

Triumph of the Heart

FAITH LEADS TO SURRENDER,
SURRENDER LEADS TO LIFE

PDF - Family of Mary

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“Your faith, more precious than gold ... tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory and honor.”

From the First Letter of Peter 1:7

*“You have faith in God,
have faith also in me.”*

*Pope Benedict XVI has proclaimed a Year of Faith
from October 11, 2012 until November 24, 2013.*

*Along this line of the Holy Father, may the following pages
help us to rediscover the beauty and immeasurable richness of our faith
so that we may become joyful and lively witnesses to it.*

*Living the Faith is a great challenge
not only in the countries where Christians are persecuted,
but also in the West which is suffering a deep crisis of faith!*

*Today, testifying to and living the Catholic Faith
increasingly requires a personal and courageous decision
from everyone individually.*

A quick look at the Old Testament shows us a very important teaching: Yahweh was able to fulfill all of his promises to Abraham simply because Abraham humbly believed and unconditionally obeyed. *“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness”* (Rom 4:3). Advanced in years, he was *“hoping against hope, that he would become ‘the father of many nations’”* (Rom 4:18). And so it came to pass that Abraham, who like a submissive child

before God, truly became Israel’s progenitor and the “Father in Faith” for all of us.

A twentieth century daughter of Abraham was St. Edith Stein, a Jewish convert, who consciously offered her life for the conversion of her Jewish brethren. In a letter from 1927, she described the way of spiritual childhood to her Jewish classmate Fritz Kaufmann, who was struggling to understand the true Faith: *“I gave you my advice:*

become a child and place life with all its searches and pondering into the Father's hands. If you are still unable to do that then ask, ask the unknown and unfound God to come to your aide. Now you look at me with astonishment that I am not ashamed to come to you with a child's naïve wisdom. It is wisdom because it is simple and all mysteries are hidden in it. And it is a way that certainly leads to the goal."

The Father sent the Son to reveal to us the full truth of our Faith: *"it is the only Son, who*

is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." (Jn 1:18) Therefore our Catholic Faith is a revealed Faith. We are not gullible followers of someone else's own thought out ideas. We believe in a person, Jesus Christ, who is both God and man. We *"believe in one God who is Love,"* said Pope Benedict XVI in his Apostolic Letter for the "Year of Faith", *"the Father, who in the fullness of time sent his Son for our salvation; Jesus Christ, who in the mystery of his death and resurrection redeemed the world; the Holy Spirit, who leads the Church across the centuries as we await the Lord's glorious return."*

Faithful to the point of shedding blood

*I*n the first centuries of Christianity, thousands testified with their blood by offering their lives for the belief of one God in three persons. One of them was St. Cecilia, a rich noble girl, who was dedicated to her persecuted brethren in Rome. When she refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods at the beginning of the third century, she was sentenced to decapitation by sword, but her head was not severed from her body. Pope Urban I had the martyr's body placed in an individual tomb close to those of the bishops and popes in the Calixtus Catacombs.

When they opened the tomb for the first time in 821, over 600 years later, her body was entirely incorrupt. She is therefore the first incorrupt saint. Pope Paschalis I immediately had her transferred to the Church of St. Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome.

The second time her tomb was opened in 1599, she was just as incorrupt after more than 1300 years, and in the same position as she was originally placed in the catacombs: dressed in a golden robe, laying on her right side and her face turned downward. Her arms before her body, she shows with her right hand three fingers and with

her left hand one finger. The numbers three and one are attributed to Cecilia's profession of faith: "One God in three persons".

*F*ollowing the religious freedom granted in the year 313 by Emperor Constantine, the first Council took place in 325 in the little town of Nicaea. More than 300 bishops attended, among them St. Nicholas of Myra. Many of the Council Fathers still had marks on their bodies from the gruesome tortures which they had suffered during the terrible Christian persecution. The Council took place in the Marian church which, unfortunately, was transformed into a mosque last November.

In this time-honored church of Our Lady, the shepherds of the Church formulated back then the first Profession of Faith, the so-called Nicene Creed. Our Holy Father mentioned this in his apostolic letter: *"Not without reason, Christians in the early centuries were required to learn the Creed from memory. It served them as a daily prayer not to forget the commitment they had undertaken in baptism."* Would it not be good for us as well to slowly and attentively pray

the Creed again? Perhaps our hearts would be so opened by the spiritual richness of the deposit of faith that we would marvel and give thanks.

Pope Benedict XVI continues by speaking about how precisely Pentecost demonstrates that we should be courageous about professing our faith publicly and passing it along: *“A Christian*

may never think of belief as a private act.” Consider, for example, the youth who receive a special power of grace already during Confirmation *“to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross”* as it is written in Catechism of the Catholic Church.

God touches the heart of man!

*G*od is always the one who makes the first step when it comes to opening up man’s heart for the working of grace so that he may be transformed in his depths. Pope Benedict mentions along these lines the example of the purple cloth dealer Lydia. With some other women, this God-fearing woman was outside the gates of Philippi along the river on a Sabbath, and *“the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying”* (Acts 16:14). Touched by the Gospel, she had herself baptized with her whole household.

*P*aul, her spiritual father, on the other hand had been a persecutor of the Christians when he found the treasure of the Faith like the man in the Gospel about the treasure buried in a field—completely unexpected, sudden and without looking for it. The bolt of grace hit Paul, in the truest sense of the word, “out of the blue”, the light of God which would forever impress his way of thinking and handling. The Prince of the Apostles later wrote, *“yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me”* (Gal 2:20).

Alphonse Ratisbonne (1814-1884), the rich son of a banker from Alsace, France, experienced something similar 1,800 years later. He said of himself that he was a *“Jew in name only and didn’t believe in God. ... Yet there was emptiness in my heart, and despite the excesses, I wasn’t happy. ... I nurtured a bitter hate to-*

wards Catholic priests, against churches and convents, and especially against the Jesuits, the mention of whose very name caused my blood to boil.”

*D*uring a cultural trip to Rome in 1842, Ratisbonne wrote in his diary, *“I did not cease to mock and blaspheme Catholicism.”* Therefore, it was solely out of courtesy that he accepted the Miraculous Medal from one of his acquaintances, and reluctantly agreed even to pray the “Memorare”. Our Lady “took revenge” in the Roman church Sant’ Andrea delle Fratte: *“I hadn’t been there long when I suddenly felt seized in a very unexplainable way. I raised my eyes; the whole building disappeared from my sight, with the exception of a single chapel which was bathed in a wonderful light. ... In the middle of the light, above the altar, the Blessed Virgin appeared, larger than life, brilliant and full of majesty and gentleness, like she is on the medal; an irresistible force drew me to her.”* Alphonse tried three times to look at her, but he could not raise his eyes higher than her hands from which streams of grace issued forth. *“She motioned to me with her hand to kneel down. Then it seems she said, ‘That is good.’ She didn’t say anything else to me, but I had understood everything.”*

*I*n an instant, Our Lady let Ratisbonne recognize and accept the whole deposit of the Catholic

Faith. He grabbed his Marian medal, covered it with kisses and, completely beside himself, shouted out in tears, *“I saw her! ... Oh, how lucky I am! How good is the Lord! What a fullness of grace and beatitude! How deplorable the lot of those who don’t know him!”* He embraced his acquaintance and with a fully transfigured

face asked him to find a priest for confession. He wanted to know when he could be baptized because he could not stand living without it. He did not want to tell anybody about the experience of his conversion without first speaking to a priest because, he emphasized, *“What I have to tell is such that I can only tell it praying on my knees.”*

Felicity and Perpetua

“Every five minutes a Christian dies for his faith somewhere in the world. In 2010, there were 105,000” reported the head of Foreign Affairs for the Russian Orthodox Church. Since the death of St. Stephen, Christians have testified that there is a love that far surpasses any mere human love and for which it is even worth giving one’s life.

“A force that the world does not know is active in defeat, in the humiliation of those who suffer for the Gospel. ... It is the power of love, defenseless and victorious even in apparent defeat. It is the force that challenges and triumphs over death.” This truth, which Pope Benedict XVI so expressed on April 7, 2008 remembering the witnesses to the Faith who died during the 20th Century, was one that Christians have understood from the beginning.

Among them was St. Perpetua, a patrician from Carthage, whose notes from prison and the report about her life and death have been preserved to this day. This valuable document, the only diary of a woman from ancient Christianity, tells of the great grace with which God strengthens in faith those who love him above all else.

Perpetua grew up under the care of her wealthy parents in northern Africa. She married young and

had just become a mother when, with her brother Saturus, she was introduced to the Christian faith and wanted to be baptized. Emperor Septimus passed an edict in 202 making conversion to Christianity a punishable offense. Neither Perpetua nor Saturus were scared away from confessing themselves catechumens and refusing to venerate the roman gods.

Perpetua was arrested with Felicity, a slave, and a few other companions; Saturus followed them voluntarily. She wrote in her diary, *“We took advantage of a short break on our way to the prison to receive baptism. As I climbed out of the baptismal water, the Holy Spirit inspired me to ask for nothing other than persistent patience during torment.”*

The father from Perpetua and Saturus was desperate and he even visited his children in the prison. *“In his love for me, my father*

didn't give up on trying to talk me out of my faith in Christ." But Perpetua did not give in. "This made him very angry; he lunged at me like he wanted to scratch my eyes out, and hit me. He plagued me so much that I was happy not to see him for a couple of days."

*I*t is written further in her notes: "A few days later we were lead to a horrible, dark prison. I was disgusted because I had never seen such a dungeon before in my life. A total darkness prevailed; the heat and crowdedness were unbearable. We suffered a lot that day, from the torments of the over-filled prison to the crudeness of the soldiers guarding us. What worried me most, however, were the thoughts about being separated from my child. While the others were caring for themselves, I nursed my baby who had been brought to me and had already grown weak with hunger. I then asked my mother to adopt my son, and I consoled her as well as my brother."

*T*hat night Perpetua had a vision which gave her clarity that she and her brother would suffer martyrdom. At the same time, however, this grace strengthened the two of them to remain unwaveringly faithful to what they believed. She wrote in her diary: "A few days later we were dragged to trial before a public court. All those who were asked before me gave a courageous profession of their Faith. When my turn came, my father suddenly walked in with my child,

pulled me down a step and used every means that tenderness could inspire in him to try to soften me. He knelt down in tears before me and pleaded. The governor Hilarian also joined him and said to me, 'Spare your father gray hair, have mercy on your child! Make a sacrifice for the sake of the emperor.' I answered, 'I will never sacrifice.' 'So you are a Christian?' he countered. 'Yes, I am a Christian,' was my reply. Then the governor pronounced our sentence. He condemned us to death by wild animals. Happy, we were taken back to prison."

*F*elicity, Perpetua's faithful companion, was eight months pregnant with her child when she was brought to prison with the other Christians. Worried that she would not be able to die with her beloved friends because of her pregnancy, they all prayed together that Felicity would give birth before the animal fights started. They had hardly finished praying when she went into labor and, two days before her execution, Felicity gave birth to a healthy baby girl.

As she was moaning during the pangs of birth, the servant guarding them mocked her saying, "If you are whining so much now, what will you be like when they throw you before the wild beasts?"

She gave the most beautiful of answers: "Now I suffer; there, however, somebody else will be in me who suffers for me because I will suffer for him!"

"Now I suffer; there, however, somebody else will be in me who suffers for me because I will suffer for Him!"

The day of martyrdom

*O*n March 7, 202 (or 203), Emperor Septimus Severus ordered for his son's birthday a presentation of the carnivores in the giant Carthage arena where the Christians were to be killed for the amusement of the people.

Saturus was led into the arena before Perpetua and Felicity. First a wild leopard and then a starving bear were let loose to hunt him down. However, neither one of them killed the courageous Christian. Saturus was called back unharmed.

The spectacle was to continue with the young women as they released a wild bull. The person who finished writing Perpetua's diary reported, "*Perpetua slowly walked into the amphitheater, like a bride of Christ. No one could resist the bright look in her eyes. Felicity entered the arena in the same way, happy that she had had a good delivery. Perpetua was whirled into the air first and landed on her back. She stood up, and when she saw Felicity also lying on the ground, she fearlessly went over*

to her and stretched out her hand to help her up. She was in ecstasy and only then noticed the evidence on her body and clothing of the suffering she had endured.

Perpetua said to her brother and the other survivors, 'Everybody remain firm in faith, love one another and do not be discouraged by our suffering!' The crowd, however, wanted to see their death.

They voluntarily stood up and kissed one another in order to complete their martyrdom with the kiss of peace. One after another they died in silence and without resistance with the stab of a sword."

"Why," asked Pope Benedict XVI, "*did these martyr brothers and sisters of ours not seek to save the irreplaceable good of life at all costs? ... Every witness of faith lives this 'greater love' and, after the example of the Divine Teacher, is ready to sacrifice his life for the Kingdom."*

The First Male Saint of the United States

*Delegations from the United States and Germany
came to Prachatitz, Czech Republic in June 2011.*

*Together with the locals, they participated in a memorial Holy Mass
and anniversary celebration on the occasion*

of the 200th birthday of a great son of this picturesque city,

St. John Nepomucene Neumann (1811-1860), Bishop of Philadelphia, USA.

*T*he Diocese of Budweis, where this great missionary bishop grew up, has had to sell one-

third of the rectories in the past few years, and Bishop Jiri Padour has lost 70 priests since he

took over the diocese in 2002. Either they retired, died, returned to their diocese of origin or have left the priesthood.

It was a completely different story in John Nepomucene Neumann's time. The seminaries were overflowing! And when this son of a large, deeply faithful family finished studying Theology in 1835, the Diocese of Budweis already had far too many priests. Therefore the 24-year-old candidate for the priesthood and his whole class were not ordained.

So Neumann, whose father had emigrated from Germany to Bohemia, decided to go to North America without being ordained because priests were urgently needed there for thousands of German speaking immigrants.

Without money, without a precise destination and without saying good-bye to his parents—in order to spare them the pain—he left in 1836. After he

had started out he wrote to his mother and father, *"I am convinced ... that it is God who calls upon*

me for this sacrifice, however painful." And in his diary the following travel notes were made: *"I will ask for permission to work for the most abandoned souls, whether they are German or Indian. And if nobody accepts me, I will withdraw in solitude ... in order to do penance."*

*J*ohn Neumann did not have to search long for a bishop after his adventurous trip across the Atlantic Ocean though. When he set foot on land at the beginning of June 1863, Bishop Dubois from New York graciously accepted him with the words, *"I can ordain you, and I want to ordain you, and I will ordain you immediately because I need you!"*

So it came to pass that the 25-year-old from the forests of Bohemia was ordained to the priesthood three weeks later in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. Three days after that, the newly ordained priest was already on his way to his vast territory in the north, close to Niagara Falls, in the area of the Great Lakes where German, Irish and French immigrants often had not seen a priest for years.

With settlers and Indians

*J*ohn Neumann spent most of his time traveling with his backpack to one of the eight outer stations of his huge parish, Williamsville, with an area of about 560 square miles.

Back then, there were not roads or railways nor any rectories for the priests. Neumann travelled hundreds of miles through dense forests and swamps on foot, on horse, by boat and, in winter, by sled to the roughly 400 sparsely scattered settler families living in log cabins or out on farms to celebrate Holy Mass, to preach, to baptize, to listen to confessions and to console the sick and dying. Additionally, he often made big detours through the woods on his pastoral journeys with the hopes of bumping into native American Indians. The wandering missionary had the thought in the back

of his mind of one day founding a mission school and a seminary for future Indian apostles out of their own ranks.

His first encounter with the Indians turned out to be a memorable one. Exhausted after a long march, Neumann collapsed nearly unconscious on a trail in the woods. Suddenly several Indians with their hair bound back and feathered arrows in their quivers were bowing over him. Without saying much, they laid him on a buffalo skin and carried him to North Bush where the people were very surprised that four Indians had brought them a priest on a buffalo skin.

The joy of the worn-out priest was indescribable when the first news of life from his homeland

arrived after three years in the fall of 1839. His brother Wenceslaus was standing before the door and he immediately took over the jobs of cook, sacristan and school teacher.

When malaria, typhoid fever and other diseases broke out after a natural catastrophe, John Neumann was forced to be not only a doctor of souls in the wild but, to the best of his abilities, to substitute for the medical doctor as well. He spent days administering the Sacrament of the Sick, and he always had his little bag of medicine and healing herbs with him.

Once it was already dark out as John Neumann started for home through the swamps when he was

surprised by a downpour and lost his bearings. Finally he reached a log cabin with its lights on. When he knocked, a frightened little girl opened the door. She led him silently to the wood burning stove where her dying father, a young Irishman who could no longer speak, was lying on a straw mattress. Neumann fought for hours to save his fading life until finally the fever broke.

When the man returned to his senses and saw that a priest had saved him, he made his confession and received Holy Communion. Only when John Neumann was certain that the Irishman would fully recover did he leave the poor cabin.

*F*ollowing the 1830 Marian apparitions in the Rue du Bac, Miraculous Medals soon found their way to the North American Indians.

Corresponding to their traditions, they believed in the protective power of holy articles and wore the Miraculous Medals therefore with greatest reverence, like a treasure, close to their heart. Missionaries testified,
“Even grown Indians cried like children when they lost their medal.”

In the Order of the Divine Redeemer

*A*fter four years of wearying missionary work, John Neumann collapsed on Easter 1840. He was sick for weeks before he was brought to the Redemptorists in Rochester, New York for recovery. There he learned to treasure so much their community life and the spirituality of their founder, St. Alphonsus Liguori, that he asked to join their order which cared especially for the religiously abandoned in the mission.

With a heavy heart the bishop let this extraordinary priest move on, and he joined the Redemptorists in the fall of 1840. His brother Wenceslaus followed him as a lay brother. Neumann wrote in his autobiography, *“I was never a true novice because when I joined our beloved congregation there was no novice master and no novitiate in America. I am not without experience though as a recruit of St. Alphonsus.”*

*L*ike the other priests in the order, he had to baptize, preach, listen to confession, hold missions and teach catechism. He was sent from one place to the next. When the young religious priest, after two years in Baltimore, was assigned to the big city parish St. Alphonsus with ten outer stations belonging to it, the tiring life of travel started anew. Fr. Neumann gave everything to strengthen the primarily German settlers in their faith. He wrote, *“As a result of their isolation and poverty they often fell into a state of religious indifference or they often became the victims of heretical sects. What a sad product of European emigration!”*

*T*he zealous Redemptorist often had to put up with mockery, derision and insult from the

sectarians, but on the other hand, every Sunday he was able to welcome at least one new convert to the Faith. Fr. Neumann became the provincial at 35, and therewith he was given the responsibility for all ten Redemptorist houses in America.

*I*t was in the Pittsburg monastery where the Redemptorist lay brother Athanasius had a dream in the fall of 1852. He very clearly saw Fr. Neumann fully dressed in the vestments of a bishop. When Fr. Neumann heard about this, he wrote to

the holy superior in Pittsburg, Fr. Francis Xavier Seelos, *“Tell that good Brother that, if he is not already crazed, to pray that he may not become so.”* As the signs multiplied, however, that there could be some truth to the dream, Fr. Neumann called many convents to pray *“for the prevention of a great disaster that is threatening an American diocese.”*

The sisters immediately stopped praying for this intention, nevertheless, when they found out what it was all about.

The holy school bishop

*O*n his 41st birthday, Passion Sunday 1852, Fr. Neumann was ordained the Bishop of Philadelphia, which at the time was the most important diocese following New York and Baltimore. It did not take long before the by far youngest bishop in the USA was lovingly known everywhere as *“our little bishop”*, in part because he was really only five foot three inches tall.

This extremely modest, new shepherd was altogether different than what people expected in a bishop, even for the faithful of the 19th century. Continuing to dress as a Redemptorist, he showed little interest in fancy receptions. He preferred being with the settler families, spooning potato soup out of a common bowl. Back home, he swept his own room, shined his own shoes and did his own dishes. *“An American bishop has to do everything on his own,”* he humorously wrote to his father.

*A*s a matter of fact, the Bishop of Philadelphia did not even have his own secretary. All the priests were assigned somewhere else. The night calls for the dying he expressly reserved for himself. During his countless visits to the sick, he never overlooked the despised African Americans, who not so long before had been slaves in the southern states, in their poor huts on

the outskirts of town. There was always a huge pile of work on his desk, and Neumann often fell asleep there.

He asked for religious sisters from Europe for the hospitals and orphanages. Bishop Neumann reformed the seminary in his own missionary spirit and several times during his episcopacy made week-long trips to visit all the parishes in his huge diocese, which incidentally is divided today into seven dioceses. During every visit, even in the most remote places, he always held a three or four day mission for spiritual renewal. Wherever he went, this benevolent man sat for hours in the confessional. On top of that, he learned in addition to the seven languages he already fluently spoke, the old Gaelic language out of love for the Irish. A wrinkled old Irish mother could not believe her ears and joyfully stammered after her confession, *“We’ve got an Irish bishop!”* Nevertheless, the shepherd was always aware, and never grew tired of repeating to his priests, *“Prayer counts for more than all our exterior effectiveness.”*

*H*ow happy then was this great admirer of the Holy Eucharist when his heart’s desire was fulfilled and perpetual adoration could be introduced in his entire diocese. Throughout the

whole year the Blessed Sacrament was exposed week for week, each time in a different church.

Regarding the number of churches, he could happily write once to his old father, *“This past summer 20 churches were built and paid for.”* By the time he died, 80 churches had been built, among them the mighty Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia.

“No parish without a parochial school!” This principle was characteristically written already in Bishop Neumann’s first pastoral letter. With an astonishing vision of the future, he was, in fact, a revolutionary promoter of Catholic schools which, to this day, is a most noticeable feature of Catholic life in the USA.

The wary shepherd simply could not stand to watch children from Catholic families led away from the faith through liberal state schools. Therefore he wrote a little catechism in German which was reprinted 30 times and an English edition for high school which was reprinted 28 times. Although there were only two parochial schools

when he arrived in the diocese, when he died eight years later there were close to 100!

This pastoral success crowned the life’s work of the first male saint of the United States, who remained a missionary until the very end: *“Though I cannot say that the diocese has degenerated since confided to my charge, yet not a day passes that I do not long to be once more in those vast forests which, for so many years, I used to traverse.”*

“I shall not see fifty,” he indicated once to one of his brothers, and on the last day of his life he said as if in anticipation: *“You always have to be ready because death comes when and where God wants.”*

A few hours later the untiring apostle of the New World died of a heart attack in the middle of the street on his way to the post office at the age of just 48. *“A bishop like Neumann could not have died any other way as on the go,”* remarked Archbishop Kenrick of Baltimore when he heard about the death of his friend.

Do You Believe in God?

On April 20, 1999, the media spread shocking news: two high school students had killed 13 people and then committed suicide. Among the victims was Cassie Bernall who offered her life for her Faith, making her the equivalent of a martyr.

When Cassie was born in Denver, Colorado on November 6, 1981, the first child of the young Bernall couple, her parent’s joy was complete. The young father, Brad, recounted, *“I was in love with my little daughter and I was in love with my wife.”* With her younger brother, Cassie had a nice childhood, nothing special, like any typical, middle-class family in America—until the cheerful, lively girl turned into a closed, sullen teenager. Her par-

ents did not like a bit the people with whom she had become friends because she began to withdraw from family life and became cold and unfriendly.

One day in December 1996, when Cassie had just turned 15, her mother was looking for a youth bible in her daughter’s room when she found a pile of letters which shocked her at first and then turned the Bernall’s family life into a terrible drama. She reported: *“A letter addressed*

to Cassie from her best friend Mona opened with several lines of unprintable sex talk and ninth-grade gossip, and went on to discuss a teacher at the high school, Mrs. R., and invited Cassie, 'Want to help me murder her? She called my parents and told them about my F.' The letter ended with a reminder about a 'neat spell,' drawings of knives and vampire teeth, mushrooms (for mind-altering drugs), and a caricature of Mrs. R. lying in a pool of blood, butcher knives protruding from her chest.

Most of the other letters were decorated as well or scribbled with spells and rhymed couplets: *Leave me to swallow my own blood, let me drink my life away. Forever the glow of the candle shines through the emptiness of my soul... As evil closes on my flame, the spark of life will fade away...*

There was endless talk about the 'fun' of contraband alcohol, marijuana, and self-mutilation, and the adventures of a classmate whose girlfriend went to 'this satanic church, cult thing where you have to drink a kitten's blood to get in.' Several of the letters advised Cassie to do away with us and thus solve her innumerable problems. One ended, 'Kill your parents! Murder is the answer to all of your problems. Make those scumbags pay for your suffering. Love you, me.'

Of course the Bernalls had noticed that Cassie had thrown all values and rules overboard since she had started hanging out with Mona; that she listened to music which caused their hair to stand on end. What her mother found here, however, surpassed her wildest imagination. *"Brad and I sat on our bed in a state of shock, reeling from the impact of our discovery."*

Mrs. Bernall went through the house praying for God's protection because, *"I felt certain we were dealing with more than a bunch of rebellious teenagers. Unfashionable as it might be to suggest it, I felt that we were engaged in a spiritual battle."*

The parents asked Dave, the youth pastor, for

advice. They forbid Cassie to have any contact with her old friends, removed her from the public school and enrolled her in a private, Christian High School. She was allowed to leave the house only with permission.

Her mother stopped working so that she could dedicate herself to her daughter, and together with Cassie's father, they monitored her phone calls, regularly searched her room and her backpack and thereby tried to make it clear to their child that they were doing everything because they loved her.

Cassie's response was daily outbursts of fury and desperation. She often ran through the house screaming, *"I'm going to kill myself! Do you want to watch me? I'll do it, just watch. I'll kill myself. I'll put a knife right here, right through my chest."*

Her mother tried to react with tenderness, she prayed out loud until she calmed down and then she would tell her, like her father often did as well, *"I love you!"*

After her death, her parents found a note from January 2, 1999, *"... I cannot explain in words how much I hurt. I didn't know how to deal with this hurt, so I physically hurt myself ... scratching my hands and wrists with a sharp metal file until I bled."*

In this seemingly hopeless situation, Cassie was invited by Jamie, a believing classmate, to a religious weekend. Jamie said that Cassie had once entrusted to her, *"that she had like given her soul to Satan through one of her friends. She said, 'There's no way I can love God.'"* Yet, God had in no way withdrawn his love from his child. During a worship service all the barriers in Cassie's heart fell. She realized her mistakes and repented with tears. From this point forward, she started a new life. She herself called March 8, 1997 her second birthday. Slowly she opened up for the different youth activities in her church and everything that had to do with

Jesus she took serious. She started reading the bible, discovered a love for nature, for hiking and climbing and poetry. She smiled again and found her way back to a normal family life.

*A*t the end of the summer 1997, she asked her parents if she could change to Columbine High School: *“I can’t witness to the kids at Christian school. I could reach out to many more people if I were in a public one.”* Later her friends reported, *“She didn’t push her religious side on*

anyone. Cassie stood out. She never flirted and we girls didn’t feel like we were in competition with her.” Yes, that was her way; she did not want to convince as much with her words as with her life. In an interview on April 18, 1999, two days before her death, she explained what she understood her apostolate to be: *“I believe the way to proclaim the kingdom of God is very simple: be a loyal friend and give a good example for non-believers and Christians alike in that you try not to contradict yourself, free yourself from all hypocrisy and live for Christ.”*

*“Our faith carried us
through the worst days of our lives.”*

Cassie’s parents eleven years after her death

*S*til, it was a struggle for Cassie to realize her ideal. In a letter to her friend Cassandra she wrote, *“I know I need to give it all to Christ, but it’s so hard. Just when I think I’m getting the hang of giving it all up I find myself trying to take control of my life. It’s spinning all around and around, and I can’t grab a hold onto anything. ... If I could only let my pride fall, I might be able to finally find a sense of peace. I need to be completely honest with myself and to God and stop thinking I can fool him, and I can’t make compromises – he’s GOD, for crying out loud!”*

Her life was very much that of a 17-year-old—full of energy, a love for sports, conflicts with her feelings and her identity, but at the same time with a deep love for Jesus. Cassie was disarmingly generous and good-hearted. She went downtown regularly with her youth group to help the drug addicts. For her, this meant making a sacrifice for something greater than her own comfort. About one week before her death she happened to be talking to her mother about dying. She said, *“Mom, I’m not afraid to die, because I’ll be in heaven.”*

*T*hen April 20th came. Cassie went to the school library as usual to study. Suddenly a teacher burst through the door and yelled at the students to crawl under the tables because there were people with guns in the hallway. A short time later, Eric and Dylan, two students at the high school, came into the library, shot around and cheered after each shot. They were shouting out things like, *“We’ve been waiting to do this our whole lives.”*

*A*ll the details of the event, and especially the dialog in the library, will never be fully reconstructed. Many people have said different things and the journalists have given various reports, but Cassie’s mother Misty Bernall wrote in her book, *“Josh, a sophomore who spoke with me a few weeks after the incident said, ‘I couldn’t see anything when those guys came up to Cassie, but I could recognize her voice. I could hear everything like it was right next to me. One of them asked her if she believed in God. She paused, like she didn’t know what she was going to answer, and then she said yes. “She must have been scared, but her voice*

didn't sound shaky. It was strong. Then they asked her why, though they didn't give her a chance to respond. They just blew her away.'"

*E*ric and Dylan killed eleven other students and one of their teachers; afterwards they shot themselves. As members of an occult group, they had been planning the assassinations and suicide for quite some time and they purposely choose April 20, the birthday of Adolf Hitler.

The news spread around the world. "Do you believe in God?" Cassie said yes and paid for it with her life. Yet the sacrifice of her life, her blood-testimony to Christ opened the way to faith for countless others. One of her classmates, Jordan, testified, "*I've begun to think about how temporary everything is, including human life. ... I think a death like this should get us asking, 'What is important in life?' ... I even look at my relationship with my husband differently. We try to pray together now, every night.*"

Josh also changed his whole way of thinking after this event: "*I still live for baseball, but there are other things that are way more important to me now than they were before, like my family, my little brother, and my friends. I guess I looked at being a teenager as being immortal. ... Now I can't think of it that way. I have to live today to its fullest, because I realize you can leave this earth at any given point in your life.*"

*C*assie's parents had many opportunities to share their family's story with teenagers and adults. "*Sometimes there were thousands in the audience,*" they testified, "*to whom we could transmit hope and strength in Faith. We thank so many who have supported and carried us through the tragedy and most importantly, our Father, God. He himself lost a child – his son, Jesus Christ – and it is he who has given us the strength to bear our loss.*"

*"I try to stand up for my faith at school ...
I will die for my God.
I will die for my faith.
It's the least I can do for Christ dying for me."
Cassie's diary, 1998*

In their conferences, Misty and Brad encourage parents who are confronted with a similar situation as theirs, "*If we've learned anything from Cassie's short life, it is that no adolescent, however rebellious, is doomed by fate. With warmth, self-sacrifice, and honesty – with the love that ultimately comes from God – every child can be guided and saved.*"

Source: Misty Bernall, "she said yes, the

A Place at the Feet of Jesus

Troubling pictures of the revolutions in North Africa are still vivid in our minds, and new reports about the radicalization in Islamic countries reach us daily. Many Christians flee to other countries, and those who remain among the faithful in their homeland have to expect the worst. A moving example of a true confessor of the faith was given by the Pakistani Minister for Religious Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, who was murdered on March 2, 2011.

Shahbaz Bhatti (1968 – 2011) and his four brothers and one sister grew up in the Catholic town of Khushpur, also known as the “Vatican of Pakistan” because many priests and religious have come from there.

Early on, Shahbaz began to realize the public disadvantage of Christians, who make up only 1.7% of the Pakistani population. Therefore, he founded an organization when he was just 17, planned demonstrations, studied law and, in his growing engagement for the protection of all non-Muslims and against any form of injustice, became the co-founder of the “All Pakistan Minorities Alliance” in 2002.

Six years later, the 40-year-old was the first and only Christian to be elected to the country’s parliament and named the Minister for Religious Minorities. He then did everything he could to repeal the notorious “Anti-blasphemy Law”, which put any offense to Mohammed under the penalty of death. He also fought for the release of anybody who had already been unjustly sentenced to death by this law.

Shahbaz Bhatti, a deeply faithful Catholic, considered every effort for the unprotected and oppressed his “mission”, through which he purposely wanted to give a “testimony to faith in Christ”. The increasing number of death threats from Muslim extremists did not hold him back either, and then one day a Taliban commando shot the 42-year-old man in his state car on his way to work in the capital Islamabad.

Anticipating that one day he would be the grain of wheat that would fall in the ground and die so that people might live together in peace in his country, Shahbaz Bhatti wrote his very moving spiritual testimony in 2005, which explained why he never gave up his fight for God and his oppressed brethren.

“My name is Shahbaz Bhatti. I was born into a Catholic family. My father, a retired teacher, and my mother, a housewife, raised me according to Christian values and the teachings of the Bible, which influenced my childhood. Since I was a child, I was accustomed to going to church and finding profound inspiration in the teachings, the sacrifice, and the crucifixion of Jesus. It was his love that led me to offer my service to the Church.

The frightening conditions into which the Christians of Pakistan had fallen disturbed me. I remember one Good Friday when I was just thirteen years old: I heard a homily on the sacrifice of Jesus for our redemption and for the salvation of the world. And I thought of responding to his love by giving love to my brothers and sisters, placing myself at the service of Christians, especially of the poor, the needy, and the persecuted who live in this Islamic country.

I have been asked to put an end to my battle, but I have always refused, even at the risk of my own life. My response has always been the same. I do not want popularity, I do not want positions of power. I only want a place at the feet of Jesus.

I want my life, my character, my actions to speak of me and say that I am following Jesus Christ.

This desire is so strong in me that I consider myself privileged whenever - in my combative effort to help the needy, the poor, the persecuted Christians of Pakistan - Jesus should wish to accept the sacrifice of my life. I want to live for Christ and it is for Him that I want to die. I do not feel any fear in this country. Many times the extremists have wanted to kill me, imprison me; they have threatened me, persecuted me, and terrorized my family telling my parents to make me give up my mission for the Christians and poverty stricken otherwise they would lose me. But my father always encouraged me.

I say that, as long as I am alive, until the last breath, I will continue to serve Jesus and this poor, suffering humanity, the Christians, the needy, the poor. I believe that the Christians of the world who have reached out to the Muslims hit by the tragedy of the earthquake of 2005 have built bridges of solidarity, of love, of comprehension, and of tolerance between the two religions. If these efforts continue, I am convinced that we will succeed in winning the hearts and minds of the extremists. This will produce a change for the better: the people will not hate, will not kill in the

name of religion, but will love each other, will bring harmony, will cultivate peace and comprehension in this region.

I have to tell you that I find a lot of encouragement in the Bible and in the life of Jesus Christ. The more I read the Old and the New Testament, the Bible verses and the words of the Lord, the more my strength and resolution grow. When I consider the fact that Jesus Christ offered everything, that God sent his only Son for our redemption and salvation, I ask myself how I can follow on the way to Calvary. Our Lord said, *'Come, take up your cross and follow me!'*

My favorite passage of scripture is, *'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.'* I believe that the needy, the poor, the orphans, whatever their religion, must be considered above all as human beings. I think that these persons are part of my body in Christ, that they are the persecuted and needy part of the body of Christ. If we bring this mission to its conclusion, then we will have won a place at the feet of Jesus, and I will be able to look at him without feeling shame."

Shortly before his death, Shahbaz Bhatti explained,

"I would like to tell everybody that I believe in Jesus Christ who gave his own life for us. I know what the 'Cross' is, and I follow him. ... I live ... for the suffering people and I am ready to die defending their rights. ... Pray for me ... I am a man who has burnt his bridges. There is no going back. I will fight fanaticism and defend Christians to my death."

*T*he openness and sincerity with which the Catholic minister opposed fanaticism and worked for religious freedom and dialog between religions even brought him the respect of numerous Muslim Imams and other religious leaders. The Pakistani Bishops Conference unanimously decided to ask the Holy Father to officially recognize him as a martyr and the patron of religious freedom.

Faith Led Us Together

Our friend Jeremy Pilch, a convert from Norwich, England married Laurretta Osunde, a lawyer from a deeply faithful Nigerian family, in the Norwich Cathedral in September 2011. They have their common faith to thank that they met one another and are now a happily married couple.

Jeremy, who is currently writing his doctorate about the Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev, tells:

“Although my mother is Catholic, the Anglican relatives on my father’s side of the family wanted my sister and me to be baptized and raised in the Anglican Church. Religion did not play a big role in my childhood though, and it did not mean anything to me. Much later, however, a serious illness and suffering in my soul helped me to recognize the beauty of the Catholic Faith.

Everything started at the age of 16 when many questions suddenly bothered me about the point and purpose of my life. There had to be more to it than just working hard to shine in athletics and at school. More and more I lost my bearings. Such a senselessness and emptiness took hold of me that I stopped being the brilliant, model student that I had once been, although my studies had always been important to me. In this difficult phase, I became involved with a group which did not have a good influence on me. I was really down.

The good thing was, though, that I came in close contact with religion for the first time. In my miserable condition, I opened up to our young, Anglican school chaplain who took care of me with a lot of sensitivity. In my inner doubt I had not yet started to pray, but inside I often yelled ‘*God, help me!*’

Something else very nice happened: my mother started practicing her Catholic faith and attending church. This certainly gave her strength to stand by me during my crisis. Mother prayed a lot for me

back then without me knowing it, as she did later when I started studying at Oxford. I had to drop out though because of the inner weight I was carrying. Once again, it was my sad disposition that helped me in the end to turn more deeply to the Faith. I started going regularly to communion in the Anglican Church and always told myself, ‘*This is Jesus!*’ In my spiritual need and interior searching, however, I did not find any help from the Anglicans. Mother started bringing me more often with her to the Catholic Mass where I went forward for the blessing at the time of communion. This always caused me, a 20-year-old student, to have tears in my eyes as I went back to the pew because in my heart I already knew: only the Catholic Church can give me true communion with Christ.

I fell in love with the Russian world during my first visit there at the age of 18 and then later in the course of my studies of Russian literature and spirituality. Having spent a lot of time in St. Petersburg, I pondered, ‘*Why not become Orthodox?*’ Since I didn’t have any Orthodox friends though, and the Orthodox Church seemed inaccessible and not very missionary to me, God kept me from taking that step.

There was not an Anglican church in St. Petersburg, so I often went to Holy Mass in the Catholic Church of St. Catherine. At Holy Communion, I always went to the priest with my arms crossed over my chest to receive the blessing. Then something completely unexpected happened in September 2001: I had gone forward like I

was accustomed to receive the sign of the cross and suddenly the priest held out the host to me.

It was an indescribable, overpowering experience although it was clear to me that this never should have happened. I was an Anglican. When I was in Norwich at Christmas time, I talked to a priest in the Cathedral. He asked me, without pushing, *'Wouldn't it help you to become Catholic?'* I simply answered *'Yes'*. I finally reached my goal on July 28, 2002. During the Sunday Mass at the Cathedral, I was solemnly accepted into the Catholic Church. At the same time, I received Holy Communion and Confirmation. A deep, unknown joy and a wonderful consolation filled my soul that day. “

'That is the end of my spiritual journey,' I thought after my conversion. But there was still a

certain sadness in me. I mean, I had experienced a lot of healing, but it was so hard for me to believe that for God and for the others there was really something lovable about me. Yet my new Catholic friends and priests, as well as the brothers and sisters of the Family of Mary, helped me to open up interiorly in this first year as a Catholic.

My mother's cancer especially helped me to understand that Catholicism is not something intellectual but above all that it has to do with spiritual, inner life and that it is about love. Mother, who so silently and bravely carried her illness, taught me through her example to stop thinking so much about myself. And so God was able to make a place in me for Laretta, my future wife. Today, I see that our meeting one another was truly led by God because I never expected such a gift.”

A way of Faith and life together

*I*n contrast to Jeremy, Laretta comes from a large African family in which the Catholic Faith played a pivotal role. Her wealthy parents did a lot for the poverty stricken in their area, and therefore were always called Papa and Mama by them. Since they wanted to give their own children a good education, Laretta and her siblings were sent to England.

“Already at the age of nine I was in an English boarding school. In Nigeria, ever since I was little, I was accustomed to speaking with Jesus personally, so I snuck out of the large dormitory every morning to go and pray alone in the bathroom. As a teenager, and then at the university as well, thanks to various prayer groups I was able to keep my faith which had always been important to me. After studying law in London and Oxford, I wanted to work as a lawyer in a smaller city, where I would have a little peace.

There, I soon met Jeremy, my great love. Yet before I even moved to his hometown, we met for the first time on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Nonetheless, his long eulogies back then about philosophy and the Russian writer Dostojewski did not interest me in the least.

I was very comfortable at my new job in the law firm, but I was alone a lot. So, as I had often done, I searched for a prayer group close by. The dean at the Catholic cathedral in Norwich told me about the youth group that met for prayer every Tuesday. I went right away, and there he was again—Jeremy! *'That's impossible,'* I thought at first. *'That's the first and the last time. I'll never show my face here again!'*

But then as we conversed, different than it had been in Israel where only Jeremy spoke, I found him really nice. Besides, it wouldn't be bad to have somebody who knew the area, I thought. I wasn't expecting anything more. Jeremy on the other hand wrote me a text the very next day: *'What are you doing this weekend?'* And the first of many dates took place. He showed me around town and especially the chapel and cell of the mystic St. Julian of Norwich. Soon, we

started to attend Holy Mass and pray together regularly. And before we knew it, our friendship turned into mutual love.

On my birthday, April 23, 2011, shortly after the Day of Prayer in honour of the Lady of All Nations in Norwich, Jeremy asked for my hand in marriage, and, without hesitating, I joyfully said yes. Although we had known each other for only a year, we were both certain that this deci-

sion for love and for marriage was good before God. We were married on September 24, 2011. It was the Feast of Our Lady of Walsingham, the largest Marian shrine in England, and by chance the 950th anniversary of the laying of the corner stone. The day before our wedding we made a pilgrimage there, as we often had, made our confessions and deliberately entrusted our future together to Our Lady.”

Just three months after the wedding, Lairetta became pregnant and the two of them were so excited when their baby boy Nathanael was born on July 9 this year. “If, in the future, God grants one of our children a vocation to religious life, it would be a great grace. We are not making any plans though; we are happy with whatever God gives us.”

*“Only through believing, then,
does faith grow and become stronger.”*

*Pope Benedict XVI in his Apostolic Letter “Porta Fidei”
for the Year of Faith 2012*