

Triumph of the Heart

THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

Family of Mary

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“You are Peter, the rock...”

*On April 27, 2014, the Feast of Divine Mercy
Pope Francis solemnly canonized*

Pope John XIII and Pope John Paul II

Hero of Charity

*Blessed Maria Rafols (1781-1853) from Spain,
relatively unknown in the English-speaking world,
is one of the greatest Sacred Heart mystics in the history of the Church.
Although her mission as a messenger of the Sacred Heart
first began to be realized one hundred years after her death,
the founder of the “Merciful Sisters of Saint Anne” made a great impression
during her lifetime through her works of charity toward the sick and suffering
in which she overcame all obstacles.*

*M*aria was born in Villafranca del Panades close to Barcelona, the daughter of a large family of millers. Her parents sought to instill in their daughter’s heart concern for the poor and, above all, a simple, strong faith. It was not long before others noted her sharp mind and her extraordinarily deep love for God. The sudden death of her father and several relatives put her through the hard school of letting go of earthly

attachments and awoke in the 12-year-old the desire to give her life completely to God. A year later, on the day of her First Holy Communion, she felt pushed to consecrate herself to the Sacred Heart and Our Lady and made a vow of chastity. After this, the family sent their talented child to the boarding school of the Sisters of St. John in Barcelona where Maria Rafols received an intense spiritual formation over the next nine years.

Our Lady of Grace

*F*r. Juan Bonal, a zealous chaplain at Holy Cross Hospital in Barcelona, was impressed

by Maria’s maturity and how selflessly already at that time she helped those in need, and he

convinced her to come work at the hospital. In 1804, he received a call for help from the king's renowned hospital in Zaragoza, Our Lady of Grace. As was customary at the time, the physically sick, mentally ill, poor and homeless were all cared for under one roof. The conditions for the patients however, because of the negligent and corrupt staff, was miserable and chaotic and urgently required the presence of religious sisters to serve the sick. Within just a few months, twelve young women gathered around 23-year-old Maria Rafols. Fr. Bonal entrusted the direction to the capable and wise sister who wanted to dedicate her life to God and the service of the sick, and therefore left family and homeland behind her. Her first

visit in Zaragoza was to the miraculous image Our Lady of the Pillar, the famous "Virgen del Pilar", where the little group entirely entrusted their new assignment to Mary's protection and assistance. In a certain sense, this was the birth of the "Merciful Sisters of Saint Anne". Although she was young, Mother Rafols proved to be the true heart of the modest foundation; she chose the sisters' habit and above all its spirit by continuing to develop her work for the poor through her inexhaustible patience and charity. Despite their hiddenness, the sisters' selfless ministry to the sick soon aroused the amazement of the public. Under her astute guidance, the hospital was quickly transformed into a place of loving and skilled care.

*"From the beginning,
our sisters have been called
Sisters of Charity
because since our institute's foundation
this virtue has been considered the greatest."*

(Statutes 1824)

The occupation of Zaragoza

During the Napoleonic Wars, French troops decided in the middle of June 1808 to occupy Zaragoza. Under the protection of "Our Lady of the Pillar" the Spanish military and the armed inhabitants were determined to defend the city to the last drop of their blood. In these weeks of great distress, the heroic courage of the Merciful Sisters was just as great as that of the military defending the city. In the midst of the bloody battles, they never tired to console the dying and bring in and care for the wounded in the hospital. Especially Mother Rafols, just 26 years

old, showed little regard for sleeplessness, bullets and grenades, and had a cheerful disposition at any time of day or night. To break the resistance, French canons started firing at the hospital in the beginning of August. The sick fled in panic, and many of the demented wandered aimlessly through streets screaming in terror, some even ran right into the enemy camps. Under continual gunfire, explosions and incessant calls to God for help, the sisters and Fr. Bonal immediately cleared the whole hospital and dragged the remaining patients to a nearby church which had

not yet been destroyed. In the church, Mother Rafols suddenly realized that one of the patients was missing and went back to look for him. She did not give up the search until she found him buried in a pile of rubble at the hospital. As she was carrying him away in her arms, something miraculous occurred: for a few moments the man's face took on the Lord's countenance, and he said to her, "*My daughter, you greatly deserve this reward!*" Compelled by selfless love, she headed alone to the enemy camp to look for other missing patients. The French, amazed by her courage and resolve, let her enter the camp, and with gentle reassurance she was able to bring the frightened patients back to the city.

After two months, the French had to concede victory to the unbending resistance of the Zaragozans. Before they left, however, they set fire to the remains of the hospital in which they had been staying. What a suffering for Mother Rafols—everything she had built up with great effort was consumed in flames.

*F*our months later, in December, the French were standing again at the gates of Zaragoza. After they stormed the city at the end of January, the streets and hospitals were overcrowded with wounded and dying. There was nobody left to bury the dead, and Typhus and hunger were raging everywhere. What Mother Rafols and the sisters managed to do in those days was nothing

short of superhuman. They cared for and consoled people day and night and had nothing to eat themselves since they rationed anything they had with those who were suffering. Her heroic trust in God was the only thing which kept her standing. They had nothing in the completely inadequate building which had been set up as a make-shift hospital. The sick and wounded died not only from their injuries but from hunger, thirst and exhaustion.

Mother Rafols could no longer watch this misery and pleaded relentlessly to the Sacred Heart for help. Consequently, the Lord forced her to go onto the streets of the half-demolished city with her sisters and beg for food. And God repaid her obedience through the miracle: with the small amount of left-overs they gathered in their basket, they were able to feed everybody in the hospital and many people outside.

*T*he French cut the water supply to the city and the shortage became so acute that, as she said, "*you could not even buy a glass of water from someone for the sick.*" Mother Rafols remembered a clay pitcher with holy water which they had in the oratory. Obeying an intuition she let every thirsty person she met have a drink from it. And God multiplied the water in such a way that the pitcher was never empty and "*this time I was able to quench the thirst of several thousand people.*"

The path of light

*O*n the same day as the miracle with the holy water pitcher, the Sacred Heart required a much more dramatic proof of Maria Rafols' trust. Following his explicit order, and against all the shouts of warning from the Spanish, Mother Rafols took two of her sisters and made way toward the French headquarters on the hill opposite the city. The Lord wanted them to be unrelenting in asking the commanding officer of the occupying forces, Marshal Lannes, for food and water for

the city's inhabitants. Before them lay a 45 minute walk over graves and decaying corpses, through the middle of the heaviest cannon fire. Maria Rafols wrote later, "*From the moment we passed the French lines, a rain of gunfire from both sides spattered around us. We were surrounded on all sides by the imminent danger of death. The confusion and darkness due to the clouds of smoke was so great that we couldn't make a single step forward. ... I continually*

trusted that the divine protection would be with us; I called out loud to my poor sister who was so frightened, and wanted to turn back, 'Stick with me!' In that moment, such a radiant and luminous path opened up in the middle of the occupation forces that the danger and the soldiers vanished from my sight, and my eyes beheld in the air a blessed Host on a throne of incredible beauty. It was guarded by a throng of angels which diverted all shots and led me, like the star for the Three Wise Men, to the general's camp. Before such a miracle and in the presence of the Sacrament of Love, I no longer realized all the dangers, and I fell to my knees in deep reverence three times along the way to adore my dearly beloved Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament. So I remained until my uneasy sisters called me to my senses; we continued without being hit by a single shot.

"When we arrived, the general, astounded to see us unscathed, asked us how we managed to make it there alive. I answered him, 'Your Excellency, Divine Providence guards

us continually; it guides our steps.' Deeply moved, he gave us everything we asked for and more. After we had thanked him, we returned to Zaragoza with the help of the same star or lighted path that our so good Jesus miraculously provided for us and on which he in the Holy Eucharist showed us the way and guided us." When they arrived in the city, the completely exhausted sisters realized as they were helping to carry in the relief supplies, that their habits were tattered with bullet holes; however, they had remained unscathed. This great miracle made an immense impression on the citizens of Zaragoza.

Without a doubt, the heroic love of the Merciful Sisters culminated in the months before the surrender of Zaragoza at the end of February 1809. Ultimately, it cost the lives of nine sisters from this little flock, not victims of the war's violence but of hunger, illness and fatigue. The city later gave Mother Rafols the beautiful and well deserved honorary title "Hero of Charity".

Mother Rafols did not differentiate, and she did all that she could to save the lives of the Spanish as well as the French. She obtained clemency from the French general for a number of Spanish nationals who had been condemned to death, as well as helping many French prisoners to escape. For this she should have been shot according to martial law, but the Spanish soldier ordered to execute her could not withstand the unconditional love of the religious sister; he lowered his weapon and let her go.

"My dear sisters shall never be discouraged. In everything I leave them behind in writing, they will see that I daily felt God's providence in an extraordinary way in all my works of charity."

The suffering of a mother

*T*he following years also provided ample opportunity for Maria Rafols and her sisters to grow in love and trust. Painful tensions within the order caused Mother Rafols in 1812, at the age

of 31, to step down as the Mother Superior for the sake of unity, even though she remained the soul of the congregation. It was her wish to take over the direction of the hospital ward for abandoned

and orphaned children. Until the end of her life, she poured herself out in motherly care for these little children and foundlings, in whom she saw Christ. It was one of her greatest sufferings to watch many of them die in her arms. She became a patient mother and educator for the older orphans whom she led to God: *“We live like angels of charity. When God’s creatures begin to trust us through our example, which is the best sermon, we will light the flame of all virtues in them, but especially faith, hope and love.”*

From 1820 to 1823, political unrest put the sisters, and especially Maria Rafols, in danger. Several times hospital employees, incited by hatred towards the Faith, attempted to murder them. Mother Rafols later wrote to her spiritual daughters, *“Even if somebody wants to kill you unjustly, do not justify yourselves; never lose your cheerfulness; believe and hope always in the Sacred Heart of Jesus and in his Most Holy Mother. When necessary, cheerfulness will deliver you from death and from every physical and spiritual danger through true miracles. It has done many great things to my benefit.”*

One day, for example, the community bell miraculously started ringing, as if to warn Mother Rafols. She understood the divine sign immediately and with composure departed from her companions to meet the aggressors. As the murderers stood before her, however, they were so captivated by the calmness she radiated that they asked Mother for forgiveness, *“Señora, you have an inexplicable ability to soften stones!”*

In 1834, civil war broke out in Spain and with it a brutal persecution of anything religious.

Priests and religious on grounds of mere suspicion were locked up, exiled or even executed; 52-year-old Mother Rafols also spent two months in prison. Although she was found innocent on a different accusation a year later, the authorities exiled her to Huesca. There, in the bishop’s hospital, was the only other house of Merciful Sisters, and yet letting go of Zaragoza where Maria Rafols had given her all for 30 years threw her into a great darkness and interior suffering. The hearts of Jesus and Mary alone were her consolation. Her poor health visibly deteriorated further due to the meager supplies of the sisters. Nevertheless, here too, Mother Rafols soon became irreplaceable in the hospital because of her tender love.

She, who never complained or expressed a wish, did ask of her own accord at the end of the civil war in 1841 for permission to return to Zaragoza. With great joy and emotion her sisters welcomed her back after six years of bitter absence. They soon realized, however, that the physical strength of the 59-year-old was spent—unlike her power to love and the strength of her spirit. Maria Rafols remained the director of the orphan ward through 1845 and continued even beyond as a tender mother for the children before a progressive paralysis slowly started taking hold in 1850. Now her place was more and more before the tabernacle, then in bed where she received her spiritual daughters giving advice, consolation and motherly wisdom until the end. Full of affection, Mother Rafols looked to her sisters with a last smile before she gave her life of truly heroic charity back to God on August 30, 1853 at the age of 71.

Die Schmerzensmutter von Sr. Maria Rafols

General Jean Lannes, “Marshal of France” and Napoleon’s close confidant, was an austere expert at combat and nothing brought him quickly out of composure. Mother Rafols’ exemplary courage and her touching, selfless request on her people’s behalf moved him so much, that he even issued her an authorization to move about wherever she wanted, something which was unheard of. He permitted her to come at any time to the French camp and take supplies for the hospital. Driven by charity, she braved a thousand dangers every day, and every day the Lord renewed the miracle of the path of light, and so she was able to secure the survival of hundreds of patients in the hospital.

Write my daughter

Once, during a visit to her place of birth in 1815, and then from the time of her exile in Huesca the Sacred Heart of Jesus appeared to Mother Rafols, and the Lord gave her a message which she was to write down. Due to the blessed's extraordinary desire to be completely hidden and forgotten, writing for her was a martyrdom which required the greatest self-denial. *"The torments I feel in writing down such a private report are so great that it seems to me that everything else I had to endure during my lifetime is nothing in comparison."*

The uniqueness of the messages lies in the fact that it was Jesus' explicit will that they be lost for nearly 100 years since they were given for a later time, which would begin with the discovery of Maria Rafols' writings, a time of great persecution and a catastrophic falling away from the Faith. The writings would be an encouragement and strengthening for many; the timeframe and situation surrounding their discovery were described by the Lord with unbelievable precision. *"When the hour has arrived, I will give a*

sister of the order whom I have predetermined the desire to search through the archives from the hospital in Zaragoza ... my daughter! What you write now will be found by one of your daughters whom I have determined in the month of January 1932...."

This turned out to be Sr. Naya, the assistant novice mistress who began searching for the written testimonies of their founder in 1926 and, according to Jesus' words, discovered the most important writings in 1931 and 1932.

In the appeals penned on the pages of her writings, the Lord again shows us the means we must apply in our own difficult and precarious time: above all personal conversion and prayer, praying the family Rosary, *"because with great tenacity the enemy pursues the dechristianization of families."* In a special way however, it is 1. Trusting love and veneration of his merciful heart, 2. Refuge in Our Lady, 3. Love for the Holy Eucharist and 4. A renewal of the priesthood.

The original, prophetic writings discovered in 1932 were brought that very year to Rome for examination. The librarian for the Vatican Archives at the time, Msgr. Angelo Mercati, definitively determined their undoubtable authenticity. On this occasion, Pope Pius XI also looked into the writings and saw with deep emotion that the Lord, 96 years earlier, mentioned him by name as "My beloved son Pius XI" who would institute the Feast of Christ the King, something he had already done in 1925.

The Miracle Worker from Belgium

Although the Church has not yet canonized Fr. Paul of Moll (1824-1896), the affable Benedictine was like a second Vincent de Paul or another Cure of Ars as his influence went well beyond the boundaries of his Flemish homeland. His legendary love was just as great for the poor and suffering as for the rich and powerful. He proved it to them through thousands of healings, miracles and inspired, fatherly advice. Witnesses used scripture to summarize his life: "He went about doing good and healing all ... for God was with him." (Acts 10:38)

*F*r. Paul, whose civil name was Franz Luyckx, was the son of a prosperous farmer in Moll, a province of Antwerp, Belgium. In 1848, at the age of 24, he joined the Benedictines at the Termonde Abbey. He was ordained a priest 10 years later, and so began an intense apostolate of prayer and self-renunciation.

Above all, he was given the charisma of working miracles and healing people, and he faithfully used these gifts until the end of his life 40 years later. God entrusted this sublime mission to him when he was close to dying from a lung infection. "The doctors had given up on me. That is when Jesus appeared accompanied by the Holy

Virgin, St. Joseph and St. Benedict. As Mary took my hand, the Savior laid his right hand on my head and said to me, 'Be healed! From now on you shall be a consolation to a great number of people. I will give you everything that you ask of me for others.' I was instantly healed."

*I*n a Paris newspaper 'L'Univers' Count Segur wrote about Fr. Paul of Moll, "In fulfilling his divine task, he acted as though he were merely a witness, merely an obedient instrument. In his humility, he often attributed his miracles to St. Benedict, but for his Flemish compatriots, he was hailed as a great saint."

Anytime, day or night

*O*ne could count on Fr. Paul anytime, especially since he slept very little, often standing up with his back against the wall. From 5 a.m. onwards, people, even from America, flocked to the monastery. Count Segur wrote,

"What was so deeply touching and attractive about this man of God was his goodness, his mercy, and his tender sympathy along with his supernatural perceptiveness. Through brief, certain answers he helped everyone

understand the cause of their illness or interior trials as well as the sure means and conditions to receive the graces they wished. Sometimes he revealed the most secret deeds and most hidden thoughts of their souls which he could read like an open book."

The sick, the crippled and the blind were healed instantly or following the fulfilment of what they had been asked to do, like saying a prayer or novena to St. Benedict. Hundreds of crutches left behind in the church are a silent witness to this. He encouraged one severely handicapped boy, *"Young man, hang your crutch on St. Benedict's pedestal, then you will be able to walk."* He did so, and the next instant he ran out of the church shouting for joy. To another, the monk said, *"During the consecration, take your crutches and lay them on the communion rail."* The young man obeyed and was healed. So many miracles happened at the priestly hands of Fr. Paul that somebody rightly remarked, *"You would almost think that this priest performs miracles out of habit*

and to pass time." It is estimated that more than a million people were helped by Fr. Paul.

All the more astonishing then is the fact that none of his Benedictine brothers knew about his miraculous gifts, neither in Termonde nor in the monastery Steenbrugge, which he founded and where he worked for years as prior and confessor for all the monks, nor in Afflighem Abbey which experienced a true revival through his presence. Naturally, everybody noted the popularity of this modest and reserved monk. Ninety percent of the visitors to the monastery from Belgium and beyond came to see him. The torrent of letters from his homeland, France, Germany, England, Holland, Austria, Italy and America were all addressed to Fr. Paul. Yet they did not grasp his extraordinary charisma. It remained so hidden to all of them that a young Fr. Benedict in Steenbrugge who was sick with tuberculosis made a pilgrimage to Lourdes to pray for healing. The prophet is disregarded in his own home! Bishop Faict of Brugge, however, was convinced, *"Fr. Paul of Moll is a saint."*

Answers to their requests

*T*he benevolent miracle worker often held watch at the monastery gate for "lost sheep". The doorbell even rang at the monastery during the night. How surprised was a young man who came without notice at 1 a.m. only to find Fr. Paul already dressed and standing in the doorway waiting to accompany him to his dying brother. Fr. Paul said after the anointing of the sick, *"It was high time! Had I not come, you would not have survived the night. You will recover now though and reach a good old age."*

The housekeeper of a parish priest in Gent, Switzerland, who was suffering from a cancerous tumor on her spine, was astounded to be greeted at the monastery by Fr. Paul with the words, *"I was supposed to leave today, but since I knew that you were coming I stayed home. But of course! I will help you. I have to, because I know how to cure cancer."* He gave her a St. Benedict medal and told her to pray a novena to

him. She did so, and a short time later the cancer disappeared.

On March 19, 1878, a religious sister with a lame and mute orphan came unannounced by train to Termonde. During the trip she worried about how they were going to reach the distant monastery from the station. As soon as they arrived, a coachman hurried over to them, *"Sister, Fr. Paul asked me to bring the two of you to the monastery and to pick you up again this afternoon."* When Fr. Paul saw the little orphan he promised him, *"You will be healed."* And turning to the sister he said, *"Pray two novenas, and if that isn't enough, pray a third."* At the beginning of the third novena the lame, mute child sprung effortlessly one morning from his bed and started talking joyfully.

A blacksmith and his wife from Vieux-Dieu brought their daughter, who was awaiting a serious operation, to Termonde Abbey where

Fr. Paul, although he had never seen them before, said compassionately, *“I was waiting for you yesterday in Antwerp. Your daughter will be healed.”*

According to the opinion of the holy Benedictine, he was never asked to do enough, and often when saying goodbye he probed with child-like urgency, *“Is everybody healthy at home? Have you no other requests?”* After reading a letter from a student, he was rather disappointed and exclaimed, *“but he didn’t ask for anything!”* He encouraged a good friend from Oostkamp, *“Ask anything you want of me and I will obtain it for you.”*

Even while he was traveling, Fr. Paul missed no opportunity to take advantage of his charisma. One day he met a group of school girls taking a walk through the avenue of the Steenbrugge monastery, when he saw a girl among them with a wide brimmed sun hat. He said to her, *“My dear little girl, your eyes are very sick. You need to*

be healed. Here, take this medal, wear it and pray to St. Benedict.” Two days later her eye problems disappeared.

On another occasion, Fr. Paul passed a building site in Antwerp with 20 construction workers. He turned to one of them who had his arm in a sling with words of encouragement, *“Don’t be lazy! Get to work! Take the bandages off your sprained arm!”* He did as he was told and the next moment he painlessly pushed away a heavy wheelbarrow.

Fr. Paul said in all simplicity to a woman whom he had healed, *“Be so good to invite all your friends and acquaintances who are sick to come and visit me. I will heal them all.”* And one Sunday he declared from the pulpit in Steenbrugge, *“I won’t be here much longer. Anybody who is bothered by something and those who are worried about their livestock should come to me. I will be able to help them all.”*

Power over animals and nature

*I*n fact, Fr. Paul of Moll, like his patron St. Paul, became everything for everyone. A landowner close to the Steenbrugge monastery recalled, *“He was really goodness in person, a true father for us all who fulfilled even our most secret wishes. His visit was a blessing every time. He also had compassion with the animals. As a calf in the barn was near death, he bent over the animal which was hardly breathing, petted it gently and said, ‘He’s doing better. Yes, it seems to be healed. Give him something to drink.’ When we set down a bucket of water for the calf, it jumped up, gulped down the water and was as lively as if nothing had happened.”*

There are countless examples which show how powerfully Fr. Paul was able to help with livestock epidemics, harvests threatened by thunderstorms or hail or plagues of caterpillars, worms, spiders, snails or insects in the fields. To

mention just one such miracle, a field was infested with various insects which were greatly damaging the crops. The farmer turned to the well-known miracle worker who told him, *“Bury two medals of St. Benedict in diagonally opposite corners of the field.”* The farmer obeyed and noted exactly where he placed the medals so that he could later retrieve the special remembrances of Fr. Paul. The very next day, the field was free of insects. Out of curiosity, the farmer dug up the medals which, to his astonishment, were surrounded by thousands of dried out insects. He carefully preserved this unique insect collection and brought it to the Benedictine monastery as a proof of the saint’s ability to work miracles. Even after Fr. Paul’s death, notable miracles took place, and were confirmed by veterinarians, whenever farmers trustingly placed a medal of St. Benedict, a letter written by Fr. Paul or his picture on their sick animals or brought these items onto their property.

In the city and abroad

*F*r. Paul paid many visits to the cities of Antwerp, Brussels and Mechlin. No sooner had news of his arrival spread than hundreds came looking for help, forming long lines down the street. The monk, who knew the needs of the suffering better than they themselves, prayed with them, healed, blessed, advised them about their vocations, prophesized about the future, revealed hidden sins and led them to repentance and Confession.

He also brought consolation to many Belgian monasteries, hospitals, institutions and prisons. Wherever he went, he performed miracles with such humility and naturalness that it gave people the impression that it was the most routine thing in the world for him. His words were simple, *“You’re sick, don’t worry; we’ll pray together and tomorrow you will be healthy.”*

Fr. Paul took advantage of his countless train trips, which he always made in third class, to benefit other travelers with unexpected graces. A Benedictine from the English abbey Downside wrote about his observations in the waiting room of the Brugge train station, *“We were all sitting there silently when a monk with a breviary entered the room. His Benedictine habit may have been black once upon a time; his hat was old too and his shoes were worn out. ‘That is Fr. Paul from Steenbrugge,’* whispered a priest to me. And I was happy to finally see the good man whom I had heard so much about. Just then a little old mother came into the room, headed straight over to Fr. Paul and asked him if she could visit him soon

at the monastery. *‘Just tell me your problem here,’* he encouraged her. *‘But my train will be here any minute,’* she replied. *‘Don’t worry,’* he prophesized, *‘it will be delayed by 20 minutes.’* When the station director heard that, his laugh bellowed through the room. Nevertheless, the woman calmly began to confide her concerns to the monk. Her train arrived with a delay of exactly 20 minutes.”

On another occasion, the steam engine on a train trip from Antwerp to Stabroek broke down after five miles. As they were waiting for the replacement part, the passengers disembarked and started picnicking out in the field. The good priest headed for the front and said, *“Let’s see if the engine is as broken as they are making it out to be.”* Next to the locomotive were standing two clueless engineers and a few passengers, one of them with a cane. The Benedictine abruptly borrowed the cane and stuck it in a random pipe from the engine. As he was poking around he turned to the engineers and said, *“This pipe seems plugged to me. Clean it out!”* The two of them started laughing at the old monk who wanted to repair a steam engine with a cane. The others standing around also just shook their heads. *“Try it!”* the priest ordered in a serious tone. *“All aboard! The engine will run fine, I assure you!”* Now the two obeyed immediately, as if pushed by a higher authority, and to everyone’s great astonishment, the train started moving forward.

Everything has its price

*T*here were also those who made fun of the “medal peddler” and mocked him. Most of the time, however, a single glance from the saint, like Padre Pio, was enough to bring those who had misjudged, slandered or persecuted him to their knees and then to follow him to the confessional where he unveiled the most hidden

sins of their lives.

Seen from the outside, perhaps it seemed like a game! *“Only on the last day will one experience what I have suffered. Satan often comes at night and tortures me, but I cannot complain because Our Lady consoles me,”* Fr. Paul entrusted to a religious sister. As a

matter of fact, he made a sacrifice of love for every transmitted grace. He often prayed for a long time with the sick and suffered interiorly with them so much so that beads of sweat formed on his brow. It was heard said more than once, *"It has cost me much to obtain this grace."* To others he promised, *"I will help you to carry your cross. I pray with you."*

"Out of love for you, O Jesus"

*H*e wrote to a spiritual daughter in Antwerp, *"Somebody criticized me because I always preach about God's love. So I stopped, but God made me understand that I should speak about his great love for mankind in all my homilies, conferences and Confessions."* He wrote with rare beauty countless letters to those making requests, friends and strangers about God's love which streamed out of his overflowing heart. *"Sometimes I am so filled that I feel enough strength in me to convert the whole world."* It is known that this priest, zealous for souls, was often in the confessional until 11 p.m. and that many Poor Souls from purgatory were waiting for him in his cell to receive consolation or liberation.

When did he take care of his enormous correspondence with 30 new letters arriving every day? No wonder he wrote at night, *"Don't be upset if I keep it brief; I don't have much time. I am overloaded with work and stacks of letters!"* He revealed to a confidant the secret of how he was able to take care of everything, *"I am always united with my dear Lord. He is the one who dictates to me what I should write. God's love is my wealth, my joy, my food, my treasure, my consolation, my life, my all."* Therefore he began every letter with the same words, *"Out of love for you, O Lord!"* Then would follow, for example, *"Where else would you seek and find God's love than in the Holy Eucharist? There Jesus' love is*

That was the case with an old man who dragged himself on crutches to Fr. Paul at the monastery church. He left him standing there and prayed the Stations of the Cross twice before he gently took the old man's crutches and placed them next to the statue of St. Benedict. Now it was the thankful old man who effortlessly and devoutly prayed the Stations of the Cross.

visible and exposed for adoration. Converse with him often. Just look at what he suffered out of love for us: contempt, derision, disgrace, blows, wounds and finally death on the Cross. Yes, God does everything out of love for man. I will pray that Jesus helps you to understand the value of the Cross because, like the Apostles, everybody today flees from the Cross. Only now and then does anybody say, *'Out of love for you, Jesus!'* This sigh of love is like an opening in your heart through which God's love immediately enters. On the days when you feel little or no love, don't complain. The devil does everything in his power to take away your love for Jesus. Say then in your heart, *'O Jesus, I feel no love, but in the hope that you will give me more love, I accept this with love.'*

Openly, but without complaint, he entrusted to a religious sister, *"I worked until the last drop of my strength. Yet to the end, the most important thing for me was to love God with the most tender, friendly love that I could and to pray that all the people of the whole world would love him too."* Anybody who turns with trust to the great miracleworker may take personally the promise Fr. Paul made to a close friend in Oostkamp, *"When I am in heaven someday, then ask for even more! There I will have enough time to take care of you, and I will be still more powerful."* He kept his word!

Miracles take place to this day at his grave in Termonde, and testimonies about miraculously answered prayers come in from all around the world. Fr. Paul died on February 24, 1896 of dropsy. His body, which was found to be completely intact three years later, rests today in the Termonde Abbey church where many burning candles testify daily to the continual love of the faithful for this saintly priest.

To Ask and to Grant Forgiveness

Ania Goledzinowska from Poland is one of the countless people who was far from God and then experienced God's merciful love in such a powerful way in Medjugorje that it completely changed her life. Such a grace of conversion far surpasses the miracle of a physical healing. The former showgirl and model publically testifies wherever she goes, "Our Lady saved me!"

I was born in 1983 to a poor family in Warsaw, Poland. Although we did not have much, I was a happy child until the age of four because I knew that my parents loved me. When my sister was born, I grew very jealous and started to hate her. My father suffered much due to the Communist regime and he drowned his pain in vodka which eventually drove him to his death. My mother fell into depression and began grappling for something to hold on to. She started bringing strange men home whom I did not like at all. When one of these "uncles" abused me at the age of ten and my mother refused to believe it, my heart filled with hate. I hated my mother because she was there and my father because he was not. I hated the whole world.

My grandmother adopted me, but I was so nasty to her that she wanted to send me back home after just a few weeks. I lost my mind at the thought of having to go back to my mother and sister, so I went into my grandmother's medicine cabinet and mixed myself a pill cocktail. "*When I am no longer around, they will realize what they did to me,*" I said to myself. "*They will cry with despair, but I won't be here anymore.*"

But being only 13, I had miscalculated; the suicide attempt failed. When I regained consciousness, I found myself in a hospital across from a psychologist who was trying to convince me to spend some time in a home for difficult girls. "*I'm not crazy,*" was my first thought, and my second one was, "*I have to get out of here!*" So I ran away.

I lived on the streets with the dream of one day becoming a famous actress. My friends and I felt like heroes when we broke all the rules. We drank ourselves silly, took drugs of all sorts—even though we saw how some had died from overdoses. We stole and began dealing drugs in order to "earn" some money. It is understandable that in such circles brutality and sex were part of the daily routine. My first boyfriend, a few years after breaking up, beat his next girlfriend to death and threw her in a dumpster. It could have been me!

At the age of 16, I met some people who offered me a modeling job in Italy. This was my big chance! I did not think twice and told them immediately that I would do it since I had nothing to lose.

Italy, my dream

A certain Yuri picked me up and, with two other girls, chauffeured us to Italy. I was full

of anticipation and did not even ask myself at first why we went to Turin instead of Milan as

we had been told. Yuri brought us to a third class accommodation, which originally had certainly been a garage, and took my passport. I received no answers to my questions and slowly my enthusiasm turned to panic. My fears turned out to be true—they wanted to make a prostitute out of me. I tried to escape, but before I was able to, a client raped me with the pimp's consent.

In time, I managed to get away, but I did not want to return to Poland; I did not want to return a failure but a success. I found a job in Milan with a modeling agency. That is how I made my way into the world of showbusiness. I met a rich man and, for a year and a half, lived in the trance of an unreal world of money, drugs, alcohol and masks. I had everything anybody could desire,

from a dream home with a swimming pool to a private plane. It seemed like I had been lucky. Then one day Marco said to me, "*Ania, I can give you anything you want, the only thing I can't give you is love.*"

That was the beginning of the end. I was speechless—I would rather return to the working world and earn my own money. In the meantime, I had a lot of friends and had no problem finding a job as a model and later as a showgirl on television. Since I wanted to make a career of it, I had to play by the rules of this milieu. That meant, for example, sniffing a line of cocaine before breakfast. This lifestyle so weakened my body and mind that I often did not know what I had done just a few hours earlier.

Port Cervo is a vacation spot on the north coast of Sardinia which Karim Aga Khan IV, one of the richest men in the world, built up in the 1960's for exclusive guests. Along with four and five star hotels, exquisite restaurants and night clubs, it also boasts the summer residences of a few very wealthy people including former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

"Ania, what are you doing?"

One night I was awakened by my dog who would not stop barking. I opened my eyes and saw an old man with a long beard standing next to my bed. I was stunned and thought I was hallucinating because of the alcohol and drugs I had taken. So I turned on the light. The man was still standing next to my bed and my dog was still barking at him. He did not say a word, he just shook his head as if to say, "*Ania, what are you doing?*" I felt guilty under his gaze. Then he disappeared.

Only nine years later, when somebody gave me a book about the life of Padre Pio and I saw his picture on the cover, did I recognize again the man who had visited me. After this nighttime encounter, I had the strength to leave my fiancé and the drugs. Padre Pio really saved my life because

I was so exhausted that I could not have handled it physically or psychologically much longer.

Later on, I met Paolo Brosio, a famous Italian journalist and television reporter who converted in Medjugorje in 2009 and since then openly professes his faith. Through him, I was able to open up to God and agreed to meet a priest with whom he was friends and to whom I went to Confession. Paolo introduced me to Diego Manetti, the editor of the Italian publishing house Piemme. After I had spent two hours telling Diego my story, he said to me, "*Ania, when I look into your eyes, I understand that I have to tell your story, but first you have to go to Medjugorje with me.*" I thought, "*Good, he'll publish my book. That's worth a trip to Medjugorje.*"

Medjugorje - the place of my true joy

Diego invited me to join a pilgrim group for the monthly apparition of the visionary Mirjana on April 2, 2010. At 6 a.m. we were already at the blue cross where the alleged apparition takes place. We waited there until 9 a.m. and when everything was over I said to Diego, *"Listen up, this is all hoax. Nobody and nothing is appearing here. It's just a business trick to get the pilgrims' money from their pockets."*

He answered me, *"Ania, you don't know it yet, but something has already changed in your heart."*

I thought to myself, *"How could he know what has changed in my heart?"*

Our group returned to our accommodations to freshen up and then, with a slice of pizza bread in our backpacks, we went to climb the mountain of the Cross. Diego said to me, *"Ania, when you are climbing the mountain, think about Jesus who full of wounds climbed Calvary with the Cross on his shoulders."*

I thought, *"He's crazy. I have my own problems; why should I think about someone else's? What do I care about this Jesus?"* Never in my whole life had I prayed the Stations of the Cross; I did not even know that there are 14 of them.

When we reached the Third Station I sat down because it was all so strenuous. I was not even used to hanging up my own clothes because I had a cleaning lady in Milan who took care of everything for me. And now I should torment myself going up this mountain? I thought, *"I'm going to go back, drink a beer and wait until*

the others come down. They can tell me then what is up at the top."

Then I heard a voice inside which encouraged me, *"Ania, climb up! If you don't climb to the top, you will not understand why you came to Medjugorje."*

I looked at the old ladies and the sick people who, with the Rosary in their hands and with great effort, set one foot before the other. And I was sitting there complaining. Suddenly I began to think, seemingly out of nowhere, about Jesus who climbed up Calvary barefoot, covered with wounds and without a word of complaint. This thought gave me strength, *"I can do it too!"* I took the Rosary in my hand and started to climb. Suddenly it was very easy, there was a strength in me which nearly carried me to the top, until I reached the white cross.

I fell to my knees and started praying out loud although I had no idea how to pray. They were words that came out of my mouth on their own. Again I heard the inner voice which said to me, *"Ania, you have to forgive everybody who has hurt you in your lifetime."*

My lips seemed to open on their own and three words passed over them, *"I forgive you."* As I spoke these words, my hardened heart seemed to crumble. I began to cry and shed all the tears which I had not shed for years. They softened my heart. An unknown joy and indescribable peace filled me. I did not want to leave, but they brought me back to Milan anyway.

Something more

From that day forward, I was a different person. I came back to the place I was familiar with, went to the usual luxurious parties, traveled with friends to Dubai, Monte Carlo and San Remo

but I felt completely out of place. I was no longer interested in what they were talking about. More and more I excused myself by telling people I had already made other plans. Since I was engaged to

Paolo Enrico Beretta, the nephew of the former Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi, I lived among the richest and most influential families in Italy. We had bodyguards and flew with private jets; only expressing a wish, it was immediately granted to me. And yet I was not really happy because it was a life of masquerades. On a few occasions I gave up and drank until I was drunk. I wanted to resist God with all my strength or rather I wanted to resist admitting that I needed him.

After a few months of intense interior struggle I called Diego Manetti and begged him to find a place for me to live in Medjugorje. He found a place in the community "Oasis of Peace". After living with them for ten days, I freed myself of my last obligation to the world—I quit my prestigious job in Porto Cervo. My colleagues called and asked me if somebody had done something to me because there was no way I could have made a decision like this; surely I had been brainwashed.

When they asked me what I do all day, I told them the truth, "I get up at 5 a.m., we pray for six hours a day, I feed the chickens, peel potatoes and help in the house."

During a personal retreat of prayer and fasting, I heard the inner voice again saying, "Ania, leave everything and follow me!" After that, I returned to Milan and sold everything I owned. My fiancé understood and let me go. My friends, however, thought that I was crazy. Yet in Medjugorje I had found a simple life which continues to give me a peace like I never experienced.

Today, I do not feel like a victim; I believe that the suffering I had to endure was not by chance or bad luck but something which God allowed in my life because it brought me closer to Jesus. I think that everything that happened in my life had to happen as it did so that today I can testify that **God exists. He forgives us everything so that we can forgive everything of everyone.**

Cuori Puri - Pure Hearts

Ania tells further: In Medjugorje I received another special grace: chastity. It is a grace which I do not want to keep for myself. Therefore the movement "Pure Hearts" was founded on June 25, 2011. Anybody who decides to live chaste until marriage can join this movement. To do so, one makes the promise before a priest, preferably during Holy Mass, "Today I, ..., promise before Jesus, through the intercession of the most pure Virgin Mary and her virginal spouse Joseph to live chaste until my wedding day." The only obligation involved is to pray at least once a day the prayer, "Jesus, help me to be faithful to my promise." On top of that, Con-

fession once a month and the Rosary on the first Saturday of the month for the intentions of Our Lady are also recommended. As a sign of membership, everyone who makes this promise and registers at "Cuori Puri" on the internet (www.pureinheartireland.com) receives a specially made ring. In Italy alone, more than 7000 people have made this promise.

One of them is Maria Borghini from Rome. She decided with her boyfriend Francesco Maria Trotta to be chaste until their wedding day so that their love will grow, free from sexual bonds. They were willing to tell us how and why they decided to do this.

Why we will wait


Maria: "I learned about 'Cuori Puri' through a magazine article before I ever met Francesco. None of my friends care to have a chaste relationship, even though the majority of them

come from faithful Catholic families like me. For me, purity before marriage is the deepest expression of my love for Jesus. Before I am engaged to somebody, I want to be engaged to Jesus and

every other love I want to live in this love. God placed this desire in me.

“Once, when I was alone, I asked myself what I want to do with my life and I felt so loved by Jesus that I wanted to give back to him the most valuable thing I have, my purity. So I made this promise and I testify to it openly through this ring, without worrying about what the others think about me.

“After this experience of grace, I had the desire to go to Medjugorje, which I was finally able to fulfill in the summer of 2012. Completely unexpected, I saw Ania and an acquaintance in the square before the church. Both were wearing t-shirts with ‘Cuori Puri’ on them, and I wanted to find out more about it. At the end of the pilgrimage, four teenagers and I made the promise to live chaste until marriage during a Holy Mass in front of a statue of Our Lady and with the blessing of the priest. Some of my friends were interested and curiously asked about the meaning of the ring. Even though none of my friends have followed my example, through my ring they are confronted with a reality which challenges them. I have experienced that when you give this sacrifice to Jesus, you will feel how he leads you.”

rancesco: “When I saw Maria for the first time, I was especially attracted by the purity she radiated. One day we went out on the terrace at the university together and she told me about the promise she made. I was very happy because that is exactly what I had expected of her. Since I was 12 years old, I also had the desire, out of love for God, to wait until my wedding day to give myself physically to my wife. So, Maria’s attitude toward sexuality was a confirmation from God for me that she is the right person placed by God at my side for this time in my life.

“We feel how important chastity is in our relationship because we are really able to get to know and grow in love for one another without being fixed on sexuality or entering into a bond which takes away our inner freedom. We are making this sacrifice of becoming one in body for the day when we have also become one before God.

“We accept the judgments of the other students with simplicity and sincerity and we help one another especially by praying together and going to Holy Mass together, as well as speaking openly with one another about our weaknesses and limits.”

The references to Medjugorje made in this article are given solely as testimony for personal meditation and do not intend in any way to anticipate the judgment of the Church to which we fully submit.

I Know for Whom I Die

*One hundred million Christians in fifty countries
are currently threatened, persecuted or discriminated against.
Every day many around the world die for their faith,
unimaginable as it may seem.
Being a Christian was never as dangerous as it is today!*

The media reports about persecution of Christians, but nobody considers that those who are suffering for their faith are continuously faced with the simple question, “*Is my love for Christ great enough to give my life for him and for my persecutors?*”

The following examples from persecuted Christians from different countries testifies to their “higher love” and might challenge us and make us think, “*I could never do that! I wouldn’t have the courage to remain faithful to Jesus.*” Do not worry: extraordinary times require extraordinary graces which we otherwise do not need.

Syria, with its long Christian tradition, where Aramaic, the language of Jesus, is still spoken and where Christians and Muslims have lived together peacefully for centuries, has witnessed a bloody conflict between the government and rebel fighters for the last three years. Since the violence started, one-third of all Syrian Christians have fled as a result of expulsion or fear of abduction, death, destruction or forced conversion to Islam. In December 2013, Greek Catholic Fr. George Louis from Qara reported, “*the armed Jihadist have a typical routine: they target a village, invade, kill, burn and destroy. Whether Christian or non-Christian, life becomes more and more difficult.*” His confrere Firas Lufti from Knayeh had to perform the funeral of a priest, Fr. Francois Murad (age 49), murdered by Muslims: “*It was the hardest day of my life. I tried to encourage the others and console the faithful even though I needed consolation myself.*” The 300 faithful in Fr. Lufti’s village decided not to abandon the spiritual heritage of their homeland

even though the government army had withdrawn leaving them defenseless: “*We have to continue to hope and courageously await the beginning of a new day.*” Those who have remained in spite of the targeted harassment have truly made a heroic decision!

“*Until now we already have 215 martyrs who were explicitly interrogated by their assassins about their faith and were executed as a result of their answer,*” confirmed the Patriarch of Damascus, Gregory III Laham, before Christmas. Unofficially, there are most certainly hundreds of other martyred Christians.

*I*n Iraq too, where before 2003 there were still 1.4 million Christians, the bishops today are trying to motivate the little more than 300,000 Christians to stay despite their fears of continual, bloody attacks. Tomas Toma, who fled to Germany in the 1990’s, intentionally returned to his homeland to enter the northern Iraqi Erbil Seminary: “*Some of my brothers will return to Baghdad, others to Mosul. Of course, it is life threatening. No matter what though, they do not want to let down their Church. Therefore I also went to Iraq—to follow my vocation. If the bishop tells me today that I should take over a parish next week in Baghdad, then I will pack my bags tomorrow. With full liberty we priests gave our yes to the Lord. We will stay even*

Raja, a 20-year-old teacher who fled with her family from the city of Mosul in the north,

does not want to return: *“We received warnings by mail and death threats as text messages on our cell phones. I do not speak about my religion with colleagues and students here either because it is dangerous. I do not want to provoke anybody. I feel free only in the parish community. There are many brothers and sisters in faith from Mosul here, and we often remember our pastor in Mosul who, shortly before I fled, was abducted and his corpse mutilated. They were so gruesome with him because he refused to deny Jesus. I cried a lot then and asked myself, ‘Would you be ready to die for your Faith like him?’ At first I thought I would just say that I had converted to Islam; I would remain a Christian in my heart though. That courageous example of our pastor, however, changed everything. I will never deny my faith in Jesus. The pain lasts only a few minutes, but after I will be with my Redeemer for all eternity.”*

*I*n Egypt as well, the Coptic Christians, who relate back to St. Mark, prove their great, courageous faith despite at least 32 churches being set on fire and thousands of Christian books burned by the fanatic Muslim Brotherhood in 2013. Although in certain districts and city quarters Christians are frequently and brutally attacked, many of them have a black cross tattooed on their wrists. Two young Egyptian Catholics explain: *“We Christians call it ‘the sign’. Many of our peoples at the headwaters of the Nile venerate martyrs in their own families, and we too could be martyred at any time. If it goes so far that for fear of death we deny the Lord, this indelible sign on our bodies professes what our lips would have perhaps kept silent.”* In her own way, Nadia Mohammed Ali, a mother of seven from Biba in Upper Egypt, paid the price for her Faith. When her Muslim husband died after 23 years of marriage, she returned to her original Christian confession and had her and her family’s conversion officially confirmed for which she was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

A Nigerian family mother, Chioma Dike,

also lives in the area where the feared Muslim Boko-Haram extremists have wanted to establish an Islamic state by whatever means necessary. During a disastrous bombing of the St. Teresa Catholic Church in Madalla on Christmas Day 2011, 45 faithful were killed and 81 wounded. Chioma lost her husband and three of her five children: *“My heart is broken, only God can help me. Yet I will never lose my faith in God.”*

Fr. John Bakeni works in Maiduguri, the hardest hit city: *“When I arrived at my parish, I could not sleep for the first three months because all around the church people were being shot and killed. They threw stones and hurled the bodies of dead animals over the church walls. Many Christians have fled. Those who have remained, however, take courage because I am here. I celebrate Holy Mass and visit them in their homes. The Church was always a persecuted Church, and if I have to give my life, then so be it.”*

Also Archbishop Kaigama, President of the Nigerian Bishops’ Conference, has remained firm: *“They can destroy our homes in northern Nigeria, but not our spirit. We suffer persecution and discrimination, but they will never take our hope in the Risen Lord.”*

*M*ore to the south, in the Republic of Central Africa, Muslim Seleka rebels have been roaming around for months looting, killing, and burning the homes of thousands of Christians: *“There is nobody out on the streets after 6 p.m., but then we are attacked in our homes,”* the faithful complain. The terror troops prefer to attack and plunder the mission stations where thousands of people who have lost everything come for refuge. The missionaries, who are often threatened themselves, remain by their side day and night to the point of exhaustion in a heroic effort to protect them the best they can. *“The people are bitter, but they carry their fate with great dignity. In spite of everything, there is no hate or rage towards those who are doing this to them,”* testified the Carmelite Fr. Aurelio Gazzera in Bozoum. *“The Christians here are tired because it seems that no solution is being sought. On the other hand their faith is great.*

The phrase we hear most often is ‘Nzapa a yeke – God is here’.”

*W*e must not forget that every Christian who is injured, maimed or killed leaves behind family, friends and relatives. Love expects them to forgive their offenders of the terrible injustice. On the Indonesian island Sulawesi, three girls between the ages of 15 and 19 on their way to a Christian school were decapitated by Muslim

extremists in October 2005. A fourth student was seriously injured but survived. When five men were arrested on account of her testimony, the Christian parents of the three girls gave an incredible testimony to their faith a few months later: *“We forgive the murderers in the hope that God will judge justly.”* – *“I was very angry,”* said Mark Sambuwe, one of the fathers, *“but God’s spirit moved and changed my heart. I forgive them, just like Christ has forgiven my sins.”*

To the Christians of the West

*A*rchbishop Amel Shamon Nona of Mosul in northern Iraq reported in a conference on the occasion of an international pilgrimage to Rome from “Aid to the Church in Need” on October 3, 2013 in St. Paul Outside the Walls: *“My predecessor had been murdered in extremely gruesome fashion. I came to Mosul Jan. 16, 2010. The very next day a series of reprisal murders of Christians began. For more than 10 days extremists continued to kill, one or two people each day. The faithful left the city to seek refuge in the small towns and villages nearby, or in the monasteries. What can we do for these people? These questions tormented me, forcing me to reflect on the right path to follow so I could fulfill my mission of service. I found the answer in the motto of my episcopate—namely, hope. And so I remained in the city in order to give hope to the many persecuted faithful who likewise continued to live here. Is this enough?”*

“I began to ask myself how our faithful were living out their faith in the difficult circumstances of every day. I realized that, above all a true knowledge of our own faith and the cause of our persecution is of fundamental importance. By deepening our sense of what it means to be Christians, we discover ways to give meaning to this life of persecution and find the necessary strength to endure it.

“To know that we may be killed at any moment, at home, in the street, at work, and yet despite all this to retain a living and active faith—

this is the true challenge.” He organized various meetings, met with groups in the most dangerous city quarters and also families. *“My goal in all this: to reinforce the fact that the Christian faith is not an abstract, rational theory, remote from actual, everyday life, but a means of discovering its deepest meaning: its highest expression as revealed by the Incarnation. When the individual discovers this possibility, he or she will be willing to endure absolutely anything and will do everything to safeguard this discovery—even if this means having to die in its cause.*

“Many people living in freedom from persecution, in countries without problems like ours, ask me what they can do for us. First of all, to make an effort to live out his or her own faith in a more profound manner in daily practice. To know that there are people in this world who are persecuted on account of their faith should be a warning—to you who live in freedom—to become better, stronger Christians; a spur to demonstrating your own faith as it confronts the difficulties of your own society; and the recognition that you too are confronted with a certain degree of persecution because of your faith, even in the West. The most powerful thing you can do in response to our situation is that you should rediscover and forge unity.

“We suffer at the hands of fundamentalists coming from distant countries to fight against what they consider to be the infidels (us Christians), using as an excuse that their brothers are

being persecuted in various countries. Their reaction is to kill others. Our reaction to persecution must be that of becoming more loving, more united. The strength of love is the foundation of faith and embraces everyone—even our persecutors. There is a great temptation to which persecuted Christians can fall victim and which I myself never tire of warning against: namely that because of being persecuted, we can, with the passing of time, end up becoming persecutors ourselves—turning to violence in our way of thinking, in treating our neighbor, in our way of living, rejecting the Christian way which is imbued with love—to a manner similar to that

of those who demand and speak of justice only, but never of love.

“*You* in the West are living in a way that persecuted Christians cannot: you must give public witness of your faith in your own societies. We have the chance of reflecting on our choice to be Christians—by defending with love the one who attacks us with rancor and hatred. Ultimately, persecution cannot make us sad or despairing, because we believe that human life deserves to be always embraced in a perfect manner, as Jesus showed us—even if we have no more than a minute left in this world.”

Source: Interviews and letter to Aid to the Church Need

*Her many sins have been forgiven;
hence, she has shown great love.*

*But the one to whom little is forgiven,
loves little.*

Lk 7:47