

Triumph of the Heart

YOU ARE LIGHT IN THE LORD
LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

PDF - Family of Mary

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*“Change us all from stone and wood
into living people in whom your love is made present.”*

Pope Benedict XVI , Christmas 2009

My Heart is Ready!

*In the Holy Night, Our Lady gave the most precious gift to all mankind:
her Divine Son. It is love, therefore, that compels us
to give to one another at Christmas.*

*Consequently, dear benefactors and friends,
we have prepared a special Christmas treat for you.*

*Our nine new apostolic sisters will open their hearts a little bit for you
to share how Jesus was able to draw them entirely to himself,
so that on September 11, 2010, they freely gave him their joyful Yes.
That which they entrust to us in the following pages is truly a gift
because not many people are willing to publish their love story!*

To the Family of Mary through Amsterdam

I was the second of four girls in a practicing Catholic family in Berlin, Germany. From childhood, we were all used to attending Holy Mass, even during the week; we prayed a family Rosary every day and regularly had an hour of adoration. If somebody stole my favorite decade of the Rosary, The Visitation, it was the only time I became obstinate and didn't want to pray anymore. Among our relatives and friends, there were several priests and religious sisters with whom we had frequent contact. Even my mom and grandma had considered joining a convent in their teenage years. It was quite natural for me, therefore, that someone could choose to become a sister, that being the mother of a family was not the only possibility. I thought about it concretely

for the first time as I was preparing for First Holy Communion when we were asked to draw a picture of what we wanted to be when we grew up. I was torn between being a housewife, working in an office, a midwife nurse or a religious sister. On a trip to Medjugorje shortly after my First Holy Communion the desire to become a sister grew within me, perhaps because I saw so many young sisters there. In addition, whenever we listened to cassettes about the saints back then, I felt that Jesus wanted me for himself.

When I was 14, my grandmother returned full of enthusiasm from a trip to Amsterdam where she met the sisters of the Family of Mary at the Shrine of the Lady of All Nations. She knew immediately, “This would be something for

my Lioba.” She brought me a copy of *Triumph of the Heart* and one of the sister’s pictures to show me why she was so enthusiastic. I was immediately interested; I sat down and wrote a letter asking for more information about the community. To my great joy, I received a reply from Sr. Benedicta, who also comes from Berlin.

In spite of being young, I was intuitively convinced, “That is your place. You belong there.” Not only did the spirituality of the Family of Mary, which I came to know better, fit so well to me, but Jesus seemed to be taking into consideration my secret desire to have a white dress as a sister. On June 5, 2004, on the occasion of 1250th anniversary of St. Boniface’s death, my mother and I made a pilgrimage to his relative and my patron saint, St. Lioba. While we were there, my mom entrusted me entirely to Jesus although she didn’t tell me about it until later. On that day, I found out seemingly by chance about a retreat with the Family of Mary. I signed up right away with the hopes of finding a confirmation of my vocation. I headed to the retreat as a 16-year-old with the set resolution of speaking to the priest in charge of the retreat about my future. I asked Jesus not to expect me to initiate the conversation because I was too shy. At the end of Confession, the priest asked, “What would you like to do later on?” Then it burst out of me, “I would like to join your community.”

He encouraged me and advised me to pray so that I might remain faithful to my wish. I was so happy about the answer that, for the first time in my life, I cried tears of joy.

That October I was allowed to visit the Motherhouse in Slovakia for two weeks, and I immediately felt at home, which made it difficult to say goodbye when the time was over. My family in Berlin can confirm that from that visit on, I lived with one foot in the Motherhouse. Nevertheless, I still had three years of high school to finish. It seemed like an eternity until graduation. Although I never found school difficult, I still invested a lot of time to make sure I received the best possible grades. As a result, my prayer life, which was often anything but intense, suffered. So, I spent my vacations in the community whenever it was possible in order to recharge spiritually.

On September 14, 2007, the big day came—I could go to the Motherhouse and join my spiritual family. I had really found my place, something I would not trade for anything in the world. In the beginning, I thought I would not be able to wait to wear the white dress so that I could go as quickly as possible to the mission. Yet in the three years of spiritual formation, I learned that a good missionary is distinguished by how united she is with Jesus and that she does her work for love of him, regardless of what she does or where she is called to do it.

Sr. Maria Rosa Karnowsky (22) from Berlin, Germany

In the Shadows of the Basilica

When I was still young, my grandmother, who has since passed away, often said about me, “Born on the Feast of St. Joseph, baptized on Palm Sunday and operated on the side of the heart on Good Friday—she’ll definitely be a sister some day.” I do not know why Grandma had this conviction, but in the end she was right. The second of ten children, I grew up in Innsbruck, Austria, the county seat of Tyrol,

close to the Basilica of Our Lady of the Four Pillars where my father is still the sacristan. I breathed “church air” so to say from my earliest days when I was allowed to help my dad with his work in the basilica. Back home, mom tried to get the lively flock to pray the Rosary every day. Holy Mass and Confession were also very important to my parents, and every time Jesus gave us a pure heart my mother, clever as she

was, had a little “confession party” for us with ice cream, cake or a little something special.

When I was still a child, my family met the Family of Mary, of which I am now part as an apostolic sister. We often participated in family retreats, and so I pretty much grew up in the spirit of the community. I soon knew several of the young sisters and brothers by name and I liked them all. I’m not exactly sure when I felt for the first time the desire to become a sister; I was perhaps nine or ten years old. Whatever the case may be, at that time I was sure, “Some day I want to live totally for Jesus and become a missionary in the Family of Mary.”

I always imagined the jungle or the street children in South America as my mission territory; it had to be adventurous! For the first time when I was 12, I entrusted to my current spiritual father that I wanted to become a sister. And from that moment on, I knew I would go to the Motherhouse when I finished school.

With this goal in mind, I remained protected as a teenager because I had consciously renounced many things out of love for Jesus. On the other hand, the way to my vocation went through some down periods as well. I often defiantly placed sport or entertainment above prayer, and sometimes I preferred to sit in front of the television watching a movie instead of praying the Rosary with my family. Even during my

lukewarm phases, if I was consistent about anything, it was the practice I learned from my parents that when I passed a cross or a church I always prayed, “I greet you dear Jesus. Give me your blessing!”

Retreats, the Days of Prayer in Amsterdam and then the monthly youth meetings hosted by the Family of Mary in Innsbruck always gave me enthusiasm for the interior life and helped me love God more. I would joyfully anticipate getting together and praying with other like-minded peers. I certainly have the prayers of various suffering people to thank that the decision I made as a child to belong entirely to Jesus always remained in my heart. I owe three of them in particular my deepest gratitude: my godmother, my grandpa and my aunt. All three of them were diagnosed with cancer as I went to the Motherhouse after finishing a three year housekeeping school at the age of 17.

In these three valuable years of spiritual formation I have learned so much, above all that prayer is our first and greatest mission. I was overjoyed to promise my self-offering to Jesus through the consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, something my mother had already done when she was pregnant with me and repeated later during my baptism in the Basilica of Our Lady of the Four Pillars.

Sr. Maria Hemma Kogler (20) from Inzing, Austria

My Vocation is to Give Everything

These words come from a song that was very meaningful in my life. It was on a Saturday many years ago—I was probably nine or ten years old—when I saw, by chance, on television a young girl sitting in a wheelchair. She sang with conviction, “My vocation is love. My vocation is to give everything, to give myself.” I was so touched that I had to hold back the tears. This girl with such a beautiful voice wanted to give herself completely, even though she

was dependent on the help of others. I was so impressed by this, that the lyrics came to mind from time to time, “My vocation is love. My vocation is to give everything, to give myself.”

The faith we lived at home was a big help in discovering my vocation. My six siblings and I prayed regularly with my parents, and my mom often read us interesting stories about the saints or missionaries. We also prayed one Hail Mary every day for a Missionary of the Divine Word

who asked for prayers at his First Holy Mass. I received an important impulse for my later decision when I was 13 through a Missionary of Charity, the community of Mother Teresa. After years of studying and working in Mexico, he came to celebrate his First Holy Mass in his home parish in our town. I had never met such a joyful priest whose whole being radiated a deep love for Our Lady. He told us about the exciting mission among the poor Indians and about Guadalupe. The desire burned in me to go one day to the missions as well. I planned first on studying law in order to help the people in the Third World whom I pitied for their often innocent suffering. I read many reports from missionaries and listened with interest to the news from the missions.

During a retreat with the Family of Mary in Trencin, Slovakia, I met the brothers and sisters of our community for the first time. Their faces radiated a living conviction and so much joy, and their relationship to Jesus seemed to be that of one living alongside them. The simplicity with which they spoke about spiritual things also impressed me. It was new to me that God has a unique plan for everybody, and at the same time gives us the freedom to choose. I had always thought it was totally up to me. Therefore, I had planned out my future as being somewhere in the missions with a loving husband and a multitude of children. When I finally opened up to one of the priests, he said, “Pray, and keep your heart wide open for God’s plan. Only then will he make it known to you. I promise you my prayers. Look, however, less in the mirror and more at the Cross.” The more I followed this priestly advice, the more clear it became to me that law school, marriage and missionary work together were

not the way for me. And somehow I felt Jesus quietly asking me to belong completely and only to him. I didn’t tell anybody about this though.

My senior year arrived, the seemingly shortest of my high school years. During the week, I lived at the boarding school in downtown Zilina where I could go to Holy Mass every day. A little Rosary in my pocket reminded me discretely to use the time well. Prayer gave me peace and my heart had already spoken the most important Yes to Jesus. But I didn’t have the strength to leave the exterior things—my parents, friends, and the worldly enticements which I still liked in all their attractiveness. Nobody at school or at home had an idea about my heart’s secret, nor about my struggles.

The same priest calmed my inner division during Easter 2007, “Don’t worry, and listen to your heart. Mother Teresa will help you. Through her intercession you will surely make the right decision.”

Shortly thereafter, I implored Jesus in the chapel, “Give me the strength to do what you want of me.” In that moment, my soul received a clear, peaceful assurance, “God is enough for you!” And I was able to happily decide to live for God alone.

Recently, I took Mother Teresa’s name as my own when I became a sister, and I have thankfully experienced how true Jesus’ promise is that for everything we leave behind, we receive it back one hundred fold. As a missionary, there are numerous opportunities to learn about other cultures and countries, something I had always wanted. Above all, Jesus has given me in my spiritual family the love of numerous sisters and brothers.

Sr. Terezka Holubova (23) from Cadca, Slovakia

So Africa is Out

I was only three years old when my family solemnly consecrated itself to the Hearts of Jesus

and Mary on December 12, 1992. Naturally, I had no idea how important this day would be for

my vocation exactly 15 years later.

As a child I dreamed of being a religious sister one day. When I was eight, I even wrote it in my poetry book under the question about what I wanted to be when I grew up. I secretly played nun using a hand towel over my head as a veil. But as is often the case, I lost interest in religious life as a teenager, and my head whirled with all sorts of idealistic thoughts and dreams that I wanted to fulfill. Only now, looking back on this time, I clearly see how Our Lady protected me from danger and led me away at the right time from bad groups. Even during these years, Jesus' call was still somewhere in the depths of my heart. I did not want to hear it and had an impulsive reaction against anything that seemed to point in that direction. When an offertory prayer at Holy Mass was made for new vocations, for example, my heart beat faster and I quickly told myself, "They are not talking about you. You will prove to everybody that one can be faithful without having to join a convent right away."

After graduation, all my classmates had already decided where they wanted to go and what they wanted to study. I still did not know what I was going to do, but I always remembered the prayer, "Jesus, I trust in you!" In the car, at school, playing sports or studying, this prayer accompanied me wherever I went. It put me at peace and reassured me, "God has a plan, which he will show me at the proper time."

In the spring of 2007, I felt pushed to give God a year following graduation—a year in Africa and Africa alone! At least, that is what I had in mind since I love that continent so much. However, no matter which organization or how many communities I called, nobody would accept me unless I made a commitment to stay longer. Since that was out of the question for me, all the doors seemed to close and I experienced how the prayer, "Jesus, I trust in you" can really be challenging.

Intending to study theology that fall, I finally

decided to go to the Youth Festival in Medjugorje in August. During a conference about "Give God a Year" the wish was reawakened and became very alive again. This time I knew very clearly, without going back and forth, as if Our Lady was pushing me, "Go to Slovakia, to the Motherhouse of the Family of Mary!"

I had known the community for four years through different retreats, and I really liked them. Yet, I never felt drawn to the East and even now I would not have gone if not for a special grace. So I was ready to go in September. On the evening before I left my godmother asked me, "You're not going to become a nun, are you?" I answered decisively with a smile, "Not me!" I never dreamed that this year for God would turn into something more.

I immediately felt at home in the Motherhouse and I was touched by the sincere love and joy that the sisters lived among one another. "They don't lead a double life; they are the same people inside the chapel and in their daily activities," I thought to myself. Thankfully, I became more aware from day to day that my soul had finally found here the spirituality and home that I had so desired and searched for elsewhere.

The deeper I discovered in the Motherhouse that prayer is speaking with Jesus, the more the chapel became the place where Jesus' call became always clearer to me. He simply conquered my heart. And it was certainly no coincidence that exactly on December 12, the day of my family's consecration, I received the sign I had been praying for when I opened a book in the chapel and my eyes fell upon the words, "You are totally mine, and I am totally yours." When I gave Jesus my Yes in silence, I was filled with an indescribable joy. From that moment on, I am going the most beautiful way I can imagine, grateful for my vocation and the guidance of Our Lady, and consider myself, without exaggerating, to be one of the luckiest people in the world!

Sr. Marietta Hammerle (21) from Mils bei Imst, Austria

A Prodigal Daughter Comes Home

With my four sisters and two brothers, I grew up in a very nice and happy family. We went to Holy Mass and prayed the Rosary together every day. But I grew older and more independent, and perhaps a bit headstrong. With my lifestyle—I loved partying, hard rock music and I didn't always have the best group of friends—my parents had a lot to worry about during my teenage years.

You all know the parable of the Prodigal Son: he left home and did what he wanted. He became poor and was lacking food and clothing, but even more he lacked love and security. My case was not quite that dramatic, but as an 18-year-old high school student, I had a similar experience.

When in 2004, the truth came out once again regarding my nighttime activities which I had tried to disguise, I simply packed up my stuff, left a note, "I want to live my life!" and ran away from home. After four weeks of "freedom", however, I was lacking not only money, but above all the warmth of the nest and my big family. My return home was so beautiful! I was relieved and happy to see that my parents rejoiced to have me back. Nobody reproached me, family life continued as normal and yet it was not the same. The worldly pleasures which had filled my heart remained unchanged and they forced the love for God out of my life.

I think the turning point for coming back to God came on the evening of April 2, 2005, with the death of Pope John Paul II. I was so touched as I followed the events on television, I wanted so badly to go to his funeral, and fortunately I had the chance. There, in St. Peter's Square, as I was waiting with thousands of others to pay my final respects by the Pope's open casket, I felt God's love so strongly that I could only cry. It was an utterly foreign and unexpected effect of grace

Back home, I was a different person, and the first thing I asked for was a Miraculous Medal, something which I had always refused up to this point. I went to Eucharistic Adoration almost every day and prayed the Rosary with my family in an

entirely different way. Although my love for Jesus grew visibly, I still did not have the strength to renounce going out at night and everything that went along with it.

So God intervened again in my life six months later when our dear father died of cancer at the age of 54. I met Fr. Paul Maria for the first time at the funeral. He invited my mother and us seven siblings to celebrate Easter 2006 together in Rome. From there, we made a pilgrimage to Padre Pio whom I prayed to on this occasion for a good husband. My prayers were answered more quickly than I thought. On the way back to Rome, I felt for the first time the desire to live for Jesus alone.

Today I understand that Dad offering his life was very decisive for my final Yes because back home everything was soon forgotten. How should I live without going out in the evening? Slowly and sensitively Jesus led me closer to him and away from the worldly joys, which only made me happy for an instant. The emptiness that I always felt inside after the loud celebrations, especially the next morning, now became evident even on the dance floor. When I sought the closeness of Jesus in prayer and adoration, I experienced a joy unlike the volatile joy of the world, one that was deep and lasting. I no longer wanted to trade this silent happiness, which none of my friends knew, for anything in the world.

So I decided during a youth retreat following graduation in 2006, to follow Jesus' call. Instead of going to Munich in the fall to study, I drove to the Motherhouse of the Family of Mary in Slovakia, where I gratefully spent four precious years of spiritual formation. I'd like to conclude as I began: the Prodigal Son returned home. The father saw him a long way off, had the best garment brought and placed a ring on his finger. I was also glad on September 11, 2010, to receive from the hands of Cardinal Meisner my white missionary dress, my pectoral cross and the ring of my vocation—a sign of the merciful and bridal love of Jesus for me!

Sr. Maria Teresa Amann (24) from Buchenberg, Germany

She is My Guarantee

I can remember very well looking through a magazine of the Missionaries of the Divine Word when I was just a five-year-old girl and the desire arose in my heart, “I also want to become a missionary!” To care for the black children in Africa, that was what I wanted to do. On the other hand, to become a sister and just pray in a convent seemed to be too boring for my little imagination. During elementary school, my opinions remained the same. This can be confirmed by a notebook from that time which I found a little while ago. During a school retreat, I wrote, “Yes, I want to do God’s will. If, however, that means going to a convent, I would probably be against it.”

In seventh grade, at the age of 13, I read in our church bulletin for the first time about the diocesan high school, Sts. Cyril and Methodius in Nitra, and I immediately decided, “You’re going there!” I did not know that sisters also taught in the school and worked as aides in the boarding house.

The beginning of the school year was my first contact ever with a religious sister. They were energetic, friendly and uncomplicated, and I immediately felt close to them, as if we had something in common. Already during the first year, I began to think seriously about my future, my path and a possible vocation. I felt the personal call to religious life so strongly that in my heart that I could not help but give a silent but resolute Yes as an answer.

I tried, for that reason, during my four years of high school to go to Holy Mass every day. I liked to visit Jesus in the boarding school chapel where we lived, so to say, under the same roof, separated from one another only by a flight of stairs. Prayer together in the evening and the school Rosary on Wednesdays were also a big help for me, but I have to admit that sometimes it was a fight for me to go. My friendship with the sisters of the Family of Mary became so

important because through them I discovered and learned the plain and simple way of being with Jesus and loving him in a very personal way. With time, I noticed how my love for Jesus slowly changed. I cut back on going to the dance clubs and pretty soon I gave them up altogether. Suddenly, I didn’t need to wear make-up anymore, and my mother and I started getting along very well.

Another big gift were the good friends from school as well as some of the older kids from other classes who lived their faith with conviction and taught me a lot without even saying much. On top of that, we had a great time together! Since I felt that Jesus loved me so much, I was never on the look out for someone else, which doesn’t mean that it was always easy to remain faithful to Jesus’ call. I had desires just like any other girl. I had no problem picturing myself getting married and having a happy family with children. In the depths of my heart, however, it hurt me just to think about not belonging entirely to Jesus.

I developed a special relationship to Our Lady when I was allowed to play the part of Mary in our traditional high school Christmas Pageant. From then on, I made a habit of visiting a beautiful statue of her in a Franciscan church. How often I entrusted to her all my worries and concerns. Even if I went into the church sad or discouraged, I cannot remember a single time where I went home not being strengthened and happy again.

After graduation, during my three years of formation in the Motherhouse, Mary continued to be my refuge and my consolation. She is my best friend, my confidant and above all my loving mother. And now, after my “wedding” in September 2010, Our Lady is my guarantee that I will remain faithful to the Lord and become a good missionary: at present as an aide in the very same boarding house in Nitra which was so decisive for my vocation.

Sr. Monica Vasekova (22) from Mojzesovo, Slovakia

“The Would-be Followers”

Being the youngest child on our farm in Bavaria, Germany, I was always a little bit spoiled by my sister and two brothers. When I was just four years old my sister became a missionary in the Family of Mary, and from my childhood on, I was accustomed to go with Sr. Anna to the different mission stations without ever considering that I too might one day go this way.

Since I graduated in 2005 without any difficulties, despite my many extracurricular activities and partying, I thought that the pursuit of an Information Technology degree in Augsburg would be just as simple. However, studying 70-80 hours a week took everything out of me. “You never have time for us,” my friends complained.

With pressure from all sides and restless sleep, I finally decided to do what my sister had always advised me. “You simply have to pray,” I told myself and picked up the Rosary. After just two mysteries I found an inner peace. This impressed me so much that from that moment forward, I prayed the Rosary every night until I fell asleep. It became more and more clear that by studying in this atmosphere of ruthless careerism my inner values would not develop but rather I would lose them.

At this time—I was 20 years old—my sister took me with her to Rome for Easter in 2006. It was decisive for me because I heard in one of the homilies while I was there, “Easter is not just a nice get-together with a good meal, but it has to change something in us.” It was as if these words were spoken directly to me. As soon as I returned home, I earnestly looked into studying something different. At the same time, that Easter season opened my heart anew for the faith.

This all seems to have been a preparation for what God wanted to say to me during a retreat in September 2006. It was in the last night before the retreat finished when out of nowhere the thought came, “I have a vocation.” What a shock! I had

never in my life considered becoming a sister. And yet I was overcome in the same moment by an unknown bliss and joy that God wanted me totally for himself. But what should become of my wish to have a family and all my other plans? God gave me time.

That fall, I began studying mass media in Austria, and it really interested me. It was a year of prayer, maturing and calm reflection on what I really wanted. One day while praying in my room, I felt pushed to open the Bible because I truly wanted for God to give me a clear answer, and that is exactly what Jesus did. My eyes were drawn to the words in the Gospel of Matthew about “The Would-be Followers of Jesus” : “A scribe approached and said to him, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.’ Another of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, let me go first and bury my father.’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead.’”

Back then, reading between the lines, I sadly thought what Jesus was thinking, “Will you ever be able to follow?” I repeatedly asked in prayer over the next several days, “But Jesus, what do you want of me?” I opened the Bible a few more times, my finger always pointed to this passage in the Gospel of Matthew, and I thought the Bible must have a crease on that page.

I wanted to try one more time. This time I opened to the same passage in Luke: “The Would-be Followers of Jesus”. It was indeed “my” Gospel passage which seemed to pursue me and through which Jesus wanted to call me. I received an extraordinary confirmation the following Sunday when my would-be followers Gospel was read at Holy Mass.

The Lord’s directness was necessary for my final Yes, because it was a struggle to leave everything: family, studies, friends and my homeland. Looking back, I can say today as one

of the youngest sisters in the Family of Mary, “Blessed are those who feel ‘pursued’ by God’s love, they will reach their goal.” This became

reality for me in 2008, when with great joy I came to the Motherhouse.

Sr. Maria Bernadette Kaltenstadler (24) from Schnellmannskreuth, Germany

Do You Love Me More than These?

The most important thing in my life was my family, actually they were my life. Ever since I was five I had only one dream: “When I grow up, I plan on living close to my parents, getting married and having lots of children.” Any other way was impossible for me to imagine. If my mom asked, “And if God has other plans?” my firm answer was always the same, “He doesn’t and anyway, I am going to be a mom.”

One morning in the fall of 2004—the “Year of the Holy Eucharist” had just begun—my mom asked us, “What do you all think about going to Holy Mass every day in this Year of the Holy Eucharist?” What an idea! I mean, I didn’t mind going to Holy Mass, but every day!?! I could not imagine that. In the beginning I went reluctantly, to make my mom happy. Then about half way through the year something started to change in my heart. Secretly, I started to like going to Mass, praying the Rosary was a joy and a comfort, and I started to think a lot about Jesus.

Despite these changes in my heart, my desire to get married and have a family was only increasing and so I prayed to Our Lady every day asking her to find me a good Catholic husband. I was 15 years old at the time.

The following year—I continued going daily to Holy Mass and to adoration—another turn of events took place in my life. In the Christmas season, I felt for the first time that Jesus was asking me to give my life to him as a religious sister. The idea had never entered my mind, but without thinking about what it meant, I told Jesus Yes. Only after a couple of weeks of really thinking about what it meant did I realize that I would have to give up getting married, having

kids, and it also meant that I would have to leave my beloved family.

With mixed feelings, I kept this Yes a secret in the silence of my heart. I found myself telling Jesus yes one day and then no the next; I wanted to get married. But no matter how far I tried to run or turn away from this calling, I heard Jesus ask me every day—subtly but urgently. Only in my final year of school was I slowly able to place all my dreams in Jesus’ hands and tell my parents that I was thinking about religious life. My mom didn’t say anything, she just smiled, and my dad only said, “You?”

After I had let the two of them in on my secret, I started praying about where the right place might be and where Jesus wanted me. Two or three communities came to mind, including the Family of Mary. I knew them because when I was five I met Karin, now Sr. Angela in our community, who lived with my family during her visit to America.

In addition, a few young priests of our community also had come from my parish in Denver. I finally flew to Europe to visit the Motherhouse in Slovakia. I liked it at first, but I was not ready to make a commitment. In prayer, and thanks to spiritual direction, I decided, therefore, to go back to America to visit other communities and religious orders.

The next six months I spent at home were difficult but decisive. I felt completely lost, like no one understood me, no community was answering my questions and I wasn’t able to visit the other places for months, and prayer seemed to have no point. Sometimes I felt that it would be easier to move a truck up a mountain than to drive to

our adoration chapel and pray. But thanks to my mom, she would always ask me, “Megan, isn’t it time for you to go to adoration?” Without this little ‘question’ I don’t think I would have continued to go. There was also a time when I wanted to give up, I told Our Lady, “That’s it, I am not going on, I will just get married,” but at the same time I heard her say in my heart, “but Megan, you already gave yourself to Jesus, and you know He is the best!”

After four months, I was finally able to visit two communities. I didn’t find my place there, but I was given important clarity—Jesus wanted to lead me back to the Family of Mary. “But I can’t

do that again, leaving my family, my country, my culture, everything!” was my first thought. But then I opened the Bible and Jesus asked me the same question he asked Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” In that moment I knew with irrefutable certainty the answer. It was the same as the one I gave three years later when I made my solemn promise, “I come, I come out of love!”

Happy to be part of the Family of Mary as a young sister, I can only repeat out of thankfulness for God’s mercy, “There isn’t anything that I have given up that He has not given back to me much more beautifully!”

Sr. Mary Elizabeth Pippin (21) from Denver, Colorado

My Heart was Restless

In 2000, while studying to be a teacher in Switzerland, I met my spiritual family for the first time. I had been planning on spending the upcoming summer in New York, in the Bronx, Brooklyn or Harlem. I had just turned 18, was inexperienced and wanted to make myself useful by doing social work with Mother Teresa’s sisters for the poorest of the poor in the ghettos. However, that never happened because I received a different offer—to spend the summer in Slovakia, in the Motherhouse of the Family of Mary. The four weeks that I spent there were very crucial for me as well as for my prayer life. However, at that time I never gave a second thought about a possible vocation to the religious life.

Between this first visit to the Motherhouse and my entrance as a postulant, seven years of struggle and searching ensued. My family supported, carried and bore with me all these years through the Christian love that they lived. In hindsight, I especially recognize how Jesus’ silent, unimposing presence accompanied me while I was studying, volunteering in foreign countries and teaching children with special needs.

During my six years of training for elementary school education (1998-2004) I had to complete three internships. I would have loved to have done a social project coupled with the Catholic Faith in South America or Africa. However, that would not be the case. Instead, I went to Liege, Belgium where I helped for three months in a boys’ boarding school run by the Salesians. Afterwards, I had a social internship as a nurse’s assistant at the University Hospital of Lausanne where I was able to understand what it means to care for people on a daily basis. Then I spent some time in a children’s safe house in St. Gallen, Switzerland where I experienced first hand how senseless it is to try to solve problems solely with human means, without God.

While the rest of my classmates applied for teaching positions following exams in 2004, I, a freshly trained elementary school teacher, headed first to Argentina for six months. There I received insight not only about the unfortunate situation in the schools, but also about the conditions in the surrounding, poverty-stricken areas. I witnessed the situation in a high-security prison and encountered Jesus in the street children, the homeless and others.

During this time, I looked deep within myself asking about the purpose of life. I have to admit I found a certain appeal to the fascinations of the world, all it had to offer along with other temptations. I liked to travel because I loved discovering new things, and I found sports to be a good way to blow off steam after school. Along with running, swimming, biking and volleyball, I dedicated most of my free time to riding and training horses. Discos and clubs were never appealing to me, but I developed a passion for dancing, especially South American style. Yet, even after great evenings on the dance floor, I felt empty inside, a desire for something more took over. Although I had everything—a boyfriend, a job, friends and various activities—my heart remained restless.

In the middle of my ongoing studies as a teacher of healing techniques, which I began after

returning from Argentina, I understood in prayer that I should give one year entirely to God. I quit my teaching position at the end of my second scholastic year without knowing what would happen next. In this uncertainty of what to do, I often became discouraged, and lost my hope and trust, but not, however, my thirst for God. On the anniversary of Padre Pio's death, September 23, 2007, I received permission to return to the Motherhouse in Stara Halic, Slovakia for a second visit. Originally, I just wanted to spend a half year there and live with the community so that I could learn more about Jesus and learn to love him more. People think, but God guides. I found the love of my life in Jesus. Now, looking back, I can only be thankful to the faithfulness and mercy of Jesus, whose love I unfortunately took so long to respond to. Now, I want to belong undivided to him and to make him happy through my life and self-offering.

Sr. Maria Bernarda Frei (28) from Morschwil, Switzerland

The Children's Christmas at the Motherhouse

*There are still children who wait for Christmas with starry eyes and rosy cheeks.
For years now here in Slovakia we have been able to experience the joy
and amazement of children and youth after a nice Holy Christmas Mass,
as the gifts under the Christmas tree are handed out.
With all our heart, we invite you to have a look at our children's mission
and thereby accompany us to a Children's Christmas.*

Nine years ago the priests of our community were entrusted with the parish of Stara Halic, comprised of ten villages; it opened an entirely new mission for us sisters in the Motherhouse. All these poor villages were rich with children, and we wanted to take care of them. Gradually, we began to meet their families, most of which

were in a distressing state. The lack of love and security left its marks on the children who tended to be hyperactive, ill-mannered and absent minded. What they needed was love. The first thing that came to mind were Jesus' words, "Let the children come to me because to such as these belongs the kingdom of heaven." We had

to bring them to him, and by doing so the other social activities would also bear fruit.

We started by celebrating a weekly Children's Mass. In a short period of time, we had to pick-up 60 – 80 children with four vans from different villages because so many wanted to come. They quickly grew fond of the regular meetings where they prayed, sang, did arts and crafts and also learned about the Faith. Over the course of the year there are many other activities such as children's days and sport days, an Easter egg hunt, summer camps, field trips, parades, the Feast of St. Nicholas, and, the high point, the beautiful Children's Christmas.

The feast started in 2002 following Christmas Mass when one of the sisters asked the children what Baby Jesus brought them. Silence. Nobody answered, so Sr. Maddalena repeated her question because she thought the children did not hear her. Only after asking again a girl called out, "A banana." Another one said, "A mandarin orange." "Don't lie!" a third one interjected, "we didn't receive anything." Only then did Sr. Maddalena understand that the children did not want to answer because they were ashamed. Due to the work in the parish, we sisters had not yet opened our presents. So the missionaries consoled the children, "The Baby Jesus hasn't brought our presents yet either. But when he comes, he will certainly bring something for all of you as well." The sisters and novices quickly prepared little packages. And so for the first time the children celebrated Christmas with us.

Since then, every year the office at the Motherhouse is transformed into a true Baby Jesus workshop. Stuffed animals are washed, toys that do not work are repaired, dolls are dressed with clothes and everything that has been gathered over the course of the year from benefactors is sorted and divided up. Everything a child's heart desires and needs lies spread out on the floor just waiting to bring joy.

Several benefactors help us with the boxes they send, so that each of the approximately 250 children receives something warm, something sweet and something to play with. This occupies

a number of sisters for a whole week.

In the schools where we teach, our sisters prepare breakfast for about 80 hungry students and lunch for 20 every day because they do not receive anything at home. We know all the children quite well and the situations at home. The younger children can write a letter to Baby Jesus, which makes it possible for us to give the children something from their wide variety of wishes.

Their wish list includes everything from toys to stationery, clothing or sweets to the humanly impossible. One altar boy, for example, asked Baby Jesus that his parents might love one another again.

A poor boy named Adrian wrote so nicely, "I wish that all the people of the world be happy and healthy... and for a car!"

Then the big day comes when the gifts are handed out. In the afternoon, an hour before Holy Mass starts, the first children begin arriving who "got away from their moms" so that they would not miss anything. Most of them kneel devoutly before the manger scene and start praying the Rosary on their own. Even though the children assure us that they have come to church just to see the Baby Jesus, naturally, the joyful anticipation about the waiting gifts can be read from their glowing eyes.

When Holy Mass is over, it is time to begin. Each of the 250 children is called up one at a time to receive his or her present which is carefully wrapped in colorful Christmas paper and has the child's name written on it. For the little children it is an indescribable experience every time. From the beginning, we explained to the children that benefactors—out of love for Jesus—sent all the nice things. In the meantime, it is perfectly normal for the boys and girls to think that it is Jesus who is giving to them through the benefactors. Therefore, big and little alike come forward to the manger scene and sincerely thank Baby Jesus with a kiss.

However, one time one of the girls was upset. She was worried whether or not Jesus knew who she was and whether he had prepared a gift

for her since she never came to the children's meetings. How surprised she was when her name was called and she could pick out her present from under the tree. "Jesus does know me!" she shouted full of joy.

Since there are always children joining whose names are not on our lists, we have to have extra gifts ready under the Christmas tree each year. Little Henry, for example, sat unannounced with the other children in great anticipation. We quickly handed him a stuffed animal that was almost as big as him. However, when we saw the sadness as he watched the other children, we knew that Henry wanted a "real" present, one properly wrapped in Christmas paper. Indeed, there was one under the tree for him too!

Obviously, a joyful get together is also part of the Christmas celebration. Therefore, after Holy Mass, we go with our happy group to the pastoral center where there is something to eat and everybody can finally open their presents. At the first Children's Christmas, the majority of the kids sat there indifferently, their gifts pinched under their arms and unable to express any sort of feeling. Receiving a gift was something completely new for them. Now, however, the joy increases from year to year. The beaming children show us what they received, are thankful and never forget to ask for a cookie or some bread for their parents or younger siblings back home. It is always a delight for us when they think of the others.

When Nicholas was three, the doctors realized for the first time that this neglected boy is deaf and dumb. Nicholas could only scream and cry, and nobody understood him. For three years now, he has been attending a boarding school for deaf and dumb children that we were able to pay for with the help of benefactors. He is learning sign language during the week, and his mother picks him up for the weekend. Skillfully and joyfully, he explained to us that he received this car as a gift.

When Sr. Luitgard drove to Renko and Vladka's family of seven to pick them up for the Children's

Christmas celebration, she asked the boys how Christmas was this year at home. "Well," he said, "there weren't any presents, but we did have a good potato salad." It is important to note that potato salad is a traditional dish for every big feast in Slovakia. However, not every family can afford even that at Christmas.

We saw this little handicapped girl from our village for the first time on Christmas. The family was so ashamed that they more or less hid from the other villagers. Only after we heard about them and went to visit the parents did they bring their little Jane to our Children's Christmas where she was overcome with joy when a present was handed to her.

Mishko comes regularly to Holy Mass; he could not believe that the chocolate spread was all for him because at home there is not even a little meat for Christmas dinner, let alone any gifts

At one meeting, Sr. Teresita spoke to them about abandoned children in Russia who sometimes end up in jail as teenagers because they steal when they are hungry. With money, however, they can be bailed out, she explained to the attentive little audience. To her amazement, the children brought to their next gathering a handful of coins for which they had begged or saved to buy the young people out of prison. Sr. Teresita had to explain to them that, unfortunately, they needed as much money to bail them out as it costs to buy a car. One quick-witted child responded, "I know what we can do! Let's sell the sisters' van and then we can set all the children free!"

We are also glad that the children are always so thankful. Sr. Zuzana asked once in the van while picking up the lively group, "Did you ever realize that none of you have to pay when you get in the van and yet you can ride for free?" The children spoke back and forth how that can be possible. Sr. Zuzana helped them and took the opportunity to tell them about you and your generosity, dear benefactors. Since then, the children always pray a decade of the Rosary for their benefactors as soon as the van is full. If the sister driving forgets to start the "Benefactor