

Triumph of the Heart

A CHILD, OUR SAVIOR!

Family of Mary
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*M*other Teresa's mission ...
remains for us today an eloquent witness
to God's closeness
to the poorest of the poor."

*Pope Francis in the homily for Mother Teresa's Canonization
September 4, 2016*

Our Work Began at Christmas

On September 4, 2016, tens of thousands of pilgrims from around the world and thirteen heads of state were present in St. Peter's Square for the canonization of Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910 – 1997). Everyone knew the "Mother of the Poor", who gave her life for the poorest of the poor, especially for abandoned children and the protection of the unborn. "Every child is a gift of God," she used to say. "If you hear of some woman who does not want to keep her child and wants to have an abortion, try to persuade her to bring him to me. I will love that child, seeing in him the sign of God's love."

"I spent practically every Christmas of my life with orphans. I felt close to the Baby Jesus when I was with them," Mother Teresa of Calcutta once told the well-known Italian journalist Renzo Allegri, who met Mother Teresa through Bishop Hnilica. She often spoke to him in interviews about her children and Christmas, "the greatest cosmic event in history." She told the journalist that it was her mother back home in Skopje who first encouraged her to spend the holidays with poor children.

"Every Sunday, Mother accompanied

us to some poor family in the city, to bring them groceries and clothing. We went to the poorest families on Christmas. I remember a poor widow with seven little children living in a dirty, dark room. It broke my heart when we visited them and found these poor creatures all squeezed together on a single bed which was no more than a pile of greasy blankets. A single room for eight people with a tiny kitchen and no bathroom!

"It was our mother who explained to us that Jesus came into the world in dismal

poverty too, in a stable which was worse than this room. I cried when I heard these words."

Mother Teresa came from a wealthy Albanian family. Her father was a respected businessman, and the family lived in a comfortable villa in Skopje. Nevertheless, at the wish of her parents

*M*other Teresa taught for eighteen years, but then, as she said, *"I received a call within the call. Jesus let me understand that I should take in the poorest of the poor. ... I wanted to start my new mission on Christmas Day in 1948. Yes, I consciously chose Christmas because this feast represents the essence of our Faith. Christmas symbolizes suffering and, at the same time, the triumph of the Son of God made man. Suffering because of the birth into poverty and coming into the world of exile and trial; triumph, because Jesus, who became man, redeemed mankind, conquered death and gave us the Resurrection.*

"After the Holy Mass on the morning of December 21, 1948, I went to the only slum I knew in Motijhil, a poor quarter close to the school where I had taught for years. I had been sending my students to this slum for years at Christmas time, to bring gifts which I had prepared for poor children whom I did not know.

"The moment had finally arrived when I could go to the children myself to celebrate Christmas, in 'direct' contact with Jesus who

the girl deepened her contact to the poor, and ultimately, she became a religious sister in order to dedicate herself completely to the poor. The Sisters of Loreto, whom she joined, worked in mission countries, but their aim was primarily education.

lives in the poor. I spent the whole day in Motijhil, making friends with the mothers and playing with their children. I was so happy, that I completely forgot that I had no place to spend the night. In the evening, I started looking for a place to stay. For me, it was a little bit like Our Lady in labor finding no room in the inn, and finally having to choose a stable for bringing Jesus into the world. In my case, it was the middle of the night before I found a woman who would rent me a poor shack for five Rupees a month.

"The very next day, I started teaching five children in the shack. My first five children! In my building, there was neither a table nor chairs, and I didn't have a blackboard. I wrote the letters of the alphabet on the bare floor with a stick. That is how I taught class! Three days later, the five children had turned into twenty-five, and before the end of the year, there were forty-one. Later on, I set up a school there large enough to teach five hundred children. Since then, I celebrate the anniversary of my work every year on Christmas."

A special gift basket

*B*ishop Paul Maria Hnilica from Slovakia lived a close friendship with Mother Teresa for thirty-three years. During his repeated visits to India, the bishop supported her and her sisters in their missionary work, often for weeks at a time. This made him realize, "Christmas was at the center of Mother Teresa's spirituality. This feast meant the most to her because her work for the poor began at Christmas in 1948.

"She saw the weak, defenseless child who

was born in the stable in Bethlehem in everyone... especially in the abandoned children. I spent several Christmases with Mother Teresa, but I remember one in particular: I was in India, in Calcutta. Mother Teresa had invited me for dinner on December 24th, to celebrate Christmas Eve with her and her sisters. It was a frugal meal, quite meager really, as is the practice with the Missionaries of Charity. Yet it was a dinner rich with affection, joy and fellowship. The atmosphere

was so loving that we almost forgot to eat—suddenly we heard a knocking at the door. One of the sisters went to look and came back with a basket covered with a cloth. *‘A woman gave this to me and hurried away,’* she said. As she brought the basket over to Mother Teresa, she added, *‘It was surely a benefactor who wanted to give us a little something to eat for Christmas.’*

“Mother Teresa pulled off the cloth and her eyes started to glow. *‘Jesus has arrived,’* she said with a radiant smile. The sisters ran over to take a look. In the basket was a baby, just a few days old, sleeping. It was an abandoned child.

Possibly the woman who brought it was the newborn’s mother who could not keep it and therefore entrusted it to the sisters. Something like this happened frequently in Calcutta.

“The sisters huddled together around the basket with cries of joy, raptured by the sleeping baby. Their excitement woke the little one, and it started to cry. Mother Teresa took the child in her arms. She smiled as she did so, yet, at the same time, she had tears in her eyes. *‘Now we can say that our Christmas is really complete, isn’t it?’* she asked. *‘Jesus has come to us. We must thank God for this wonderful gift.’”*

From Starry Skies Thou Comest

Alphonsus was a very gifted child from a wealthy noble family, De’ Liguori, in Naples, Italy, the third largest city in the world at the time. By the age of sixteen, he already completed doctorates in both civil and canon law. The deeply faithful young man was a sought-after lawyer who never lost a case—until the summer of 1723.

In a sensational lawsuit between two dukes worth millions, the honest twenty-seven-year-old suffered a bitter defeat through corrupt politics. Shaking with dismay, he left the courtroom saying, *“World, now I know you; courthouses, you’ll never see me again!”*

Shortly thereafter, during a visit to the poor in a hospital for the terminally ill, Alphonsus heard God’s call to follow him in an overwhelming conversion experience. Alphonsus clearly heard the Lord’s words, *“Leave the world, give yourself to me.”* With tears in his eyes, he offered himself completely to God, *“Here I am, do with me as you will.”* He immediately went to the church “Our Lady of Ransom” and placed his dagger on the altar at the foot of Our Lady’s statue as a sign of his willingness to let go of the world, and there he promised to become a priest. Ever more aware of Jesus’ redeeming love, the seminarian decided

to dedicate himself, even beyond his strength, to the needy. Later, as a young diocesan priest, he became a true friend to the 30,000 so-called “Lazzaroni”, Naples’ poor and homeless. The further the parish missions were from the cities, the more shaken and “more fatally wounded” Alphonsus was at seeing the material misery and the religious ignorance of the people out in the country; nobody cared for these souls! Wanting to proclaim the Redeemer’s love to them, Alphonsus placed at their service his compassionate heart and all his abilities as a gifted preacher and confessor, poet, painter and musician. In the ragged huts of the goat herders in the mountains close to Scala over the Amalfi Coast, for example, Alphonsus prayed, sang and explained the Word of God in a way they could understand. It was here in 1732, at the age of thirty-six, that the apostle founded the “Redemptorists”, the “Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer”. In the engaging homilies, prayers and meditations which he composed, Alphonsus never shied away from placing before everybody’s eyes with touching words what the Redeemer had done in the manger and on the Cross for that person so that he too would love the Redeemer. And many changed their lives.

Spending hours before the Blessed Sacrament, Alphonsus marveled when meditating on just how deep our Lord descended: *“First, you appear among us as a child in a stable, a poor man in the workshop, then as the condemned one on the wood of the Cross and finally in the form of bread upon our altars. Tell me, is there anything else you can devise so that we love you? ... When I hear the words, ‘manger, Cross, altar,’ I burn with desire to do great things for you, my Jesus, you who have done and endured such inconceivable things for me.”* Love and redemption—these were the key

Alphonsus had a simple, childlike soul, and when his faith-filled heart began to overflow, he stopped thinking and began—like a true Neapolitan—to rhyme and sing. Thanks to his musical training with Master Cajetan Greco the composition of rhymes and music came to him naturally.

During a parish mission to Nola in December 1755, the apostle wrote the spirited Christmas carol *“Tu Scendi dalle Stelle—From Starry Skies Thou Comest”*, which, to this day, is a beloved song in Italy at Christmas time.

Fr. Michael Zambadelli heard about Alphonsus’ composition and audaciously asked if he could copy it. Alphonsus did not want to permit

words which the stable in Bethlehem spoke to Alphonsus so that he, like St. Francis, was unable to separate himself from this place. Here, he learned the virtues of the Divine Child—the infinitely great one who made himself little and accessible to all. He, who as God belongs only to himself, desired so much to belong to us so that from now on anyone can say, *“Jesus is all mine—his body and blood are mine, his suffering and merits are mine, his life is mine, his death is mine. ... Yes, this man was born to suffer for us. Therefore, he accepted a body which is fully capable of suffering.”*

him, but he left the score laying on the table in his room and went to pray in the church. Fr. Michael could not resist—he secretly copied the music and stuck it in his cassock pocket. Soon the moment arrived during the evening service when Alphonsus started singing his carol; the people sang with him enthusiastically. Then the missionary paused suddenly, as if he could not really remember the other verses, and told the altar server standing next to him, *“Go to Fr. Michael and ask him for the copy in his pocket.”* The priest, red with embarrassment, met Alphonsus afterwards in the rectory. Giving him a wink, the former lawyer said, *“Fr. Michael, I’m going to turn you in for spiritual robbery.”*

Translated from: Josef Heinzmann, *Unruhe der Liebe: Alfons Maria von Liguori (1696-1787)*, Kanisius-Verlag Freiburg

Alphonsus’ mother taught him to love Mary. He liked to meditate about Our Lady and her motherly role within the mystery of Christmas, and he understood that everything she did for Baby Jesus back then, she continues to do for us. In addition to instilling a deep faith in Alphonsus, his mother also gave him a little statue of Baby Jesus wrapped in cloth. He carried it with him wherever he went. Today, it is in the Redemptorist monastery museum in Pagani, where on August 1, 1787, the saint died at the age of ninety. Alphonsus was one of the most successful parish missionaries and authors in the history of the Church. By the end of his life, he had written 111 works, including the precious book *“The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ”* and his famous *“Moral Theology”*. It was with good reason that Bl. Pope Pius IX declared the prophetic pastor a Doctor of the Church with the title *“Doctor Zelantissimus”*, “the most zealous”. Pope Pius XII named him the patron of confessors and moral theologians.

The Feast of Feasts

During his touching homily at Midnight Mass in St. Peter's in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI, then still in office, unlocked for us the joy of Christmas in a particularly beautiful way. Six years later, it still speaks consolation and hope to us when we feel the weight of our times like never before.

“*The kindness and love of God our Savior for mankind were revealed*”: this is the new, consoling certainty that is granted to us at Christmas. The Prophet Isaiah describes the epiphany that took place at Christmas in greater detail: “*A child is born for us, a son given to us and dominion is laid on his shoulders; and this is the name they give him: Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God, Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace. Wide is his dominion in a peace that has no end.*” This is the only text in the Old Testament in which it is said of a child, of a human being: his name will be Mighty-God, Eternal-Father.

God has appeared—as a child. It is in this guise that he pits himself against all violence and

“*In 1223, when Saint Francis of Assisi celebrated Christmas in Greccio with an ox and an ass and a manger full of hay, a new dimension of the mystery of Christmas came to light. Saint Francis of Assisi called Christmas “the feast of feasts”—above all other feasts—and he celebrated it with “unutterable devotion”. He kissed images of the Christ-child with great devotion and he stammered tender words such as children say, so Thomas of Celano tells us. Francis discovered Jesus’ humanity in an entirely new depth. This human existence of God became most visible to him at the moment when God’s Son, born of the Virgin Mary, was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. For God’s Son to take the form of a child, a truly human child, made a profound impression on the heart of the Saint of*

brings a message that is peace. At this hour, when the world is continually threatened by violence in so many places and in so many different ways we cry out to the Lord:

O mighty God, you have appeared as a child and you have revealed yourself to us as the One who loves us, the One through whom love will triumph. And you have shown us that we must be peacemakers with you. We love your childish estate, your powerlessness, but we suffer from the continuing presence of violence in the world, and so we also ask you: manifest your power, O God. In this time of ours, in this world of ours, cause the oppressors’ rods, the cloaks rolled in blood and the footgear of battle to be burned, so that your peace may triumph in this world of ours.

Assisi, transforming faith into love.

“*The kindness and love of God our Savior for mankind were revealed*”—this phrase of Saint Paul now acquired an entirely new depth. In the child born in the stable at Bethlehem, we can, as it were, touch and caress God.

This has nothing to do with sentimentality. Francis loved the child Jesus, because for him it was in this childish estate that God’s humility shone forth. In the child Jesus, God made himself dependent, in need of human love; he put himself in the position of asking for human love—our love. Today Christmas has become a commercial celebration, whose bright lights hide the mystery of God’s humility, which in turn calls us to humility and simplicity. Let us ask the Lord to help us see through the superficial glitter of this season,

and to discover behind it the child in the stable in Bethlehem, so as to find true joy and true light.

Francis arranged for Mass to be celebrated on the manger that stood between the ox and the ass. Later, an altar was built over this manger, so that where animals had once fed on hay, men could now receive the flesh of the spotless lamb Jesus Christ, for the salvation of soul and body. Francis himself, as a deacon, had sung the Christmas Gospel on the holy night in Greccio with resounding voice. Through the friars' radiant Christmas singing, the whole celebration seemed to be a great outburst of joy. It was the encounter with God's humility that caused this joy—his goodness cre-

ates the true feast.

Today, anyone wishing to enter the Church of Jesus' Nativity in Bethlehem ... must dismount from the high horse of our "enlightened" reason. ... We must follow the interior path of Saint Francis—the path leading to that ultimate outward and inward simplicity which enables the heart to see. ... Let us also pray especially at this hour for all who have to celebrate Christmas in poverty, in suffering, as migrants, that a ray of God's kindness may shine upon them, that they—and we—may be touched by the kindness that God chose to bring into the world through the birth of his Son in a stable. Amen.

Excerpts from his homily

The Little White Envelope

*I*t was just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past ten years. It all began because my husband, Mike, hated Christmas. Oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it—overspending and the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma; gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son, Kevin, who was twelve that year, was on the wrestling team at the school he attended. Shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparking new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the

*F*or each Christmas, I followed the tradition—one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and so on.

The white envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning, and our children—ignoring their new toys—would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents,

other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the opposing team obviously could not afford.

Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat. Mike, seated next to me, shook his head sadly, "*I wish just one of them could have won,*" he said. "*They have lots of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them.*" Mike loved kids—all kids. He so enjoyed coaching little league football, baseball and lacrosse.

That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed a small white envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done, and this was his gift from me. Mike's smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year. And that same bright smile lit up succeeding years.

but the envelope never lost its allure. You see, we lost Mike last year due to dreaded cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up.

But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad.

The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope.

The Divine Child Consoles and Heals

Sr. Emmanuel from the community of the Beatitudes has lived in Medjugorje since 1990. During a pilgrimage, the words of Our Lady, "I need you!" captured her heart and never let it go. As a result, she left her homeland, France, to stand in the service of the Queen of Peace.

Nearly every day she speaks to French, English or Italian pilgrims about the mysteries of our Faith and has helped countless people to turn trustingly to God. Her great love is Baby Jesus, which is why she named her house Bethlehem. She shares with us some of her valuable experiences.

The majority of people who visit Medjugorje come with great concerns or wounds and hope for help or healing. It has been my experience that, in many cases, Baby Jesus very unexpectedly proves to be a wonderful counselor and physician. One priest, for example, openly admitted to me, "Baby Jesus is really my least concern. As a university professor, I have more important things on my mind!"

However, after attending a talk I gave, he decided to try what I suggested. Something special happened to him about which he then testified. "After I imagined Our Lady placing Baby Jesus in my arms, I was really embarrassed. I thought, 'What should I do with him now?'"

"I felt very uncomfortable, and I would have been happy to give him back. Nevertheless, I was suddenly overcome by a tenderness, the like of which I had never experienced.

"The grace only lasted for a few seconds, but it changed my life. I am no longer the same person. The Baby Jesus made me meek and comprehensive; he melted my heart. And how drastically I needed that!"

Another time, during one of my talks, I invited the listeners to imagine taking in their arms the Baby Jesus whom Mary was holding out to them. Valerie from the USA later told me what she experienced when she did that: "To hold Jesus

as a baby was something entirely new to me because I had always imagined Jesus only as a grown man. Yet I did what Sr. Emmanuel told us to do and started speaking with this Child in my heart. He seemed to come alive; I even had the impression that I could feel the weight of his body.

"It took my breath away, because I felt in that moment the absence of my own son. I had become pregnant at the age of sixteen; I gave birth to him and then gave him up for adoption. I married some years later, but then I was never able to have children.

"So, there was a big hole in my life, an emptiness in my heart which caused it to bleed incessantly. I had given up my only son! I felt this pain like never before and started to cry. I had only held my son Peter twice in my arms—once when he was a baby and now it seemed that he had come to me again with Baby Jesus. I felt how the Divine Child filled the void!

"In the meantime, I am now forty-nine years old, and I know the problems from which my son suffers because I was not a mother for him. After this experience of grace, I called him and told him all about it. He silently listened to me. At the end, he only said, 'Mom, I love you!'"

“He had never said these words to me. I cannot say thank you enough for what the Baby Jesus gave me and my son—an incredible healing! He freed me from a sadness which was constantly hidden in my heart, and he gave me back the dignity of a mother.”

A short time ago, a woman came to me after my talk and told me crying, *“I am almost sixty years old. Although I married young, I was*

*T*his spiritual reality to which I try to lead the faithful, namely to livingly believe in Baby Jesus’ presence and to prepare a place for him to live in their hearts, is nothing extraordinary among the mystics. St. Faustina wrote in her diary:

“I saw Our Lady with the Infant Jesus, and the Holy Old Man [St. Joseph] standing behind them. The most holy Mother said to me, Take My Dearest Treasure, and She handed me the Infant Jesus. When I took the Infant Jesus in my arms, the Mother of God and Saint Joseph disappeared. I was left alone with the Infant Jesus. I said to Him, ‘I know that You are my Lord and Creator even though You are so tiny.’ Jesus stretched His little arms out to me and looked at me with a smile. My spirit was filled with incomparable joy. Then suddenly Jesus disappeared, and it was time for Holy Communion.

“I went with the other sisters to the Holy Table, my soul deeply moved. After Holy Com-

*A*fter five years, a phone call came, *“Sr. Emmanuel, please prepare a concrete foundation. We’re coming in a month to set up the manger scene.”* And he did. He arrived with ten men from France. In just a few days, they built the beautiful little wood house which was to become the dwelling place of the Holy Family.

Now we only needed the figures. They should be life-size statues so that people can speak with them as if they were alive. I asked in my newsletter if anybody knew where I could buy some. I did not have to wait long before an unknown benefactor gave us the whole Holy Family.

You cannot imagine with what joy we vener-

unable to have children. My husband did not want to adopt, and so we had this cross in our marriage—an unimaginable suffering for me! But today... today,” she needed a moment to compose herself before continuing with a trembling voice, *“I received my child! I will take very good care of him, believe me!”* The Baby Jesus made use of her suffering to prepare a manger deep in her heart, and now he lives there.

munion, I heard these words in my soul: I am in your heart, I whom you had in your arms.”

Diary 608 and 609

Women often entrust to me what they are suffering as the result of an abortion or a child they have lost. It became always clearer to me that, along with forgiveness, they especially need the warmth of Divine Love in order to return home healed or at least consoled. Yet, who could help them better than the Holy Family? In Our Lady, they encounter a merciful mother, in St. Joseph an understanding, tender father and in Baby Jesus they find forgiveness and healing. For this reason, I had the idea to build a manger scene for struggling mothers and couples. I spoke about it with Marcel, a talented handworker who is friends with our community. He loved the idea and promised to take care of it. Whenever we met, I hesitantly asked how the project was coming. He calmed me each time telling me, *“In my head, everything is finished.”*

ated Baby Jesus here at Christmas for the first time in the “Little Bethlehem”! Since then, there has been no end to the visits to the Holy Family and to the graces given. Many return home not only consoled, but even healed by the Divine Child.

One of them is Lola from Quebec. She came to Medjugorje in October 2012, and told me:

“I went with my pilgrim group to the manger, but I had my reservations. I thought, ‘What can I really receive in such a place?’ Our priest prayed for each one of us. When it was my turn, I started crying, seemingly without reason, and couldn’t regain my composure. I saw before my eyes the scene which

had taken place a number of times during my childhood.

“We always went over to grandpa’s house at Christmas time and, unfortunately, he abused me. Since then, I am always overcome by a deadly sadness at Christmas or whenever I

hear Christmas songs on the radio. I believed “I had forgiven him, but there was still a deep bitterness in me. Here, in this simple place, it all came back. And yet the Holy Family was here, above all the Baby Jesus, to heal me. They have given me peace.”

Jesus Wants You to be Very Little

Sr. Josefa Menendez (1890-1923), like St. Faustina, had already fulfilled her mission here on earth at the age of thirty-three.

She lived for only four years as a modest lay sister in the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Poitiers, France, working as a seamstress. With the exception of her superior, none of the other sisters knew about her mystical gifts and her great suffering as a victim soul for the conversion of sinners.

In 1938, the cardinal protector of the congregation, Eugenio Pacelli, who would later become Pope Pius XII, allowed the publication of Jesus’ messages to Sr. Josefa. “May they effectively contribute to awaken in many souls an always greater and more loving trust in the infinite mercy of the divine Heart toward sinners, which includes all of us.”

n December 26, 1922, Josefa asked with Holy Communion that Our Lady bring the Baby Jesus and teach her to love and console the Divine Child. She wrote in her diary: *“I spoke to her as one speaks to one’s mother, with great confidence, and after Communion I begged her to adore Him for me and to teach me how to thank Him.”* Then Our Lady appeared and brought Josefa the Baby Jesus with the words, *“Look, my child, I bring you your Jesus. ... Place Him deep down in your heart. See how cold He is! You can warm Him by your love. He is so good, and He loves you so much! Let Him be the sole King of your heart.”*

Josefa assured Our Lady that she really wanted to love Baby Jesus, but that, unfortunately,

she was not always faithful in fulfilling what he desired of her. *“Then in His sweet baby voice He said: ‘Mother, I have asked Josefa to make Me a little tunic adorned with many souls.’ ... Our Lady at once replied: ‘Yes, give Him souls, and do not let any go away from Him.’”*

Josefa professed to the heavenly Mother her sincere desire to carry out this task with her whole heart, that is, to help souls come closer to God through prayer and sacrifice. And yet, despite her sound resolution, she was confronted with her own lack of diligence.

Dear reader, does this not also apply to us? Yet Our Lady responds tenderly, *“Do not fear, my child, Jesus asks only for your good will. Try your best and prove your affection in that*

way. *Do you know how to do it? Jesus wants you to be very little . . . quite tiny, so tiny that you may be able to creep in here.*” With her hand she showed Josefa the small, narrow space between her heart and the Baby Jesus who was leaning on her. *“How happy you would be in there,”* Our Lady continued. Jesus encouraged her by waving His little arms, *“Just try, ... and you will see!”*

Once again, Josefa asked for forgiveness for all her resistance, of which she became so deeply aware before so great a love. Our Lady responded,

“Yes, you are right, there are moments when you are ungrateful. Do you know why? It is because you are thinking of yourself more than of Him. Do not consider whether a thing costs you or not, prove your love by doing all He asks of you. If He tells you to speak, speak. If to be silent, then keep silence. If He tells you to love, then love. What does anything matter, if He takes care of you?”

Our Lady finally departed with the words, *“Adieu, my child, do not forget the tunic. Comfort Him and give Him souls!”*

Source: The Way of Divine Love by Sr. Josefa Menendez

Three Pieces of Straw

Jesus' lesson to the Spanish victim soul Josefa Menendez pertains to all of us. It is presented with such simplicity that it may seem too childish for us adults.

Yet it contains a very deep truth which is not as easy to live as it seems at first glance. Sometimes children understand it better and can even become models of love for us.

*T*hat was the case for us last year during Advent. One of our sisters in Rome was teaching catechism to some children and explained to them that, in preparation for Christmas, they can prepare a warm place for Baby Jesus by placing a piece of straw in the manger for every sacrifice that they make.

Five-year-old Maria paid close attention. She is very lucky to grow up in a family where they talk openly about the faith and pray with one another. Lisa and Michael take time each evening with their children Maria and seven-year-old Francesco to pray the Rosary before a statue of Our Lady in the living room. The children usually fall asleep around the third mystery. At the end of the Rosary,

however, when they bring their personal petitions to Our Lady, they are wide awake again.

The day after catechism, Maria was noticeably attentive during the Rosary, and her parents wondered why she did not fall asleep this time. After the prayer, she shed light on her “secret”. Exhausted, but with a radiant smile, Maria told her mom, “Today, I can put three pieces of straw in the manger.”

Somewhat surprised, Lisa asked, “Why three?” “I prayed the whole Rosary, I prayed it on my knees and I forgave Francesco.”

Yes, the little ones often understand better than we adults how they can “keep the Lord warm” and show him their love.

God Needs the Little Ones

The shepherds came to the stable in Bethlehem and adored the Child. They brought gifts, and they were happy when they left empty-handed. Yet, a little shepherd boy secretly took something from the manger. He held it tightly in his hand so that nobody would notice.

Then someone asked, “*What’s in your hand?*”

“*A piece of straw,*” he responded, “*a piece of straw from the manger in which the Child was lying.*”

“*Straw,*” one of them laughed, “*that’s trash, throw it away.*”

But the little shepherd boy shook his head. “*No,*” he persisted, “*I’m keeping it. It reminds me of the Child. Whenever I hold this piece of straw in my hand, I will remember the Child and what the angel said about him.*”

The next day, the other shepherds asked him again, “*Do you still have the straw? Yes? Get rid of it. It’s really worthless.*”

Yet the little shepherd knew better, “*That’s not true. The Divine Child was laying on it.*”

“*So what?*” they pressed on, “*the child is precious, for sure, but what are you going to do with the straw?*”

The little shepherd, however, thought differ-

ently, “*Where else could the child have lain, poor as he is? The straw teaches me that God needs what seems worthless and little. God needs us, the little ones who cannot do much and are not worth much in the eyes of the great!*”

The little shepherd often held the straw in his hand, remembering the angel’s words and rejoicing that God loved man so much that he became little like us.

One day though, a shepherd took the straw away from him and shouted, “*You and your straw. You’re driving me crazy!*” He bent the piece of straw over and over again and threw it on the ground.

The little shepherd carefully picked up his treasure, straightened it out and said to him with a sigh, “*You see, it remained what it is—a piece of straw. All your anger was unable to change it. It is easy to bend a piece of straw, and maybe you think the same thing: what is a child when we need someone stronger? But I tell you, this Child will become a man and no one will be able to overthrow him. He will endure and bear man’s anger and remain what he is—God’s savior for us, because not even hate can destroy God’s love!*”

The Shepherd without a Gift

Fr. Florida, one of our missionaries in Sherbakty, the “Bethlehem of Kazakhstan”, recounts: As I was writing Christmas cards last year and wanted to send one to my little great-nieces and nephews in Austria, I remembered a short but touching Christmas story from Mexico. Surely some of you know it. When I thought about the

children’s eyes back in my snowy homeland in the Alps, my imagination came alive and started to bubble over. All at once, everything became so real before me—the shepherds suddenly had names and the angels their clothing. So, I just started to write.

Dear Children,

Christmas will soon be here, and we are all invited to the church on this joyful feast. The little Baby is already waiting there for us, poor, but in a manger softly bedded on hay and straw. He smiles at us, as if he wants to tell us how much he loves us and how happy he is that we are with him.

It was not much different for the shepherds of Bethlehem back then, on that cold night. The stars were twinkling, and the moon was shining down on their little sheep who had all huddled very close together to stay warm with their wool. The shepherds were keeping the night watch and sitting by the fire.

Some of them had dozed off while others were by the fire warming their rough hands stiffened by the cold. Imagine, the shepherds even had names like us back home: there was a Simon, Thomas and Matthew, Peter, John and Sebastian. One of them had an especially nice name ‘Godhard’ which comes from ‘God-heart’, the one who has God in his heart.

This shepherd did not own a thing—not a sheep, not a sheepdog, he did not even have his own lantern! Nevertheless, everybody liked Godhard because he had a good heart and was always ready to help.

That night it just so happened that a ray of light broke loose from heaven and came closer and closer to earth until, all at once, a bright shining angel was hovering over the shepherds and their

flocks. Everybody saw him clearly in his long, white robe which glittered as if it had been sown with diamonds. He solemnly spoke to them:

“Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was a heavenly host around the angel which sang and praised God, *“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

When the angelic host departed and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, *“Come, let us go to Bethlehem to adore our Redeemer. And let us not forget nice gifts, everyone should bring what they can.”*

They all set out joyfully—one carrying a woolly white lamb over his shoulders, another fresh butter in a basket, a third one had a warm fur pinned under his arm, a fourth stroked the hand-carved flute in his sack. Only Godhard’s heart became heavier and heavier—he was the only one without a single possession. He would not even be able to give Jesus a handkerchief!

When the joyful horde of shepherds arrived at the grotto, their eyes lit up because everything was just as the angel had told them—the Mother

of God with Jesus in her arms and St. Joseph at her side.

They all crowded curiously around the Baby, only Godhard retreated ashamed and sad to a corner of the grotto. Then, one after another, the shepherds started presenting their gifts. Yet how was Our Lady supposed to receive them for she was holding little Jesus in her arms?

In that moment, she noticed Godhard, the

shepherd who was not holding anything. She immediately handed him the Baby Jesus with the words, "*Don't be sad! Here, take the Baby and become a child yourself!*"

How indescribably happy the poor shepherd was about his empty hands. He was now able to hold God in his arms and in his heart. Since that Holy Night, Godhard finally understood the meaning of his name.