

Triumph of the Heart

ALL THINGS WORK FOR GOOD
FOR THOSE WHO LOVE GOD.

ROMANS 8:28

PDF - Family of Mary

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The Transforming Power of Christian Love

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*We are confronted daily with violence and crime through the media
and experience practically live on our television and computer screens
terrorist attacks and natural catastrophes.*

*It can prove quite challenging, even for a Christian,
to answer the reproach, "Where was God?"*

*That considered however, nothing and no one should ever obscure
God's only true image which Jesus himself revealed to us.*

God is only love and mercy.

*In his infinite, fatherly love, he desires our happiness
and only the best for us.*

God does not want us to suffer

Just as God does not want sin, neither does he want its effects: suffering, sickness and death. Therefore, it is never God who sends us unemployment, a car accident, cancer, starvation, war or any other hardship. It is people turning away from God and unrepented sins which bring about suffering in the world.

When we act selfishly and make decisions with no consideration for God, we give more room

for sin in our lives and, thereby, more power to Satan. He takes merciless advantage of the power that is given to him to harm us or even destroy us.

Our Lady spoke about this in her message in Medjugorje on January 25, 1991, "Satan is strong and desires to destroy not only human life, but also nature and the planet on which you live."

God does not punish, he corrects

We Christians also succumb to the temptation to think that God sends suffering to punish us. On the contrary! In response to the sins of mankind, God did not send punishment after punishment, but rather he sent his Son.

Disasters which affect the guilty as well as the innocent may appear as punishments from God and are commonly referred to as such even by believers. In actuality, they are a result of what man draws upon himself through godless

living, selfishness, greed, refusing forgiveness and reckless ambition. Consider the Babylonian captivity in the Old Testament, the atrocities of the Second World War or the plague of AIDS—God

actually wanted to prevent all of these tragedies! In reality, it is self-punishment, which God, in his infinite mercy, uses to correct us, to help us understand and to lead us to conversion.

He took all our suffering upon himself

As our Redeemer, Jesus took upon himself the suffering of all ages and made it his own, soddened it with love and offered it to the Father. Although the unjust execution of the Son of God was the greatest crime of all time, Jesus transformed it through his infinite love into a sacrifice of expiation to the Father and into a well-spring of grace which will never run dry for us. His love is a redeeming love, an offered love, which gave itself even unto death in order to give

us eternal life. Our suffering, its meaning and its coredeeming power can only be understood in light of our Redeemer on the Cross and the Mother of Sorrows. In this light we see that the power of evil can only be defeated through love and through suffering offered up in love. Like Jesus and Mary, therefore, we are called as Christians to accept our suffering, to carry it, to offer it up and make it fruitful. It is the only way in which we, united with them, can defeat evil.

A Christian suffers differently

Every person inevitably encounters suffering at some point, whether they are a believer or not. The common belief that Christians have more misfortune than believers of other religions or non-believers is not true! If we would ask those who are suffering about their religious convictions, we would see that most of them have little, if any, faith at all. A Christian suffers neither more nor less than others—a Christian suffers differently.

Non-believers often react bitterly to their interior or exterior affliction; they rebel, resign or despair. The Christian, however, who draws strength and consolation from faith and prayer,

is able to surrender to God and remain at peace. He is often consoled when he implores God's help with prayers such as, "Out of love for you Jesus!" or "Jesus, I surrender myself to you—take care of everything."

The Christian knows that, especially in the difficult hours, God is close and helps him to carry the entrusted cross. He lives in the spirited awareness that Jesus asks him very personally to unite and offer up his suffering and need with his redeeming suffering so that it will become a blessing for him and for others. Only a Christian, no Muslim nor Buddhist, has this consoling and wonderful understanding.

All things work for good for those who love God

Additionally, the Christian may be certain that God's loving providence directs everything that happens in his life. Everything that is joyous and beautiful is given to us by God. Similarly, every pain and suffering which God allows is also held in his merciful love.

Even believers initially feel that their suffering is a misfortune. They are also incapable of reasoning why God permits an innocent child to be handicapped, that a marriage falls apart or a loved one is killed in an accident. In such circumstances, a Christian is also challenged to

believe that God is a loving God. For the Christian too, a painful situation remains the same on the outside. The Christian cannot change it, but he can accept it and offer it up. It all depends on his interior disposition—suffering can separate him from God or unite him more deeply to God.

St. Faustina wrote about her experience in her diary, "I want to live in the spirit of faith. I accept everything that comes my way as given me by the loving will of God, who sincerely desires my happiness." (1549) In this way, suffering is transformed into a blessing.

God even transforms severe guilt into grace

It sounds very provoking that, even if somebody incurs serious blame through his own egoistic and uncontrolled passions, God, in his mercy, can use this self-inflicted suffering and give it a coredeeming value. That means that not only can I place my severe guilt in God's heart and repent my wrongdoing, but I can even entrust and offer up to him the serious consequences of my sins. The conditions, of course, are sincere repentance, asking for forgiveness and doing all that is within my power to make things good again. Then, from the suffering which I have brought upon myself, blessing

and grace proceed for all those involved.

St. Francis de Sales said so beautifully, "David never would have been so humble if he had not sinned; Mary Magdalene's love for her Lord, without her former sins, would never have reached such heights." Obviously this is no license to sin, but rather a praise of God's mercy from which all things work for good for those who love God.

The following examples should help us to better understand the transforming power of love so that we too may give a loving "yes" in all life's situations.

The Holy Apostle of Ireland

*Although Christianity in Europe dwindled
through the confusion of the Migration Period (375-568),
Christian culture was flourishing in the monasteries of Ireland,
the “Land of saints and scholars”.*
*Around the year 600, monks left Ireland for the mainland
to bring anew the Gospel and the lost Latin education.*
*They built churches and monasteries
and founded schools and libraries
from Iceland to northern Italy.*
*Celtic missionaries like Columba, Gall, Fridolin, Kilian and Fergus
spread the Faith throughout Europe.*
*This blessing, however, never would have gone forth
from the “Green Island” if the holy bishop St. Patrick (385-461)
had not previously converted it.*
God called him to this mission in a very unusual way.

Patrick, the would be Apostle of Ireland, was born on the neighboring isle Great Britain, which in the 4th century belonged to the Roman Empire and thus maintained Christianity as the state religion. A baptized and free Roman citizen, Patrick grew up in a well-to-do British noble family. His father Calpornius was a reputable Roman councilor and deacon. The family’s summer residence was close to the sea, and it was there, in the year 401, that the drama that would change Patrick’s life took place. In his “Confessions”, which is one of the greatest autobiographies in world literature, he wrote in his old age, “I was then almost sixteen years of age, when I was taken in captivity to Ireland, with so many thousands of people, and deservedly so, because we turned away from God and did not obey our priests.”

Celtic pirates violently kidnapped Patrick from the security of his family, and he suddenly found himself alone in a strange land among pagans whose language he did not understand. He was sold as a slave with no rights and brought deep inland to pastor sheep in the inhospitable hills of northern Ireland. Yet in his time of misfortune,

despite being lonely and homesick, Patrick found God—and God found Patrick. He describes, “In the land of my captivity the Lord bestowed me the great grace and opened my heart to an awareness of my unbelief. Until then, I did not believe in the living God, but remained in death and in unbelief until the time I was indeed castigated and truly humiliated by hunger and nakedness, and that daily. I was like a stone lying in deep mire. ... At least then I recognized my sin and turned with my heart to the Lord my God. And he turned his gaze round on my lowliness and had mercy on my youth. In his mercy the Lord lifted me up and comforted me as a father a son.”

The serf shepherd began to have intimate talks with God on the slopes of the Slemish Mountain. “In one day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and at night nearly the same, even while I was staying in woods and on the mountain; and before daybreak I was roused up to prayer, in snow, in frost and in rain; and I felt no ill-effects from it, because the spirit was fervent in me then. More and more the love of God and fear of him came to me, and my faith was being increased.” In these six years of slavery

and inner conversion, the Lord was able to grant Patrick everything he might need to make him an untiring missionary among the Irish: “One night in a dream I heard a voice saying to me, ‘It is well that you are fasting, soon you will go to your own country.’ And again after a short time I heard, ‘Look, your ship is ready’. But it was not nearby, but was at a distance of perhaps two hundred miles; and I had never been there, nor did I know anybody there. So I abandoned the person with whom I had stayed for six years, and in the power of God who was directing my way unto my good, I was fearing nothing until I reached that ship. And on that day on which I arrived the ship had set out from its anchorage.”

The captain had no intention of allowing the obvious fugitive on board. So Patrick started back for his hut, praying along the way, when a sailor ran after him and yelled, “Come quickly!” Perhaps the captain had changed his mind because he was impressed by the way 22-year-old Patrick had handled the ship’s cargo of hounds. The anchor was drawn in that day, but the ship strayed from its course and after three days it landed with its pagan sailors on the shores of Gaul, modern day France, which through the Germanic invasion had been completely deserted. Patrick gives us an exhilarating account of occurrences: “For 28 days we traveled through deserted country, and food failed them and hunger overcame them, and on the next day the captain began to say to me: ‘How is this, Christian? You say your God is great and all-powerful? Why then can you not pray for us, because we are in danger of starving?’ So I said to them with confidence: ‘Be converted in faith with all your heart to the Lord my God, because nothing is impossible for him, so that today he may send food on your way until you are satisfied, because he has plenty everywhere.’” And with the help of God so it was, a herd of pigs appeared at that moment and everybody ate their fill; even the hounds received their portion. After that, Patrick and his God were highly valued by the seamen. They even kept the useful young man with them a longer time, until they finally let him go when they reached his British homeland.

Patrick’s parents were overjoyed as they embraced their son whom they had believed to be lost forever. They begged him in vain, however, to remain with them, because one night Patrick had a vision in which his vocation was revealed to him. “I saw a man coming from Ireland whose name was Victoricius with many letters, and he gave me one of them. I read the beginning of the letter containing the ‘Voice of the Irish’. And as I was reading the beginning of the letter aloud I imagined I heard, at that moment, the voice of those very people who lived near the Western Sea, and thus they cried out as if from one mouth, ‘We request you, come and walk once more among us!’ And I was truly cut to the heart, and I could not read any further.”

This vital experience led young Patrick to understand his mission to return as a priest to the very people who once imprisoned him, and lead the pagan Irish to the Christian faith. In order to do so, he had to first make up for his lacking years of study. He spent long years with monks in Gall and Italy before the holy bishop Germanus, at the monastery of Auxerre in the Bourgogne region of France, ordained him a deacon and subsequently a priest. At the age of 47, Patrick was finally able to embark for Ireland in 432, a newly ordained bishop with 24 companions. “I never had any reason” he wrote, “besides the Gospel and its promises for ever returning to that pagan people whence before I had barely escaped. I made myself a slave of Christ for them.” How well he had been prepared for his future mission when he was dragged away as a prisoner! Had he not learned the Celtic language of the Irish as a shepherd boy, and did he not know the traditions and customs as no other? Patrick worked primarily in the north and the west, but he also came to the center of the “Green Island”, which upon his arrival was still deeply pagan and had remained practically untouched by Roman civilization. “I journeyed for your sake in many perils, even to the remotest regions, where no one had ever come, to baptize or ordain clergy,” he wrote in his journal. Through beating drums, the traveling apostle called together the simple people from the fields, and explained the Christian faith to them with blazing words,

yet with great love, enthusiasm and lucidity. In doing so, the missionary met an unusually open and accepting people, and thereby Ireland was the only country in Western Europe which became Christian without the shedding of martyrs' blood.

In 444, Bishop Patrick was confirmed as the highest pastor of Ireland by Pope Leo the Great. Nevertheless, the saint had many enemies and he often had to be concerned for his life and those of his companions. "Daily I await death or imprisonment through betrayal, and being turned back into a slave. I live in the midst of barbarian pagans, a sojourner and a refugee for the love of God," he wrote in his "Confessions". Again and again the jealous druid priests throughout the country sought to rouse the people against him, and, like St. Paul, it was not unusual for Patrick to be robbed and mistreated. Even so, Patrick was able in the course of his mission to free Ireland from all heresies. Once he even destroyed a statue of the Crom Cruach idol with his own hands and built a large church in its place.

The personality and radiance of this determined man must have been extremely attractive and his behavior very compelling. His efforts were primarily focused on the princes and chiefs of the tribes he visited. He knew that if he managed to convince the leaders and the nobility of the territory about Christianity, they would also have their dependants baptized.

Wherever Patrick went, the youth flocked after him. "The sons and daughters of the petty Irish kings are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ," he could delightfully write about those who became his most faithful assistants and supporters in the mission. "They follow Christ, even without their father's consent. They even suffer persecutions and false reproaches from their own parents, and nevertheless their number ever increases. Even if they are forbidden, they nevertheless continue steadfast in their imitation of him." From the beginning, therefore, Patrick

placed great value on the constancy of each conversion before baptizing thousands with his own hands. He also successfully strove to give the people, in the shortest possible time, a blossoming Irish priesthood and even their first native bishop.

Despite his success our great saint remained human, "God knows how greatly I desired to make a journey to the Britains in order to see my homeland and family. But it was Christ the Lord, who has commanded me to come to stay here for the rest of my life, and so I prefer to stay in Ireland until I die." This offering of his life paid off!

Within the 30 years of his mission, the whole island of Ireland converted and embraced the Christian faith. Since there were no cities, Patrick sowed the country with blossoming monasteries to which he entrusted the organization of the Church. He often helped with his own hands in the construction of churches and chapels. Schools emerged and the Latin alphabet was introduced. Ireland was actually the first country in western Europe to have an ecclesiastical language as well as literature in its native Irish tongue. Monasteries and abbeys so quickly became famous centers of piety, science and art that young men from the European mainland set off to receive an education on the "Island of saints and scholars".

At the time of the Apostle of Ireland's death at age 76, his mission was a unique success, and the foundation for the Catholic Church in Ireland had been laid. "It was especially fitting 'to spread our nets' ... and it was indeed our duty, to 'fish' well and diligently," Patrick wrote modestly. And indeed he had "fished" well. All the same, he still considered himself "God's greatest sinner," who concluded his "Confessions" with the words, "No one should ever say that I, Patrick, a sinner, by my ignorance have accomplished or demonstrated any small thing according to God's good pleasure. Rather it must be most truly believed that it was 'the gift of God'."

I did it for you!

*In the 13th century, a young Italian lawyer, Jacopone da Todi,
dramatically experienced that success and wealth
are not what make you happiest in life.
A turn of fate allowed him to start a completely new life,
and one that would lead him to holiness.*

As crafty as he was ambitious, Jacopone (1230-1306), a lawyer from the noble family Benedetti, achieved fame and fortune at a young age in his hometown of Todi in central Italy. At 37, he married the count's beautiful daughter, Vanna di Bernardino di Guidone, and his happiness appeared to be complete.

Jacopone idolized his young wife, but in a self-centered, possessive way. He proudly presented her at glamorous ceremonies like a precious object. Vanna on the other hand, a faithful, gracious soul, suffered from all the pomp. Since her avarice husband was not very religious, Vanna was only able to secretly help the poor and suffering. The remainder of the time, she tried to accommodate the materialistic lifestyle of her husband who was flattered whenever the others marveled at his wife or when people turned to look at them as they walked through town. It was all the harder for him then, after just one year of marriage, when his wife died unexpectedly.

Jacopone had arranged a splendid festival. His wife was to dress magnificently, as the queen of the day, and to sit with all the noble ladies on a podium reserved for the important guests. Suddenly, this stand collapsed with a loud crash burying Vanna and the other guests in the debris. Despaired, Jacopone finally pulled his wife from the rubble. He opened her brocade dress to aid her breathing and saw to his bewilderment that under the extravagant dress, she was wearing a raw hair-shirt. He was taken aback as he heard the last words of his dying wife who whispered with a quivering voice, "I did it for you!"

Shaken by Vanna's secret life of penance, her

husband realized that he had known nothing about the true, interior life of the person closest to him. Jacopone reproached himself bitterly before her casket and was filled with terrible remorse. His heart was crushed thinking that he could never make amends. His whole life had come crashing down with the podium.

Jacopone first found consolation and peace for his painful regret when he turned to the Mother of Sorrows under the Cross. Looking upon her pierced heart and her suffering was as if she echoed the words of his dying Vanna, "I did it for you!" He was able to draw the strength for a radical conversion from his gracious love to the Mother of Sorrows. He quit his glamorous career and divided his goods up among the poor. He became a Third Order Franciscan and performed public penance in his hometown Todi for the next ten years. In doing so, he found no humiliation too great, and his contrition was such, that he freely made himself the laughing stock of the town.

Finally, Jacopone asked to be accepted into the Order of Friars Minor, and they accepted him in 1278. He continued his strict penances and spent the rest of his life as a simple lay brother who did the lowliest of tasks. His greatest concern was that the Lord and the Mother of Sorrows were loved too little. To their glory, Jacopone, during his 28 years in the monastery, composed glorious verses which turned him into one of the most noteworthy poets of the Middle Ages. A true spiritual son of St. Francis of Assisi, who glorified God in his wonderful song about creation "Canticle of the Sun", Jacopone also became one of the most famous Italian religious composers.

*At the cross her station keeping
stood the mournful mother weeping,
close to Jesus to the last;
Through her heart his sorrow sharing,
all his bitter anguish bearing,
now at length the sword has pass'd.*

*Oh, how sad and sore distress'd
was that mother highly blest,
of the sole-begotten One.
Christ above in torment hangs;
she beneath beholds the pangs
of her dying glorious Son.*

*Is there one who would not weep,
'whelm'd in miseries so deep,
Christ's dear mother to behold?
Can the human heart refrain
from partaking in her pain,
in that mother's pain untold?*

His most beautiful hymn is undoubtedly “Stabat Mater”, “At the Cross Her Station Keeping”. This profound sequence honoring the Mother of Sorrows came from the depths of his compassionate heart and greatly influenced the spread of devotion to the Mother of Sorrows.

I will honor those who honor Me!

*Even though many stores and businesses are open on Sundays,
it still remains the Lord's Day for us Christians.*

*We rest from our work and are called to attend Sunday services
unless we have a legitimate excuse.*

*"I won't run on Sunday," said the Scottish athlete Eric Liddell (1902-1945),
a faithful Christian who, out of love for God,
made a heroic sacrifice to participate in his Sunday services.*

Eric Liddell was the son of a Scottish protestant missionary. He lived in the Chinese port city of Tianjin until he was six years old, at which point his parents sent him to a boarding school in England for his education.

"God made me fast," admitted the talented runner, but he remained "entirely without vanity," according to his rector. He used his fame as the "fastest runner in Scotland" to give testimony to God.

Eric began studying at the University of Edinburgh in 1920, and athletics continued to play an important role in his life there too. He ran for the university team, and in 1924, he became the British champion setting new records in the 100 and 200 meter sprints. He qualified for the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris where he wrote a unique page in sport's history.

When it was announced that the qualification for the 100 meter sprint, his best event for which he had trained so hard, would take place on Sunday, the professed Christian renounced his start with a heavy heart. The news that the favorite would not start hit the country like a bomb. Neither the prospect of a gold medal nor the disappointed citizens of Great Britain calling him a traitor could change his mind. "Sunday is a day of rest and God expects it of me," he said decisively. At peace with God and with himself, he went to downtown Paris on Sunday to preach at the Scottish Church instead of going to the Olympic qualification heat. On race day, Eric was watching from the stands as his compatriot Harold Abrahams won the gold for England in

the 100 meter sprint. Without a trace of jealousy, he rejoiced with the winner and congratulated him sincerely.

Another surprise was still to follow. Eric Liddell's name appeared in the headlines anew because his teammate, Lord Andrew Lindsay, unexpectedly gave Eric his starting position in the 400 meter. Although longer distances had never been Eric's strength, he accepted the offer since neither qualifications nor the race itself were to take place on a Sunday. Shortly before the race, somebody handed him a piece of paper with reference to a Bible passage from the Book of Samuel, "I will honor those who honor me" (1 Sam. 2:30b).

To the amazement of the spectators, trainers and other athletes, Eric Liddell not only won the 400 meter race, but broke the world record! The gold medal winner, then known everywhere as "the flying Scotsman", said later, "The secret of my success over the 400 meter is that I run the first 200 as hard as I can. Then, for the second 200, with God's help, I run harder!"

A half-century later, the Scotsman Alan Wells won the gold in the 100 meter at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. He dedicated his victory run to Eric Liddell and thereby honored his countryman who had become more famous for the race he did not run as for the race in which he won the gold.

In 1925, less than a year after his Olympic triumph in Paris, Eric Liddell completed his studies at the age of 23 and returned to China.

He followed in the footsteps of his father, being an energetic missionary and pastor for 20 years. The Japanese-Chinese War broke out in 1937, and Eric was brought to a Japanese internment camp in 1943 where he died of a brain tumor two years later at the young age of 43.

A fellow inmate, Stephen Metcalf, testified about his friend: "Liddell was a great Olympic champion who gave up everything to become

a Christian teacher for the youth in China. He gave me personally two things in the camp. In the winter, he gave me his worn out running shoes for my bare feet. The best thing he gave me, however, was his baton of forgiveness. He taught me to love my enemies, the Japanese, and to pray for them." After Metcalf was freed, he taught as a missionary in Japan for 40 years.

The story about Eric Liddell's Olympic victory was so convincingly portrayed in the 1982 movie "Chariots of Fire" that it received four Oscars.

Stolen by slave hunters

Just as St. Patrick in the 5th century, we see also in the life of 20th century Sr. Josephine Bakhita (1869-1947) how, despite a crime, God can make all things work for good. Pope John Paul II canonized her in the Jubilee Year 2000 and named her "our universal sister".

Bakhita had a happy childhood with her three brothers and two sisters in the little village of Olgossa in southern Sudan before she was kidnapped by Arabic slave hunters in 1878. "I was nine years old when I was walking through the fields outside the village one morning with a friend of mine. Suddenly two strangers approached us. One of them grabbed me violently with one hand, and with the other he drew a knife from his belt. He pressed it to my ribs and threatened me saying, 'If you scream, you die! Follow us!' Petrified, I could neither scream nor cry." She would never see her family again. She was so shocked by her abduction that she could no longer remember the name of her family or her own. So, the slave hunters ironically named her "Bakhita" which means "the lucky one".

The girl changed ownership five times in the following years on the slave market. Cruelly tortured and humiliated, she experienced first

hand the severity of slavery. She was never sexually abused, however, and therefore said later on, "Our Lady protected me before I even knew her." At the age of 14, she was bought by an Italian consul, Callisto Legnani, in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. For the first time she was treated well, "My new master didn't beat me nor have me whipped. I began to love God without even knowing him."

When the consul returned to Italy in 1885, he brought 16-year-old Bakhita with him. He gave her to the Michieli family as a nanny to take care of their little daughter Mimmina. Three years later, they were both entrusted to the Canossian Sisters in Venice for their education. It was there that Bakhita finally met the God she had felt in her heart as a child. "When I saw the sun, the moon and the stars, I often asked myself, 'Who owns all these things?' I had a great desire to see him, to know him and to honor him."

Although Bakhita was illiterate, the nearly 20-year-old paid close attention in her catechism lessons. “I ‘drank’ the Christian teachings and I was so happy when I heard that God had seen my suffering.” What fascinated her most, however, was that she was a beloved daughter of God. She often ran to the teacher during the day to make sure, “Am I really a daughter of God? I, a former slave, a black person? And he loves me although I have nothing to give him?” In 1890, after being a catechumen for a few months, 21-year-old Bakhita was baptized, confirmed and given First Communion all on the same day. She was given the baptismal name Josephine. Even later on, she was often seen kissing the baptismal font saying, “Here God made me his daughter!”

Although it was very unusual in that time to allow a black person to enter a religious order, Bakhita was allowed to enter the Canossians three years later.

In 1902, she was sent to the convent in Schio

(northern Italy) where she served for 45 years as a seamstress, cook, sacristan and porter. In obedience, she had to recount throughout Italy, in overfilled churches and meeting halls, her dramatic story and how she was lead in mysterious ways to freedom, to God and to her religious vocation. Known far and wide as “nostra Madre Moretta”, “our little black mother”, she won everybody’s heart with her constant friendly smile, full of humility and goodness. Mother Bakhita’s later years were marked with a long, painful illness. Yet if she was asked how she felt, she always answered humorously, “Just as the Lord wants.” During the 78-year-old’s last agony it was as if she relived the terrible days of her slavery. She even begged the nurse once, “Loosen the chains, they’re so heavy!” On February 8, 1947, it was Mary who freed Sr. Josephine from her burdens. In her final breath, the radiant sister sighed, “How happy I am! Blessed Mother, Blessed Mother!”

*“If I ever met the slave trader who stole me
and those who tortured me as well,
I would kneel down and kiss their hands
because if they hadn’t done that to me,
I would never have become a Christian and a nun.”*

With Trust and 200 Dollars

*In 1961, Mother Angelica,
a sister of the “Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration”,
set out from Ohio to become the abbess of the new
Our Lady of the Angels Convent in Birmingham, Alabama.
She never could have foreseen that she would one day become
the founder of EWTN, the largest Catholic television network in the world,
and the most influential Roman Catholic woman in America
according to Time Magazine.*

Already in the 1960's, Mother Angelica held countless personal and down to earth talks about Catholic spirituality aimed at bringing the true Faith closer to common people and to those who suffer. When the enthusiastic listeners requested copies of these speeches, the sisters in the convent typed them, printed them and mailed them to those who had asked. That was the advent of her famous pamphlets and 57 books. More people found out about Mother Angelica at the beginning of the 1970's when her industrious sisters converted the convent's sewing room into a recording studio where they recorded and made copies of audio cassettes. Still more were reached when Mother began speaking live on the radio.

How Mother Angelica came to found her own television station is, nevertheless, an amazing story of God's providence. The abbess visited a state-of-the-art television studio in Chicago for the first time in March 1978. She was overwhelmed thinking about the number of people who could be reached by such means. “Lord, I gotta have one of these,” she prayed spontaneously.

Just one month later, she was standing in front of the camera! Her first video series “Our Hermitage” was recorded in Birmingham for the Christian Broadcast Network of Protestant televangelist Pat Robertson. When she found out a few months later, however, that this television network intended on broadcasting a series called “The Word”, which denied the divinity of

Jesus, Mother Angelica confronted the station's manager in his studio.

He retorted, “I see no way we can cancel this program because of one person, or are you trying to tell me how to run my station?”

The 55-year-old nun decided uncompromisingly and without hesitation, “I've never told you how to run your station. But if you run that blasphemous series, I will not put my programs on this station, nor make any other programs here!”

He asked irately, “But do you think God really cares what we are doing here?”

Mother Angelica stood up and headed for the door saying, “Yes, he cares, and I care.”

The furious manager yelled after her, “You leave here, and you're off television. You need us!”

Mother Angelica turned around once more and responded confidently, “No, I don't. I only need God! I'll buy my own cameras and build my own studio.”

“You can't do that,” he answered.

“You just watch me,” she countered.

Saddened, Mother Angelica returned with her companions to the convent, where she sank exhaustedly into a chair and told her sisters, “I told that man we would build our own studio. I wouldn't even know where to begin.”

The little community thought about it for a while before some of them had the idea, “The garage! Mother, let's make the garage a studio!” All 12 sisters ran behind the convent where the

construction workers were busily building the garage they had just begun for the convent.

Mother Angelica went over to the supervisor, “Nelson, you have to build me a television studio.” He could not believe his ears, “Sure, Mother, we’ll do it. Just tell me how because I don’t know anything about a TV studio.”

“I don’t know anything about it, either, that’s not the point. We’re going to build one. When you have God, you don’t have to know everything; you just do it,” she answered with conviction.

From that moment on, the television studio developed in the convent’s garage. Most people did not think the project would survive more than six months. Even friends doubted, “And what if you fail?”

Mother countered with humor, “Then I’m going to have the most well lit garage in Birmingham.” Although she knew absolutely nothing about television technology, she was always convinced that, “Even though we were small, I felt sure at that point that somehow it would be a great instrument in the Lord’s hands. I was starting a new way of evangelization.”

Years later, she joyously looked back on the beginnings, “There never has been such a thing as a budget and we never had a parish to help us. We started with \$200 and we went from there. We never wanted to earn anything. It is a work of God. He planned it, he led us, he provided for us, he protected us! Nobody can say these nuns, any of us, could have accomplished this—we couldn’t. I thought we’d just make some programs, really, because there were no Catholic programs much of anywhere. And so as it evolved, I was always surprised. I never thought it would be this big or this beautiful. I just always tried to listen to the Lord.”

In short time, Mother Angelica produced her first program in her “garage studio” which was broadcasted locally at the end of 1979. What should they do with all the other new productions though? “Mother, you have to broadcast via satellite,” somebody advised her.

She answered, “Satellite, that sounds good. What is it?” She let somebody explain satellite technology to her, and just two years later the

impossible became reality. On August 15, 1981, “Mother Angelica’s Eternal Word Television Network” (EWTN) began broadcasting via satellite four hours a day to 60,000 households. In the fall of 1987, the number had grown to 10 million. In 1991, they broadcast the first TV-Rosary and daily Holy Mass from the chapel of the new studio where many coworkers of EWTN participate. They also broadcast praying the Chaplet of Mercy during the Holy Hour at 3 p.m.

Fr. Federico Lombardi, the spokesman for the Holy See, highlighted in 2006, “Since EWTN does a live broadcast of the Pope’s travels, appointments of bishops, beatifications and canonizations... to the furthest regions of the world and makes their signal available to other broadcasters, count-less people have the possibility to accompany the Holy Father from a distance. Through EWTN more than 300 million households were able to experience on their screens the 2005 World Youth Day in Cologne and the great events surrounding the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict XVI.”

Twenty-seven years after its foundation, the largest religious media network in the world, which is financed solely through donations, reaches with its round-the-clock programming in English and Spanish 123 million households in 140 countries. It spreads the teaching and the beauty of the Catholic Church in a format which is modern and interesting for young and old alike through television, radio and internet broadcasts.

“We go where the doors are opened for us,” emphasized Mother Angelica time and again, and especially her coworkers can testify what great blessings have gone forth from EWTN.

Often their relatives have come back to the Church after watching an episode of “Mother Angelica Live”. Letters, telephone calls and e-mails from around the world show that some people have even been kept from committing suicide by watching one of the programs; still others converted to Catholicism after learning more about the Faith on the shows. The number of people suffering from depression, drug addiction, illness and suffering that have personally thanked

Mother Angelica for the help they have received is known to her alone, or better said, to God alone. Since the year 2000, Mother Angelica has withdrawn to her Hansville convent where she attentively followed Pope Benedict XVI's visit to

the United States in April 2008. It was such a fitting gift that the last day of his visit, on which he celebrated Holy Mass, fell on Mother Angelica's 85th birthday, and she watched it all on EWTN.

Blind and Yet Sees

*“God made use of my blindness to help me let go of certain things
in order to discover more important ones.*

He used my blindness to help me see many things more clearly.”

*With these words, Fr. Benoit Marie Ette
began recounting to us the story of his life,
about his childhood in Africa and about how he went blind.
It changed him into someone who began to love God
and led him to become a happy and fulfilled priest.*

I was born in Abidjan, in the Ivory Coast on May 22, 1960 and was baptized with the name Emmanuel. I grew up in a pleasant family with my nine brothers and sisters. My mother was very kind and, since I was the first-born son, I was the pride of my father, a port official.

At the age of nine, however, I turned into an extremely difficult child. Other boys my age had a negative influence on me—I began smoking and, instead of going to class, I'd go to the movies which became my great passion. In the following two years, I must have watched a hundred movies. In order to fund my craze, my friends and I went to the market and sold fish which we had secretly caught in the port, or we stole money from home. At school, everything started to go downhill fast; at home, I was punished, but it was useless. I wasn't on the wrong track yet, but I was certainly on my way toward becoming a criminal. In 1971, my parents finally decided to send me to school in Tiassale, 100 miles away. A family friend took over the responsibility of raising me, and he was so strict that many times I obeyed out of pure fear. In this time, God disappeared from my life;

he became meaningless. “Why should I go to Holy Mass and to the catechism class, it is just a waste of time,” I thought.

Something changed my life forever in May 1972—I went blind. Earlier, at the age of nine, I was given the wrong medication and lost sight in one eye. When I awoke that May morning, I could barely see out of the other eye. I was scared, but I didn't say anything about it the whole day. That evening, as I was sitting by the television with my eyes opened wide so that I could make out the outlines, the lady where I lived asked me, “What's the matter with you?” “I can't see well,” I answered abruptly. At school the next day, I couldn't even read what was written on the blackboard; only in the sunlight could I distinguish shadows, colors and movements. A visit to the eye doctor was in vain; despite precise testing, the cause of my blindness was as much in the dark as I was.

Four weeks later, they sent me home from Tiassale, blind at the age of 12. My mother cried for compassion and pain like somebody at a funeral because, for her, a son without his eyesight was a man without a future. My father's

many hopes for me also vanished. My parents often asked themselves, “What did we do that God has punished us like this?”

Even though I never answered, this hurt me profoundly. I didn’t consider my blindness a punishment even though in one blow everything changed for me: no school, no cinema, no more movies. And what was worse, I lost most of my friends. Since I could no longer read or write, I had only the radio; but I learned a lot from it and I was always well-informed. Listening to the numerous French stations was like going to language school, and I soon understood and spoke French better than all my former classmates.

The most wonderful consequence of my blindness was that I began going to catechism classes and Holy Mass again, and it was as if I had never left God. I prayed to him in my own words, even though nobody had ever taught me to do so. An unknown, but sincere love for Jesus blossomed within me. It no longer seemed to last forever when my father called me into his office once in a while to pray a decade of the Rosary.

At this time, a friend named Franz was helping us around the house. He was a gift for me, and he often brought me to the church and read for me. Once, he recounted the life of St. Francis of Assisi, and I prayed spontaneously, “O Lord, I want to be like St. Francis! I want to be a saint.” In that moment, at the age of 13, I thought for the first time about becoming a priest. But how? Surely my blindness would make that impossible. I still remember well how I rested my head on the table out on our balcony, cried my heart out and pleaded with God to give me back my vision.

God heard my prayer! He didn’t give me back my sight, but he gave me hope instead. Through my sister, Sr. Georgia Marie, I found out about a school for the blind. My father made me wait a year, however, before enrolling because for him that meant admitting, “Emmanuel will never see again.” It was extremely difficult for him to accept. I started going to the school for the blind at the age of 15, and thanks to my good memory, I learned Braille in a matter of months.

When I was 17, there was a French missionary who celebrated Holy Mass weekly at our school. Since I woke up very early each morning, he advised me to use the time for prayer. So I began to pray longer and more deliberately. This more intense prayer helped me indescribably in my spiritual life. First, I was able to really accept my blindness and not just carry it because I had no other choice, and I also felt more and more distinctly the call to the priesthood. It was not until just before my graduation in 1982 when I was 22 years old, that I entrusted my intention to a Jesuit priest who, unfortunately, had to explain to me, “You cannot become a priest if you are blind. It is not allowed by Canon Law!” I remained calm and said to God, “If the Church does not want a blind priest, you have to find a way for me to become a priest. Everything is possible for you; you can even give me back my sight.”

When I heard testimonies in charismatic prayer groups about people who had been healed miraculously but was not healed myself when they prayed over me, I struggled sometimes with the question, “Why doesn’t God heal me so that I can become a priest? Do I have too little faith to be healed?” That couldn’t have been the case though because some of those who were healed were not even all that pious.

Since my situation did not change, I began studying marketing after graduation and I went to work in a bank. In 1986, I started a four year course in Paris to become a teacher for blind children and adults in order to work in my African homeland once I was qualified. I never entirely gave up the wish to become a priest, and so I was overjoyed when I finally learned that, since 1983, Canon Law had permitted the blind to be ordained to the priesthood too. Back then, it was as if Jesus made me understand without saying anything to me, “Your vocation beckons!” My way to the priesthood was, in fact, realized very quickly thereafter.

I met my future spiritual family through a friend from Paris, Delphine, who had since joined our community and is now known as Sr. Louise Marie. The first visit was enough for me, and I

had the inner conviction from God, “This is my place! I am at home here!” To this day, nothing has taken this grateful assurance from me!

When I was ordained a priest on September 8, 1994, in Roznava, Slovakia, my parents, sadly, were not there. Just three weeks before the ordination, God called my mother and my father to himself, one after the other, on August 16 and 21. What a mystery, what a sacrifice and, at the same time, what a grace for my priesthood! I learned in our community to understand this coredemptive suffering as one of the most precious treasures for my spiritual life as a blind priest. Nothing is senseless anymore! Each individual sacrifice, when it is accepted, carried and offered up—united with Jesus—acquires an immeasurable value. In our community, I understood ever more clearly that God, who is only good, would not have allowed me to lose something as crucial as my ability to see if he did not have a plan for me, and for others through me, with my blindness.

I experienced this, for example, in the spring

of 2008 in the chapel of our seminary in Rome when I said to a visiting group of blind young people from Vienna, “Being blind is not a grace in and of itself, but a suffering. Being blind is something very difficult, and I would do anything not to be blind. However, if Jesus would ask me, ‘Do you want to see?’ I would answer him, ‘Jesus, if seeing helps me to fulfill your will better and to become a saint, then please. If it doesn’t, then I prefer to remain blind.’ That is because there is a worse form of blindness—an inner blindness of not knowing or believing in God. There are many people who do not know or realize how blind they are through their lack of faith. Therefore, I thank God that I am unable to see with my earthly eyes but see ever more interiorly.” His words helped one of the blind youth there so much that he found his faith anew. More than once I was also able to give a silent witness to the faith. A lady said to me once after Holy Mass, “Fr. Benoit, I saw with what living faith you as a blind man celebrated Holy Mass. I, on the other hand, have two eyes that see, and yet I believe so little! It is high time that I change!”

Two friends in Heaven

Thirteen years ago, we began a new mission in Sharbaky, Kazakhstan. Within the first few days we met Raya, a loving young lady with four children, who lived in dire poverty. She was lively, joyful and energetic—typical traits revealing her Tartar ancestry. Despite the fact that her marriage to a man named Sasha, who had been in prison since 1993, was anything but easy she maintained her vivacity. Her husband’s drinking and drug addiction drove the family into financial straits and his violent nature aggravated the situation to the point that Raya was forced to protect the children by fleeing from home some nights.

As soon as we started in 1996, Raya began helping us in the mission around the house: she

cooked in the soup kitchen, helped look after the children, worked in the garden and shoveled snow. Her willingness to help us was all the more remarkable considering that she was not baptized nor raised in the faith. Through the years though, she came to deeply know the Catholic faith and you could feel that everything that she did, she did very personally for God. Her love was more than that of an “average Christian”.

It was 2001. Raya returned home one evening to find Sasha in front of the house. He had just been released from prison after an eight year sentence. “I’ve been looking for you,” were his first words. “I didn’t know where else to go or if you would take me back.” At that moment, Raya recalled the challenging words that Bishop

Lenga said in the homily of a Mass she had attended in Karaganda during the Great Jubilee in the year 2000: “The bishop invited us, ‘Now you have to forgive everybody, especially those who have caused you the most pain!’ When I received Holy Communion, I said to the Lord,

‘Jesus, I don’t just want to simply say that I forgive Sasha. I ask you that I may look him in the eyes again and tell him that I forgive him.’ Jesus had heard my prayer because Sasha was standing at the door.”

The church is the best home

In her need and uncertainty about whether God really wanted her to take her husband back after he had caused so much pain and suffering in the family, she asked Fr. Ulrich, who was helping in Sharbakty at the time, for advice. He encouraged her, “Maybe Jesus has come to you through him. Accept him as you would accept Jesus himself.” That was sufficient for Raya who was now sure that it was God’s will. She took Sasha back despite the understandable objections of the older children. To make a bad situation worse, Sasha had contracted tuberculosis while he was in prison. None of this was easy for Raya, especially since she had recently been diagnosed with diabetes. The medical attention was inadequate and Raya was reduced to skin and bones.

Amidst the difficulties, something unexpected happened. Sasha began to open his heart to God’s grace. He knew nothing about God and had not been baptized. He was educated by communist atheists and did not even know how to make the sign of the cross.

Raya gradually taught him about the faith she loved so profoundly. Sasha began to ask if he could attend Mass with her on Wednesday mornings. “It is so quiet in the morning,” he said,

“and there isn’t anybody there yet. I’ve been in many different places: prisons, hospitals, other peoples’ houses, but the church is the best home because it is so quiet there.”

Sasha’s tuberculosis was contagious and the danger of infecting others was too great for the family. After a long wait, he finally received a place in the tuberculosis ward in the Sharbakty hospital, but their efforts to help him were in vain. Sasha’s condition progressively grew worse each day. He had terrible pain and swelling all over his body.

Fr. Bonaventura and the sisters came to see him regularly. During one particular visit he wept tears of repentance, and that evening he asked his wife, “Why does the priest come to hear about other peoples’ suffering? What do they need all these problems for?”

“It’s true, but didn’t you feel like a weight had been lifted from your heart today?” Raya answered simply.

“Yes, I felt free,” he said pensively.

Since there was nothing more that the hospital staff could do for him, Sasha was released to make room for somebody who had a chance of recovery. Slowly, God prepared himself a place in Sasha’s heart.

Forgive me!

Purified by his suffering, the desire for God continued to grow in him. It still took a few years, however, until Raya could bring him the

good news that he may receive the Sacrament of Baptism. Calm and determined, Sasha said, “Wash and dress me, I have to be absolutely

clean for the baptism!”

Due to his weak state, Raya advised him, “If it is too difficult to sit for so long, don’t be afraid to lie down.”

“What is difficult for God,” the ill man responded.

Sasha was baptized at home with the name

‘Joseph’, which he himself had chosen. “Once I am baptized, I will die shortly thereafter,” he told us promptly. And indeed it was. His condition deteriorated rapidly. His hands, feet, legs and face swelled severely. The pain was so great that the hospital, after great hesitation, readmitted him a second time.

The final days in May

Since he worried about how contagious he was, he had his wife bring us a message, “Tell Fr. Bonaventura and the sisters that they should not come because I smell of decay.”

Of course we did not let that deter us and Raya, naturally, came too. She told us, “Every day when I come to him, he asks me for forgiveness, ‘You always told me that I should change, but I never listened to you. I’m sorry for all the pain that I caused you.’

“The night before Sasha died, Christina, one of our daughters, had a dream. She saw her father, who said to her, ‘Christina, don’t be mad at me anymore! When you’re young, you do what you want. You’ll be older some day too and then you’ll understand me.’ After this dream,

Christina found the strength to forgive him for the pain that he had caused.

“He was worried that he would die in solitude. ‘Don’t be gone too long! Otherwise, you won’t be here when I die,’ he feared. I was full of trust and said to him, ‘I will ask God that I may be with you. I will pray a novena for it.’

“On May 1, I told Sasha that the Feast of Easter is being celebrated in the Orthodox Church, and he asked, ‘Which month is it?’ ‘May,’ I said. ‘Yes, May, that is my month’ he added ponderingly. That May evening, in the month of his death, he said, ‘Everything is burning in my body; it is like a painful fire!’ I tried to console him, ‘Do you remember what I told you about St. Faustina? Hang on a little longer!’”

They anointed me

On May 2, Raya informed us that Sasha’s end was near. Fr. Bonaventura gave Last Rites, and he had previously made a general confession. During the sacrament Sasha was only semi-conscious, but when Raya asked him in the evening if the missionaries had come, he answered very quietly, “Yes, they anointed me.” On May 3, Raya felt pushed to visit Sasha sooner than she had planned. He was lying in

pain, but he did not want to have any more pain killers. Raya washed him, put fresh clothes on him, made his bed and sat down next to him to begin to pray the Chaplet of Mercy. “Sasha still wanted to say something to me, but he couldn’t. He looked at me with such clear eyes, lately they had been so dim, and then he closed them forever.”

Lord, take everything You need from me

To everyone's surprise, just four months after her husband's death, God called our beloved Raya to himself. When we heard that she was in the hospital in Sharbakty, we missionaries drove there first thing in the morning. We were shocked to see her in such a miserable condition and so unexpectedly. She greeted us as always with a smile and with a humor that was always typical for her.

Fr. Bonaventura gave her the Anointing of the Sick, and she was even able to consume a small piece of Holy Communion. Raya, who could only whisper, confided the following words to us, "When they brought me to the hospital, I said to Jesus, 'Lord, take everything you need from

me!' Less than a half hour later the terrible pain started. It was horrible. I didn't want to scream, but I had to. My only thought was, 'Jesus, you suffered much more!'"

The next day, Raya was taken to the state hospital in Pavlodar where they performed an emergency operation on her small intestine. However, since the abscess had ruptured two days earlier and her whole abdominal cavity was infected, it was too late to help.

Yes, very unexpectedly, the Lord took Raya to himself on September 14, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. He accepted the sacrifice of her life.

*I want to live in the spirit of faith.
I accept everything
that comes my way
as given me by the loving will of God,
who sincerely desires my happiness.*

St. Faustina