

Triumph of the Heart

THE TRUE LIGHT CAME
IN TO THE WORLD

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*“The heart of God,
during the Holy Night, stooped down to the stable.”*

Pope Benedict XVI

Edith Stein and the Christmas Mystery

Most people would not suspect that the German philosopher Dr. Edith Stein (see Triumph of the Heart issues 16 and 27), a Jewish convert and later the holy Carmelite Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, had a deep relationship to the Child Jesus—and yet she did! Without visions or locutions God led this simple soul to an understanding of the Christmas mystery through inspiration in a way her intelligence or eager meditation could have never achieved. His grace helped her to become a child who, through her fate, came to understand ever more clearly that “the manger and the cross belong together” as Pope John Paul II expressed at her canonization in October 1998.

The mystery of the Holy Night

Even before entering the Carmel in 1933, Edith Stein nurtured a great love for the Child Jesus. She spent eight years teaching at St. Magdalene’s Teacher Seminar in Speyer, Germany where she lived with the Dominicans, and it is reported that in this time she often knelt for long periods of time in adoration in a hidden corner of the convent church close to the tabernacle. One of the Dominican sisters recounts the following event of one Christmas Eve:

“Madame Doctor must have been very taken with the mystery of the Holy Night! Midnight Mass was over, the church had emptied and

the lights had been switched off. Nobody was aware of the silent adorer under the choir loft, and the doors to the church were locked. In the morning when the sacristan opened the door, she could not believe her eyes—kneeling before the manger was Edith Stein, immersed in prayer. “When the worried sister started to apologize for her supposed negligence which had kept the professor from sleeping, she replied, ‘Who can sleep during the night that God became man!’” Yes, Edith Stein had grasped the mystery of the Holy Night, but she was well aware, “To permeate a whole human life with divine life, it

is not enough to kneel before the manger scene once a year and be taken by the magic of the Holy Night. You have to converse daily with

God your whole life long, listen to the words he has spoken ... follow them and, above all, pray like the Savior himself taught us.”

Hand in hand with the Lord

Parallel to her teaching, Edith Stein was a much sought after speaker for seminars, scientific conferences and congresses both in and out of the country. Be it in Paris, Vienna, Prague, Munster or Basel, her great intelligence and ability was hidden behind her simple, modest manner.

Occasionally the plainly dressed philosopher’s style of presentation was criticized for over-emphasizing the supernatural. She just answered with a smile, “If I was not supposed to speak about such things, I would not go up on any podium. In essence, it is only a small, simple truth that I have to say—how one can begin to live hand in hand with the Lord.”

In her meditation “The Mystery of Christmas” she wrote, “It is a long path from a good Catholic’s self-complacency ... to a life in God’s hand and from God’s hand, with the simplicity

of a child and the humility of the tax-collector. The one who has gone this way, however, will never go back.”

Although she was a well-respected philosopher who was used to examining and studying everything with her intelligence, she was such a model on this path that her confessor, Archabbot Raphael Walzer from the Benedictine Abbey Beuron, said of her, “Rarely have I met a soul who unites so many and such great qualities in one spirit. ... She was extraordinarily simple; a very clear, transparent soul; very attentive, giving in to the faintest wisp of grace; and without a shadow of fear. She was simple with simple people, learned with the scholarly without being presumptuous, a seeker with the seeking, I’d almost like to add a sinner with the sinners.”

“I take it how God leads it”

Edith’s short academic career as a professor at the German Institute for Scientific Pedagogy in Munster came to an abrupt end at the beginning of 1933 when the Nazis took over Germany and she lost her position because she was born Jewish.

Looking toward the future, she recognized early on, “that again God had laid a heavy hand on his people and that the fate of this people was also mine. ... Was it not finally time that I enter the Carmel like my goal had been since I was 12?”

As a matter of fact the door to the Carmel in Cologne opened for the future Sr. Teresa Benedicta a short time later, even if only for a limited time. In quiet prayer she understood

more clearly that her way, because of the increasing persecution of the Jews, would lead now from the manger to the cross. “The child in the manger who came to fulfill his Father’s will even unto death on the cross saw in spirit all those who would follow him along this path. ... St. John followed him without asking where or why. He ... followed the Lord along all his paths right up to Golgotha. ... Let us also place our hands in the hands of the Divine Child, and give our yes to his call, ‘Follow me!’”

Sr. Teresa Benedicta gave her fiat despite all the worries and uncertainty. “Let me blindly go your ways, O Lord. I do not want to understand how

you lead me, I am your child! You are the father of wisdom and also my father. You lead through the night, you lead to yourself. Lord, let it be done according to your will, I am ready. Let all

come true as you have planned according to your counsel. When you silently ask for sacrifice, help me to complete it. Let me look beyond little me so that, dead to myself, I live alone for you.”

The Child Jesus is with us!

Despite moving to a safer Carmel in Echt, Holland, Edith Stein and her sister were still arrested by the Gestapo on August 2, 1942. When a messenger Alois Schlutter brought relief supplies to a collection warehouse in Westerbork, Holland on August 6, he had a short, unforgettable encounter with Sr. Teresa Benedicta. “When the SS patrol announced with a piercing whistle that all the prisoners had to return to their barracks ... it was very edifying for me to see how this sister was calm and collected. As I expressed my compassion, the courageous sister replied, ‘Whatever happens, I am ready for anything. The loving Child Jesus is also here with us!’ With a strong handshake, she

wished me and those dear to me God’s blessings. As I wanted to convey my wishes she said we need not worry about her since she is in God’s hands. Now we said goodbye to everybody else, but the words were stuck in my throat. As they withdrew to their barracks, everybody turned to wave goodbye, but Sr. Teresa Benedicta went her way in recollection.”

The following night they were deported to the gas chambers of Auschwitz where on August 9, Edith Stein “an expiatory offering for true peace” gave herself over to death “for the disbelief of the Jewish people and so that the Lord would be accepted by his own people.”

Rejoice Jerusalem, your Savior comes!

These words become reality for Edith Stein because this Jewish convert found the Messiah, her Redeemer, in the Divine Child. How she desired the same grace for the Chosen People, her people! “How great must the joy of the Virgin Mother have been when she saw the magnificent procession of the Three Kings approaching ... the first among the pagans. Others should follow them until it is reality that all nations adore the one God in spirit and in truth. And with the eyes of her spirit Mary saw another procession coming—a crowd that could not be counted, all those that the Mother of the Divine Child would

herself call to follow her son.”

“The Wise Men at the manger represent those who are searching from all countries and peoples. Grace led them before they even belonged to the visible Church. ... Since God is truth and he wants to be found by those who seek him with their whole heart, sooner or later the star had to rise for the Wise Men to show them the way to the truth. And now, standing before the truth made man, they fall down in adoration. We were also looking for a star to show us the right way. And it rose for us in the grace of our vocation. We followed it and found the Divine Child.”

My Most Precious Christmas Experience

It seems hard to believe, but today in the People's Republic of China, there are still hundreds of concentration camps built according to the model of the Russian Gulags. Mao Tse-tung introduced them in 1949, and trivialized them with the name "Laogai" which means "camps for re-education through work". A few years ago the international Catholic organization Aid to the Church in Need published a report about the current state of Catholic persecution in China, which we do not wish to publish in this issue due to its gruesomeness. We would rather tell you a true story which the late Bishop Paul Maria Hnilica pulled from his archive for us a few years ago and which is directly related to the mystery of Christmas. In his memoirs, Jean, a French prisoner who survived internment in a camp south of Peking, tells how he rediscovered his Faith.

If you believe, then God will help you

I met Hsia at the beginning of 1961. It was during a massive resettlement which Brigade Commander Yang had ordered. I was assigned to a company of 18 men. We had to clean the pig sty, dispose of the manure and bury the dead. Hsia slept on the straw mat next to me.

We were worried about him from the beginning. Considering how old and weak he looked, it seemed that it would be impossible for him to do his work. On top of that—and worst of all—he had been a Trappist monk who spoke continually about God and how God would help us if we believed in him. Practically all of us had long since stopped believing in God. The Communists had seen to that because in the People's Republic of China religion was considered "opium" and superstitious. Whoever believed in a power greater than Mao Tse-tung was punished severely, especially the Christians who were declared guilty of adoring the god of the Imperialists. Hsia was one of them. He

was sentenced to 20 years in a work camp for the sole reason that he was a Catholic priest. Nevertheless, he continued to pray and practice his Faith to the extent that he was able. We all left him in peace; well, actually, we avoided him. It was dangerous enough; we did not need to become involved with Hsia's religion too. He would not be intimidated though.

I do not know how he noticed that I was the only Catholic besides him in the company. One day he turned to me and said, "Always be a good Catholic, Jean! In your heart you are, isn't that right?"

"I'm an old prisoner, just leave me alone!" I said tiredly.

He seemed to have misunderstood me and continued, "We could pray together, Jean. You could make your confession to me."

Shocked that somebody might have heard this crazy old man, I countered gruffly, "Listen here, Hsia, if you want to be hung in short order, that's

your problem. I, however, will do whatever I have to to save myself. Therefore I advise you to knock this off immediately. Is that clear?"

My words did not seem to offend him. "Good, my son," he answered, "I understand. Do not forget that I am your friend." Then he went to carry away the bucket of manure as he prayed his Rosary. Despite his measly appearance, Hsia was able to carry—though none of us knew how—two 70 pound buckets of manure across the uneven terrain. He carried the weight on a wood pole laid across his shoulders, and it seemed to crush him. He just kept going, however, and often even helped the weaker prisoners.

A fellow inmate asked one day, "Where does that old man get his strength?"

One of us answered mockingly, "From God. When Yang is not looking, God comes down and carries away the manure." Everybody laughed. In reality, there was not much to laugh about here because we worked from sunrise to sunset, and our daily ration consisted of stale bread and a little bowl of bullion. Our cells were dirty huts full of flies and lice, and whoever

was responsible for the funerals each day had to carry the deceased up the long, steep path to the cemetery.

That summer, I thought my time had come. Weakened by malnutrition and illness, I collapsed unconscious out in the field and was taken to the infirmary. One night, as I returned to my senses, I recognized Hsia sitting on my bed, fanning a gentle wind towards me. Then he gave me some warm soup which smelled like frogs, herbs and rice, and with each bite, I could feel my strength returning. "They can torture us and destroy our bodies, my son," he whispered to me, "but they cannot kill our souls. It is up to us to keep them from doing that because Our Lady is helping us." He came to me three more times, and he brought me soup each visit. It was not until I had regained some of my strength in September that I found out that he had instructed the others to pick wild herbs and to catch frogs during the afternoon break. He collected small quantities of rice until he had a bowl full which he then secretly cooked over a small fire. I thanked him and was ashamed at how lovingly he cared for me.

I live because God wants me to live

One day, Hsia told me how he was arrested. The Communists had occupied his home province Yangkiaping in 1947. He had been out and when he returned he found his Trappist monastery completely destroyed and all the monks murdered. The soldiers who had just quenched their thirst for blood were satisfied with simply throwing him into prison. After being interrogated countless times over a two year period, he was finally sentenced to 20 years of "re-education through work".

"At least you're still alive," I remarked.

He looked at me seriously, "I live because God wants me to live. I believe he has entrusted a mission to me. If that is not the case, then I would prefer to have shared the fate of my brothers."

That November, Yang put me in charge of a group assigned to cultivate the rice paddies in

Plot 23. After a short time, he summoned me and informed me that Hsia was praying secretly at night. "Is that true?" he screamed at me.

I tried to smile, "Of course not, he's just an old man who is tired after working all day and talks a little in his sleep."

Yang gave me a threatening look, "If I find out that he said just one word of prayer you will both pay for it. Tell him that!"

I went to Hsia as soon as I returned to the barracks. "Be careful," I pleaded with him. "I'm risking a couple months in solitary confinement. But you... are risking your life."

"Is my life really that important," he asked me very calmly. I just could not bring this old man to reason.

It was overpowering

By December it had grown very cold. An icy wind was blowing from the northeast. One day, near the end of the month, Hsia came to me and asked if he could take a break. “Can’t you just wait a few more minutes? The shift is about to change.”

“No, because then the supervisors will also pass by.” It seemed as though he wanted to tell me something but did not know how. “Do you know what day it is?”

“Monday, December 25,” I responded irritably. Then I was silent, not only because I realized in that moment that it was Christmas, but also because I understood that the old man wanted to pray. “Hsia,” I pleaded with him, “you are crazy to take this risk!”

“But I have to do it,” he remarked calmly, “and I would like you to pray with me because this day is meaningful only to the two of us. Today, Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary.”

I looked around. There were no supervisors anywhere to be seen and the closest prisoner was in the middle of the rice paddy. “Go down to the watering dyke,” I said to Hsia, “I’m giving you 15 minutes, old man, and nothing more!”

“And you?”

“I’m staying here.” The following minutes were terrible. Every time the wind started to blow, it seemed to take the form of one of the guards yelling.

Then suddenly something—I don’t know what it was—helped me overcome my fear, and it compelled me to climb down into the channel. What I saw was overwhelming. For the first time in four years I could forget about Yang and the

work camp, and I remembered once again what it meant to believe in something which is greater than life on earth.

Hsia was celebrating Holy Mass in a dried up pit; his church was all of northern China and his altar was a pile of frozen dirt. His vestment was a tattered prison uniform and the fragments of an enamel cup were his chalice. He tried to squeeze a little juice from a few grapes which he had received as a precious gift and had guarded for I do not know how long. From a few grains of wheat which must have come with him from the harvest, he made something like flat bread which served as a host. Instead of candles on the altar, a couple dry twigs burned and the evening wind served as a choir which was so strong at times that it really sounded like a hymn. It seemed as though the little flames carried the courageous old man’s prayers directly to heaven and the winds brought them to all the ends of the earth.

I felt an irresistible desire to share the Faith with Hsia. For me, it was as if on this Christmas there was nowhere in the world, not even in the most glorious cathedral of Christianity, where such an impressive Holy Mass could have been celebrated. Without really being aware of it, I answered, “Et cum spiritu tuo” – “And with your spirit”. Not surprised in the least, Hsia finished the Holy Mass, “Ite missa est”- “Go forth, the Mass is ended” as if to encourage me. Out of the blue I answered him with words I had never used in this camp, “Deo gratias” – “Thanks be to God”. The Mass was over.

A soul that trusts in God

“The Lord will forgive us and understand that this was not a lack of respect,” Hsia said, “it was not the proper way to celebrate Holy Mass.”

I had a lump in my throat. His unchangeable and unalterable values, his fear—not that of being shot but of offending God—helped me to finally

understand what the old man was trying to tell me over the last several months: It is not enough to use just human wit and fear to do anything to survive like an animal. A person has to have something greater, something that makes living worthwhile—a dream, a belief. Therefore I answered, “I am certain, Fr. Hsia, that God understands and forgives us.”

“Thanks Jean. May the Lord and Our Lady bless and guide you.” And for the first time in four years I believed that they really would.

At that moment, I saw the camp commander Yang approaching the pit on his bicycle. I was just able to put my hands over the small flames as if I was trying to warm up before he looked down

suspiciously. “What are you doing here?”

“The old man just wanted to make a little fire to warm up,” I answered with an innocent smile.

“You do not interrupt work until the moment of the break, and not earlier,” yelled Yang. “Go back to work!”

Since that Christmas Mass there was a secret corner of my heart where I lived in safety and without fear of Yang or his guards. After a few days, they reassigned the groups of prisoners as they often did, and I was separated from Hsia. I never saw him again. Maybe they killed him. Even if that was the case, however, they could have only killed his body, not his soul which was unbending and trusted in God.

Three New Priests in our Family

On June 25, 2011, three candidates for ordination, Wolfram Rupert Maria Konschitzky from Germany, Alexander Martino Serrano Puerto from Colombia and Jean-Baptiste Marie Simar from France joyfully came with their families and friends as well as numerous brothers and sisters from their spiritual family to the festively decorated church Santa Maria in Vallicella in Rome. In a side chapel of the “Chiesa Nuova” as it is also called, there is a golden shrine with the relics of St. Philip Neri, who is considered the “Apostle of Rome”.

Through the imposition of hands by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, His Eminence Mauro Cardinal Piacenza, the three deacons of the Family of Mary were gratefully ordained to the priesthood. In a beautiful, spiritual homily, Cardinal Piacenza found touching words to

speak to the candidates from the depth of his own priestly heart about the greatness and dignity of the sacramental priesthood:

“It is your privilege as a priest to be a prophet and to proclaim the Gospel. At the same time, you are called to be servants of the mystical body of Christ, especially when you administer the sacraments. And finally, the Lord has called you to be teachers and fathers.”

These joyful new priests would also like to thank you, dear friends and benefactors, for your spiritual and material support during their years of study, and they would like to tell you a little about their vocation and how God has worked in their lives.

Everything started with the Rosary

I grew up in Bogota, the capital of Colombia, with my brother Wilson who is nine years

younger than me. My parents were religious people but not practicing Catholics, and so until

my conversion, it seemed completely normal to me to go to Holy Mass three times a year—on Christmas, on Easter and for my grandma’s memorial service. Yes, as a matter of fact, these three visits were all that connected me to God in my childhood and teenage years—it was practically nothing.

To me, nothing seemed to be missing though; and honestly, I did not have any time for it either because I was always in action. My days were filled with Boy Scout meetings, youth theater, instructing children’s tennis and helping out with the Red Cross at my school. My head and heart were full of these activities, but—and it could not be any other way for a South American—soccer was naturally the most important thing in my life.

My friends back then, however, were not always the best influence on me, and looking back, I see clearly and thankfully how it was surely Our Lady who held a protective hand over me at this time.

The decisive encounter came during Advent 1998. I was 15 years old, and I was supposed to pick up my younger brother in the afternoon at the parish Juan Macias where they were practicing Christmas carols. I came too early and so I waited in the back of the church. The young choir director waved me to the front with the invitation, “Come, sing with us!” I cannot say that I was very interested in singing Christmas songs, but I did not want to be rude either.

So I forced myself to participate for a few minutes, and I was surprised to see how natural and relaxed all the boys and girls were. They all radiated joy and somehow they were different than of my friends. I found that attractive and it made me curious. And then something happened which I never could have imagined. My “by chance” meeting in the parish would not be my last.

I started participating regularly in the choir and in guitar lessons that were being offered. After a few months, my new friends gave me another push. They invited me to their evening Rosary meeting at the church. Although I did not have any idea about the Rosary, or about prayer in

general, I accepted the invitation. I could not believe that I was saying one Hail Mary after another with the prayerful youth. It was the first Rosary of my life. A girl gave me her very beautiful Rosary, and soon thereafter I fell in love with this prayer.

The Rosary and with it Mary, whom I experienced more and more as my mother, became my inseparable companions—be it in the prayer group, on the way to school each day, during soccer practice or at work. I was filled with a peace I had never known. To the astonishment of my family, I was more helpful and loving at home even though I remained a rebel and wanted to do my own thing.

With time, however, I gave up my former activities and eventually lost sight of my old friends. I became more involved in my parish as an altar server, working with the audio system and helping out at musical events. It was like growing up in a new life, and the Rosary, or better said Mary, was the main “culprit” that I now turned my heart to Jesus.

Although I wanted to become an accountant and have many children someday, I had to ask myself again and again during the silence of the Rosary, “What does God want from me? Could it be that Jesus also wants me to become a priest?”

When I was 16 years old, I did something that would have been unthinkable earlier. Without my parent’s knowledge, I visited a seminary with two of my friends and gave some consideration to the Franciscans. God led me a different way though.

In the Jubilee Year 2000, Fr. Paul Maria brought the image of the Lady and Mother of All Nations to my city, Bogota. Our prayer group participated in the Marian feast day for which we also prepared by going to Holy Confession. During the conferences about Our Lady, I gathered up my trust, went to this priest and opened my soul to him—my desire to live entirely for God, but also my uncertainty whether it was really God’s call that I was feeling. He reassured me and confirmed my vocation to the priesthood. When I asked him if I could go this

way in his community, he joyfully allowed me. Although it was a huge step at the time and my parents could not believe it, when I finished school at the beginning of 2001, I went to the Family of Mary in Rome.

Over the next ten years of novitiate and studies at the Gregorian University, I was always helped in my interior trials with the most important “helper of the first hour”, the Rosary. Those were the times, surprisingly, that I often found it a struggle to stay faithful to praying the Rosary. Therefore, I never want to forget the advice my spiritual father gave me as soon as I arrived in Rome. He shaped a Rosary into a heart and said, “Look at this Rosary; imagine you are in the

middle of it, like in the heart of Our Lady. When you pray it faithfully, nothing can drag you out of this heart or separate you from your vocation. On the contrary, the prayer of the Rosary will become a protective shield.”

So I reached not only continuously anew for the Rosary, but Our Lady also took my hand and my life, to form it over the course of the years according to God’s will. My vocation began with the Rosary, with Mary, and in her and for her I would like to reach perfection as a priest. Therefore, I wrote on the card for my First Holy Mass “Tutto per Maria! Everything for Mary!” , and at my ordination I gratefully put on my chasuble with the Queen of the Rosary for the first time.

Fr. Martino Maria Serrano Puerto, Bogota, Colombia

Good things come to those who wait

The family album kept by my mother recounts an event when I was seven years old. At Sunday Holy Mass, I was visibly bored and then—so she wrote—I slapped my forehead during the consecration and whispered, “Oh no, he’s already said that a thousand times!” This obvious lack of sacramental understanding continued, unfortunately, in my loving family from Munich, Germany which at the time did not know much about religion other than Sunday Mass. First Holy Communion and Confirmation did not change anything either. One might ask if such a boy could ever have the idea to become a priest one day.

I have my weak stomach and the Sisters of Mercy at the hospital to thank that on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, just a few days after I was born, I received an emergency baptism. In a certain sense, I belonged to Our Lady from the very beginning, without being aware of it nor having the slightest relationship to her for many years. Yet in her goodness, she decided to renew my

Christian life from the ground up, and she found my grandma to be a skillful assistant. At the end of the 80’s she began the life of a fervent pilgrim and slowly but surely won my mother over to the flock of the children of Mary.

The first change for me took place after a serious bicycle accident when I was 17 years old. During the long weeks in the hospital, more or less out of boredom, I started praying the Rosary which my mother had taught me on a walk just a few days before the accident. Only later, however, did I learn about the true strength and beauty of this prayer.

In the summer of 1992, I was 21; and the hour had come for my grandma’s decisive cast for her two grandchildren, my sister Sigrid and me. She gave us a trip to a youth festival in a northern Italian town named Schio and said innocently, “I’m sure it will be beautiful with lots of young people, and besides, you have never been to Italy.” I had just finished my first year of architecture at the university, and I thought a little Italian cultural horizon would not hurt.

Completely unaware of what we were getting ourselves into, we took the bait.

Under Our Lady's gentle guidance, something completely unknown to me, the wonderful world of the Faith, opened up before me—the Eucharist, grace, vocation and holiness. I experienced Our Lady as deeply as a living person who cared for me with motherly love and who knew me through and through. Happy and without resistance, I soaked up everything as if I had been waiting just for this all these years.

In this time of searching for my Faith, I met the Family of Mary. Yet with all respect, I never thought that I would find my place there. I mean, our friendship grew, but I liked studying and I traveled a lot on pilgrimages, retreats and with my prayer group from Munich. It happened again and again on these trips that different people approached me and asked if I was interested in becoming a priest. It was out of the question for me though.

Not that I was against such a vocation, but there wasn't anything in the world to which I could say, "Yes, that is what I want." I was just as open for married life. Along this path, however, I was so astounded that every friendship which could have become more was so obviously interrupted that really only heaven could have been behind it.

Then the day came in which I was vividly placed before the choice of my life. It was September 1997, during my historic preservation training in Thierhaupten, a baroque monastery close to Augsburg, Germany. Over the weekend, there had been a wedding in the old monastery church, and when I arrived for work on Monday morning I noticed something written in chalk which

the wedding party had drawn on the pavement between the church doors and the monastery gate. One arrow pointed to the monastery with the words, "Ho, ho loneliness!" and a second arrow pointed to the wedding church promising "eternal happiness together!" In this moment the crucial question formed in my mind, which God and I asked one another without saying anything, "What do you want?"

Looking back, I have to admit that I did not pray enough in searching for an answer. I did not know, however, that many good people had been doing this for me for a long time. My contribution was really only an attitude of watching and waiting. I graduated with a degree in architecture, worked for an engineering company for a year and a half and continued attending daily Holy Mass. Gradually, I understood that God was in fact indicating a way to the priesthood, and finally, with the help of my spiritual director, I gave a definitive yes.

It was a great gift for me to begin my path to the priesthood without having to search very far. I was allowed to join the community which had accompanied me spiritually from the beginning. At the end of October 1999, practically ten years to the day that I had my bicycle accident, I boarded the express train to Italy and entered the novitiate of the Family of Mary. The inner joy that I experienced back then did not disappear from my heart through all the years of formation, despite a lengthy illness and some spiritual trials. With her merciful and yet clear instruction, Our Lady went to work teaching me the great mystery of love and sacrifice to form me into a Marian priest.

Fr. Wolfram Rupert Maria Konschitzky, Munich, Germany

Thank you Lord for your love!

Everything started on Holy Thursday 1987, a few weeks after the birth of my little brother

Matthieu. I was not even four years old. On this day in which the Church commemorates

the institution of the Holy Eucharist and the priesthood, my mother noticed for the first time symptoms of a muscular disease, Myasthenia, which she has to this day. She had surgery, remained in the hospital for several weeks and returned home completely exhausted. To see her in such a deplorable state was very trying for me as a little boy, and it left a deep impression.

That August, I spent part of my summer vacation on my uncle's farm. One afternoon, we watched a movie about the life of Pope John Paul II. I was so fascinated that I talked about it constantly, and, being the naive little boy that I was, told my aunt, "I want to be pope."

When my parents came to pick me up at the end of vacation, my first question was, "Mommy, what do I have to do to become pope?"

She answered, "First you have to become a priest."

So I spontaneously declared, "Then I will be a priest!"

Of course I forgot about this later on, as it is with children. At the age of 11, however, I felt anew the call of the Lord. For two years I attended the boarding school of the Foyer de Charite in Courset which was founded by the great French mystic and stigmatic Marthe Robin (1902-1982). In the two years I spent there, I had the great grace of learning how to pray. I do not mean only the Rosary, but above all personal prayer in silence before the exposed Blessed Sacrament. I experienced there that praying is a personal encounter with Jesus. From that point on, I felt the vocation to the priesthood grow in my heart. Without the important grace of prayer, however, I would have never had the strength to answer Jesus' call.

In Courset I also learned much more about Our Lady. I joined the brotherhood Knights of the Immaculate Conception which St. Maximilian Kolbe founded. We young members obliged ourselves to certain spiritual exercises like praying a consecration to Mary every morning kneeling at the foot of our beds, meditating the Rosary every day and making sacrifices out of love for Our Lady. For me it was really a school to learn to love Mary. I found out later that my

parents had already consecrated me to Our Lady at my baptism with the words:

"O Mary, Mother of Jesus and our mother, we bring you our child Jean Baptiste, who has been transformed now through baptism. We ask you to take him under your protection. Watch over him more than we do and accept him as your own. O Mary, protect him, lead him, save him." She is the one who has led me to this day and to whom I consecrate my whole priesthood. It is no coincidence that she has called me to her community, the Family of Mary.

At the end of the second year in Foyer de Charite, I received the Sacrament of Confirmation. Beforehand, the bishop encouraged us to ask the Holy Spirit for one of his gifts. I asked for the gift of strength to answer God's call faithfully. And he heard me, because immediately following graduation, at the age of 18, I joined the seminary in Ars where I studied for one year before entering the Family of Mary in 2002.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Lord and to Our Lady for the great grace of my ordination to the priesthood on June 25 in Rome. With how much tender love they have led me to this day. Through these few lines, I would like to thank not only God but also all the people who have carried me in a special way through their prayers and sacrifices and whom I have to thank that I am a priest today.

One of them is my grandma, Marie Therese (+2004). As I entrusted to her many years ago my desire to become a priest, she could not hold back her tears of joy. She had silently hoped that she would one day see one of her sons at the altar. When all of her sons were married, she started praying that perhaps one of her grandsons would be called by God to the priesthood and accept this vocation. In one of the last letters she wrote to me, she admitted, "I offer all the pains of my rheumatism for your vocation."

Along with my grandmother, certainly my mother has prayed and sacrificed the most for my vocation—since that Holy Thursday when I was just four years old. Today, I am certain that exactly this daily silent sacrifice of her bodily

pain and weakness deeply unites me to her. I am convinced that my mother's illness is the great

grace for my priesthood. Thank you, Lord, that you love me so much!

Fr. Jean Marie Simar, Grandvilliers, France

“God Bless and Protect You”

Many homeless people at the door of our mission station have thanked us with this traditional Russian greeting since the onset of winter. We have been able to help them with a warm meal, tea or clothing.

Dear friends and benefactors, with the same “God bless and protect you” we missionaries would also like to thank you for your support. With your help, we were able to finish up some work on our caritas house in the fall before the first freeze and the return of winter. The heating and water pipes have already been laid, and the

electrical installation is also finished.

We will be able to continue working on the inside of the house during the winter, even if the storms are raging outside. We hope that the inaugural blessing for the new house can take place soon! When we move to the new facility and open the doors to the poor, we will not forget to thankfully remember you and your intentions in our prayers. We thought you might enjoy the following story from our mission here in Kazakhstan.

No place at the inn

One day, we sisters in Ust Kamenogorsk were doing the dishes after lunch when there was suddenly a knock on our door. When we opened it, we were surprised to find a young Kazakh woman standing outside with a baby in her arms. None of us sisters had ever seen this woman. She started to speak immediately, “I came right from the maternity ward at the hospital. Please help me; I have nothing for my baby.” She held out a pink cushion with her newborn who had only a little hat on her head and was wrapped from head to toe in an old diaper. Despite the great poverty here, we had never seen such a poor little thing. Of course we brought the young mother, a Muslim, into our house right away. Sr. Angela held the baby carefully in her arms and brought the mother into the kitchen where she first had to calm down before telling us all that had happened.

The 26-year-old woman's name is Julia. She is unemployed and lives in our town. She had given birth to her little Albina four days earlier. When she was released from the hospital two days later, she left her baby daughter there with a heavy heart. The reason is a drama which is more and more common for the families here in Kazakhstan:

“I had nothing for my baby, not even a crib. Nothing! I had no idea how I should take my baby with me. My husband left me months ago. Before that, he had been drunk every day and beat me. When he found out that I was pregnant, he screamed, ‘That's your problem, not mine!’ Then he left and I was alone.

“In my need, I asked my relatives for help and shelter, but none of them would even listen to me. Finally, my six-year-old son Rasul and

I were taken temporarily into the little rental apartment of my mother whose salary was just enough to cover the simplest groceries and rent. Since my permit visa is not in order, I knew from the beginning that the state would not give me any support. Having nothing, I thought I had no other choice but to hand my daughter over to the state.

“But when I returned alone to my mother’s apartment two days after the birth, I only cried and thought about my baby. I couldn’t believe that I had abandoned my own child and given it away. Two horrible days passed before finally making a decision this morning—I woke up and headed right for the hospital to pick up my Albina, even though I had no idea what I would do after that. It was early when I arrived and the hospital was still closed so I paced back and forth by the entrance, crying and waiting. When they finally opened, I ran to the maternity ward. The doctors and nurses were happy to see me, and when I asked, they tore up the documents in front of me that I had signed giving my baby up for adoption. Then I was just standing there with the baby wrapped in a diaper and a cushion,

and I had no idea what to do until I remembered the advice of one of my neighbors, ‘Go to the Catholic Church, they’ll surely help you.’ So I left the hospital an hour ago and came directly to you.”

In the meantime, the baby had been passed from one sister to the next. First of all, we thanked Julia for deciding to keep her child. Fr. Martin blessed the little one while we sisters sorted through donations we have from our benefactors for everything that is necessary for a newborn. The woman was so touched that she burst out, “I will have my Albina baptized in your Church!” Even though this understandable expression of thankfulness is far from a sufficient reason for baptism, we soon realized that Julia was serious. She has already attended several baptism classes and confirmed, “I want the protection of baptism for my child.” This is very unusual and courageous for a Muslim because she could be punished for betrayal. Nevertheless, Julia’s relatives, luckily in this case, have no interest in her.

Wishing you God’s blessing and protection, Your little missionary familyin Ust Kamenogorsk