiveness is undoubtedly the conversion of the president of the Senate and chief justice of the Supreme Court, Paul Korbuly. For years, in the name of Czechoslovakia, he handed down the most severe sentences—life in prison or death. Sr. Zdenka’s maximum sentence was also finalized through his signature in 1952. One year after her death, around 1956, Judge Korbuly astonished those who knew him. He began not only to doubt the Communist ideology, but to attend Holy Mass in the Blumenthal Church in Bratislava, although he had long ceased to practice. His son remembered it well: “My father had a conversion in this time. He went to the church every day, occasionally two or three times a day; he would remain along time in prayer. Once in a while I would accompany him. Most of the time, he knelt, deep in prayer, below the cross in the left side chapel. He suffered grievously and did his own

form of penance: he would go out at night or otherwise very early in the morning and pray the Stations of the Cross on his knees from the main entrance of the church in Blumenthal to the cross in front of the rectory, a stretch of about 150 feet. Only our family knew about it, but we often reproached him because we were ashamed of what the people might think. None of us had any idea how much his soul was suffering from his past actions. He was left totally alone with his tormented conscious.”

Paul Korbuly was arrested by the secret police in the summer of 1959, but released through an amnesty program in 1960. Afterwards, the only work he could find was hanging up advertisements, in factories or as a night watchman. In 1970, the year in which all the verdicts against Sr. Zdenka were reversed, Judge Paul Korbuly died a very faithful Catholic.

His son also noted, “Today, I have a framed picture of Sr. Zdenka hanging in my home, that I may always have her in my sight. She prayed for her enemies and a miracle happened to my father who had ruthlessly persecuted the Church in Slovakia—he repented. Now, after more than 50 years, Blessed Zdenka is working miracles with me because I have also come to believe in God and in Jesus. I am convinced that my father would rejoice and that Sr. Zdenka’s prayer was heard.”

The priest she saved

Fr. Stefan Kostial (1913–2003), whom Sr. Zdenka helped in the hospital, came from a small village close to Ruzomberok, Slovakia. He was not only a well-educated, but also a very active priest. The Communist secret police believed the 38-year-old to be a clandestinely ordained bishop and a Vatican spy. They finally arrested him in a church in 1951 while he was hearing confessions. Such brutal interrogations followed that he had to be admitted to the hospital in Bratislava for grave injuries. Sr. Zdenka had helped him to escape, but nevertheless, the police caught him five weeks later and brought him back to prison.

The federal court sentenced Fr. Stefan on May 19, 1952, to 19 years in prison for suspected high treason and they even revoked his civil rights. Like Sr. Zdenka, Fr. Stefan vehemently denied the accusations brought against him and pleaded innocent. Even so, he spent eight years in prison before he was released as part of the

amnesty in 1960. He was still required to serve the rest of his term through forced labor. He spent nine years doing hard labor on a road crew before the court gave the remarkable order in 1969 to erase any trace of his conviction.

That same year, he was allowed to return to caring for souls. He worked as a pastor until 1991 before finally returning home where he helped the parish priest until his final days. Through all the years, he never spoke about the persecution or imprisonment. He never sought financial retribution for his years of suffering. For him it was more important that, “When I stand one day before the Lord, he doesn’t have to say to me, ‘And you, what do you want? You’ve already received your reward.’”

Fr. Stefan died on April 5, 2003, just five months before the beatification of Zdenka, whom he had to thank so much for his vocation. After all, in spite of his suffering during Communism, he was able to work as a priest for 63 years.

From Persecutor to Persecuted

There are no “hopeless cases” for God. A prime example is the life of Sergei Kourdakov (January 1, 1951 – January 1, 1973), an atheist and communist who callously persecuted Christians. His conversion, although entirely unimaginable for him, was no surprise for those he persecuted because these faithful had prayed and suffered for his conversion until God dramatically intervened in this young man’s life.

The Party was my life

Sergei was born in the city of Novosibirsk, Siberia. Having lost his father at the age of four and his mother shortly thereafter, the dejected

street orphan ended up in three different staterun homes. They greeted the pupils each day with the words, “Good morning children.

Don't forget, there is no God!"

The lack of human warmth, cruel treatment and brutal punishments for even the slightest mistakes led the abandoned but clever boys to understand intuitively that those who want to survive have to fend for themselves. Sergei wrote later in his biography, "In silence, I swore to become the toughest, the strongest and the most cunning."

At the age of 15 his evident leadership skills lead him to become not only the feared boss of a youth gang and an efficient drug dealer, but an ambitious, promising leader of the Communist Youth Division.

"In the Communist Party, for the first time in my life, I felt like I 'belonged'. Lenin, the founder of my 'religion', gave me something that I could believe in. Many ran away from the orphanages when they were 16 or 17, and became criminals, drug addicts or prostitutes. I realized that in

my life, I too was facing a decision. I had to choose between becoming more entangled in underworld activities and working more seriously on my career in the Communist Party."

Sergei decided to enter the military, a life of demanding studies and strict discipline, first at the Marine Academy in Leningrad and in the autumn of 1968 at the Elite Marine Academy in Petropavlovsk, on the Pacific Coast. "At the same time, I was put in charge of the communist development and instruction of 1,200 future officers, and I was only 17 years old."

Quickly acquainted with many of the highest Communist officials in the province, the young officer gained a view into the Party's work, and through passionate talks about communism, soon became a highly sought speaker for schools and universities. "The Party was my 'family'. I was part of something... for which I could live."

Natasha

Parallel to his studies, the KGB offered the 18-year-old in May 1969, the opportunity to assemble and lead a top-paid, special security force which, under strictest secrecy, was to exterminate the number one enemy of both the state and the people—the "religiozniki", the believers. The ambitious young soldier was flattered and agreed.

"I soon had a group of 21 men... I don't believe anybody could have put together a tougher group in all Russia. I knew, of course, that God did not exist, and I also knew that religion had no place in the contemporary Soviet Union. For the first time, however, we considered the believers as miserable, scheming, deceitful people who gathered secretly in their apartments plotting the collapse of our government and the poisoning of our children. We were so irate that we were ready to act immediately... to wipe them out."

A bloody hunt and massacre began. "Our missions became more and more frequent... two, three times a week. And the believers seemed to

become more active. We never saw the same face twice." That was not always the case, however! During a raid at Okeanskaja Street 66, Sergei had a decisive encounter. "Fifteen people kneeling, who had been praying and singing quietly, looked up at us petrified and astounded. They knew what was about to happen... A couple kept praying and three or four even started to sing... 'These people,' I thought to myself, 'are unbelievable!' I had to admire their courage, but on the other hand it infuriated me.

"I roared, 'What are you doing here?'"

'We're praying', someone replied.

'To whom?'"

'To God'

'There is no God' I bellowed. 'Don't you know that yet? You're praying in an empty room. Where is your God? Let's see if he comes to help you now!' And we unleashed our rage.

"Nothing in the house escaped our destructive fury; the believers were half-covered in debris,

some unconscious and others in unspeakable agony. Then I saw Victor Metveiev grab a girl who was trying to run into another room. She was beautiful. What a waste, I thought. She pleaded, ‘Please don’t. Help me, O God!’

“Victor threw her with all his strength against the wall. Moaning and half-unconscious she fell to the ground. Her name was Natasha Sdanova. I wished I had met her under different circumstances.”

During a raid on a secret youth meeting three days later, Sergei did not want to believe his eyes. “There she was again! Long, flowing blonde hair, big blue eyes—one of the most naturally beautiful girls I had ever seen.” To finally teach her a lesson, he beat her mercilessly until she collapsed. “It made me wonder though. How could young people from my generation believe in God? It was too much for me!”

And then one week later, “I couldn’t believe

what I was seeing! Natasha had been warned and bullied. She had suffered indescribable pain, and we found her here yet again. Then something happened which I would never have thought possible. Without warning, Victor, one of my most brutal men, jumped between Natasha and her attacker, raised his club and threatened, ‘Nobody touches her. She has something which we don’t have!’

“That was one of the few moments in my life where something really touched me. She truly had something which we did not have. How I wanted to run after her and ask, ‘What is it?’ This heroic Christian... touched me and yet made me uneasy. Natasha put all my notions about faith in question. What had she found in God that made her willing to endure our brutal attacks?”

The Word of God pierced my heart

By July 1970, the mountain of literature confiscated from the believers had piled up again in the basement of the police station. Sergei set about burning “this rubbish”. “What did the young people see in this nonsense?” I asked myself. I had to think about Natasha again and it made me very curious. I picked up a booklet and started to read it. It was handwritten excerpts from the Gospel of St. Luke, mostly from chapter 11. I wanted to take a closer look, but I heard footsteps. I quickly tore out a couple pages from the notebook and stuffed them in my pocket. As soon as I had a chance... I pulled them out again and started to read them. Jesus was speaking with someone and teaching them how to pray. In any case, it was not propaganda against the State. Suddenly,

the words didn’t seem simply to be written on paper, but somehow they took hold of my heart. I read on, captivated by the gracious words of Jesus.

“My inability to understand ... subsided, and the words burned into my soul. It was as if someone was in the room teaching me. So this is what Natasha believed! These were the words that led her to be a better person. During the following days and weeks, no matter how hard I tried, I could not forget the words of Jesus. They simply persecuted me.”

Sergei’s belief in Communism was broken. He felt lost and uncertain. This made him all the more irritable. “The last raids which I carried out were the most brutal of all,” he repented later.

An invisible hand

Four months later, Sergei and his troop of ruffians surprised 16 Christians at prayer. It was to be the last of the 150 raids he had led in less than 18 months. “The screams of the believers were so loud that our eardrums nearly burst. I saw a woman close to the wall. Fear was written across her face and her lips trembled in prayer. I couldn’t hear what she was saying because of all the noise. The very fact that she was praying, however, made me even angrier. I rushed toward her and raised my club to slug her. Suddenly... she started praying out loud. Out of curiosity, I listened for a few seconds to what she was saying, ‘O God, forgive this young man. Show him the true way. Open his eyes and help him. Forgive him, O God.’ “I started to falter. Why wasn’t she praying for help for herself, instead of for me! I was outraged that she, who was nobody, was praying for me, Sergei Kourdakov, the leader

of the Communist Youth Division...

“I wanted to deal her a deadly blow. I started to swing, but suddenly the most amazing thing happened. Someone grabbed my wrist and jerked it back. It wasn’t just my imagination.

“I thought, at first, that it was one of the believers and turned around to hit him, but there was nobody there! There wasn’t anybody who could have held my arm. And yet somebody had seized me; I could still feel the pain.

“I stood there in shock, sweating and horrified; I tried to grasp what had happened. It was so unbelievable, so confusing. Then I forgot everything. I let my club fall and I ran away. Blood rushed to my head, and tears ran down my face. I had only cried once since I was four years old. But now, as I ran from this inexplicable event, I wept bitterly.”

New life

In January 1971, Sergei successfully finished the Marine Academy as a radio officer, but turned down a tempting Party offer to study at the infamous KGB Academy in Tomsk. “I knew deep in my heart that I could no longer serve the system, that ... it had changed me into an animal which beat women and defenseless believers.” I thought, “I will either die or be free, but I will never come back.” Three months later he left Russia forever.

Off the coast of Canada, after six months at sea, 20-year-old Sergei made a spectacular defection with the help of a miracle. He trained for it every day on the ship. On the night of September 3, 1971, he jumped from the Elagin into the rough, icy ocean waters. He swam for his life for three hours only to find himself back at the ship! He had lost his orientation in the fog and had swum

in a circle. “My strength was spent. Dazed from the cold... I decided it was better to die trying to find true life than to continue my life as it was. I had grown up with Marx, Engels and Lenin. They had been my gods.

“Having reached my end, I turned in spirit to the God whom I did not know. Almost instinctively, I prayed, ‘O God, I was never happy on earth. When I die now, please accept my soul in your paradise. Perhaps you will still have a little happiness there for me, O God. I don’t ask you to save my body, but should it sink to the bottom of the ocean, please draw my soul to yourself in heaven.’

“‘I can go no further,’ I said to myself and stopped swimming. Slowly, very slowly, I felt something extraordinary happening to me. Even

though I had given every ounce of my strength, I felt a new power in my exhausted arms. I was not a believer. I had never prayed to God before. But in this moment, I clearly felt new strength in my clammy, exhausted, frozen body ... strong enough to bring me to the shore! I had been in the water for nearly four and half hours. The most amazing thing was that I even knew which direction I had to swim!”

Canada granted Sergei asylum, and he wrote in his memoirs, “The first thing I had to do was fulfill my promise to God, to serve him. But how? Where? I knew practically nothing about God ... I wanted to have what Natasha had ... I felt a spiritual hunger which is difficult to describe ... I began frequenting the Ukrainian Church where I found a wonderfully vibrant spirit, especially among the young people.” Although Sergei could have worked as an electrical engineer, he could not let go of Russia. “I couldn’t forget

the many believers who would still be beaten for their faith. So I began speaking about it in public, in churches, in the press, on television and other places.”

From 1972 on, Sergei reported about the persecutions and the KGB’s tactics and gave testimonies about being Christian. The Soviets did not wait to respond. In Toronto, on his way home once, three big thugs suddenly came up behind him. “One threatened in perfect Russian, ‘If you open your mouth again, you will have a fatal accident. Think about it, you’ve been warned!’”

Sergei did not remain silent. “People have to see my life is a witness ... that God exists and that he can change a ruined life, like he did with mine.” He did not have a lot of time, because on January 1, 1973, on his 22nd birthday, he was found shot dead in his home.

Translated from:
Sergei Kourdakov, *Vergib mir, Natascha*,
Felsenverlag, Frankfurt a. Main 1975.

The Power of Baptism

*In Sergei Kourdakov’s Russian homeland,
another “conversion” of sorts transpired recently with a three-month-old baby boy.
Our native Kazakh sister, Sr. Ulrika Savtchouk,
read an impressive story recently in the Russian newspaper, Ai-bolit,
testifying to the forgiving, freeing, purifying and healing power of Baptism.
Ms. Korsunova witnessed and documented the mighty work of God
in an Orthodox church south of Moscow, in the city of Elez.*

“It was Sunday, and I went to the Orthodox church. A larger crowd than normal had gathered since several baptisms were to take place that Sunday. The godparents were sitting with the babies and waiting patiently. The children

were all still, except for one three-month-old boy who screamed incessantly. His godmother tried in vain to calm him down by rocking him or walking with him through the church. The baby just continued to wail as if he had strong

stomach pains. The whole situation was very embarrassing for the woman and everybody looked at her compassionately. What could they do though?

“The priest finally came and decided, with everyone’s approval, that the screaming boy should be baptized first. At other baptisms I have attended, it always seemed that the children calmed down when the ceremony began. The little boy on this occasion, however, did not. He hollered at the top of his lungs.

“The moment of the actual baptism arrived where the priest lowers the baby into the baptismal font three times. When he lowered him the first time, something terrible happened. The three-month-old had barely come in contact with the water when he bellowed out with a rough, manly voice, ‘I’m burning!’ followed by the dirtiest cuss words.

“Those present were horrified. The priest, however, who held the child firmly in his hands, asked them to remain calm and proceeded with the baptism. The second time he lowered the child in the water, he cussed and swore again, but the words were less clear and understandable. The third time, the boy trembled, cramped up and began to gasp like he was being choked. He finally fell asleep and appeared lifeless in the hands of the priest, who quickly wrapped him in

linens and brought him to the sanctuary behind the iconostasis, which is part of the Orthodox liturgy for the baptism of males. After a while, the priest returned with the baby who lay very peacefully, half asleep in his arms as though nothing had happened. The godmother had no sooner left the church than everybody stormed the priest and asked, ‘Oh Father, what was that?’ ‘Innate possession,’ he sighed and made the sign of the cross. ‘With the help of God, everything is okay now!’”

His response requires a little explanation. There is no such thing as “innate possession”. What was meant is that it is not uncommon for unsuccessful people or people who live in poverty, like many in Russia, to look for help from palm readers, magicians and even Satanists. The help which Satan gives in worldly affairs, especially when it comes to fame, fortune and power, has its price. People sell Satan their soul or, once in a while, even their own children.

The parents of this child must have consecrated him to Satan in his mother’s womb in order to become successful. God’s mercy, however, saw to it that a believing godmother took care of having the child baptized, and the baby boy was freed from this “innate possession”.

(Korsunowa, Elez, Lipezkaja obl., May/June 2005)

From Death to Life

*In 1991, Clare Amirante began going at night to “Termini”,
the central train station in Rome,
to bring the love of Christ to numerous young people hanging out in this hell.
A new community formed which they called “Nuovi Orizzonti – New Horizons”.
Their mission includes reaching out to young men and women
who are living on the streets as a result of drug abuse, alcoholism or prostitution,
and offer them a chance to escape their despair and start a new life
in which their desire for love may be satisfied through Christ, the Resurrection.
Many of these young people are involved and reliant on occultism and, therefore,
Clare Amirante soon became a thorn in the side for Italy’s Satanists.
She had rescued a significant number of followers from satanic sects
and that made them determined to kill her.
A young Satanist, Michelle, who was “chosen” for this crime,
saw this assignment as a great honor.
She explains how it came about.*

An adoptive daughter

I only had second-hand knowledge of my father from the stories other told me about him. He was a very influential person in politics and in the Church in Italy. I was the illegitimate child of his lover in northern Italy 40 years ago. My mother quickly freed herself from the burden of responsibility and placed me in a children’s home. I was mistreated and abused for the first time in my life by one of the aides, but it would not be the last time. My adoptive parents were unable to protect me from the sexual abuse of the relatives. Strangely, I didn’t feel like a victim; rather, it seemed to me during the abuse that I was important and valuable to somebody. When I was 12, one particular event was to dictate the course of my future development. I was very gifted, especially in mathematics, but I had a bad habit of not letting the other children speak when I already knew the answer. My behavior disrupted the class so much that my

parents were asked to come in for a meeting. In their helplessness, they answered, “You have to understand, our daughter is adopted.” From that moment on, I had an excuse for everything, “I’m an adopted daughter!” I used it, for example, when I was treated unjustly. It made me so crazy that I no longer knew any limits. Once, I felt that I had been unfairly graded in my writing class, so I faked a suicide by jumping out the classroom window. I knew that I would land on the balcony below, but the teacher had a heart attack and had to be taken to the hospital. I was just an adopted daughter! Such situations occurred often, especially throughout puberty. Being wounded and rebellious, I had no inhibitions when an acquaintance offered me my first joint, “red Lebanon, a dream”. Then I was over that hurdle as well. My adoptive parents gave me the choice, either move out or see a psychiatrist. Since I knew that I

had a ton of problems, I accepted the proposal to receive psychiatric help. What a disappointment though! My mother handed over my diary and intercepted many of my letters. This breach of

trust and interference in my personal life hurt me so much that I ravaged the office of the psychiatrist, smashed all my mom's favorite trinkets and ran away from home.

My way to hell

I took a job in the kitchen of a diner, unaware of where it would actually lead me. The owner soon recognized my talents and encouraged me to gain some experience. So I started to travel: northern Italy, the Netherlands and islands off the coast of Spain. I learned new recipes and tips from the chefs everywhere.

Through my promotions at work, I came into circles where daily use of marijuana and cocaine was totally normal. At the same time, I had another "disposable" addiction. I had no qualms about having two or three lovers simultaneously, but I didn't trust any of them. While I was working in a big hotel in Liguria in 1991, I met Luca, one in a long list of lovers. He was different though. He explained to me that, after a difficult life, he had experienced a conversion that year and wanted to live friendship and sexuality according to Christian teaching. With time, I fell in love with him and I remained faithful to him—something new for me.

One day, I received a letter from the hospital in which he wrote that, through a blood transfusion after an auto accident, he had contracted the AIDS virus. I had only one wish—to marry him, even though the marriage could never be lived in its fullness. We asked a priest to wed us, but Luca died just four days before the ceremony. For his friends, the funeral was a celebration of the resurrection, but my heart was pierced by such pain that I started to hate everybody. I looked to heaven and cried, "God, if you exist, I'm going to destroy you. If you don't exist, I will spend my life making it known to the world."

One month after Luca's death, I started working for a big restaurant franchise in central Italy. Although it was a very challenging position, it

gave me a chance to make a name for myself. I worked up to 16 hours a day, but not even that could drown my pain. One of my colleagues suggested Reiki, an esoteric therapy that claims to help eliminate stress and increase physical and spiritual well-being. I was not very comfortable there, so my colleague gave me the number of a psychoanalyst whom she maintained to be one of her trusted friends.

The first session was very nice; even on the telephone, the extremely kind voice gave me an indescribable calmness. In her office, quiet music played, the lights were dimmed and the psychologist always responded to me with a relaxed, steady voice. She rarely asked questions. I felt good around her and it seemed that she gave me the peace I needed. She found me another job as the head chef in a very high-class restaurant where there were no problems and where I could take time off for my therapy.

At the end of the fourth session, she told me to decide whether I wanted to go with her "to the depths". To be healed, I would have to undergo a more targeted treatment which was capable of uncovering the wounds in my subconscious. So in the fall of 1994 I started hypnotic treatments. I started going regularly three times a week, and I became totally dependent on her. I didn't do anything without her approval. I was even ready to have a lesbian relationship with her, something to which I had never felt any inclination.

She was not pretty nor did she have beautiful features, but her intelligence and calmness impressed me. With her treatment, she destroyed the child, and actually everything feminine, within me. She taught me to endure pain and to

transform it into joy. In other words, she prepared me for sadomasochistic relationships.

In June 1995, she brought me to my first black mass. Slowly, one week at a time, I became accustomed to the gruesomeness I experienced there. To keep me going, she gave me cocaine, which had already become my indispensable daily companion. I took other things which she prescribed as well: Bach Flower remedies and other drops whose components were unknown to me.

Just two months later, on the night of August 14-15, 1995, I was ready to consecrate myself to Satan through a rite of initiation. My life changed from that moment on. Suddenly I had

the ability to speak and understand foreign languages; this was very useful in our restaurant. I knew the occupations of the guests dining with us and knew things I had never read or heard before. Above all, I knew when a priest was carrying the Blessed Sacrament. That gave me a feeling of power. In reality though, I was a living corpse in this time—spiritually, physically and psychologically. An invisible suction held me prisoner. Nothing satisfied me. I had an irresistible desire for new and excessive emotional experiences; I was eager to dominate the others and be powerful. Power was the magic word for which I would have done anything, even if it meant walking over the dead.

True love conquered the Devil in me

“Now you’ll receive power! Now you’ll receive power!” Drop by drop, these words penetrated my body, my will, my understanding. During a ritual on Christmas Eve, the satanic priest chose me to kill Clare Amirante with a dagger. Everything had been prepared, right down to the smallest detail. Directly, but also through hypnosis, I was given precise instructions about Clare. Now my true rise to power was about to begin.

It was Monday, January 6, 1997, when I was ready to execute my assignment. I took public transportation to Trigoria, a small suburb of Rome, where Clare lived with her community. I arrived around 8 p.m., and I had the dagger tucked under my belt. They were expecting me because I had called with the pretense of wanting to meet the community and work as a volunteer. A guy opened the door. I saw Clare behind him; I knew her from pictures. She came to the door, embraced me and said with a smile, “Welcome!”

This embrace, this love went straight to my heart. I was totally confused. For the first time in my life, I felt I was being embraced by a mother. Clare lovingly invited me in for dinner. I did not know what had happened to me. I had an

assignment! One embrace of intense love foiled all my plans and I had only one wish, “I want to forget everything and live here!”

When I returned to my apartment two days later, so that I could go back to work, I was a different person. Since I had not done anything in the last years without first asking permission from my satanic psychologist, just the thought of meeting her now filled me with fear. I could not forget the memory of Clare’s smile. I had to call her and tell her my original plan and how much I wanted to come back now.

The other members of the satanic sect pursued me not only on the telephone, but they even tried to break into my apartment. I locked myself in for fear. Without the usual consumption of drugs, I went through terrible withdrawals and my whole body throbbed. It wasn’t until January 17, a good week later, that I made it back to Trigoria. An indescribable fight was raging within me. On the one side, I wanted to get away from the Satanists; on the other, the demonic powers, to whom I had freely handed myself over, tormented me. When Clare welcomed me anew with a loving hug, the demons could not resist—my face distorted and with the gruesome

voice of a man a demon screamed out of me, “She belongs to us, and we are not giving her up. I will kill her and murder you, and then we will destroy the whole community!”

Clare called an exorcist. A spiritual battle began which lasted for months between Fr. Raffaele and the demon in me. First and foremost, it was essential that I go as quickly as possible to Holy Confession and receive Holy Communion, because if I was murdered after these two sacraments, it would make me martyr.

My companions in the sect knew this all too well. Therefore, they hunted everywhere for me, to avenge themselves in time, so that my soul would belong to Satan forever.

I experienced a terrible martyrdom inside and

out until a priest finally arrived three hours later to hear my confession. Afterwards, the priest explained to me that it would only be possible to receive absolution for stealing and desecrating consecrated hosts with special permission from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Knowing the danger that I was in, he immediately wrote a letter to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the current Holy Father. Just a few days later permission was granted to receive Holy Communion. To my great joy, the letter, which Cardinal Ratzinger signed personally, finished with the words,

“Today is a great feast for the whole Church because a daughter has come home.”

Translated from:
Michela, Fuggita da Satana, Piemme 2007

I experienced the power of the Resurrection

Michelle has consecrated her life to God as a lay person.

She wants to dedicate her life to those who have not experienced God’s love.

“The whole world has become my home, because people everywhere thirst for love,”
she explained when we had the opportunity to interview her.

What did you experience during your conversion?

What was the biggest change in your life?

The first part of my conversion was being freed from the demonic possession. It took a total of two years. The first four months consisted of Fr. Raffaele, assigned to me by Bishop Boccacio, praying over me four to ten hours every day. Over and over again he encouraged me not to give up.

In the years that followed, I especially learned

not to run away from suffering, nor to mask it with drugs or work. Our Lady at the foot of the Cross became my great model. She taught me to transform my pain into love and not to close up in suffering, but rather to turn to those who need me. I know I have the prayers of many people to thank for my “new life”, especially several nuns who knew about my situation.

What would you say to those who feel drawn to esoteric practices?

The first deadly failure is to trivialize esoteric methods and occultism and to distinguish between what seems to be “harmless” white magic and black magic. Every practice, from palm readers and fortune tellers, to ouija boards and magical healers, is tied to demons. In reality, however, demons do not know your future. They know what they are planning, and they know how they want to harm you, through an accident

for example, but they do not know if they can realize their plans or not, because God is there too. We Christians have Jesus’ assurance, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” That is enough for us. I would like to warn anybody who is involved with satanic practices of any shape or form: If you think that it is enough to believe in God to escape from Satan, you’re fooling yourself. Satan also believes in God!

How can parents protect their children from satanic addictions?

The first step is to baptize babies shortly after their birth, because demons can enter unobstructed into children who have not been baptized, through a curse for example (see pg. 12-13).

Then I would advise parents to turn off their televisions and take time to talk with their children. Parents should teach their children that true freedom comes through obedience and not in doing whatever they like. Today, many children do whatever they want because their parents are incapable of saying no. They want to

have their peace and, therefore, they fulfill their child’s every desire. As a result, in the western world, on average, someone takes their own life every 45 seconds with the excuse, “I have had and tried everything in life. There is only one thing left, to kill myself!”

It seems to me that we have to learn above all not simply to punish our children when they do something wrong. It would be much better to speak with them and mercifully explain the truth, like Jesus does with us.

Did you ever want to see your biological mother again?

Oh yes, this longing came to me one evening during adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. How much I wanted to tell my biological mother that I had forgiven her and to thank her that she gave me life, despite the difficult situation she was in when she was pregnant with me.

We found her address and were able to set up a meeting. I drove to northern Italy in June 2004 full of joyful anticipation. After nearly 40 years, I saw my mother for the first time. I looked her in the eyes and embraced her; she was as cold as stone. The biggest shock, however, came after lunch. Completely calm, she said to my face, “You never even existed to me, nor do you today. Get out of my life!”

I was devastated. Why did she even let me come? If someone had cut me in half I would

not have suffered more. I cried the whole way home and couldn’t calm down. Nothing could ease the pain.

Clare suggested making a pilgrimage to Medjugorje, “because who could help you more than Our Heavenly Mother?”

At first, my condition didn’t change there either. After ten days, Maria Pavlovic, one of the visionaries, saw me sitting sadly in front of the church. She invited me to come with her and didn’t give up until I agreed. So I knelt next to her during the apparition of Our Lady; I remained absent-minded and bored. Suddenly, I felt a strange warmth in my body which pervaded me from head to toe. I had the impression of being lovingly embraced by somebody; it was indescribably beautiful. I had never experienced

anything like it! If I experience only ten percent of this joy in heaven, then it will be enough for me!

A moment later, it was as if a stranger took my heart out of my chest and put a new one in its place. An inexpressible peace overcame me.

After the apparition, Maria, who knew nothing about my suffering, said to me,

“Our Lady took all the pain which you carry so deep in your heart and made it her own. From this day forward, she alone is your Mother!”

“Conversion is a greater miracle than raising the dead.”

St. Bernard of Clairvaux