

Triumph of the Heart

SALVATION IS IN THE CROSS

Family of Mary

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*“Jesus is there on the cross to be with those who are guilty:
through this closeness, He offers them salvation.
... The good thief thus becomes a witness of Grace.”*

Pope Francis, September 28, 2016 ; General Audience

The Sign of Our Redemption

From the beginning, the Cross has been a sign of contradiction.

Jesus died like a criminal between two thieves on Golgotha.

*How did a wooden Cross become the central symbol of Christian faith,
when in reality it is a pillory, and is still so offensive to other religions
and non-believers that they fight to have it removed from public places?*

Why do the demons even take flight from a simple cross?

St. Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians, *“We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”* Christ crucified testifies that He is truly God in that He appears as the Risen One to Peter and the Apostles, to the women, to more than five hundred brothers at once and, finally, to St. Paul.

Jesus lives; that means He transformed all the consequences of sin, even death, into Resurrection through the power of divine love. That is the Good News of the Cross. After the Resurrection, a divine, transforming love permeates our suffering when it is united to Jesus’ suffering, and it lifts man out of earthly darkness into supernatural light.

The one who accepts the Cross will not be

crushed by it. So that is why the Cure of Ars said, *“You don’t carry the Cross; the Cross carries you.”* Only those who have first understood the mystery of the Cross can truly grasp the depth of Christian joy.

John Maria Vianney further described the key to this joy: *“It is so hard, you say, that you have to suffer. Oh no, it is not hard; the Cross is full of sweet consolation and holy bliss. However, **you must love when you suffer.** ... I have experienced it for many, many years. I’ve been slandered, persecuted and kicked around. Oh, I’ve had crosses! I almost had more than I could carry. Then I prayed earnestly for love of the crosses, and I felt content, so content! I said to myself: truly, there is only one beatitude, the Cross! One never has to ask from where the crosses come, since they all come from God. Through them,*

He always gives us the means of proving our love to Him!" Countless people left Ars seeing their crosses in a completely new light, shining with the holy brilliance of Easter.

Yes, the cross is the strongest proof of God's love for us. On Palm Sunday 2003, when the World Youth Day cross was handed over to the next country, Pope St. John Paul II encouraged the youth, "Urge you: look at this Cross, draw close to it so that you will recognize the Lord's marvelous love for us and throw yourselves joyfully into his work of renewing hearts!"

The Christian understanding of the Easter

mystery tells us that there is a power hidden in the Cross, the power of Redemption. The Lord spoke about it to His apostles before His death: *"Now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself."*

Through the Lord's suffering of love, Satan's power was conquered. Therefore, we bless in the Sign of the Cross and receive absolution in the Sign of the Cross. Consequently, there is no place more secure than at the foot of the Cross, the only true protection from evil. Through Jesus, the Cross has become a source of salvation for us, infinitely precious and life-giving.

In this sign you will conquer

Christ's Cross played a decisive role in putting an end to the 250-year Christian persecution under the Roman emperors! How did this happen?

When Constantine crossed the Alps into Italy in the spring of 312 with 40,000 soldiers to dethrone his rival, Emperor Maxentius, he encountered an opposition three times his size. He believed, according to the customs of the time, the oracle of a pagan priest which predicted his defeat.

In his great need, the young general, who at the time worshiped Apollo, the "invincible sun god", turned for the first time to the God of the Christians. In a vision, he saw a radiant cross in the sky under which was written, *"In this sign you will conquer."*

The experience made such a strong impression on Constantine that he had the sign of Jesus

Christ put on all his military flags and standards. The soldiers were filled with new courage, and the Christians in the army passed on their confidence to their pagan comrades.

On October 28, 312, the nearly impossible happened. On the Milvian Bridge near Rome, Constantine defeated the enemy army of Maxentius who wanted to fool him by partially destroying the bridge.

The new emperor showed his thankfulness for the victory by enacting the Edict of Milan in February 313. It stated that nobody was to be persecuted anymore for their religion. Crucifixion as a punishment was forbidden by law and the Cross was placed on many items, including the crown of the emperor and his empress mother, Helen. Consequently, Christianity became the official religion of the empire

The finding of the True Cross

Understandably, Emperor Constantine was not the only one who had great interest in the historical wood of Christ's Cross. In particular, his mother, St. Helen, who found her way to the Christian faith and was baptized in the year 312 at the age of sixty-three, greatly desired to visit the

holy places of Christianity. Above all, she wanted to preserve them, and it was her dream to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to search for the Cross of Christ.

In the year 325, Constantine the Great, who had been the undisputed ruler for months, fulfilled

his mother's wish. With an enormous entourage, St. Helen, who was now over seventy years old, marched into Jerusalem and met Bishop Macarius. She ordered that the temple of Venus, the god of love, which Emperor Hadrian had built on Mount Calvary, be torn down and that they look for Jesus' Cross on that spot.

"Helen ... went up Golgotha, had the ground dug up, the dirt taken away and, buried in the rubble, stumbled upon three crosses intertwined in one another" St. Ambrose reported at the state funeral of Emperor Theodosius in 395. The tradition of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher says that the three crosses along with the nails and the inscription were found in an old cistern about thirty yards east of the Golgotha hilltop. The plaque with the inscription "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" in three languages and the nails were so close to each other that one of the three wooden crosses must have been from Christ. They prayed for a sign from God in order to determine which beams had been the ones on which the Lord completed His mission here on earth. Rufinus of Aquileia writes, *"It so happened that in Jerusalem a noble woman of the area was lying half-dead, the result of*

a serious illness. Macarius was the bishop of the community at the time. When he saw the Empress and all the others standing there undecided, he said, 'Bring all the crosses that were found. God will reveal to us which one He carried.' ... When the third cross was laid upon her, the gravely ill woman opened her eyes, stood up ... and started praising the power of the Lord."

On September 14, 335, the day after the consecration of the basilica which in the meantime had been erected over the Holy Sepulcher, the Cross was "lifted up" for the first time for veneration. The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross was established based on this event and is liturgically celebrated by Catholic and Orthodox Christians alike each year on September 14.

Polish researcher Grzegorz Gorny wrote in a scientific article, *"While she was still in Jerusalem, the Empress divided the find into three parts: the first part she left in Jerusalem, the second she took with her to Rome, the third she gave to her son who was building the new capital, Constantinople, where he wanted to display the newly found relics for veneration."*

Santa Croce in Jerusalem

*A*fter returning from the Holy Land, Empress Helen had part of her Sessorium Palace in Rome remodeled into a chapel so that the believers could venerate the relics she had brought back with her. On top of that, she ordered that earth from Golgotha be brought and spread underneath the chapel, giving the possibility also in Rome to pray on holy ground. Upon the Empress' death, her son Constantine gave the palace to the

Bishop of Rome who transformed the residence into a basilica in honor of the Holy Cross, Santa Croce in Jerusalem.

The reliquary chapel in Santa Croce still contains some of the most precious objects of Christianity—three pieces of the Holy Cross, two thorns from Christ's crown of thorns, a nail from the Cross and part of the inscription in three languages, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews".

The largest relic of the Cross is located in Santo Toribio de Liébana monastery in Spain, close to Garabandal. St. Turibio of Astorga, a monk of the fifth century who had the responsibility of guarding this precious object in Jerusalem, brought it to Spain during the Persian invasion to protect it from being profaned. When the Muslim Saracens came to conquer Spain in 754, the king had the valuable relic of the Cross brought to safety in the mountains. Since then, countless pilgrims have come to venerate it there, and many sick and possessed have been given consolation, healing and liberation. On the lower part of the reliquary there is a square opening without glass where it is possible to directly touch and venerate the Cross with a kiss

In the Shadow of His Wings

In the Old Testament, we already are given a wonderful image pointing toward the saving reality of the Cross. Namely, as the Israelites rebelled against God in the desert and were afflicted by poisonous snakes, the Lord heard their repentant cry for help and told Moses to make a bronze serpent and mount it on a pole. It is written, “*whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.*” Later, Jesus identified Himself with this “saving” serpent: “*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.*” The Good Thief shows us that indeed it is enough to look up to Christ Crucified with contrition and trust. He awaited everything from the Redeemer, “*Jesus, remember me...*” And that same day he was

For more than fifty years during the course of the tenth century, large tracts of central Europe were occupied by pagan Hungarian cavalry. Their gruesome army overthrew Bavaria and the Swabs in 955.

Thanks to St. Ulrich, the city of Augsburg was able to resist the onrush of the Magyars until the troops of King Otto I arrived. The holy Bishop of Augsburg especially called upon the children of the city to pray while he untiringly encouraged the defenders to hold firm. He himself rode high on a horse unscathed through a rain of enemy arrows—without armor and shield, wearing only his bishop’s vestments and the pectoral cross containing a precious particle of the True Cross, which the Holy Father had given him in Rome a year earlier.

St. Ulrich also wore this famous pectoral cross, which still exists today, during the Holy Mass at which King Otto and his army commanders participated before the well-known *Battle of*

with Him in Paradise. The Church was often called throughout history to defend the faith with united forces and God’s help. Early on, Christian nations of the West experienced that being invaded by non-Christian peoples threatened not only country and inhabitants, but the common Christian heritage.

This is more relevant than ever in the twenty-first century, since crosses in the West are being “voluntarily” removed from public places and also radical Muslims, in their spirit of conquest, threaten through propaganda with their sights set on Rome, the heart of Christianity, “*We will conquer your Rome, smash your crosses and enslave your women.*” A few examples should encourage us to learn from history and to trust in the unbroken power of Redemption in the Sign of the Cross.

Lechfeld against the Hungarians’ superior forces. At St. Ulrich’s pleading, the Hungarians were not only destroyed in this battle, putting an end to their war march, but soon the Magyars accepted baptism and became part of the Christian family of nations.

Unfortunately, much injustice was also done in the name of the Cross during the turbulent time of the Crusades. That was only a part of it, though. As believing Christians, we may never forget the significance that God chose Palestine as the place to become man for us, that He lived there and redeemed us through His death in Jerusalem. Love obliges us to honor, to keep and to defend the holy places of Jesus’ Passion, Death and Resurrection.

It is similar for Christianity in the West which was paid for by the Blood of Christ and many martyrs. It must be protected, especially since the Ottoman Empire conquered the Christian Empire’s capital city, Constantinople, in 1453,

and repeatedly attempted to spread throughout the West and make Europe submit to Islam.

Under the sign of Turkey's crescent moon, Europe was threatened in 1571 by the Ottoman fleet, considered invincible, in the Mediterranean Sea under the command of Ali Pasha. The conquest of Cyprus was an alarming sign for the

*T*he great naval *Battle of Lepanto* took place on Sunday morning, October 7. Before it commenced, crosses were set up on all 211 Christian ships, and the 30,000 soldiers, together with the sailors, did what their commander Juan de Austria did on the flag ship "La Real", kneeling down before the cross with folded hands and imploring God and Mary for assistance. The "Holy League" defeated the significantly more numerous Ottoman armada. In thanksgiving for Mary's mighty intervention, Pius V declared October 7 a memorial: "Our Lady of the Rosary", reminding us to this day how Europe was saved.

Vienna is the door to western Europe, and, as such, it was the goal of the Ottoman Empire several times. In 1683, Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa, reached anew for the "Golden Apple", as the Ottomans liked to call Vienna. He besieged the city with a huge force for nearly two months while the citizens of Vienna, being only one-third in number, offered heroic resistance waiting for the imperial army to come to their aid.

In this extremely dangerous time, the blessed Capuchin and preacher Marco d'Aviano proved himself as the "protector and savior of Christian-

*T*his was yet another occasion which made it apparent that on the grounds of these great battles a spiritual fight was raging. There are demons who blind the enemies of Christianity through arrogance, instill in them a thirst for conquest and lend them courage to die. However, as soon as the demons' power is taken away through prayer, forgiveness and receiving the Sacraments, they are forced to flee and the courage of the aggressor collapses like a house of cards and they fall into panic and confusion.

So, we as "ordinary people" can cooperate

"Rosary Pope" Pius V. With the greatest concern for the West, he united the quarreling Christian powers of the Mediterranean in a "Holy League" to fight against the Turkish power at sea. He called on all Christianity to storm heaven with the Rosary and had the Eucharistic Lord adored in monasteries and convents day and night.

ity". He not only stood by Emperor Leopold I in Vienna as a determined advisor and confessor, but as papal legate, he was also able to unite the Christian army generals under the command of the Polish king, Jan Sobieski. An inspiring preacher, he led the troops to contrition for their sins which, as Fr. Marco emphasized, were the actual cause of the scourge of war. He awoke in them enthusiastic trust in God's help. During Holy Mass in Sobieski's tent on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Marco prayed deeply for Mary's aid and commended to the soldiers the battle cry "Jesus, Mary! Jesus, Mary!"

During the famous *Battle of Kahlenberg* on September 12, the Capuchin stood on Kahlenberg hill with a crucifix held high and prayed aloud, "*Ecce crucem Domini, fugite partes adversae—Behold the Lord's Cross, flee you enemy powers!*" He is also to credit that, through the attack of the Polish cavalry coming down the Kahlenberg hill, the Ottoman army finally fled in panic and was defeated. Remembering once again how the West was saved through Mary's intercession, Pope Innocence XI established the Feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary on September 12.

just as much as influential politicians—with the Cross of Christ more in our hearts than in our hands—that God's power and Mary's intercession have an effect on history.

There are still rulers today who have the courage to place their country and the people entrusted to them under the protection of the true King who triumphed on the Cross.

In 2016, on the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, a Holy Mass was celebrated in Poland at the Shrine of Divine Mercy in Cracow-Lagiewniki and attended by the

country's president, Andrzej Duda, the Minister of Justice and other government officials at which Christ was enthroned as the King of Poland. In a serious time, bordering on both the Ukraine and

the Baltic, they found it important to express "*the national recognition of Christ's Kingdom and the submission to His divine will,*" and to ask Him for His special protection.

The greatest galley battle in history. The constant prayer of Christianity resulted not only in unifying, strengthening and guiding the Christian navy in the fight, but also in dividing the enemy. On the eve of the battle, commander Ali Pasha had a dispute with his ally, the former pirate Uludsh Ali, whom he urgently advised not to let the Christian fleet draw them out of the Bay of Lepanto into the open ocean. It was a similar situation in the siege of Vienna when, in the final battle, the Turkish military commanders could not agree on a united strategy against the two fronts from the town fortress and the Kahlenberg hill.

Coming to Life

*A modern-day mentor in spiritual life once gave the advice,
"Do not look at your own wounds, otherwise you will fall into darkness.
Rather, look at Jesus' wounds, and you will be healed."
This experience was a great turning point
in the life of a Russian Orthodox saint, Fr. Aleksey Metshov.
He recognized the Lord's wounds particularly in those who suffer.*

The peaceful, warm-hearted Aleksey would have loved to become a doctor, but his mother, who knew him well, often encouraged him to choose the priesthood instead. Since he greatly respected her, he followed her advice, and he was thankful to her for the rest of his life. First and foremost, he wanted to serve people and a priest can do that in a very special way.

Following his seminary training, he was chosen to read the Psalms in church. Orthodox seminarians who do not become monks are accustomed to marry before their ordination, and so Aleksey also married Anna Petrovna Moltschanova at the age of twenty-five and became the father of five children. He loved his family and gladly served as a deacon.

He was ordained a priest at the age of thirty-four and was assigned to a little church in the center of Moscow which nobody attended. A very trying time lay ahead for this young, enthusiastic priest. He celebrated the long Orthodox liturgy every morning, but he was always alone. Fr. Aleksey trusted in the power of prayer, and he did not

give up. He offered Holy Confession and Holy Communion every day and celebrated another liturgy at the church in the evening "*so that every believer on the feast of his namesake may hear the sung praises and pray along to his patron saint.*" Every once in a while, someone looked briefly into the church when the bells were ringing, but very rarely did anybody stay for prayer.

This went on for eight years before someone looking for help came to Fr. Aleksey and received not only the Sacraments but also good advice and relief for his burden. Slowly the word spread that, in the Church of St. Nikolaus, there was a pastor who could read souls and whose prayers even worked miracles. The stream of suffering souls, alcoholics and the dejected grew from day to day. In the years of being alone and suffering, Fr. Aleksey had become a true spiritual father, a starets.

He was only forty-three when his dearly beloved wife died and left him with all the children; the youngest was just six years old. Although he was used to suffering, he could not get

over his loss. He fell into a deep sadness, locked himself up in his room and did not want to see anyone. God came to help him through another priest, seventy-three-year-old John of Kronstadt, a world-renowned shepherd of souls and miracle worker. When Fr. John saw Fr. Aleksey in his pain and dejection, he advised him, enlightened by God, *“Share your pain with that of the people, and your pain will be only half as great. Console, bless, pray and help the people as much as you can.”* Then Fr. John spoke with him about the importance and the meaning of prayer, espe-

cially for a pastor. Fr. Aleksey wrote, *“I listened to Fr. John and started to see the sadness in the hearts of the others. My own suffering was drowned out in theirs. I found happiness again in my life, consoling the people, giving them warmth, loving them. From that point forward, I became another person. I truly came to life.”*

From then on, Fr. Aleksey served the suffering Lord in all those who came to visit him. His merciful, forgiving love was his fortune; therefore, through him many found spiritual healing and the joy of the Resurrection in their hearts.

Main source: «Пастырь добрый». С.В.Фомин. М. «Паломник». 1997. Translated: “The Good Shepherd”, Life and Works of the Starets of Moscow by S.W. Fomin

“When we see that someone is down-trodden, we should take the weight upon ourselves, give him reprieve and help as much as we can. The one who acts in this way and prays can completely deny and forget himself. Once we have understood this, we will not falter, no matter where we are or who we meet.”

Until his death in 1923, the saint worked as pastor of the St. Nikolaus Church in Moscow where, today, his incorrupt body is venerated by countless pilgrims.

The Height of God's Love

*Over the course of more than forty years,
Servant of God Luisa Piccarreta wrote thirty-six volumes of revelations
received in visions or that Jesus Himself revealed to her.
“The 24 Hours of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ”,
is a unique way to meditate and console the Lord in His suffering and,
united with Him, to expiate for the sins of the world.*

Who is this extraordinary soul who also became known as “The Little Daughter of the Divine Will”? Luisa was born on Whit Sunday, April 23, 1865, in Corato, Italy and was baptized the same day, as was customary. Although by nature she was a joyful child, the girl showed a strong inclination toward solitude. The reason was that, from her earliest years, she had terrifying demonic nightmares and therefore sought refuge in prayer. When she received First Holy Communion at the age of nine, the Holy Eucharist became her passion. She motionlessly knelt and adored for hours before the tabernacle in her church. By doing so, she drew courage and strength to overcome

On another occasion, Luisa, who was only thirteen years old at the time, was meditating on the Lord's suffering while working in her room when she felt such a pain and pressure on her heart that she gasped for breath. Needing air, she went out on the balcony.

What a touching scene she witnessed on the street below: *“I saw countless people passing below the balcony, led by my most meek Jesus Who was carrying the Cross on His shoulders and being pulled from one side to the other. I saw Him wheezing, His face dripping with blood. He raised His eyes, looked at me and sought my help.”*

After this vision with a wrenched heart, Luisa went back into her room crying. *“How much You suffer, my Good Jesus! If only I could help You*

the fear of her nightmares.

At the age of twelve, she interiorly heard the voice of Jesus for the first time. Especially after she had gone to Holy Communion, the Lord taught her about love, the Cross, meekness, obedience and the hidden life, like the Holy Family lived in Nazareth. He encouraged the girl to contemplate His suffering of love often so that Luisa vividly had His Passion before her eyes. Fully immersed in this supernatural world of love and suffering, she experienced *“an unbounded ocean of light, which penetrated me with its fiery rays and enflamed a love for Jesus who had suffered so much for me.”*

and free You from these raging wolves, or if I could at least suffer Your torments for You in order to obtain the greatest possible reprieve for You. ... It is not fair that You have to suffer so much for love of me and I, the sinner, don't suffer for You!”

From that moment, a desire burned in Luisa to obtain respite for her beloved Jesus, and He accepted her willingness. She had physical pains which no doctor was able to diagnose. For longer periods of time, Luisa was unable to get out of bed, and she finally had to drop out of school. Moved by the gentle and loving invitation of grace, the sixteen-year-old freely and consciously said yes to her vocation as a victim soul. She gave her “Fiat”, her yes to everything that God would ask of her for the salvation of souls.

From 1887 onwards—Luisa was now twenty-two years old—until her death shortly before her eighty-second birthday, the silent victim was confined to her bed. She suffered from a form of paralysis leaving her stiff as a board, even though she still showed signs of life.

When all medical means of helping her failed, her parents called a priest, Fr. Cosma Loiodice. To the astonishment of all present, the Sign of the Cross which the priest made over Luisa's tortured body was enough to return her body to its normal state of movement. Luisa suffered this expiation every night, and every morning, she lay completely stiff in her bed, bent over and motionless. Only a blessing in the Sign of the Cross given by a priest could release Luisa from her rigidity so that she could begin her day.

With the bishop's support, she even received permission from Pope Leo XIII that Holy Mass be celebrated every day in her room. Following Holy Communion, she remained in prayer for about two hours, giving thanks to God. Around eight o'clock, she started with her work, doing embroidery to earn a little money. Her sister took care of her, and girls from the area often came to her for catechetical instruction.

God wanted to demonstrate through Luisa's life that Holy Communion is true nourishment. She lived for more than sixty years without food or water, living only from the Holy Eucharist. Her expiatory suffering remained hidden from the eyes of the world, but we do know that the Crucified One shared his wounds with her. At her wish, however, the stigmata remained invisible. From then on, Luisa frequently suffered the Lord's Passion, like Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich or Therese Neumann. Although miracles happened at her bedside—even a child was raised from the dead—Luisa remained relatively unknown, because her life was unimpressive to the world.

In 1899, she started writing down her mystical experiences in obedience to her confessor, and the result was the work "The Kingdom of the Divine Will". She describes in it how man can return to the original grace of his vocation as a child of God, to live entirely in His Will and find the fullness of happiness. St. Annibale Di Francia was later commissioned by the bishop to examine her writings, and she published nineteen volumes of her diaries.

The Lord took this great mystic to Himself on March 4, 1947. The news of her death spread like wildfire, "*Luisa, the saint, has died!*"

Translated from: Pablo Martín Sanguiao,
Luisa Piccarreta, *La Piccola Figlia della Divina Volontà*, Edizione Segno 1992

A vast crowd of believers came one last time to see "the saint", as they all called her. The beatification process has been completed at the diocesan level, and the Congregation for the Cause of the Saints in Rome has been working on it since 2006

The Good News of the Cross

What message does this great soul of the previous century have to give us about the Cross? Incredibly good news, namely, that the Cross is the pinnacle of the revelation of God's love to us. Luisa describes in the "Hours of the Passion", what she saw in the visions and heard from Jesus. These words are surely among the most beautiful ever said or written about the

Cross. "*My Jesus, unable to contain the Fire that devours You, You pant, moan, sigh, and in each moan I hear You say, 'Cross!' ... And You exclaim, 'O Cross, beloved and longed for, You alone will save My children, and I concentrate in You all My Love! ... Adored Cross, finally I embrace you. You were the longing of My Heart, the martyrdom of My Love. But you,*

O Cross, have delayed until now, while My steps were always toward you. Holy Cross, you were the goal of My desires, the purpose of My Existence down here. In you I concentrate My whole Being, in you I place all My children, and you will be their Life, their Light, defense,

custody and strength. O Cross, it is true that you are My Martyrdom, but in a little while you will also be My Victory and My Most Complete Triumph; and through you I will give abundant Inheritances, Victories, Triumphs and Crowns to My children.’”

The Defeated Defeats

On Calvary, Jesus appeared to be defeated on the Cross, a loser; but, the Resurrection shows that, in the end, He was the victor. Hungarian Cardinal Mindszenty always carried with him a picture of the Crucified Lord with the words, “The Defeated defeats” and from it drew the strength to remain faithful to Christ, even during the terrible tortures in prison. It was the same for a Romanian, Blessed Vladimir Ghika (1873-1954).

*T*he cross accompanied the Romanian prince Vladimir from his earliest years. He was born in Istanbul on December 25, 1873, the fifth child of the noble family Ghika, and baptized and confirmed in the Orthodox Church. His family moved to Paris in 1878, when his father was named the Ambassador to France. Yet before he even arrived, John Ghika died following a bout with pneumonia. This was the first great, painful loss for little Vladimir!

Then, in the French school, he learned about the Catholic religion through his friends and was burning with desire to make a First Holy Communion with them. His mother was outraged, “*Think of your ancestors! You, the descendant of Greek Orthodox princes, want to become a traitor?*”

Vladimir later admitted, “*I waited sixteen years before I decided; the longer I waited, the more my soul caught fire. This call was present to me even at night!*” The inner suffering was his hidden cross; in addition to this, there was a further humiliation, namely, his poor health. Although Vladimir graduated with honors in Paris,

he had to renounce his planned diplomatic career when he himself caught pneumonia.

Yet, precisely through this sacrifice, God was able to reveal his true vocation step by step. He went to Rome for six years with his brother who had been called to the Romanian embassy in Italy. He later described these years as “*a time when the Catholic faith seized my spirit and my heart.*” Vladimir understood that unity among Christians could only be realized under the authority of the Pope, the Successor of St. Peter.

In 1902 in Rome, therefore, he officially converted to the Catholic Church with his cousin, Queen Natalia of Serbia. This step was a scandal, however, not only to his own family but for the Romanian Orthodox faithful. His mother, who intuitively feared that her son might become a Catholic priest, turned to Pope Pius X personally, requesting him to discourage Vladimir from such plans. The holy pope did, as a matter of fact, recommend that the prince remain in the world and testify to his faith there. Vladimir received yet another blow, but he obeyed! When an Orthodox monk who was touched by his decision asked him

why he had become Catholic, he simply answered, *“In order to become even more orthodox!”*

His great model was St. Josaphat, who gave his life as a martyr for the unity of Orthodox believers with the Holy Father in Rome. Vladimir wanted to work towards the unification as a lay person through charity. Orthodox Christians, Jews, non-believers, everyone should experience

Vladimir was the heart of this operation, which he formed in a very priestly spirit. He called taking care of the poor the “Liturgy of the neighbor”. “A poor person sees Christ coming to him in the form of the person who is helping him—and for the benefactor, in the poor appears the one to whom he bows down, the suffering Christ. Therefore, it is a single liturgy because when this act is fulfilled as it should be, Christ is found on both sides. Christ the Savior comes to the Christ who suffers, and they complement one another in the glorious and blessed Christ who is Risen. In this way, the Eucharistic liturgy celebrated on the altar is extended in the visit to the poor. It is nothing other than prolonging the Holy Mass throughout the day and throughout the whole world, like in circles which, starting with Holy Communion in the morning, concentrically spread out further and further.”

When Princess Alexandrine, Vladimir’s mother, died in 1914, he questioned himself anew

He accepted every cross that he encountered in his apostolate with indescribable meekness and, thereby, won over for God with much patience even aggressive atheists. He experienced that accepted suffering conquered all evil and became a blessing for himself and others. He witnessed how God worked miracles through him with the Sign of the Cross.

After Pope Pius XI gave Fr. Ghika the title “Protonotary Apostolic” in 1931, his apostolate led him to Japan. There, he visited a friend, Admiral Yamamoto, who had converted to Catholicism and arranged an audience for him with Emperor Hirohito of Japan.

the testimony of love of neighbor in action, in order to open up for the fullness of the truth.

The thirty-one-year-old prince set up, at his own expense, a walk-in medical clinic in Bucharest together with Sr. Pucci, a Vincentian. Soon a group of about one hundred “Ladies of Charity” from upper-class Romania and a young doctor started working there together.

about whether he had a vocation to the priesthood. A believer helped him to decide with the words, *“A single Holy Mass which you celebrate would do infinitely more for the souls than all the good you could do through your activities if you remained in the world.”*

On October 7, 1923, in the presence of many representatives from royal European families, Vladimir Ghika was ordained to the priesthood at the age of fifty by the Archbishop of Paris. A very blessed work immediately ensued. Wherever he went on his many pastoral trips, he spoke about God with people from all different confessions, and often the people to whom he spoke converted—rich or poor, well-educated and even Satanists.

Above all, he led the souls to a deep contrition and, like his model St. Josaphat, gave absolution in the Sign of the Cross no matter where he was, whether in the train, at the café, in the theater or concert hall; they called him the “Street Confessor”.

For this special occasion, Fr. Vladimir learned by heart *“May Almighty God bless you”* in Japanese, even though it had already been explained to him that it would be impossible to bless the Emperor because he himself is a god.

The sovereign spoke at length in French with Fr. Ghika and shared with him his great need, that although he had daughters he did not have a successor to the throne. Fr. Vladimir trusted in the Lord and responded to the ruler, *“Your Imperial Highness, I will give you God’s blessing, and God will give you a son.”* They both stood up after their conversation, and the Emperor bowed his head.

As Fr. Ghika raised his hand to make the Sign of the Cross and speak the blessing in Japanese, the horrified diplomats present rushed at him to stop him from what he was about to do; yet, their “god on earth” gave a sign to let the stranger continue. One year later, the Emperor was holding a son in his arms.

This is only one of the many hidden miracles which Fr. Vladimir obtained through his priestly blessing. The greatest, however, were the miracles of consolation and hope which he worked in the military prison from 1952-1954, where priests and laity alike, accused of being “Vatican Spies”, were locked up and tortured by the Communists.

In prison, Fr. Vladimir repeated in his heart over and over again the words, *“Lord, I believe in your goodness more than in that which is making me suffer and more than in my torment.”* So, for his fellow prisoners he became a light in the terrifying darkness of the dungeon.

He was now eighty years old, and despite being five-foot-nine, he only weighed one hundred and ten pounds. Yet, Fr. Ghika remained unshak-

able, even during a farce trial which extended his prison sentence for three more years. *“If you know how to take the pain of your neighbor upon yourself, then the Lord will take yours upon Himself and make it His own, in other words, use it for Salvation.”*

The gloomy prison cell was transformed into a church in his presence. Fr. Vladimir gave the prisoners strength to accept their suffering from the hand of God as expiation; and, therefore, he radiated a deep peace. One witness recalled, *“I saw true freedom in this person. The prison walls did not exist for him. He was free because he did the Will of God.”*

In January 1954, the eighty-one-year-old prisoner Ghika was deemed incapable of work and moved to the infirmary where his life slowly and in constant prayer came to an end on May 16. He was heard saying, *“Lord, don’t leave me. I cling to Your love in order to triumph over my enemies.”* He offered his life for the unity of the Orthodox and Catholic Church and for his country Romania.

Main source: Antonio Maria Sicari, *Ritratti di santi*, Bd. 9, Beato Wladimir Ghika, S. 123 ff., Mailand 2006

Kissing the Missionary Cross

*P*ietro Molla, an engineer, met the radiant Gianna Beretta at a First Holy Mass on December 8, 1954. It was “*the meeting of a lifetime*” for him. Reminiscing, he described the thirty-two-year-old surgeon and pediatrician, ten years his junior, as, “*beautiful, intelligent, and kind. She loved to smile. She was a modern, elegant woman. She loved the mountains, skiing, flowers, and music.*” They came to know each other better and ending up falling in love. In her first love letter, Gianna wrote to Pietro, “*I want to make you truly happy and be the woman you’ve longed for: good, understanding and ready for the sacrifices which life will ask of us.*”

They married, and their joy was complete. Through their unity with God, it was even more lively and deep. It was not long before Gianna had the satisfaction of being a busy mother of three children who felt the necessity after each birth to thank God and give a large donation from her savings to the missions. Despite difficulties during the pregnancies which had brought Gianna to

*O*n Holy Saturday, April 21, 1962, she gave birth to healthy little Gianna Emanuela. At this point, they all should have breathed a sigh of relief and started celebrating Easter, but Gianna’s condition rapidly deteriorated. She was diagnosed with peritonitis. Even when the severe pains were greater than the resilient Gianna could handle, she turned down any pain medication because she wanted with a clear mind to be able to unite herself with Jesus as long as possible. She put a handkerchief in her mouth to keep from groaning. Pietro did not leave his wife’s side for one minute during the Easter Octave, and when she received Jesus, her thankful smile revealed how much strength she drew from it.

Sr. Virginia, Gianna’s younger sister who

her limits, she still prayed to God with her little children for another baby.

In August 1961, she announced that they were expecting their fourth. In the second month, however, a large, rapidly-growing tumor was discovered on her uterus. From the beginning, Gianna was determined to save the child at any cost. She prayed intensely with Pietro and their three children.

When their only option left was to operate, she instructed the doctors, “*No matter what happens to me, I am ready to do anything to save my child.*” To everyone’s relief, the operation to remove the benign tumor was successful, and the courageous mother kept her child. Nevertheless, she was not out of harm’s way!

“*A few days before the birth, something touched me deeply,*” Pietro said. “*Gianna was leaning against a piece of furniture in the hallway. ... She leaned toward me and said, ‘Pietro, if you have to decide between the child and me, don’t hesitate. Choose the child, I beg you! Save the child!’*”

had studied medicine with her and worked as a Canossian and missionary doctor, arrived as if by providence on Tuesday from India. “*You are finally here!*” Gianna whispered relieved. “*Virginia, if you only knew how painful it is to die and have to leave behind tiny little children!*”

Sr. Virginia remained with her throughout her agony. She recounted, “*In the evening, Gianna had a serious collapse. She asked for a priest. Since he was not immediately available, and one obtains a plenary indulgence for devoutly kissing a crucifix, I gave her my missionary cross assuring her that Jesus, in His infinite goodness, had forgiven even her slightest inadequacies. She took it in her hand, lovingly kissed it and immediately felt better physically.*”

Shortly thereafter she said, 'If you only knew what consolation I received in kissing your cross! Oh, if Jesus' wounds did not console us in such moments! ... If you knew how differently things are seen from a deathbed. Some things seem so worthless which, during life, were given such great importance.' She drew strength to suffer from a short but profound prayer of the heart: 'Jesus, I love You! Jesus, I adore You! Jesus, help me!'"

Pietro brought Gianna home as she wished, and Sr. Virginia whispered to her sister, *"Take courage, Gianna! Mom and Dad are in heaven waiting for you! Would you like to go to them?"* Gianna expressed her yes by blinking her eyes. She repeated until the end, *"Jesus, I love You! Jesus, I love You!"* On April 28, 1962, the Saturday in the Octave of Easter—the

*P*ietro gave an interview in which he described what he had experienced in those difficult days. At first, he frankly admitted, he was down and discouraged and asked himself how the prayers of so many people to save a mother and child had not been heard. He went to the funeral filled with a deep sadness. Yet, in these sorrowful hours, the children were a true consolation for him. *"The children, with their simple faith which was stronger than mine, left me no way out. 'If Mom is in heaven and she is okay, then*

day on which her daughter was baptized and, like her siblings, consecrated to Our Lady—Gianna passed on to eternal life at the age of thirty-nine.

She commended herself to God, trusting that He would take care of her family and the four children. And so He did. Yet, Divine Providence went even further. The day she died, He allowed a ray of His glory to shine forth—once the death of the young doctor and mother was made known, a true pilgrimage to her coffin commenced. Whole flocks passed by the open casket in gratitude and amazement: mothers and their children, doctors and patients, employees from the company where Pietro worked, farmers, teenagers, sick and elderly. The parish priest of Ponte Nuovo never heard so many confessions in his life for many sought reconciliation with God before they entered the house of the deceased.

why are you crying?' they asked. On the way home from Holy Mass, five-year-old Pierluigi, the oldest, turned to me and asked, 'Does Mom still see me? Does Mom still hear me? Can Mom still touch me? Does Mom still think about me?'

"I spontaneously answered yes four times and asked Jesus to give me this same certainty. Although the children were so little, they helped me so much. They were a powerful incentive to keep living life to its fullest."

Source: Hildegard Brem OCist,
In der Freude der Liebe, Gianna Beretta Molla,
Salterrae 2005

Pietro Molla had the joy, together with his family and especially with Gianna Emanuela who greatly resembles her mother, to be present in St. Peter's Square when Pope John Paul II beatified and later canonized his beloved Gianna.

My Helper in the Mission

It is truly a great grace to unite one's cross with the suffering of Christ so that by carrying the cross when one is sick and in bed, one is even transformed into a missionary. God wants to transmit this grace, and the indescribable inner consolation that streams forth from it, to everyone who suffers. Fr. Hernán Jiménez from Mexico, the rector of the international center of studies for the Legionaries of Christ in Rome, recounts the story of his friend Lauro's cross.

I was assigned to northern Italy in 1991. One day, I went to visit a twenty-seven-year-old man named Lauro in the city Novara. It was my first encounter with somebody who had AIDS, someone formerly addicted to drugs. In the terminal stage of illness, everybody experiences a monotony of the hours, which drag on under the weight of an irrevocable reality; one anticipates nothing other than a certain death. Lauro made his confession and received Holy Communion for the first time in many years. Afterwards, I continued to visit him. The role of a priest who visits an ill person is transformed in the shortest amount of time from a priest who was a friend into a friend who was a priest. And that's how the miracle happened. One day, I was on the way to visit Lauro. I suddenly thought to myself, *"You just go there, spend a half hour with him, joke with him and listen to his confession. But then you leave him alone again in his martyrdom and go back to your own world. Enough! You cannot go on like that!"*

*Y*et, at the same time, I did not know what more I could do. Suddenly, I heard a voice in the car which spoke to me so clearly and distinctly that I turned around to see who was there, *"Stop at the next church and ask for a crucifix."* Then I heard the same thing again. I knew that it came from inside me.

I pulled over at the first church along the way—luckily, I knew the priest—went inside and

told him, *"I need a crucifix."*

"A crucifix?" the pastor asked surprised.

"Yes, I have to bring it to a man who is ill!" We went into the sacristy, and he gave me a dusty cross. I thanked him and went back to my car. I was still a half an hour away from my destination. In order to concentrate and understand what I should do now, I turned off the radio.

At first, when I arrived, I wanted to go into his house without the crucifix, saying in my heart, *"Lord, if You don't help me understand what You want of me, I'm going to leave You here."* As I was getting out of the car, I turned around one more time and saw a ray of sunlight shining on Jesus' body on the cross. Immediately, I understood what the Lord wanted. I took the cross and went inside. I spoke with my friend about God and the world like we always did. Yet, at the end, I said to him, *"Lauro, I brought you a gift, but it depends on you. Do you want it?"*

"Yes, Padre!"

"But it will be tough for you," I warned him and asked him further, *"Do you want to be a missionary?"*

Lauro's big eyes looked at me perplexed from his thin face. Then I showed him the cross. *"Look closely at the cross. Jesus is the only one in the world Who knows you to your very depths and understands you. You are bound to your bed as Our Lord to the Cross. Your wounds hurt you; His nails cause Him indescribable pain. It seems to you that the hours of the*

night never end, and the temptation to despair creeps up on you. He called out to His Father, 'Why have you abandoned me?'"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw how the ill man looked captivated at Jesus on the cross. As a priest, I suspected that a miracle of grace was taking place here, and I continued,

"Lauro, look at the difference between you and Him. He is innocent and gave Himself for us. You, on the other hand, are guilty. You brought your fate upon yourself. He, on the contrary, took it upon Himself for you, to give meaning to your suffering. You are both facing death and you are in similar situations. But you, Lauro, have a power, an infinite treasure, which you haven't offered up yet: pain, loneliness and, sometimes, even fear. Don't waste them! When you take your heavy suffering and unbearable pain and say, 'Jesus, You on the Cross understand me. I sacrifice them all to You. I want to save the world with You,' nobody will be able to stop you. Then you are a source of grace. Do you understand this?"

He silently nodded and tearfully stretched out his hand to take the cross.

"But I am not finished, Lauro. Do you want to help me in the mission? You know, I have been asked to open a seminary here in six months. I need a house, permits, money and young men with vocations to the priesthood. On top of that, I have difficult cases to

attend to every day, and I don't know how I should do it all anymore. That's why I am asking you to help me as a missionary! If I have a difficult situation to take care of, I will call you. You can pray for the young people and offer up your pain for them and for the future seminary. I really don't know, Lauro, how I should continue alone, but together we can do it. Will you help me?"

"I am ready. I am ready," Lauro agreed, nodding his head. Then I laid the cross on his chest. He held it with one hand and closed his eyes. I silently started to leave, but turned around toward Lauro one more time. He was completely with Jesus and no longer realized I was there.

After that day, we talked on the phone at least twice a week. "Padre, how's it going?", he would ask. If I entrusted difficulties to him, Lauro responded, "Don't worry about it, Padre. I have horrendous pain right now. I offer it all up for you. But you have to pray too! I sacrifice. You pray. We're a team, aren't we?" I

In such moments, I distinctly felt that Lauro was the missionary, that he was strong. With time, the number of difficult cases increased. Whenever I visited my sick friend, I told him about achievements, difficulties and gave him names. He noted every detail in order to offer it up on the altar of his suffering. Over the course of three months, permits, first vocations, material support and conversions all came through.

The day the seminary opened, while I was celebrating Holy Mass for the dedication and thinking of Lauro, God took him to Himself. Lauro's mission had been fulfilled. He was buried with his "mission cross" on his chest. Unfortunately, I could not attend the funeral; but when I visited his mother later, she told me some details from Lauro's life.

During his last months, he always asked from his bed that the crucifix be held before his eyes. Then he prayed for hours before it while she read the list of difficult cases to him. He would pray

profoundly and then say weakly, "One more, mom." Then she would read the next name to him. Lauro's mother did not know, however, what his mission was all about.

When I mentioned the church from which I had picked up the cross, she started to cry: "From where exactly did the cross come?"

"From the parish in Pernate," I told her.

She sniffled and shared with me very moved, "That is where we were living when Lauro was born. He was baptized in that church thirty-three years ago."

Translated from: Thomas u. Valentin Gögele LC,
Das ganz normale Wunder, 100 Glaubenszeugnisse von katholischen Priestern

Wood and Wire

Francis Xavier Van Thuân had been a bishop for only three months in Saigon when he suddenly was imprisoned on August 15, 1975. Amidst isolation and gruffness, Francis nevertheless understood one night in his cell, "You are still very wealthy. You have the love of Christ in your heart. Love everyone as Jesus loves them." He promised Jesus, "I will follow You in Your Passion and Resurrection." So, the cross he accepted became a powerful key in Van Thuân's hand which opened his own heart and the hearts of his friends and enemies to unexpected, new graces.

Later in life, Van Thuân often recounted an event which was very important to him. "I was carving wood one afternoon in Vinh-Quang Prison, in the north Vietnamese mountains. I asked the ubiquitous guard whom I had befriended,

"Would you allow me to cut a piece of wood in the shape of a cross?"

"You know that any religious symbol is strictly forbidden."

"Just as a souvenir."

"No, it is too dangerous for both of us."

"But you are my friend,"

"I continued to beg. 'Just look the other way and let me do it. I will be very careful,' I pushed. He turned his back and walked away. So, I cut a piece of wood in the shape of a little cross which I hid in a piece of soap and kept until the day I was released. I always carried it with me. Encased in a little metal, it became the cross of my imprisonment and later my pectoral cross.

"In another prison close to Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam, I asked a guard whom I had befriended, "Could you get me some electrical wire?"

"Do you want to hang yourself for what?" he asked me shocked.

"With a smile, I said no.

"Then why do you need electrical wire?"

"To make a chain so that I can hang my cross around my neck."

"But how do you want to make a chain out of wire?"

"Oh, I can do it! If you bring me a pliers, I'll show you how."

"Too dangerous!"

"But we are friends!" Hesitantly, he gave in, 'Okay, I'll bring the wire with me tonight at seven o'clock when I come for guard duty. And I will talk my colleague into taking the night off, because if he caught wind of this, he would immediately denounce us. Let's do it then, but we have to finish in four hours.' Together, we fabricated my chain; we finished in time, shortly before eleven o'clock.

Many years later, during a speech in Los Angeles, Cardinal Van Thuân related the following. "This cross and this chain are not only keepsakes from my imprisonment, but a constant reminder that only Christian love can change someone's mind, not weapons, drugs or propaganda. It was so difficult for my guards to believe that one could love their enemies. 'Do you really love us?' they often drilled me unbelievably.

"Yes, I love you!"

"Even when we make you suffer and make you sit unjustly in prison?"

"Yes, of course. Think of all the years we have spent together! ... I would love you even if you wanted to kill me."

"But why?"

“Because Jesus taught us to always love. If we stop loving, we are no longer worthy of being called Christians.”

Cardinal Van Thuân also demonstrated this heroic love for his enemies later in Rome. He was summoned there, following his release from prison, by Pope John Paul II. When he found out that the one who had betrayed him to the Communists in 1975 and had blocked his discharge all those years—it was, unfortunately, a priest—was coming to Rome, Cardinal Van Thuân insisted on personally picking him up at the airport. He cooked for him and gave him a place to stay at his apartment, as if he were his best friend.

To top it all off, he brought the priest back

to the airport and even paid for his ticket back to Vietnam.

When the Cardinal was diagnosed with cancer, he asked his secretary every evening to push his bed in front of the crucifix hanging on the wall. Until the end, the concerned shepherd had the most important news reports from around the world read to him so that he could offer up his pain for them.

During his Requiem on September 20, 2002, Pope John Paul II said of his greatly cherished friend, *“During the last days, when he could no longer speak, he fixed his gaze on the Crucifix before him. He prayed in silence while he consummated his last sacrifice”*

Do You Love Me?

*I*n the Third Secret of Fatima, the shepherd children saw a large cross on the top of a steep mountain. “Beneath the two arms of the Cross there were two Angels each with a crystal aspersorium in his hand, in which they gathered up the blood of the Martyrs and with it sprinkled the souls that were making their way to God.” And so it happens, as Pope St. John Paul II expressed it, *“in a wonderful exchange of spiritual goods, the holiness of one to the benefit of the other,”* and the strength of the martyrs flows for the conversion of non-believers as well as to those souls after them whom God calls to a deeper unity with the Crucified Lord.

The Russian Orthodox starets Ioann Krestiankin experienced how much we are united with one another in the “communion of the saints” through this exchange of grace. He told some of his spiritual children the following event regarding Communist Russia under Breshnev as if it had happened to some other priest. Only much later did it occur to the one who wrote down the

story that the unknown priest must have been Fr. Ioann himself.

A young priest, who had been ordained for only three years, hurried every morning over to the crucifix, before anybody was in the church, and prayed profoundly to the Crucified Lord. One day, as he was praying on his knees with his forehead resting on the Lord’s pierced feet, he heard the following words from the cross: *“Can you love me like they love me?”*

The priest sprung to his feet and turned around. The church was empty. Suddenly, he saw crosses of various dimensions standing in a semi-circle around the crucifix. Imploring and without an answer he looked to the face of the Lord. Jesus, however, was silent.

The priest dwelt upon what he had experienced the rest of the day, but it was not until evening that he finally went to his holy spiritual director, himself a living martyr, and told him what happened. The starets interrupted the account of his spiritual son with the earnest question, *“And*

what did your heart answer the Lord?" Only then was the young priest able to believe that he had not been deceived by what took place.

A short time later, the vision repeated itself. The only difference this time was that the priest saw on some of the crosses people who had been dear to him and who had already suffered martyrdom during the Communist persecution. The priest's heart cringed in compassion, but also for fear of what was awaiting him. Then he heard Jesus ask him anew from the cross, "***Do you love me like they love me?***" And once again he failed to respond.

Time passed, and the priest suffered much from his betrayal and cowardice. He felt the devil pestering him. When he was alone in the church, he lay helpless before the Crucified Lord. Darkness filled his soul.

One day, in near desperation, he found himself in the presbytery of the church and he saw around him once again the crosses with the suffering, but this time he could not recognize their faces because they were so radiant. He saw their arms stretched out toward him, and he felt a stream of grace flow into his soul which, through

the temptation, had become powerless. Then the priest ran to the cross and pleaded in tears to his suffering Savior, "*Lord, You know, You see that I love You. Cover up my weakness!*" And he immediately felt life again in his soul. The Lord had accepted his declaration of love and worked the miracle of an inner transformation.

 God gave the young priest a new power of love and the resolution to no longer think of himself but only on loving God and all people and that His Will be done in everything. For Ioann, the moment to follow the Crucified Lord came just two years after this experience.

In 1950, after only five years of fruitful work in a Moscow parish, he was turned in by his own jealous parish priest and condemned to seven years in a work camp. In the midst of this world of horror, Ioann Krestiankin became a radiant light of forgiving love, a starets who, even after his return to the monastery, gave strength and consolation to countless suffering souls. If someone asked him about what he had suffered, he countered, "*I do not have even enough time to love, why should I waste it thinking back on the offenses?*"

A bloom in the Spring Frost

*The cross can take on very unexpected forms.
Eva Sedláková, the mother of our Sr. Julian,
experienced that with her coworkers two years ago in Slovakia.
As a botanist, she has worked body and soul for decades
in both research and growing fruit with the Plantex company.
She tells us what happened.*

*I*n April 2016, more than two hundred and fifty acres of our apple plantation, which was in full bloom, was threatened by freezing temperatures. Losing a crop of seven to eight thousand tons of apples would have been disastrous for nearly eighty employees and their families—no paychecks, possible layoffs, etc. The whole harvest lay in the balance.

Everything depended on the next six crucial nights when the temperatures dropped to nearly 20° F (-6° C). We knew all too well that ninety percent of apple blossoms freeze when they are exposed to a temperature of 25° F (-3.5° C) for more than thirty minutes. So, in an effort to save the crop, one hundred men, employees and helpers worked non-stop night after night. Paraffin candles were set up across the entire orchard and lit as needed in order to raise the air temperature. We even called in a helicopter to stir up the air in the early morning hours when the frost was strongest, thereby raising the temperature by 4-5° F (2° C). It was clear to all of us: without a miracle, we would lose eight thousand tons of apples. The strain on the people was physically and psychologically exhausting.

Since praying together daily has been part of the routine for the last five years for me and fourteen other believing coworkers at our company, we have a deep spiritual bond. We sought strength through prayer especially now in this dire situation. Lubo Lovrant, the director and co-owner of the company, who also belongs to our little prayer group, encouraged us late every evening with text messages to continue to trust and to pray. Normally, we take a half an hour break

every day at work to pray an Our Father, Hail Mary and the prayer of the Lady of All Nations. We read the Gospel of the day and ask God for His blessing upon our work and for a good working atmosphere among all the employees, believers and non-believers alike.

During the days of the heavy frost, some of my believing colleagues who were not at work in the orchards at night, woke up during the night to pray alone or with their whole family in the hours in which the freezing temperatures were most threatening. I also united myself in the middle of the night in prayer with my coworkers who were struggling outside to obtain the impossible. I clearly felt how my prayer can help when I trust like a child. Some lit a thousand candles in the blooming plantation while others let their hearts be lit in constant supplication of God and trust in Mary's intercession.

Following the critical days, Lubo said, *“It was a difficult time, but these days were like a retreat for us in which we could practice trust. Now we want to accept everything from God's hand. The company will probably have a high price to pay, but what we have gained spiritually is priceless!”*

*W*hen harvest time came, we had a more pleasant problem: Where would we ever find enough people to pick all the apples! We had to hire a lot of temporary help. It might sound unbelievable, but, in the end, we harvested six thousand tons of apples in 2016. It was not much less than we had hoped for before the week of freezing temperatures. Although some of the fruits

were not first class because they had been damaged by the cold; it was, nevertheless, a miracle! “Even if that had not been the case,” Lubo thought, “and the harvest, despite our efforts, would have been completely ruined as it was

for many fruit farmers in Slovakia, Austria and other countries, then it would have been a hard hit for everybody of course. But, we would still say the same thing: What we have gained spiritually is priceless!”

Because of My Mother's Love

“It’s your own fault... You did this to yourself...”

are often our spontaneous thoughts, words or judgments.

However, when we allow Him, Jesus can and will make the best out of things we have messed up or caused ourselves. One of our missionaries, Fr. Tomáš Ján, shared this touching example from his friend Pavel in the Czech Republic.

March 16, 2012, was the fateful day for then twenty-five-year-old, unemployed Pavel Svoboda from a town close to our Monastery of Divine Mercy. “*I’ll be right back!*” he wrote on a piece of paper and taped it to the door before going to a nearby store where he met a friend. As it tends to happen when showing off, they came up with a crazy, reckless idea. To test their courage, they decided to play chicken by driving at each other, Pavel on his old bicycle and his friend on the motorcycle he had just bought which did not even have a license plate yet. The first to veer off would lose, and the one who dodges out later or not at all would be the winner and the hero. Agreed! Of course, neither one of them wanted to be a wimp. Nevertheless, Pavel steered his bicycle away in the last moment. His friend also turned away at the same time; but, unfortunately, there was a power line pole in his way and he had to make a lightning-quick choice—the pole or Pavel. He crashed head-on into his comrade. Pavel went flying through the air and landed head first on the ground.

He was seriously injured and survived only because they immediately operated on him at the

hospital. His condition was critical: hemorrhaging in the brain, extreme swelling and some parts of the right side of his head, where the skull was missing, his brain was only covered up by skin. His lower jaw was broken in five places, his upper in three, and he was paralyzed on one side. From the beginning, Pavel was conscious of everything that happened, but he had little desire to live. He did not speak and soon stopped eating. He had to be fed artificially through a tube. Unable to move and weighing only ninety pounds, he just wanted to die. After eleven months, even the doctors gave up on Pavel and wanted to move him to hospice. On February 19, 2013, his mother Renata, however, determinedly took him home to their meager one-room apartment where she lived with her four sons. “*He won’t live until Christmas,*” the doctors told the resolute woman who gave up her job for her son, but not her hope. The ray of light throughout all of the worrisome months was being able to read over and over again his note, “*I’ll be right back!*”

Today, Pavel tells everyone, “*I am alive only because of my mother’s love.*” And it is true! Renata learned from therapists how to

care for him properly, night and day. She never takes a day off, never goes on vacation. Through her motherly care and good cooking, she even managed to get him to eat on his own again—a miracle!

I visited Pavel for the first time in February 2013, three weeks after he had come home. I did not know him or his family, who were all baptized but not practicing. While his mother was telling the story, Pavel nodded slightly from time to time, but never said a word. At the end, I said, *“If you would like, we could pray together.”* I made the Sign of the Cross and started the Our Father. Pavel prayed right away with a strong voice and continued with the Hail Mary as well. His mother stared at us, her mouth ajar. *“He never speaks, never!”* she stuttered in awe. As a matter of fact, it took months before he started to speak again, other than the Our Father and the Hail Mary that is. Praying together for the first time was a wonderful sign for mother and son, and surprisingly, it helped them both open up to God and the faith.

*P*avel became my friend. When I visit him, he is just as helpless as he was five years

ago and is still lying there in his diapers. He is not discontent though, but rather joyful and loving. *“Hello Pavel! How’s it going?”* I ask. *“Actually, I’m doing quite good. I can lay around here the whole day,”* he jokingly responds. He does not rebel and openly admits his guilt that his daredevil act back then was wrong. Together with his mother, he tries to forgive his former friend who was only slightly injured, but who never visits and never really apologized.

It is touching to see how compassionate Pavel can be. Once, I brought him a nice, short video about Jesus, but he was unable to watch the whole thing, because the sensitive young man was so taken by the Lord’s Passion that he cried for hours. I have asked Pavel twice, *“Do you want to offer up your pain, your paralysis and your suffering?”*

“Yes, yes,” he willingly answered twice.

“Do you want to offer it up for the priests?” I continued.

“Yes, for you,” he replied quickly. That pleased me, and I am convinced that God gives me and all of us in the Monastery of Divine Mercy grace through the sacrifice of my friend.

“As a priest, I am always impressed to see how reverently Pavel makes a noticeably large Sign of the Cross—slowly up and down, and from left to right. Just like the first time we met, he always prays in a loud voice, and Mother Renata with him.”