

# *Triumph of the Heart*

THANKFULNESS  
THE KEY TO HAPPINESS

*Family of Mary*

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*“All too often we take everything for granted!  
This happens with God too.  
It is easy to approach the Lord to ask for something,  
but to thank him: ‘Well, I don’t need to.’”*

*Pope Francis, October 13, 2013*

*“In all circumstances give thanks!”*

In Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians

*The testimonies in this issue should encourage us  
to use that little but powerful word “thank you”  
much more frequently with both God and our neighbor.*

Saying “thank you” is so simple and yet often such a challenge. It might merely be that we are just not aware of the fact that we need one another and are always dependent on someone—primarily on God, but on many other people as well. We do not even know most of them, like the farmer who milked the cow so that we can buy milk at the grocery store. Since we are often unaware of what others do, we fail to be grateful in our daily lives. Especially when something is lacking or is not as we had expected, we quickly begin to complain and grow dissatisfied.

In reality, this is a lack of faith, because if we are convinced that God, in his love for us, is concerned with the minutest details of our lives, then we really should not complain when we find ourselves in a situation that does not meet our expectations or plans. Those who give thanks show their appreciation. This is a fundamental

truth of our existence: our whole life from birth until death is a gift; our soul, our body, our desires, everything is a gift of God, which we have received without having done anything for it, without even asking for it.

Our parents gave us their love and care, without which we never would have developed. Even though young people or adults may fall victim to the conviction that their life is in their hands and they can do with it as they please, nevertheless in the spiritual life, it is evident that we must await everything from God.

In all the sacraments, from Baptism to Holy Communion, we receive freely and without any merit on our part, the greatest gift that a human can receive—the personal indwelling of the Trinitarian God. At first, we can only respond with sincere thanks. *“Give thanks to the LORD who is good, whose love endures forever!”* Psalm 107

## *A thankful person is a humble person*

*Although Celine Martin, St. Thérèse of Lisieux's sister, was four years older, she was one of her pupils in the Carmelite cloister. In her notes, Celine left us valuable advice from the future Doctor of the Church, "My dear little sister said to me: 'That which draws the most grace from God is thankfulness. When we thank him for something he has done for us, he is moved and hurries to do ten more things. If we thank him again with the same sincerity, how unpredictable will be the multiplication of grace! I have experienced this—try it, and you will see. My thanksgiving is boundless for all that he gives to me, and I show it to him*

*in a thousand ways.'"* St. Thérèse teaches us how thankfulness and modesty go hand in hand. The more modest and humble a soul is, the more thankful it is, but also all the stronger it will be in Faith that suffering is actually a gift from God.

*E*motionally, we are often not in a condition to give thanks but rather to complain and lament. In painful situations, which can blind us to the beautiful and good things that we have, we must use our will and understanding. Then thankfulness will become a disposition of the heart that no longer depends on the momentary feeling and even gives us peace and joy in difficult situations.

## *Thankfulness is a disposition of the heart*

Marija Pavlovic Lunetti from Medjugorje noticed one time in a group of lively Italians a little old priest whose face radiated a rare sense of peacefulness. After her talk, she approached him and asked, *"Please forgive me for being so direct, but why are you so happy? Do you have a particular reason?"*

*"Oh no, it's more my little secret. But I will tell it to you, ma'am,"* he said with a smile. *"I'm 95 years old. When I was five, I was grieved to discover that people were always complaining about the littlest things, and I was shocked. I felt that this made Jesus sad too. So I made an agreement with him, and promised not to complain for the next 100 years of my life and that, on the contrary, I would praise him for everything, the good days and bad, and that I would always honor the gift of life. And I have to say, ma'am, I have kept my promise. In all these years that I have extoled life, evil could do me no harm, and so I have avoided all the demons!"*

*"But if you are now 95, your contract will soon run out!"*

*"I thought about that recently ... and then I said to Jesus that I am prepared to extend the contract for the next 100 years of my life!"*

The nearly 100-year-old priest proves with his life that thankfulness has made him a happy man. Thankful joy desires to share; it does good works. If I have received a lot, then I desire to share it with others. Therefore, thankful people are so easy to love. They bring peace and a certain cheerful serenity, even when there are crosses to bear. People like that are pleasant to be around and that brings them joy too. The unthankful are quick to complain and criticize, and that causes dissatisfaction to rise and evil to increase. However, when our heart is full of thanks, there is no room for jealousy, envy, revenge, resentment, anger, stinginess, dejection or despair. Therefore, thankfulness is the best remedy when we experience the vices from which we so often suffer.

To sum it up: thankfulness is the key to happiness. Hence, St. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians, *"In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus."*

1 Thes. 5:18

## Give thanks for suffering?

Yet what should we do when misfortune strikes, when someone loses everything he owns in a natural disaster or suddenly becomes gravely ill? Is it also possible in these circumstances to give thanks? The experience of a Brazilian missionary named Delton Alves de Oliveira Filho shows that there really are Christians who, through their strong faith, see suffering as a gift. He recounts the following event, which made a lasting impression on his priesthood.

“I was called to the hospital to visit a young woman who had given birth the previous day. I pursued this obligation with great enthusiasm and prepared to visit the other patients as well. A girl approached me and asked me to go and speak with her mother, *‘The doctor said he had done everything within his power....’* The woman was suffering from cancer and she was at the point of death. I never could have imagined that, on this day and through this encounter, I would receive one of the most important teachings of my entire life. *‘I’d like your blessing,’* the woman asked. Her eyes were sunken and she was pale; her illness was obvious. I was convinced that the Lord had led me there to console her. After her confession and receiving the anointing of the sick, tears streamed down her face. It touched me very deeply that, in this moment, my hands were Jesus’ hands that had consoled a dying woman. Before I left the room to call back her family, I told her softly, *‘Jesus came to visit you today; thank him and don’t be sad!’*

“*I consider myself to be very lucky,*’ she responded. I was not expecting an answer like that, and I reacted somewhat confused. She noticed and added, *‘In all the years before I was diagnosed with cancer, I was never as happy as I am now. I have suffered in my marriage for 37 years. They were dominated by the infidelity of my alcoholic husband, who could not overcome his vices. I prayed a lot, and asked the Lord to free him from his addiction so that he could change his life. When the doctors diagnosed my illness, I noticed that it*

*deeply shook my husband and that something started to change in his heart. A few days ago, he asked me to forgive all the suffering that he had caused me. Long before this happened, however, I understood that my illness had healed his illness. This saved my marriage!*

“*In addition, my daughter, the girl that called for you, suffered from severe depression. ... She tried to take her own life on a number of occasions. How often I cried with the Rosary in my hands and pleaded with God for a miracle for my daughter. And this miracle did in fact happen. After I started coming to the hospital for cancer treatment, my daughter fully recovered. ... When I felt dejected, she was the one who cheered me up with a funny story and showed me how much she loved me.’*

“I was very moved by the woman’s story. She continued, *‘You must also know, that my oldest son, who has been married for 15 years, was very close to getting a divorce. He had a crisis in his faith and wanted to leave the Catholic Church, but his wife would not agree. The situation saddened me; despite the suffering I had borne because of my husband, I never considered asking for a divorce. ... I silently prayed very often for them. What my lips did not say, my illness did. For the last three months, everything has been fine with them again. They come to visit me every day and we pray the Rosary together. My son found his way back to the faith, and he respects the Church again. Cancer has saved my family. Now I can die in peace, thanks to the blessing which God has given me through the sacraments, and thanks to the joy I feel because my family experienced salvation through my pain.’”*

Not everyone who suffers has the grace like this Brazilian woman to see the fruits of their sacrifices. Blessed Elizabeth Canori Mora (1774–1825), for example, prayed and suffered her whole life for the conversion of her husband, yet only

after her death, did her carefree and unfaithful husband turn his life around and become a deep believer. He was even ordained and died a holy priest in a religious order. Every pain has a value when we accept it in love and unite it to Jesus' passion. So we may always thank God, even in suffering, for the great things that come out of suffering offered up out of love. The reason for this is that Jesus the man-God carried all suffering with infinite love, making it thereby precious and imbuing it with redeeming power. The emeritus

Pope Benedict XVI wrote about this mystery on June 23, 2011:

*“Everything begins, one might say, from the heart of Christ who, at the Last Supper, on the eve of his passion, thanked and praised God and by so doing, with the power of his love, transformed the meaning of death which he was on his way to encounter. The fact that the Sacrament of the Altar acquired the name ‘Eucharist’ — ‘thanksgiving’ — expresses precisely this...”*

## St. Felix of Cantalice

*Few saints have lived the Franciscan ideal of thankful simplicity as powerfully as the Capuchin brother Felix of Cantalice (1515-1587).*

*His friendly, “Deo gratias – thanks be to God!”  
for whatever he received on his collection rounds through Rome  
as the mendicant for his monastery,  
made him known among the locals as “Brother Deo gratias”.  
He was canonized in 1712, the first in his Order.*

*F*elix Porro was born 1515 in a little village called Cantalice in the mountainous part of central Italy to a simple farming family. He never learned to read or write. Instead, he prayed in his childhood before crosses he made while tending his father's sheep and goats. Soon the joyful boy, whom everybody loved, hired himself out to others, first as a shepherd, then as a servant; they were 18 happy years of great unity with God.

One day, as he was plowing, two young oxen were spooked. They yanked Felix to the ground and pulled the plow over him as they ran away. It was a miracle that he stood up unharmed. Calling out, “*Mercy, mercy*” he fell to his knees and gave thanks for his life which he had received anew and which he now wanted to consecrate untiringly to God. He immediately asked his employer for dismissal and the recently founded Capuchin order for admittance.

In the novitiate at nearby Cittaducale, it was only a matter of days before the 28-year-old blissfully received the brown habit of St. Francis' sons, and the novice master quickly ascertained, “*It seems to me that Br. Felix prays without ceasing.*” He was a model of zeal and virtue; and from the beginning, he understood his religious life as a way of the cross, the shortest and most certain path to perfection on which he happily desired to follow his master.

The illiterate brother's textbook was the cross, so much so that he said, “*Who does not understand this book, does not know what books are.*” Meditating on the suffering of Christ, all the good that the Lord had done for him, was a perpetual source of thankfulness and delight. He gladly explained, “*I study six letters: five red and one white. The red are the wounds of the Savior, the white is Mary,*” whom he loved

like a child. Felix professed his religious vows in 1545, at the age of 30, and his superiors sent him to Rome two years later.

*T*here, in the great Monastery of St. Bonaventure, his assignment was to help the elderly begging brother, Angelus. When this brother died shortly thereafter, Felix alone fulfilled the difficult and humiliating task of daily walking the Eternal City's streets, begging for the needs of the numerous brothers. What a demanding office, so necessary for the survival of the monastery and yet an opportunity to awake a spirit of love in the citizens. And so Br. Felix headed out day after day following the early Holy Mass, in the scorching sun and icy winter rain, through the city's streets and narrow alleys: barefoot and "armed" with a jug and a sack in which he gathered wine, oil, bread and vegetables for the monastery. Even though he was convinced, *"everything is capable of lifting us up to God when we contemplate it with an eye of humility,"* he traversed the streets of Rome with his eyes turned down and praying the Rosary in order to remain recollected with God.

The Capuchin soon knew every corner of the city, undauntedly knocking on the doors of

palaces and poor houses alike, always joyful and content with whatever he received. Even when the Romans, who were rash and temperamental about what they said, laughed or insulted him, he always answered with a smile and a sincere *"Thanks be to God – Deo gratias!"*

Felix saw everything as a gift from God's hand, not only the alms people gave but especially the humiliations, which served for his sanctification and that of the others as well. He never passed by a beggar without giving him a word of encouragement and some of the bread he had himself just obtained.

Br. Deogratias liked to sing among the people his own little compositions about love to Jesus and Mary or recite verses from the liturgy or Holy Scripture that, thanks to his remarkable memory, sprung up word for word from his heart. If he happened upon a crowd that he was unable to push through, he called out, *"Make room dear people! A little room for the donkey from the Capuchin monastery please!"*

The sinful circumstances he sometimes encountered moved him with concern and compassion for the moral poverty of the people, and he found clear words of reprimand, *"Have some pity on your soul!"*

The Franciscan Cardinal Felix Peretti was friends with Br. Felix of Cantalice and knew about his prophetic gifts, so he jokingly asked him one day if he was going to become pope. Br. Felix answered, "You're just kidding, but it will come to pass." And he warned him, "Try to be a good pope and lead the Church in an exemplary way!" As Pope Sixtus V, he visited his brother's tomb and declared his intention to beatify him quickly, himself being one of the witnesses in the process, after hearing about 18 miracles that had taken place through his friend's intercession.

At the time of Felix of Cantalice, there was a whole group of great saints living in Rome who all cherished this poor lay brother as a wise advisor: Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Borgia, Pope Pius V, Aloysius Gonzaga, Camilo Lellis, Stanislaus Kostka and the cardinals Robert Bellarmine and Charles Borromeo. This last one asked once Philip Neri to inspect the monastic rule he had composed. Without even looking at it, Philip Neri led the Cardinal to Br. Felix saying he did not know anybody more qualified to judge the rule. The Capuchin apologized, "But Father Philip you know I can't read or write." – "That doesn't matter," Philip Neri responded, "have someone read it to you, and when we return, tell us what you think." Br. Felix did, as a matter of fact, make two recommendations which St. Charles Borromeo then incorporated into the rule.

The Capuchin had an entrancingly childlike and open disposition. Along with the poor and sick, therefore, he especially favored the children of the city. He loved gathering them around him and had them repeat “*Deo gratias!*” as if to have them help him in his continual thanksgiving to God for all the benefits that had been received. A special friendship and kinship of soul united him with Philip Neri, the Apostle of Rome and founder of the Congregation of the Oratory. How lovingly they laughed and embraced when they met on the street. They were one heart and soul.

When Br. Felix returned exhausted to the monastery with his gathered “treasures”, he was satisfied with a few crusts of bread and a little wine. He was thankful, however, when Brother Cook gave him some leftovers from lunch, but he never asked for them himself.

At night, when his brothers were sleeping—he rested for only two hours on bare boards—he went alone to the monastery church to place in deep prayer before God the petitions of their benefactors and the whole Roman people. Standing with his arms outstretched before the Blessed Sacrament, hour after hour of intercessory prayer passed, often in tears, in deep contemplation and frequently in ecstasy, as his brothers secretly observed.

Over the course of the 40 years in which Br. Felix fulfilled his office faithfully and with exemplary humility, the Romans came to know and love him, to the point that they could not imagine the city without him. More and more frequent were the reports of healing and the fulfillment of the Capuchin’s prophetic words, like the prediction of the Christian fleet’s victory at the sea battle Lepanto in 1571. His reputation for sanctity spread throughout the people.

In his last seven years, severe colic tormented Br. Felix, but of this suffering he simply said, “*They are roses, they are flowers.*” They united him in joy to Christ Crucified; and so when asked by the doctor why he did not pray for his own healing, Br. Felix answered, “*What are you saying? Even if I knew that the Lord were to answer my prayer, I would not ask him. If he permits the pains, why should I not accept them with love?*” Moreover, to the doctor’s astonishment, the brother intoned a deep prayer of thanksgiving.

His age was visibly taking its toll on the 72-year-old, and people tried to convince him to give up his responsibilities. He defended himself saying, “*The soldier has to die at the sword and the donkey under the saddle.*” He predicted to a few friends his impending death. When the doctor finally admitted there was nothing else he could do, the saint cried out in relief, “*Deo gratias! Deo gratias!*”

## The passing of a saint

The day before he died, Br. Felix suddenly fell into ecstasy and exclaimed, “*Oh! Our Lady is here, accompanied by the angels.*” After he received the Last Rites the following day—it was Pentecost Monday, May 18, 1587—the Capuchin called out three times, louder each time, “*Deo gratias!*” and calmly closed his eyes as if he wanted to sleep.

No sooner had the news of the holy Capuchin’s death spread like wildfire through Rome than the

crowds streamed to the monastery. Since the Capuchins with well-founded concern closed up the monastery, people quickly used ladders to climb over the walls and fill the courtyard. When the brothers were forced to open for a cardinal, they were unable to control the pushing crowd behind him. They could only watch as the cell of the deceased was plundered—straw and hay on which he slept, worn out sandals, boards, rags and even the dust on the floor was eagerly gathered.

The next day, the crowd came with knives and scissors to the monastery church where his body was exposed and cut not only his beard, hair

and habit for relics, but his fingernails as well. The Romans are truly unique!

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Brother Lupus, who once gave Felix the ingenious advice to often repeat “Deo gratias” on his mendicant rounds, observed one night how Brother Felix threw himself before the high altar and pleaded with Our Lady, “Let me hold the Divine Child for just a moment.” Suddenly the image of Mary at the altar came to life, and Our Lady bowed down to Felix and placed in his arms her son whom he pressed to his heart with exuberant love and tears of joy. For good reason, Christmas was the high point of his year.

## Thank You for all the Goodness You've Shown Me

*Dr. Peter Egger from northern Italy is a famous author, theologian and speaker. His radio and television programs are very popular as is his pastoral work for families and his lectures on religious science at the Benedict XVI Philosophical and Theological University in Heligenkreuz, Austria. The 6'3" former decathlete has been very happily married to his wife Daniela for more than 30 years and thankfulness is a special characteristic of this humble man. The couple treasures their privacy despite his various pastoral activities, and therefore they never speak about themselves at public events. At our request, however, they gave us permission to publish the testimony of their love, which the young husband wrote on the first day of their marriage and later supplemented. May it help other couples to live more consciously and deeply the Sacrament of Marriage.*

*I*t was May when I met my beloved Daniela for the first time in Padua, Italy. She was a young elementary school teacher, and I remember well how she immediately enchanted me. Everything in life seemed brighter. I suddenly had loving eyes for my fellow man. Even the nature seemed lovelier to me: the grass was greener, the heavens bluer, the sun seemed warmer, I heard the birds chirping and noticed the bubbling of the spring brooks. It was May...

When I came to know Daniela better, I real-

ized, to my great joy, that not only a great human appreciation united us, but a deep congeniality. We both saw the Christian Faith as the center of our lives and considered the Gospel to be the ideal way to live and to love. So we decided in God's name to start down the path of love together. God was to be the center of our lives, and his love was to be the light of our love. We wanted to live our love in complete harmony with the Gospel. We made an effort to pray with each other and go to Holy Mass together. We strove for virtue and



nobility of heart, and we often did an examination of conscience. The goal of our love was not only the joy of our hearts but also the salvation of our souls. Our mutual love was to help one another come always closer to God.

It was a grand proposition, and we felt how our love for each other spurred us to grow in the humanness of our hearts. Yet the more we tried to live a life according to the Gospel, the more distinctly we felt certain limits in our love. We felt how we needed a much greater and stronger love: we should love one another with God's love. Only then when our love was filled with the grace of God's love could we achieve the development of our love according to God's will.

We gradually understood better what the Sacrament of Marriage is about: we should love one another on God's behalf and with his grace. We both came to the realization that through our marital vows we would be accepting God's order to love. God wants us to represent him to our spouse and to love that person through us. God entrusts our loved ones to us so that we love him or her with his respect, cordiality and generosity, but also with his patience, lenience and clemency. Through the bond of marriage, we receive the strength and grace from God to love our spouse with his love. God calls us to be his sacrament for our spouse. He wants that our sanctified love leads the other ever closer to perfection.

Daniela and I then understood the deepest reason for the insolubility of sacramental love. When we love our spouse with God's love, we cannot annul this love. Our love has to be marked by God's infinite love. Such a love stands firm in good times and in bad. We, like God, must be consistently merciful and compassionate. We have to be constantly ready to support and encourage. We have to do everything to bring those we love to

God in their entirety. God will ask us at the end of our lives, "*Where is your loved one whom I entrusted to you now and forever? Where is your beloved whose temporal and eternal joy and salvation I have placed in your hands?*"

*D*aniela and I realize that our love should also be open to many others. Our shared love should be a blessing. Our marriage should be a sacrament, God's remedy, in a much broader sense than we originally thought. God calls us to pass on his love through our love. We should pass his love on first to the children whom he wants to give us. We should give these children not only a bodily life, but also transmit to them the life of faith. We began to understand that we should work as ambassadors of divine love in our surroundings and for our fellow human beings. Our neighbors, our friends and relatives, but also the poor, elderly, sick and outcast should experience a little of God's love through our love. This beautiful perspective of love given to us by the grace of God deeply touched us. We suspected, however, that this way to true love would be long and difficult.

An eight-year period followed of spiritual growth and longing for one another in which we often saw each other only every few months. Finally the time came! Our wedding took place in the chapel at the House of St. Anthony's Providence in Padua, Italy. We were married in the company of many with impaired abilities. The sign of peace was unusually long because all those with disabilities wanted to hug and kiss us. We went from wheelchair to wheelchair and from stretcher to stretcher. The love and joy, as well as the crying and sighs, were indescribable.

## *Unending goodness*

*I*n the meantime, Daniela and I have been married for over 30 years and can truly say that we have a very happy marriage. It was good

that we prepared for such a long time for our wedding. We are thankful that we are able to comprehend the deep meaning of the Sacrament

of Marriage. We feel that God has richly blessed our union. He has also taken us by our word, however, and sent many, many people over the course of the years to knock at our door. Yet he has also given us the strength we need to fulfill his order to love. There have been many joys, but also some difficult trials. A deep inner harmony and unity always reigned between the two of us

though. Again and again we have experienced that God is the innermost source of our love. We want to thank him forever for this heavenly gift.

I also thank my dear Daniela for the unending goodness she has shown to me in the many years of our marriage. Every night before I fall asleep, I say very quietly, *“Thank you for all the good you have done for me today!”*

*Oh God, I thank you  
for my beloved wife!  
I surmise through her love  
how much you love me!*

*Give me a sensitive heart  
so that I can love and honor her  
with your tender love.*

*Repay her  
all the love and goodness  
she has shown me in your name  
day for day.*

Peter Egger

## *Conductor Batons and Wooden Spoons*

*Falling in love, raising children, career promotions,  
fleeting time, stepping back to make space for the others....  
Those who are married and have a family know these topics all too well.  
Over the years, since Manfred (55) and Christiane (50) Honeck from Altsch, Austria  
made the conscious choice to place God at the center of their life together,  
the couple has experienced with great gratitude how much help Faith can give.  
That was not always the case however; they have grown into it.*

**Manfred:** When I look back, I am astonished at how some events completely changed my life's direction. I was just seven years old, for example,

when our mother's death took me by surprise. My dad, a retired postman, decided then to pick up and move his family of nine to Vienna, just to make

it possible for us children to study music. To this day, I do not know where he found the courage—a widower and without a cent—to make this move.

In any case, I enrolled in the Cistercian school in Zwettl, where I trained as a choirboy. There, with the monks, I learned to pray. Since we never prayed at home, and because I did not want them to think that I was crazy, I prayed secretly. I often stealthily scurried into churches as I was passing by to speak with Jesus. I wanted to profess my Faith and authentically practice it in daily life, but I lacked the courage. During my music studies, I deepened it through a growing interest in Holy Scripture, and I read about the saints, especially Mary and her apparitions in Fatima and Lourdes.

**Christiane:** It was a little different for me! Worry-free and sheltered, I spent my childhood in a town 40 miles south of Vienna. My polish grandmother on my mother's side was very pious, and my mother, a violin teacher, made the effort to go to Holy Mass on Sunday. As for me, I was more interested in worldly things, especially dancing. My prayer life was limited to the nighttime prayer, "*Mary, find me the right husband someday.*"

**Manfred:** This prayer was quickly answered, thanks be to God! More precisely, it was 1979 at an orchestra youth camp in Salzburg where I met Christiane. She was just 16 back then, studied at the music school in Vienna and played second chair violin like me. I liked her from the moment I laid eyes on her, so I was more than happy to tutor Christiane and bring her up to par with the other participants. Could she be the one? Already then, it was my desire to marry a woman willing to lead a Christian life with me. I hoped she was it.

**Christiane:** I too still have vivid memories of the day we met, especially the first walk where we passed by a wooden cross on the side of the path. Independent of one another we both paused silently for a moment before it. Neither one of us just wanted to walk heedlessly past. This little gesture was the first that united us interiorly without words. Sure, we were soon madly in love with one another. "*You have Mozart's eyes,*" was the rather unusual first compliment of the 21-year-old guy, but in his presence I felt safe and at ease.

**Manfred:** To the dismay of the future in-laws and Christiane's violin instructor who thought her pupil was throwing away her future, we quickly engaged—romantically with violin music, rings and flowers. We married in 1981 at my beloved Zwettl Monastery where as a boy I had experienced so many good things for my spiritual formation.

**Christiane:** "*Robbing the cradle!*" joked some of our relatives back then, and it was a little true because the happy newlyweds were just 18 and 23 years old.

**Manfred:** As in love as we were, it did not bother us to live a meager life in Vienna. To my disappointment though, our faith life did not develop as I had hoped; there was no praying before meals or a regular sacramental life. Christiane was not that far yet; however, she was soon pregnant.

**Christiane:** Actually, I had never thought of anything but being married and raising a family. I was a loving young wife who happily grew into the role of mother with the birth of our first son Joachim in 1982. Of course, this meant giving up my freedom, but Manfred knew well how lovingly to encourage me. He helped where he could and showed a true understanding for me. I, for my part, was proud of my husband who in the meantime was playing for the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and celebrated his first success as a conductor.

**Manfred:** How infinitely thankful I was to my Christiane who put aside her training for the sake of our family. She completed her degree later, despite the household and three children, being licensed by the state as a music teacher. When I was hired as the head conductor of the Zurich Opera in 1992, Christiane energetically undertook our move and skillfully built our house on the other side of Austria.

Life as a conductor would have been and still would be impossible without such a selfless wife and mother. I had little idea back then what it meant for my wife to be available at home for everybody around the clock and to take care of everything herself.

## Broken Melody

**Christiane:** It did, in fact, become more and more difficult for me to be married to an artist. My husband's appointment calendar became increasingly busy, his absences ever longer. Manfred was out of the country a lot, in opera houses and concert halls, surrounded by applause while I stayed at home unnoticed, changing diapers and trying to manage raising the growing number of children with the help of my parents and relatives. I found myself often frustrated and hopelessly overwhelmed. Back then, regrettably, I sought no help in faith, and Mary had not yet become a part of my life. Feelings of emptiness and loneliness tortured me.

**Manfred:** Yes, there were times of separation because, unfortunately, my career kept me often away from home for long periods. Countless times I had to fulfill my role as father for problems at home over the telephone until I reached the point where I said, *"Be honest with yourself and go the way of faith with your family more*

*concretely and consistently, as you see it fit before Jesus."* They were surprised at home, and the resistance was evident, as step for step prayer before meals, Sunday Mass and Confession before church feast days were "introduced". As a father, I could write a book about what it means to persevere until the end in battle.

**Christiane:** As much as I would have like to, I could not follow Manfred's spiritual life. To pray the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary on Friday afternoon at 3 p.m. when friends were visiting us seemed exaggerated and made me very uncomfortable, even when to my surprise some of them willingly prayed with us. It hurt my feelings after I had cooked, to fast on bread and water as Our Lady requested in Medjugorje. I never gave any thought to Mary, except perhaps when I was often tempted to believe in light of Manfred's outright love for her that *"It is almost as if he loves Mary more than me."* Our faith was simply not in unison and we both suffered from it.

## Convergent Harmony

**Manfred:** In her spiritual life, my wife still did not know where she was going. She was searching though, so she decided to go on retreat in 1999. Christiane returned home radiant; she had obviously heard things that she needed to help her in daily life. She was as enthusiastic as I was relieved.

**Christiane:** My faith life really did begin with that weekend retreat in St. Johann, Austria. It completely changed my way of thinking and gave me a very different perspective. I was a long way from understanding everything that the others in those few days so enthusiastically and attractively shared with me in word and deed, but it fulfilled

me nevertheless. Earlier I was of the opinion, *"Jesus yes, Church no!"* but that changed now dramatically. I started dealing with the various aspects of our Faith. Although the Sacraments, Eucharistic adoration and the Rosary had always been foreign to me, I was finally able to open up to their richness. I recognized how precious Holy Mass is and was happy to understand for the first time my husband's soul.

**Manfred:** I still remember how Christiane accompanied me to a concert in Stockholm with Theresa, our sixth child. The two of them stayed at the hotel while I went to practice with the Swedish Radio-Symphony Orchestra.

**Christiane:** Yes, exactly. While I was nursing our youngest child, I suddenly thought, “*Now you have time. Learn the mysteries of the Rosary by heart.*” So I did! Manfred was especially happy that after 20 years of marriage we started praying together.

**Manfred:** A new period began for us because now together we worked on our family’s life of faith, above all by following the request of Our Lady in Medjugorje, “*Put God at the center of your lives!*” I could finally share with my

wife what I had long since tried to live at work.

It had always been important to me, for example, to be truthful and put aside any fear about what others think when it comes to defending the Catholic Faith and the Church. So, I spoke pretty openly in an interview with the New York Times about my convictions, even though close friends with the best of intentions tried to talk me out of it saying my openness could have a negative effect on my career. The opposite was true because, to this day, I am asked to direct great world-class orchestras.

Thirteen years ago, seeing the cross formed by the wooden beams in the second floor of our house, Manfred had the idea to set up a chapel. Since then, our priest-friends come regularly to celebrate Holy Mass. We might not have the Blessed Sacrament in our simple chapel, but we do have two valuable relics: St. Padre Pio and our family’s patron saint, Blessed Emperor Charles of Austria.

## *God has become indispensable for us*

**Christiane:** The great gift of a deeper faith has not changed exteriorly, perhaps, my often repetitive daily life as mother and housewife. Yet in my newfound relationship with Jesus, slowly I have learned to give everything to him, to offer up everything to him. The same work, situations and problems as before suddenly acquired a completely new meaning and value. It still meant sharing and supporting Manfred’s stress as a conductor, as when he wrote me from the USA last year, “*I’m under tremendous pressure. I just came from Cleveland, and in the next weeks, I have concerts in Pittsburgh with a CD-recording and radio program. After that, I have to go immediately to Vienna and finally to Berlin for another recording.*”

I am much more relaxed now, even though staying in contact between continents is not always easy due to the time difference. I know that I am

so united with Manfred in prayer that I can accompany him spiritually wherever he goes.

**Manfred:** That’s very true! This mutual trust has become indispensable for us because we often have to live celibate in our marriage; it is not always easy to stay faithful but we can with God’s help. We often experience the feeling that God can unite two hearts even at a distance.

**Christiane:** The children have also slowly grown into the Faith. Many things could only be solved with prayer and patience. There is really so much to be thankful for and to ask for, especially before the tabernacle where Jesus is always waiting for me, where I can tell him what is on my heart and “unload”, where I feel free to take his time. He gives to me and even heals me without charge.

So, I often say to myself when it is busy, “*Drop everything and go to him, to Holy Mass! It is so precious. Then the Lord will surely bless everything else.*”

In the course of his extensive concert work, Manfred Honeck has conducted leading international music groups, among them the Symphony Orchestra of the Bavarian Radio, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (Holland), the London Philharmonic Orchestra as well as from Israel, the Orchestre de Paris, the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, the Vienna Philharmonic and various philharmonics in the USA. He has been the music director for the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra since 2008. In February 2013, Conductor Honeck made his successful debut at the Berlin Philharmonic. In the 2013/2014 season, he returned to Prague, New York, Los Angeles, Boston and Rome and also made his debut in the Philadelphia Orchestra.

# *In Tune with One Another*

*Johannes Fischer and Julia Anna Konig said “I do” on September 8, 2012. Johannes had waited a long time before meeting the woman to whom he would promise his faithfulness forever. They are convinced that they were made for one another. In their great thankfulness, they were willing to share their story.*

Julia: *M*y life changed when I was 14 and made my first trip to Medjugorje. I have an 85-year-old woman to thank whose greatest joy is encouraging and sponsoring young people from our village to make a pilgrimage there. Actually, I would also like to thank my grandma in heaven because she, as I found out later, had a great devotion to the Queen of Peace and shared her enthusiasm with her friend, this 85-year-old woman.

Step by step I began entrusting my life to Our Lady—I started praying the Rosary, reading the Bible and the lives’ of the saints and conscientiously going to church on Sunday. Looking back, I can say that God gave me an undeserved gift by planting the seed of faith in my heart because I desired to live the joy of being Christian. My family was quite astonished however, that a teenage girl, out of the blue, was more interested in God than in parties, boys and fashionable clothing. My mom believed that if I kept acting like this, I would never find a husband, and would grow old and die alone. In my heart, I had to smile because I knew that Jesus had a better plan, and I also know that she did not mean it in a bad way because mothers always want what they believe is best for their children.

Johannes: *G*rowing up in a practicing Catholic family, I knew I had to base all my life’s decisions on God’s commandments. Two of my three siblings decided for consecrated life in the Family of Mary. Therefore, I have been close to

the brothers and sisters of this missionary community since my youth, and the question of a religious vocation was just as present for me as the possibility of a happy married life.

When I was 21 years old, I fell in love with a beautiful girl and thought she would be the perfect wife. We were together for four years, but unfortunately, she was unable to share my convictions about the Faith. Our engagement was the beginning of the end of our relationship, because it became more and more apparent that our values were very different. What did God want to realize now in my life? The deep pain of our separation made starting out as a young, self-employed carpenter difficult. Nevertheless, God was able to lead me well during these troubled years. He taught me constancy in prayer and gave me the necessary strength to work—but nothing more.

In retrospect, I am very thankful for this sorrowful experience because God helped me adapt to his plans and made me capable of feeling for others in difficult situations. Through very special circumstances, I was forced to realize my teenage dream of building harps. Ten years ago, I developed the first “Finess harp” model and went into business. For a few years, I lived practically detached from the world in my little workshop, refining the harp’s construction. It took a lot of energy, but I must thank God for the experience because through this everything necessary for founding and nourishing a family matured.

Julia: *A*fter my first trip to Medjugorje, I was very alone with my newfound Faith. Before my conversion I was involved in a few relationships that were not so ideal. My idea of love was wrong; I was selfish and too focused on bodily appearance. That had changed now. Therefore, I saw it as a great gift when I found a Catholic friend who introduced me to “Youth 2000”.

I consecrated myself to Mary with a number of other young people. I felt fulfilled by the grace of God, so at the time I did not think much about becoming involved with somebody new. A priest confirmed my decision, *“Maybe you will become a religious sister; we’ll see; but if God sends you a husband, he’ll be the best you could ever dream of.”* In the end, the priest was right.

## *A pilgrimage together*

Johannes: *T*ime kept ticking, I was 33 years old and the waiting period seemed to take forever. During my free time, I helped out with youth pilgrimages and faith meetings where, on a number of occasions, I met a girl named Julia of whom I never really took notice.

Then once she suddenly caught my eye and I felt such a strong love for her, coupled with the certainty that she carried a great love for Our Lady in her heart. Her radiant face and reserved, gentle nature completely agreed with the naturalness with which she wore the Miraculous Medal. So I decided to write her a note.

Julia: *A*t the age of 18, I received a letter from a certain Johannes Fischer who addressed me as Dear Sunshine. Who is he again? Oh yeah, the harp builder; I had seen him at the prayer festival, at some pilgrimages and recently eating pizza with friends. I always wondered why he still wasn’t married. Rather, I was happy because I thought he might be a good match for a friend of mine.

Actually, I had never really spoken to Johannes, but I knew that if he wrote something, he must be serious about it. I was fairly convinced about the beauty of his heart; otherwise he never would have noticed me and certainly not waited so long for a girl. So we planned our first date for November 13, 2009, following a youth catechism. I was excited. We spoke for a long time, well into the night. It was as if I had always known him, and we both knew that we belonged together.

We decided to make a pilgrimage of thanks-

giving the next day to Our Lady in Altotting, Germany. Johannes had been making a pilgrimage there on foot for several years praying to Our Lady that he may find his future wife soon. This time we wanted to go together—on foot and through the night—not in supplication but in thanksgiving.

A new phase of my life had begun. I finished school, together we prepared an apartment above Johannes’ workshop and, after three years, we married on September 8, 2012. I believe that Johannes’ constancy in prayer and his readiness to make sacrifices contributed to my sudden conversion. Without the Faith, I’d certainly have a very different lifestyle. I would have sought fulfillment perhaps in my career and certainly never would have experienced the joy that I live today as a Christian wife and mother. I am so thankful.

Johannes: *I* too can only thank God that he prepared me for his plan through so many years of pain, sadness and uncertainty. I can say today that he has fulfilled my heart’s every desire—I have a wonderful wife and we have a healthy daughter and are now expecting twins. Soon we will move into our own house and I can be self-employed, right next to our home and close to the family. I’ve realized my dream of turning my hobby into a profession, both as a carpenter and being creative as a musician and artist. I want to thank God, together with my Julia, for everything, especially for all those hidden souls who have accompanied us with their prayer and taught us to love God without whom we never would have met.

# Absurd Idea?

*Irina Weiss from Hochst, Austria is a 21-year-old who went from being a Sundays-only Christian to finding a personal faith in Jesus. She tells us how this came about.*

I grew up in a Catholic family, but until two years ago, the faith was not important to me. I went to Holy Mass on Sundays more out of obligation than out of conviction. It was not until graduation was drawing close that I decided to start going to daily Mass in the hope of overcoming my nervousness and fear about the final exams. When I graduated in 2011 with good grades, I thought I was the happiest person in the world.

Like every summer, there was a youth retreat with the Family of Mary in Kundl, Austria. Over the years, I had been invited a number of times by different young people to go along, but I preferred to party and go to the dance clubs with my “friends” rather than “go and pray”. That year, the youth from my parish would not give in. After thinking about it at length, I thought, “*Come on, it can't be that bad; just go and do it once.*”

I drove with a couple girls from my parish; and we spoke about things from everyday life and about God as well. That led us to the topic of Facebook, which is a way in the Internet to meet a nearly unlimited number of people, exchange personal information and publish

pictures in order to win over as many friends as possible. As we were talking about it, one of the girls, Valentina, told me she had deleted her Facebook account.

At first, I could not believe my ears. A life without Facebook? That was inconceivable to me. Facebook was a huge part of my life. I spent hours a day on it. You could say that I was addicted to it. When I published pictures, it was all about receiving as many “likes”, positive responses, as possible. These “likes” were, in a certain sense, a confirmation for me that other people thought I was cool.

I spent hours looking at the pictures of other young people and “liking” them. Whenever I saw a pretty girl in these pictures, I thought I had to be just like her. I wanted to have the same figure, wear the same clothing and be just perfect. Yet a continual discontentment reigned in my heart, and I was always thinking in competitive terms: “*I have to be better, prettier, cooler and more successful than everyone else.*” In this virtual world, it is only about looks. Everybody portrays himself or herself better than they actually are in order to please the others and satisfy their own desire for recognition and love.

## Give me a true friend

Back to our drive. Appalled, I asked Valentina how she came up with such a ridiculous idea as deleting herself from Facebook. Then she told me something intriguing. “*I made an agreement with Jesus, so to say. I asked him for something very specific, namely, to give me*

*true friends, and I, in return, was prepared to delete my Facebook account.*” I was baffled and could not comprehend what she was saying. I thought, “*What an absurd idea,*” because at the time, everybody I knew was on Facebook. The whole time I was at the youth retreat in



Kundl, I could not get Valentina's story out of my mind. I started to think about whether it would really be possible to delete oneself from Facebook out of love for Jesus in order to find the right friends. No! I couldn't imagine it. At the same time, I began considering who my real friends are. I had around 500 "friends" on Facebook, and that was actually quite a lot. Yet half of them I did not know at all, and the other half I only knew a little bit. I didn't really have any friends with whom I could carry on a normal, personal conversation. Whom could I truly name as a friend for life? As much as I wanted to, I could not think of anybody. I felt a painful emptiness in the depth of my heart.

*I*n Kundl, the young people were different than those I knew back home. I tried to figure out what they had that I was missing. Every one

radiated such happiness. It did not matter whom I ran into, they all greeted me with sincere love and open arms. Every day we had Holy Mass, prayer, talks and Eucharistic adoration, and through it, something changed in my heart too. For the first time, I felt so much that God loves me.

At the end of the youth retreat, I was so filled with God's love that I did not want to return home. Above all, I felt an inner yearning for one true friend, who would always be there for me, who would listen to me and give me strength. Suddenly, I remembered Valentina. Then I made the decision which a few days earlier seemed impossible to me: I decided to delete my Facebook account out of love for Jesus under one condition: "*Jesus, give me the right best friend for life.*"

## *Self-denial out of love*

*I* logged into Facebook determined to delete my account. It took forever to find the option to "delete profile" on the screen. The creators of Facebook do whatever they can, of course, to have as many people belong to them as possible. Therefore, the next message on my screen was "*Your friends are going to miss you*".

I really had to overcome myself to press delete because with one click of the mouse all my "Friends" and pictures would be gone. My whole virtual world would dissolve into nothing. I said to myself, "*You can do it, do it out of love for Jesus.*" After I was finally able to delete my profile, a new message appeared: "*Sorry that*

*you deleted yourself. If you want to see your friends again, just sign in within the next two weeks and your whole profile will be restored.*" I thought, "*How will I manage not to sign in again for the next two weeks when I know that it is so easy for the profile that I deleted to be restored?*" I knew that it would be impossible on my own. So I asked Jesus to help me resist the temptation. To my surprise, the two weeks just flew by, and incredibly, I did not sign back in to my account. For the first time, I finally felt free from the necessity of being continually connected to the Internet and having to present myself in Facebook.

## *Unbelievable but true*

*You* may not believe what I am about to tell, but it is true. On the second to last day of the youth retreat, I was standing around with a few

other young people after Holy Mass. We were laughing together when another girl walked over. She radiated the same joy as the others there in

Kundl who laughed heartily and were so happy to see all their friends again.

I was the only one in the group who did not know her yet. Immediately she held out her hand and said to me, *“Hello, I’m Angie. It’s nice to meet you!”*

We spoke for a moment and then she continued on saying hello to some others. I had been surprised to find out that she lived only 20 minutes away from my house, so I offered her a ride home.

We laughed a lot on the drive back and shared with one another a little about our lives. It was as if we had known each other forever. Then, we

started doing things together back home. Today, Angelika is the friend whom I had wished for my whole life. We both strive to live the faith, making the effort to meet God every day and be faithful to him. Jesus and Holy Mass are the center of our lives, and I thank God every day that he has given me such a best friend.

It was truly a huge sacrifice for me to delete my Facebook account, but I have experienced that God has repaid me a thousand times over. I am very thankful that I may experience God’s love every day and that he shows me his plan for my life one step at a time.

## St. Nicholas in Russia

*Just like St. Francis or St. Patrick in the Western Hemisphere, St. Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, is the most beloved saint in Russia, second only to Our Lady in popular devotion. Part of the reason is certainly the countless miracles that have taken place among the Russian people through his intercession over the centuries, for which they are immensely grateful.*

Around the year 1515, in a little town named Kolomna southeast of Moscow, a silversmith named Koslok, driven by greed, decided to break into the church of St. Nicholas. He came one night and stole the silver riza (the artistic metal cover protecting an icon) from the miraculous icon of St. Nicholas which was venerated there. When Bishop Mitrophan and the faithful discovered what had happened, they were deeply saddened and could not understand why anyone would do such a thing. *“What insolent criminal would dare to lay his hands on this miraculous image?”* they asked themselves.

For the next five weeks, there was no trace of the missing riza. Then the great miracle worker St. Nicholas appeared to a pious man named Sosont, who had been in bed paralyzed for the previous eight years, and commanded:

*“Go to Bishop Mitrophan and tell him that the silversmith Koslok stole the riza of the miraculous image. His house is on the other side of the Kolomna River close to a pond, and there he buried the silver piece in a pot.”*

The paralyzed man objected, *“Man of God, you are ordering me to go to the bishop, but I am unable to walk because of my illness.”*

In reply, St. Nicholas took him by the hand and helped him sit up in bed. From that moment, he was healed.

Sosont hurried to the bishop and reported to him everything that had happened, just as St. Nicholas had commanded him. When Bishop Mitrophan realized that a great miracle had taken place, he had the church bells rung at length, and all the people from town streamed to the church of St. Nicholas.

Once they were all inside, they saw the man

who had been healed standing next to the miraculous icon; they were amazed and gave thanks to God and to St. Nicholas the miracle worker. The bishop and the priests then put on liturgical vestments, took the miraculous image and processed with all the faithful out of the church. Only the bishop and Sosont knew why they were leaving and where they were going—to the other side of the river, to silversmith Koslok's place. When they arrived, the thief was standing at the gate. He saw the procession and immediately repented his sin. The bishop did not have to ask him anything; he admitted his crime and returned the precious silver riza. Everybody rejoiced over the miracle of conversion.

On the way back, the procession arrived at the city gates with the holy image. A beggar by the name of Kliment, who had been deaf and dumb

since birth, was sitting and waiting for alms. He lifted his gaze to the icon, prayed to St. Nicholas and in that moment, he was able to hear and speak. The additional healing through the venerable image shocked the bishop and faithful, and they thanked God and his holy miracle worker anew.

The bishop sent a message to Prince Vasilij Ivanovitch in Moscow about the numerous miracles that had taken place through the intercession of St. Nicholas: the paraplegic Sosont and the healing of the deaf and dumb man, the discovery of the silver riza, the conversion of the silversmith Koslok and many others.

The great prince was pleased, praised God and his most pure Mother and the great miracle worker St. Nicholas. He also ordered that the holy liquid that exuded from the miraculous icon be brought to him in Moscow three times a year.

## Ecumenism in Practice

Since his ordination in 2012, Fr. Nicklas from Muscatine, Iowa (USA) has been working at our mission station in Alexejevka, Russia in the Diocese of Saratov. He discovered his deep love for Russia as a seminarian in Rome and repeatedly spent his summer breaks helping in the eastern missions. Everybody was amazed at what a big heart he as an American had for this poor and foreign country, especially since the United States and Russia were enemies for much of his childhood. An additional confirmation from God is that he has St. Nicholas as the protector for his priesthood. While he was helping as a seminarian here in Alexejevka, Fr. Nicklas met Fr. Vadim Koval, an Orthodox priest from the neighboring town Jasijkova, who has helped our community in many ways. Today, they enjoy a special friendship, and St. Nicholas has a special role in this lived ecumenism. Fr. Nicklas relates:

When I came to Alexejevka in November 2012, Fr. Vadim paid us a visit to welcome me as the new pastor. As we were having dinner to-

gether, he casually mentioned his life-long wish of one day possessing a relic of St. Nicholas whom he loved, venerated and prayed to every day. I actually had a valuable relic of St. Nicholas from Rome, which I had received once as a gift; it was something very special to me. I felt that I should not keep this from him and, after an initial hesitation, admitted to him, *"You know, Father, I have a relic of St. Nicholas."* The Orthodox priest jumped up from the table, even knelt down and begged me, *"Oh please, may I see and venerate it?"* So I went up to my room and retrieved it. He begged me if there was not some way he might receive a relic of him too. In my helplessness, I promised, *"I'll share my relic with you."*

And so it was. Since I had to return to Rome anyway for a new visa, I bought a little silver reliquary there. One of our brothers carefully divided my precious relic in two with a scalpel and placed one half in the reliquary. As soon as I arrived in Russia, I already had 30 text messages

on my cell phone from Fr. Vadim, asking when I would be back and if I had the relic with me. We agreed I would bring my friend this cherished gift on an upcoming Saturday. I thought it was going to be a simple and personal encounter, but I had thoroughly underestimated the event. When I arrived in Jasijkova with our brothers and sisters and headed up to the church, the bells began ringing solemnly. The Orthodox faithful poured out of the church and welcomed us with open arms. They received the relic with great respect, like receiving St. Nicholas in person, and began to venerate him in the church by singing festive hymns in his honor. It was very touching to see with what love and festiveness they welcomed him.

A journalist and a photographer from the local newspaper were also on hand to interview Fr. Vadim and me. The article in the newspaper the next day brought much elation to Alexejevka, and I thought to myself, *“Well, you didn’t expect that much attention, but it’s all over now.”* How wrong I was! About a week later, Fr. Vadim called me and said with a laugh, *“Fr. Nicklas, you’ve become the most famous Catholic priest in all of Russia!”*

That made me a little bit nervous, and I as-

ked, *“Why?”* Then he explained to me, *“There’s a Russian Orthodox website which published the newspaper article, and already one million people across Russia have read it.”*

We had a good laugh together, and then I was sure that this was finally the happy ending of the story. For the third time, I was wrong because Fr. Vadim called again a few weeks later and pressed me, *“Fr. Nicklas, you’ve got to come to the church in Jasijkova right away! Come as quickly as you can!”* Since he did not want to tell me what was going on over the phone, I jumped in the car and headed over there.

When I entered the church, he walked over to me and we greeted one another warmly with the traditional Russian, “Praised be Jesus Christ”. Only then did I notice the camera crew. They had come with a reporter from the national television station “Rossija 2” from the provincial capital Ufa. I looked at my Orthodox priest-friend with bewilderment, and he merely said, *“Oh, they want to interview you.”* So like it or not, I, the Catholic country pastor who gave an Orthodox priest a tiny fragment of a first class relic of St. Nicholas, held an interview which was, as a matter of fact, broadcast on national news.

## Eleven Baptisms in Christmastide

*The joy of a missionary is seeing God’s grace at work, seeing how souls open up and may even be led to baptism. This is especially true of the children who are the future of the mission.*

*I*n our village Alexejevka, we met Grandma Ljuba, who has come to church faithfully every day for more than a year and is preparing

to receive First Holy Communion. She has such a good heart, but she lives in destitute conditions. Despite her poverty, however, she took in an el-

derly 84-year-old woman and her invalid daughter who did not have an apartment of their own and had been living for some time in an old car on the street. Both mother and daughter were very ill and could not believe their ears when they heard that dear Grandma Ljuba had pity on them and invited them to stay with her.

It was very important to Grandma Ljuba that all her grandchildren be baptized and did what was in her power to see to it. There are four boys; two of them, Jura (12) the oldest and his brother Sergej (9), have been coming to our children's hour for the last four years. However, Grandma Ljuba wanted them baptized too, so she started bringing them to Holy Mass, and Daniel (4) also came with them. He is a special boy. Now he wants to be a priest, plays "Holy Mass" at home and is delighted whenever he can come to church. Even though Grandma Ljuba has a difficult time going to church because she is quite ill, Daniel does whatever he can to get her to go, and until now, he has always been successful. In the meantime, the three brothers have also succeeded in bringing their mother Svetlana to Holy Mass. Jura and Sergej's father, unfortunately, died five years ago. When the children went to the cemetery with us on November 1, the two boys cried as they led us to his grave so that we could pray for him. In the meantime, a fourth member has joined the family, little two-year-old Anatolij. All four boys were baptized in our parish on January 17, to the great joy of Grandma Ljuba and Fr. Nicklas since it was his birthday as well.

Yet the little "quartet" with their handsome strawberry blonde hair was not the only addition

to the Church that day. Timur (8) and his brother Daniel (7) were also there. Although their father is in prison, the two of them showed up at our church for children's hour three years ago. It was wonderful to see how also in their case it is the children who gradually draw their parents to the church.

For a year now, their mother Anya has been coming too, although she still has a little one-year-old daughter, Nastenka, to care for at home. Following the baptism of her two sons, she asked Fr. Nicklas if she also could become Catholic.

In yet another instance, grace touched the whole family. Through nine-year-old Alesia's faithfulness and her preparation for baptism, her mother Ljuba also found her way to the faith. Ljuba likewise had Alesia's two-year-old brother Anton baptized in January, and even Ljuba's partner comes to Holy Mass now and again, without going to Communion of course.

*The* Child Jesus could not have given us a greater gift during these January days of the Christmas season than a total of eleven children to whom Fr. Nicklas administered the Sacrament of Baptism. The oldest ones are now preparing for First Communion and come faithfully several times a week to Holy Mass. We are often astonished by the children's readiness to make sacrifices because, after six days of school during the week, more than 50 children still give up sleeping in and come to church on Sunday, even on icy cold winter days.