

# *Triumph of the Heart*

I PROMISE TO BE FAITHFUL TO YOU  
IN GOOD TIMES AND IN BAD

*Family of Mary*  
*2018 (IV) / No. 86*

*“When a man and woman celebrate the Sacrament of Matrimony God as it were ‘is mirrored’ in them; he impresses in them his own features and the indelible character of his love.”*

*Pope Francis, April 2, 2014*

## *The Pelican's Love*

*In 2003, Pope St. John Paul II beatified an ophthalmologist who embodied in an exemplary way that “love never fails”, as taught in the First Letter to the Corinthians. Yet he was not alone! At the side of Hungarian-born Prince Ladislaus Batthyány-Strattmann (1870-1931) was a constant and wonderful support, his wife Maria Theresia. She shared with him all the joys and all the demands of marriage, family and career.*

Ladislaus was the seventh child of a long-standing Hungarian aristocrat family in Dunakiliti. Unfortunately, the parents of the cheery Laci, as they called him, were not models of a happy couple. He was eight years old when his father, Count Joseph of Batthyány, left their large family for another woman. Three years later, his beloved, deeply pious mother died, blind, from a kidney problem—a loss that made a deep impression on Ladislaus. His inclination to become a doctor in order to help others continued to grow within him.

Nevertheless, years passed without goals or purpose for the sensitive and yet hot-headed teenager. He had to switch high schools because of his mean pranks, and he did not know where to invest his interests and talents. Although he needed training to manage his future inheritance of numerous mansions and family possessions,

he dropped his economics major. Slowly, but resolutely, Laci pursued his childhood dream of becoming a doctor. In 1896, the twenty-five-year-old moved to Vienna to study medicine. In what may be considered a final erroneous choice, Ladislaus had an illegitimate daughter through a fleeting affair. The future Blessed cared for her the rest of his life. Meanwhile, Ladislaus' sisters were seriously concerned about his erratic bachelorhood. They keenly tried to pair him in courtship with their South Tyrolian friend Countess Maria Theresia of Coreth. At first, Ladislaus did not want to hear anything about getting married, but then he finally “bit at the bait”. Although Laci was still in medical school, the two fell in love and proceeded to the altar in Vienna, on November 10, 1898, after only three months of dating. It was the bride's twenty-fourth birthday.

## *My children and my patients are my treasures*

Being married to the deeply faithful Maria Theresia, whom Laci lovingly called Misl, completely transformed him. After moving into the Kittsee mansion in Austria, the rebel soon became a conscientious, selfless and sensitive doctor and husband and, for the thirteen children whom God gave to the couple, a model father. Above all, a great love for God and neighbor blossomed in Count Ladislaus.

While nobility with much wealth, the Batthyánys centered their life around God and lived extremely modestly. They all assembled for Holy Mass each morning in the mansion chapel, just as they did each evening for the Rosary before dinner. It is true, Ladislaus led his family resolutely in the spiritual life, but they helped each other to live the turbulent daily life with God in sight. Yes, one could say that Ladislaus and Misl lived an ideal marriage and perfectly complemented one another. *“In a routine stroll back and forth through the mansion halls,”* they discussed everything concerning the family, especially

As far as his medical practice was concerned, Dr. Batthyány always wanted to be a doctor for the poor; it was a special vocation which God had placed in his heart. Already in 1902, he built a private clinic with thirty beds on the Kittsee grounds, and he set it up with everything one would find in a big-city clinic. It was exceptional enough how he treated as many as eighty patients a day for free, but he often paid for their medicine and travel expenses as well. If a poor patient asked with embarrassment what he owed for his treatment, Ladislaus always answered friendly and humbly, *“Pray an Our Father for me.”*

In the same way as he completely dedicated himself to the children, the young doctor also sacrificed himself for the sick. His best assistant and support thereby was Misl, but soon Laci’s health could no longer keep pace with the ever-increasing stream of patients. So, in 1907, his wife cleverly “prescribed” a few weeks of family vacation in

regarding how to raise the children to be modest and ready for sacrifice. Rather than spoiling their children with extravagant gifts, they lavished them with heart-felt affection.

Although Ladislaus usually had time for the children only in the evening, he became a child himself in their presence and gave them the entirety of his love and the plentitude of his gifts: he baked fantastic cakes, played music and made ice cream, truffles and cologne with them. Ladislaus took a keen interest in the inner development of each one of his children.

Most of the time, Misl took the initiative for organizing the family. If the children did something wrong, they generally “feared” their mom more, but they felt safe and secure in the extraordinarily harmonic relationship between their parents and obeyed their every word throughout their lives. One of their governesses testified, *“I have never experienced anything close to such an intimate family relationship, a so loving atmosphere and an authentic cheerfulness.”*

the south, and the thirty-six-year-old gratefully wrote, *“We love each other more each day. After nine years of marriage we are truly one body and soul.”* Since they both wanted to take advantage of this break from the clinic to make a fresh start in their life and work, placed under the will of God, they decided during the joyful time in Nizza to make a general Confession. After doing so on Holy Saturday, they drove to the beach and solemnly threw their torn-up confessions from a hill into the ocean.

Ladislaus now specialized as an ophthalmologist and soon became known far and wide through his outstanding abilities as a respected eye surgeon. This obviously did not reduce his work load. During the First World War, the “Prince Doctor”, as they now called him, also treated wounded soldiers.

*“The sick teach me to love God more, and I love God in the one who is sick. The sick*

*help me more than I help them! They pray for me and pile graces upon me and my family. ... How often patients said to me, May God repay you! In heaven and on earth! And the many blessings have been and will be given by God!"*

In 1920, the family moved to their estate in Kormend, Hungary. Ladislaus set up a second hospital in a wing of the mansion and continued his blessed work. Just one year later, the prince had to face the sudden death of his oldest child,

the talented and very pious twenty-one-year-old Ödön. It was a heavy trial.

As doctor and father, he stood by helplessly as his son died in inexpressible pain from a blocked intestine. Through Ödön's joy and pure desire to finally go to heaven, Ladislaus understood how suffering can draw us closer to God. The final admonition of their dying son, "*You all have to become better and better;*" shed more light on the married couple's true vocation; namely, they have to help one another on the way of perfection.

Ladislaus' favorite saint was Francis de Sales who, by nature, was choleric. The prince, who was inclined to a violent temper, imitated the saint's heroic struggle for goodness with such consistency that his family members and coworkers unanimously agreed that they had never experienced an impatient Dr. Batthyány. He often begged God, "If I could only be meeker!" One can rightly apply without amendment his spiritual testament about the loving manner toward patients, to his marriage and family: "We make big mistakes with impatience; we should leave any bad attitude at the door before entering the patient's room. Never show the patients that we do not have time for them."

Once, his sister Elizabeth asked, "Tell me, why did you specialize in optometry?" Ladislaus beautifully answered, "Because the eye is the mirror of the soul. When with God's help it is possible for me to help give someone back their sight, then I usually have influence on their soul because those who were blind and now see are so thankful."

## *The pelican's sacrifice*

*This* pain, which Ladislaus thankfully and trustingly accepted from God's hand, worked a second conversion in him, "*Whatever He wants; He is the best Father!*". The highest ideal of their lives radiated for him and his wife more clearly than ever before: the way of love from First Corinthians, chapter 13, was to become their measure in everything. The married couple harmonized perfectly in this greatest demand. If one of them was exhausted or at nerves' end with the often-difficult patients, one look and whispering the "magic word" was enough: "*'Corinthians', and then she and I knew what to do! Just as the sunlight makes everything shimmer, the rose blossom really turns into a rose and gold gives off its shine—so too the sense of the Letter to the Corinthians: Only through love will life be made beautiful.*"

Ladislaus was profoundly aware that, with his medical abilities recognized throughout Europe, he was only a tool in God's hand. He started and finished his service to the sick before the Eucharistic Lord in the mansion chapel. Before every

operation, he prayed with his patients, often on his knees, and invited them to entrust themselves to God's goodness; and then he gave a blessing in the sign of the cross on the spot he was to operate. In especially difficult cases, he pleaded in the night for a miracle for the patient and invited his family to pray with him. He truly counted on them and thanked the children in the evening for their successful cooperation.

In Spring 1926, Ladislaus felt that his strength was waning. When the fifty-six-year-old coughed up blood, he was ready to place everything in God's hands. "*My good Misl was really worried. Whatever God wants ... He kept me in His grace; surrounded by the most loving family; a good, pious wife and a job in which I had the opportunity to help thousands of people to see the light of day again.*" Ladislaus understood clearly that the suffering Lord now wanted to become present in him, the doctor, and unite Himself to him. From this time on, Ladislaus received an even deeper grace of prayer: "*For my wife and children so that everyone, everyone*

*becomes holy, for the sick.*”

Ever weaker, Dr. Batthyány continued to work selflessly for the next two and a half years with an ever-increasing stream of patients and seemed to be at the high point of his creativity—until he was diagnosed with bladder cancer late in the summer of 1929. An intervention at the hospital in Vienna came a little too late. Ladislaus suffered tremendously painful cramps, as many as thirteen a day. Nevertheless, he radiated peace from the depths of his soul.

In order to be close to him, the family moved back into the Kittsee mansion. Misl or one of the children was always with him. In this time, his wife also became very sick and had to undergo surgery in Germany. Before she left, he wrote to

her, “*God bless you, my dear little heart; He is with us.*” How much the two of them were one heart and soul was so obvious at that time since, in spite of the great distance between them, they simultaneously suffered heart failure.

Amidst sheer intolerable pains, Laci faithfully prayed his Marian breviary until the end during these fourteen months of his way of the Cross. Misl and his children were with him on January 22, 1931. As they always had, they still prayed the Rosary together in the evening at 7:15; afterwards he lost consciousness and went quietly to God. The day before he had asked his loved ones, “*Carry me out on the balcony, so that I can shout out to the world how good our dear God is!*”

Translated from: Josef Dirnbeck, *Geöffnete Augen*.  
Ladislaus Batthyány-Strattmann und sein Leben als „Arzt der Armen“, Stadtpfarre und Franziskanerkloster Güssing

# The Pope of the Family

*If there is a great intercessor in heaven for married couples and families, then it is certainly Pope St. John Paul II. There was nothing so close to his heart as the sanctification of the youth, marriage and families, which he described as a “vital cell of society”.*

*The “Totus Tuus Pope” who could just as easily go down in history as the “Pope of Mercy” or the “Pope of Fatima”, said of himself one morning at breakfast in Castle Gandolfo, “I do not know if history will remember this pope; I doubt it. But if it does, then I want to be remembered as the Pope of the Family.”*

*K*arol Wojtyla was already known to the younger generation for his friendly confidentiality as a chaplain and young ethics professor. Whether in the parish, lecture hall or on vacation; on camping trips or beautiful outings to the lakes; hiking or skiing in the mountains; everywhere people listened to Karol with great interest and asked questions when he spoke directly about sexuality, love and marriage—something completely new for Polish priests back then.

*“As pastor, I have prepared a lot of young people for marriage. Being a priest never distanced me from them—on the contrary! It brought me closer to them and helped me understand them better. ... I blessed their marriages, I shared in their joy as young parents, I baptized their children which came into the world. They trusted me, and we spoke openly about all their problems.”*

Shortly after his election to the papacy, John Paul II began to speak in 129 catecheses about the meaning of the body, sexuality and marital love, about the dignity and value of human life, about

his “Theology of the Body”. In the end, this Holy Father wrote and spoke more about marriage and family during his pontificate than all of his predecessors combined!

*D*uring his visits around the world, during his audiences and personal encounters, this Pope had a special charisma of turning especially to young couples who, fascinated by his radiance and fatherly love, felt strengthened. His encouraging words applied to many of them: *“You cannot test living; you cannot test dying. You cannot test loving nor test only accepting someone for a while. ... To set out on the path of a vocation for married life means learning bridal love, day by day, year by year: the love which embraces soul and body; the love which is patient and good, which doesn’t seek its own advantage ... and does not bear a grudge; the love which ‘rejoices with the truth’; the love which ‘endures all things’. You have to find your way to this love if your future marriage is to endure the test of a lifetime.”*

# Best Friends for Life

*There are amazing love stories  
which lead more or less romantically to a happy marriage.  
Yet rarely did a holy pope play such an essential role  
as in the case of the Slovak couple Mirko and Lenka Očenáš.*

*I*n Kriváň, Slovakia, not far from our Motherhouse, we sisters met the successful businessman and wholesale flower dealer and his nice wife in their shop where we usually go to buy flowers and plants for our churches and chapels. From this encounter, a deep, beautiful friendship has grown and closely unites us personally and spiritually to Mirko, Lenka and their three children. During a visit to the Motherhouse, the Očenáš couple told us how God brought them together or, better said, how Pope St. John Paul II, whom they greatly revere, “united” them.

They became good friends in middle school, where they were classmates. They talked a lot together and always saw eye-to-eye. But that was it. After graduation, they each went their own way. Mirko, a smart guy who his classmates deemed would one day have a dream job, decided already in his childhood, “I want to be rich someday.” Yet, it did not look like that from the beginning. He worked in his mom’s shop, taking care of the accounting and specializing with great interest in the flower trade. Nobody understood why he pursued this “crazy idea” instead of doing something “re-

ally promising” like working his way up in his father’s lumber company. One of his relatives even said, “*The whole family is ashamed of you!*”

Lenka, who wanted to go to college and study economics, was not accepted, as was the case for Mirko. So, just like him, she did bookkeeping until she was offered a very good job at a bank. Lenka had a boyfriend who was a professional skier and Mirko a girlfriend who did not believe in God.

That was the situation in 1996, when they had an unexpected reunion. Mirko’s brother and his wife had to cancel their plans for a pilgrimage to Rome, so Mirko jumped in for them. Since he knew from their many talks that Lenka was open to the faith, he spontaneously called her and asked if she wanted to go along. It is true, Lenka had always been impressed by Mirko’s lively Faith, something she never received at home. Her father was a teacher during the Communist regime, and so the family was not allowed to go to church. She often had the silent wish though, to experience God working in her life. As a result, Lenka joyfully agreed, and, as if through a miracle, she was able to take the week off of work.

*T*he next thing you know, the two nineteen-year-olds, the youngest in the group, were sitting in the pilgrim bus to Rome. At St. Peter’s Square, the tour director advised everybody, “*If you want to go to the Pope’s Holy Mass in the basilica, you’re gonna have to push your way in.*” He did not have to say it twice to the Slovak pilgrims who, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, were finally allowed to travel

outside the country and had come to the Eternal City with great enthusiasm. The mob scene was so embarrassing to Lenka and Mirko that they decided to stay outside alone on the steps in front of the basilica.

Suddenly, a Vatican security guard came over to them and told them to follow him. He led them through side corridors to the very front of Bernini’s baldachin inside St. Peter’s. He left

them standing there saying, “*Wait here!*” At that moment, Mirko and Lenka saw a door open on the side and Pope John Paul II walked in. He quickly walked past several pilgrims and stopped in front of the two young Slovaks.

He talked to them for quite a long time, asking in Slovak their names and from where they came. It was a very strong spiritual experience, especially for Lenka, who clearly felt what a charismatic personality she had before her. At the end, the Holy Father leaned over to Mirko and whispered something in his ear. Despite Lenka’s insistence, however, Mirko did not want to betray what the Pope had said to him.

**Mirko:** That’s how it was. What I did not want to repeat was that the Holy Father had said to me, “*I bless your marriage.*”

I did not even want to consider it and thought, “*What marriage? Not in a million years! She has a boyfriend and I a girlfriend. Of course, he sees two young people in front of him and thinks they belong together, and he blesses their marriage.*” So, at first, I did not give much thought to John Paul II’s words and his “papal marital blessing”. Honestly, I could not even imagine something like that with Lenka back then. We were both with someone else; and, although we knew each other well, she was not really my type. I, actually, was not hers either.

So, we returned home after the pilgrimage. We stayed in touch, but we continued to live our own lives like we had until then. I was poor and had to work hard. Lenka, on the other hand, had quite a bit of money. When it came to relationships, however, she had no luck. From time to time, she entrusted her problems to me, that her boyfriend, the professional skier whom she had always swooned over before, now dedicated himself only to his athletic career.

I felt sorry for Lenka, and so I started bringing her flowers on her birthday and patron saint’s day—merely out of compassion! But then Lenka also showed me compassion and above all trust: When I needed a larger sum of money to build up my business, I went to visit her at the bank. Without hesitation, she immediately responded, “*I’ll lend you the money.*”

“*Okay,*” I responded, “*but what if I cannot pay it back?*”

“*If you can’t, you can’t,*” she ended the discussion with a smile and sent me the money the next day. In a situation where someone normally expects a thousand guarantees, Lenka simply trusted me and acted accordingly. She has been that way to this day!

**Lenka:** When I look back at our friendship, a deeper relationship developed on its own when Mirko started bringing me beautiful bouquets more frequently, even when I didn’t have something to celebrate. Although in Rome I could not hear the words of Pope John Paul II, who in the meantime has been canonized, I am thankfully convinced today: The marital blessing he gave back then, which Mirko finally told me about, was not by chance! This blessing was clearly a foundation, at the beginning of our marital union! It became precious to us and has a deep meaning for our happiness as a couple.

**Mirko:** When just being friends turned into something more, we decided to continue our lives together. It was not in the style of a Hollywood love story. There were no huge emotional manifestations, but to this day we have treasured growing in everything together, especially in Faith. Already when we started planning our wedding, we agreed that love is not only some great feeling. Nor is love just sharing a table and a bed. God is absolutely necessary for a harmonic relationship. And so, I wanted us to start praying together right away—every day, regularly, the Liturgy of the Hours!

**Lenka:** I wasn’t used to that. My family only prayed together at Christmas. But I was happy to learn and to understand the mysteries of the faith. God helped us to find our way to Him more deeply through the Family of Mary. Retreats, homilies, spending time with Fr. Paul, Mother Agnes, the priests and the sisters in the Motherhouse all made an impression on our spiritual life and opened for us the beauty of meditating on the Rosary.

**Mirko:** Yes, we want to consciously live the Faith with our children in everyday life and to give wit-

ness to being Christians in our circle of wealthy business partners and managers.

**Lenka:** The most important thing in our marriage is our mutual trust. Mirko travels a lot for business and is often surrounded by women at his job. Our trust, the deep awareness of our love, is what really makes marriage so beautiful.

**Mirko:** Since Lenka and I work in the same shop all day, we have a lot to talk about in the evening. We often speak for hours, just like best friends. And we really are! We need this time to share everything with each other. That is how we make sure our marriage remains fresh.

**Lenka:** We know each other through and through with our strengths and weaknesses: how the

other one sees things, what moves him, why he reacts the way he does, the real reason for his impatience... Sure, we have different opinions and ideas sometimes; that's normal! That can be resolved. Sometimes one gives in, the next time the other.

**Mirko:** The inner and outer challenges remain. But we have often experienced that if we let the Lord be involved, He can show us how He takes care of us.

**Lenka:** Most of the time, God makes use of people, as He did back then with Pope John Paul II. Looking back, I see this encounter as a great grace, as a special expression of Jesus' love for us; and for sure the Holy Pope keeps blessing us from heaven!

# The Power of Tender Love

*Rina and Michael Albergo from Pescara,  
on the Adriatic Coast of Italy, have been married for twenty-three years.  
They live their marriage in such an exemplary way  
that all four of their sons admit, "One day, I want to be like my father."  
They shared with us how they became such a happy married couple.*

**Michael:** I was twenty-eight years old when I fell in love with Rina. On my way to Holy Mass, I saw her on the steps of the church speaking to the priest, and intuitively I knew that she had to be the one for whom I had been praying a Hail Mary and a prayer to my guardian angel every day for years.

**Rina:** I was just nineteen and was not in a hurry to find a husband. I liked Michael a lot, but I also felt that there were still some things which needed healing in him from a previous relationship. Since I also prayed every day for my future husband, I calmly left everything in God's hands.

**Michael:** We were engaged for four years, and I couldn't wait to finally marry my Rina because we had been living chastely before marriage, "like in the old days". When we made our marital vows on a sunny September morning in 1993, we were sure that our love would last forever. But that was not the case.

**Rina:** I became pregnant on our honeymoon. Michael, who picked up the test results from the gynecologist, was overjoyed and came home with a huge bouquet of roses.

When I heard my son's heart beat for the first time, it was the most emotional experience of my life. Then our second son came, and I suddenly felt the challenge of being a mother. Michael also had a lot of problems to take care of at the law firm. Under these heavy demands, our limits began to show more and more, and there were frequent disagreements between us.

**Michael:** Each of us was disappointed in our own way because we could not fulfill one another's expectations. We spoke the same language, but we did not understand each other. We reproached one another in our hearts and with our words because both wanted to see our own way. It can go so far that one even doubts whether he made the right decision about the person he chose to marry. And that after twelve years of marriage! Since other friends with families were having similar struggles, we accepted our lot, even though we had envisioned a completely different, joyful family. We still went to church on Sunday and prayed as well, but the love and happiness we so desired was missing.

**Rina:** Actually, each one of us was good at what we did. Michael went to work and took care of many things; I ran the house and took care of the children, but we were not united. I criticized him when he came home from work and did not immediately pay full attention to all the problems I had with the children. Our lack of unity became more apparent when each one of us started looking for our own time and doing something with our own friends. Michael went and played tennis, and I went out with my friends. This all seemed "normal". The children demanded a lot of us, and so we blamed them for the lack of intimacy in our relationship.

**Michael:** Our first step was to recognize that it is not enough that each go his own way of Faith. We wanted to find a way together. Therefore, we made a family pilgrimage to Medjugorje in 2005. This

changed our lives. Through Divine Providence, we met the Family of Mary and asked Fr. Aleandro to accompany us spiritually. He introduced us to Fr. Carlo Rocchetta, who had quit his career as a theology professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in order to help troubled engaged and married couples to discover and live the beauty of

sacramental marriage. Thanks to the help of these two priests, we have a very happy marriage today and would like to advise all couples who are in a similar situation to which we were in: don't be satisfied with living alongside one another. The love which your hearts desire exists and is livable, even if it requires a little bit of effort.

*A few bits of advice which have helped us,  
we gladly pass along to you.*

**Rina:** Fr. Aleandro recognized our problem, which needed to be removed like a cancerous growth so that it would not spread and completely extinguish our love. First of all, he explained to us that the majority of our “not understanding one another” was due to the differences between man and woman and not necessarily faulty behavior. We learned to see our differences as man and woman as a richness to be treasured, through which we complement one another, and not something strange leading to division.

**Michael:** In my job as a judge, I am used to solving the problems which people present to me. When Rina told me her problems with the children, etc. in the evening, I wanted to come to the point as quickly as possible in order to find the solution and close the case. But I have learned that women think differently than men. Rina gives a detailed description of a situation. If she brought up a problem, then she did not necessarily expect an answer or a solution.

Just being able to share her feelings or her thoughts with me often gave her the solution or the strength to further endure difficult situations because she no longer felt alone with the problem. I learned to listen to Rina with love, without trying to force it into my timeframe. That was very important for us because when the language of our communication was unsuccessful, it carried over into our body language and our sexuality. When we understood one another again more deeply in words, it also

changed the language of our intimacy to a much greater harmony and fulfillment.

**Rina:** It angered me when Michael came home from work and didn't immediately react to my temperamental tirade or just sat down in front of the television. I felt like I wasn't taken seriously and thought that he wasn't interested in me. We learned from Fr. Rocchetta that a man's mind needs time to unwind, especially at the end of a tough day. Since I started giving Michael this half an hour time out, he has become a wonderful father and husband for us. After he has taken a little break, he is wholly there for his family. Additionally, I try not to go into too many details when explaining something—but I am not always successful.

Michael often seemed to me silent, nearly absent, when something was bothering him, and he didn't want to speak to me about it either. I interpreted this as mistrust until I thankfully understood from Fr. Rocchetta that Michael's silence isn't a lack of trust, but often simply the way that men deal with problems. He wanted to do it alone.

**Michael:** Our priests explained to us, what makes up a Christian marriage is that there has to be room for God. Only when we look to Him will we be able to overcome our limits and give the other one the love which we receive from Jesus through the sacraments and prayer.

It is a married couple's vocation to become

an earthly reflection of the Most Holy Trinity by giving themselves to one another without reservation, accepting each other and sharing everything. Fr. Rocchetta showed us a way to live this, even though we are sinners: passing on God's tender love for us and making it visible in every situation.

*W*e know from psychology that a child who receives a lot of tenderness can develop well, whereas a lack of tender love causes permanent damage. As adults, we also know that when somebody comes to us with sincere, humble love, we can more readily show our good side too.

Tender love doesn't have anything to do with sentimentality. It is a power which goes forth from a firm decision to forget one's self and reach out to the other. It may be an inner death when our feelings don't play along and I have to overcome my ego. Tender love feels responsible for the other and doesn't leave him on his own. Above all, it is quick to forgive and doesn't bear a grudge. For that, one needs prayer and the sacraments. Tender love makes us creative; it thinks about ways to make the other person happy. I often go shopping with Rina, for example. I really have the desire to share this chore with her, to help her and to show my love to her by doing so. It is also simply time spent together.

**Rina:** The goal of Christian marriage is the "we". To discover that my spouse is not an obstacle to my freedom and my joy was a new beginning for us. "I" and "you" have to become "we" amidst difficulties but also in the certainty that God's grace is poured into both of our lives. If one stops thinking, "What makes *me* happy, what do *I* want," and rather asks, "What makes *us* happy, what do *we* need?", then the first "child" is born in the marriage. When I ask myself, "How can I make Michael happy?", then I am on the right path.

We have also discovered that our differences of opinion are something positive. Different points of view, which formerly quickly led to a fight, we now consider a richness. We have learned to let the other one speak his peace and to listen with an open heart without immediately casting

it aside because I think differently. When people listen to one another and choose the right words in a conversation, they can reach very good decisions together.

*F*r. Rocchetta encourages all couples to find an hour during the week in which they can undertake something together, just the two of them, and thereby make time and space to speak with one another. We were able to arrange it that Michael takes off work Tuesday mornings. We go to church together and then do something like ride our bikes or go for a walk on the beach which is just a few yards from our house.

**Michael:** A woman wants to be loved, a man wants to be appreciated! A woman needs personal attention and respect. Therefore, it is important, for example, that a husband doesn't overlook that his wife is wearing a new dress or has just returned from the salon. To then make the comment, "*And what did it cost?*", is offensive to a woman.

For men, it is similar when his wife doesn't recognize his success at work or if he drives the wrong way and she comments, "*I knew it. It's always the same; you can't find the way.*" In this case the man hopes that his failure will be overlooked and the woman helps him by standing by him and saying, "*It doesn't matter; we'll find the way.*" Rina and I have been able to change a lot in our relationship, but there are still mistakes we continue to make. In these situations, it is good when the other one says, "*You're not really like that. It just happened to you, but I know you better.*"

This gives the other person an enormous strength to change, because it is true. We try to pray the Rosary every day in our family, even when only some of the children pray with us. Since we were in Medjugorje, Rina and I have also decided to fast, something that isn't always easy. We draw a lot of strength from the sacraments. Rina goes to Holy Mass every day, and I go when it is possible with work. Rina has often motivated me to go again to Confession when she herself returns from Confession full of light.

**Rina:** Michael helped me a lot to be open for life. We invested all of our love in Antonio, our first child, just as we did in our second son. When Michael spoke about a third child, I thought, *“I can’t, I only have two hands, one son on the left and one on the right; more isn’t possible. Then I would have to divide the love in three!”* Trusting in my husband, however, I said yes to a third child. I learned that with each child, one

receives more love. When I realized that, I wanted to have a fourth child as well, even though I had to have a caesarean section with each baby.

**Michael:** It has been my experience that, through her intuition, Rina grasps or understands things much quicker than I do. Therefore, I try to pay attention to this gift of hers when we make decisions. Many good things have happened as a result!

e thank God every day that He and the priests, especially Fr. Rocchetta, have helped us to learn about the tender love of God as something which should be a reality also in our married life. If we hadn’t discovered this, we would have continued to disappoint one another believing that it was enough to love as we were at that time. We’ve experienced, however, how Jesus healed our marriage and how much He is with us. Today,

our love is greater than our mistakes, and we can say, we love each other much, much more than on the day of our first “I do” at our wedding.

In our parish St. Stephen in Pescara, we accompany a group of engaged couples and families sharing what we have learned under the direction of our pastor, Fr. Giuseppe Femminella. We try anew every day to transform the ever-present “I” into a giving “we”.

# Happily Ever After

*“We are certain that without the Lord at the center, we could never do it,” Rocío Sorribas admitted in a sincere testimony she e-mailed us from New York. “He has humbled us all,” she wrote, “to make us see that He is the source of love and life and joy and purity and beauty and power and forgiveness is Him.*

I met my future husband Julio in New York City in 1991. It was summertime. I had just turned twenty and had come home from college to start a summer job as a secretary at a travel agency. Julio owned his own travel agency at the Rockefeller Center and worked together with us. He was forty-five, good-looking, very clever and charming. He could pick up any woman, but he was known for going out only with the younger ones. As naïve and inexperienced as I was, the wounded child of divorced parents, Julio had no problem winning me over. I subconsciously sought a father-figure, someone to protect me, in this self-confident man who was twenty-five years older than me. In any case, I was fascinated by him and accepted his invitation to dinner. We became intimate much too quickly. I was plagued by a bad conscience even though in my home country,

I was adventurous and liked to travel, so after graduating from college in 1992, I took a job in Japan which I found out about through the Ministry of Education. When I returned to New York from Tokyo after three years, I soon met up again with Julio. Before meeting him, however, I went to Confession, which I often did when I could no longer stand my sinfulness, and made a firm resolution: I am not starting a relationship this time! For Julio, who came from a non-practicing family in Montevideo, Uruguay and denied the existence of God altogether, my proposal to live a chaste friendship was just a joke. Despite the loud voice of my conscience and because I did not want to give up Julio, I became weak again and in August 1995, I became pregnant. When I told

Ecuador, nobody in our family ever spoke about a woman’s dignity, which also consists in purity and chastity. We weren’t practicing Catholics; I was only certain that God exists.

At the end of the summer, I went to study abroad for a semester in Italy. During this joyful time in Rome, the first, quiet beginning of my conversion took place during a trip to Medjugorje. Yet back in the States, I met up with Julio again when I returned home to New York from college in Ohio. I knew that he did not want to make a commitment and that, in the meantime, he had been with other women. I simply suppressed the thought about whether all that was morally right or wrong. Besides, divorce and cohabitation was “normal” in my extended family. I did not have the slightest idea about the beauty of Catholic teaching regarding marital love and sexuality.

Julio, he immediately refused any sort of responsibility and threatened to dump me if I decided to keep the child. The pain in my heart, the shame, fear and worry of being a single mom were more than I could handle, and the suggestion to have an abortion was a temptation which I overcame only after many tears and on my knees before God. It was the Lord’s pure mercy that, with growing Faith, I slowly had the courage to choose the life of my child! Julio had been serious, and after my decision, he did not want to have anything more to do with us.

Oh, how humiliated and abandoned I felt. Yet, God did not leave me hanging.

Dear believing friends began to pray more intensely for me when I started toying with the

idea of giving my child up for adoption so that it could be taken care of and grow up in an intact family with a mother and a father. I could not offer any of that to my child.

In this crisis, I entrusted myself to Fr. Christopher Hartley one afternoon in the rectory of the old St. Patrick's Cathedral. He patiently listened to me, took me by the shoulders and said to me, "*Oh Rocío, what terrible thoughts! Don't you see, your child has a father, the best father ever? God is his father and mine and yours.*" I was so touched and encouraged by these words that I cried for joy. God's goodness and loving closeness were so tangible that I was certain that

Jesus would take care of everything and help me to rebuild my life to the benefit of my child. I spontaneously asked for Confession.

From that day forward, I went to Holy Mass almost every day; this became my lifeline. Together with prayer, it kept me from the poison of bitterness and anger and gave me the strength not to hate Julio. The last time we met, he even dumped on me—I was in my second month of pregnancy— "*You're gonna ruin your career with this child.*" The decision had already matured in me, however, that I was going to use the last bit of strength I still had in me to rebuild my integrity and dignity as a now single mom.

## *My son's prayer*

*M*y little son Paolo was not born into an ideal family but, nevertheless, in a healthy atmosphere because, thanks to grace, I was able to remain on the path of Christian Faith. When I look back, I ask myself how it was possible: a baby, a job at the U.N. and doing a master's for teachers of special education. The answer is definitely God and His care.

My mother outwardly helped me during the day and interiorly I was strengthened by daily Holy Communion so that I could live pure and direct the heart of my happy little boy to Jesus who was the center of our family. It borders on a miracle that God could form me, such a sinful person, into a mother!

When my alert little child started pre-school at the age of three and saw the other children's fathers, the many painful questions and desires for his own father started. I had to explain to the sad boy, "*Dad can't be with us, but we can pray for him and send him the blessing.*"

It was touching every time he prayed with the innocent words of a child, "*Divine Father;*

*F*rom that moment forward, the greatest thing for Paolo was to be with his father. Julio was a different man too. Soon he legally recognized

*protect my Dad and tell him how much I love him and miss him.*" Paolo often cried afterwards, and I had to take him in my arms and comfort him. I secretly offered up my child's pain for Julio's conversion. I also usually stopped at the altar of St. Joseph after Holy Mass and implored his intercession to help Julio to accept his son. I never thought of myself though, because with God's help I remained single until I met Julio again nine years later.

I thought it would be best if Paolo did not meet his father until after his First Holy Communion. So, although I was afraid of being rejected, I went to visit Julio at his travel agency. He was surprised, but at the same time agreed to a meeting. I will never forget the day they met.

It was after Paolo's violin lesson; he came into the waiting room packed with people, walked right over to Julio and said, "*Hi Dad!*" I hadn't expected that, and Julio was speechless about the spontaneity of the little boy. Paolo naturally grabbed his hand and asked him if he wanted to go to his favorite book store.

our child as his son and, after fifty years—miracle of miracles—he accompanied us regularly to Holy Mass. He even moved to an apartment closer to

us! “*Dad should stay with us,*” Paolo pushed.

Since Julio wanted to see me more often and be close to me, I had to draw a clear line. The price I had paid for trampling God’s commandments had been too high. I often said, “*Julio, you can only live with us when we belong together before God and marry in the Church.*”

At first, he was against it, but after a few months, Julio asked for my hand in marriage. Fr. Jorge Queija was the tool which God used for months to prepare us so wonderfully for marriage. Grace caused a complete transformation in Julio. He suddenly hungered to understand the

truths of the faith. On top of that, he felt a deep contrition for his former life. During the time of our marriage preparation, Fr. Jorge was not only our confessor, but when he became very sick with cancer, he consciously offered up his suffering for Julio’s complete conversion.

It was the greatest gift when on my birthday, January 31, 2009, we gave our Yes and became a true family before God. Today, my husband prays the Rosary and, at home with me, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy. We go faithfully to the sacraments and to daily Mass. The Lord healed and made many things good again.

When our son Paolo started studying at the University of Boston, he quickly wandered from the Christian path. Julio and I decided to offer all our prayers and even ourselves for our son. Thanks be to God, everything has taken a positive course.

## *A Home for the Abandoned*

*Claudia and Gioacchino Bruni from San Benedetto del Tronto, Italy celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary on September 12, 2017.*

*Their marriage turned out completely different than they had imagined at the time, and yet they discovered their vocation as a married couple through a sorrowful trial.*

*Today, they testify, “When you allow Jesus into your marriage, He will work miracles with you.”*

**Claudia:** We met at a catechism class in our parish. Gioacchino really wanted to deepen his Faith; I, on the other hand, participated more because I was fascinated by another young man. Although this one was called to the priesthood, Jesus had prepared a different gift for me. Gioacchino fell in love with me, and I liked him too because he was so quiet and yet still down-to-earth.

**Gioacchino:** We had known each other for three years before we married. I was twenty-four years old and Claudia was one year younger. She was always the workhorse in our relationship, and it has remained so to this day. Sometimes I am just astonished at her energy and the good ideas she

has. The faith was very important to both of us from the beginning. We were active in the parish: in the choir, in catechism and in a class for couples. But at the same time, we felt deep down that these activities were not what we were seeking. Something was missing, something “more”, but neither one of us could identify what was lacking. When friends of ours told us about their experience as foster parents, we immediately agreed that we were open if a child was offered to us for foster care in addition to our own children. In any case, we wanted to be a family with an “open door”; friends and acquaintances should feel at home with us. That’s why, in our first little apartment, we sacrificed having a family room

with a couch and comfortable chairs for a large dining room table, so that there would always be room for guests.

I worked as a plumber and loved my job, and Claudia had a good position at the post office. We earned enough money and we liked taking weekend trips to Italy's pretty towns, dining out and doing things with friends. We thought our first year of marriage should completely belong to the two of us; afterwards, naturally, we wanted to have children.

**Claudia:** Yet after only two months, our love pushed us to not put off having children any longer. We wanted to see the fruit of our love as quickly as possible. Since impatience is one of my personality traits and I was accustomed to realizing whatever came into my mind as quickly as possible, I could hardly wait for the first signs of pregnancy. But no baby came! We consulted various doctors who all guaranteed us that we were healthy and that there was no reason why we couldn't become pregnant.

 We hoped, one year, two years. Then I fell into a serious crisis. For the first time in my life I was faced with something I really wanted but was unable to obtain. Not having a child was so dramatic that I reached the point where I wanted to have my own child, no matter what. I was overjoyed when I finally received an appointment at a hospital in Genoa which offered various methods of artificial conception. I could hardly wait for Gioacchino to come home from work in the evening. I ran over to him full of joy, and spurted out, "*We have an appointment on Monday in Genoa. They assured me that we would leave the hospital with our own child!*"

Gioacchino did not react with the anticipated enthusiasm. He remained calm, looked lovingly at me and said, "*Claudia, are you sure that THIS is the will of God? Did we not promise Him that we wanted to do His will in our marriage?*" These words struck me like lightning and it was as if scales fell from my eyes. I thought I was someone who lived according to the will of God, but in reality, I was leading my own life. I felt like St. Paul at his conversion, and there was

nothing left for me to do but to admit in tears that I am not almighty, that, without God, I am nothing.

**Gioacchino:** From that moment, we prayed much deeper; and our life took on a new dimension. We no longer wanted to have a child at all costs, but we tried to help one another to recognize and accept the will of God. We considered whether we should take in a foster child. Through friends, we found out about an organization where we could receive more information and take a class for foster parents.

 In 1990, the time had come. After three childless years of marriage, six-year-old Emily was entrusted to us. Social Services took the child away from her parents because her father was making death threats to her mother. Emily was a tremendous joy for us, but also a big challenge. I still remember well how, repeatedly, she provocatively scratched our valuable chairs to test whether we loved her or our furniture more. We learned so much through her before she was able to return to her biological mother three years later.

One of Emily's classmates was the next one to need our home because her mother earned her living as a prostitute, and this put the child in an extremely precarious situation. Our efforts alone were not enough to protect Martina. We needed help and so we met the "John XXIII" community, which has been approved by the Church. A priest named Fr. Oreste Benzi founded the community in Rimini, Italy in 1968, with the objective, "*to give a family to those who don't have a family*".

Today, the John XXIII Association has several branches which care for society's "least and rejected": handicapped, prisoners, prostitutes, orphans, drug addicts, refugees, etc. Fr. Benzi was convinced that each child and teenager needs the love and esteem of a father and mother in order to develop well. Couples who open their families for this ideal are called "Casa Famiglia – Family Homes" and belong to a network of like-minded families who meet regularly for prayer and conversation, but also to make decisions together.

**Claudia:** We found out that you can accept foster children for a certain period of time through

this association and also receive support from the community. This was especially agreeable to us because Faith played a decisive role in these families. For a year, we participated in the community's prayer meetings and conventions, met the founder, Fr. Benzi, and made friends. Then those in charge offered to let us take in Silvio, a six-year-old physically and mentally handicapped boy. It was not an easy decision for us—a handicapped child. Yet, since the community assured us of their help, we dared to take this step. After a while, we wondered whether or not it would be good for Silvio to grow up with another child. The question was, could we handle taking care of a second one? Would Silvio be ready to share our love with another child? When we spoke with him about it, he was immediately excited and spontaneously said, *“Yes, if his name is Marco!”*

Four weeks later, we received a call asking if we would be willing to take in another child who had been born as a twin in the sixth month of pregnancy and who, due to a brain hemorrhage, was blind and severely handicapped. The child would not be able to speak and was not expected to live more than a year, but it would be wonderful if he could die in the arms of a mother and father. The news shocked me. Take on another, severely handicapped child, one that is going to die? How would Silvio deal with that? How would I? No, that was way too much for me; we couldn't accept. I was afraid; I was especially afraid of the child dying. At the end of the conversation, the social worker asked us to consider it anyways; we were welcome to visit Marco in the hospital whenever we wanted. *“Excuse me? Marco?”*

*“Yes, the little boy's named Marco.”*

**Gioacchino:** When we heard the boy's name, we knew that Jesus wanted to entrust this child to us. The first hospital visit was very difficult. We could hardly look at the child, he was so disfigured with all the tubes. This decision would mean Claudia giving up her job because Silvio and Marco would require her full love and attention. But we didn't want to say No to Jesus.

Now Marco is twenty-one years old. After standing by him for twenty operations, he can see

well and his paralysis is by and large healed. We took Silvio and Marco into our hearts so deeply that we adopted them as our own children.

We were given a further gift with Marco: God showed us our vocation as a married couple. Until then, we belonged to the circle of friends of the John XXIII community. Could it be our vocation to surrender ourselves totally to providence and found a “Family Home – Casa Famiglia”? That meant, however, we would still have to give up some things. Therefore, we asked God for a clear sign to be sure that it was His will because then He would give us His strength.

**Claudia:** We wanted to make this step dependent on whether we could find a house in which we could take in several people. We turned to our diocesan bishop with this intention. During a meeting with the Bishop, something happened which only God's Providence could foresee. It was 1997, more than twenty years ago.

*“Emanuela's father was with me ten minutes ago,”* the Bishop said after greeting me. *“Emanuela heard your testimony at a retreat for engaged couples and was deeply impressed. When she returned home that evening, the twenty-six-year-old wrote her will: ‘I, Emanuela, in full possession of my mental capacity, thank God that I met Claudia and Gioacchino because through them I understood how one can live a Christian marriage. If I die, I want half of my possessions to go to their family and the other half to an institute benefiting children. Emanuela.’”* Normally, no twenty-six-year-old writes a will. God must have given the young woman a preconception, because one month later Emanuela died in a car accident.

Her parents found her will and brought it to the Bishop, the same day on which I went to him! Divine Providence could not have sent us a stronger sign. The Bishop recognized it as well and, therefore, entrusted us one of the diocese's houses, our first “Family Home”, which we placed under Emanuela's protection and named “Emanuela's Home”. We joined Fr. Benzi's community and promised to share our lives with the most abandoned, “the least”.

**Gioacchino:** I understood in prayer that I had to quit my job in order as husband and father to be with those God's Providence wanted to entrust to us. That was the biggest sacrifice of my life, but I have never regretted it.

Today, our family consists of Silvio (28) and Marco (21), Diana (24) and Valerio (11) who both need care as well and Sebastiana (9), all of whom we have been able to adopt. Ibrahim has also lived with us for seventeen years and means more to us than just a foster child. Raffaele (16) who was baptized, confirmed and received his First Holy Communion from Bishop Seccia in June 2017, is also one of our foster children.

In addition to our children, we have a special love for prisoners. Claudia keeps in touch with several of them, and we often have the chance to take one or the other into our family. Currently, Francesco, a thirty-year-old inmate, is living with us with the permission of the prison direction because we are convinced that, through the experience of family life and helping care for our handicapped children, he will also be healed and succeed in starting a new life. Additionally, we have taken in Claudia's eighty-year-old parents because her mother is confined to a wheelchair

and her father also needs help. In the two of them, our children have been given a grandma and a grandpa. Over the course of the last twenty years, we have been able to give sixty people a home for various periods of time. The youngest one was fifteen days old when he came to us, but he was soon adopted by a family. The oldest was grandma Pierina who moved in with us when she was eighty-six and stayed for ten months until her son was able to take care of her.

**Claudia:** Our daily life is full of challenges. We are not always able to handle them as we would like. Yet, when I lose my temper, I have Gioacchino at my side like a rock, calm and quiet. We live our marriage as three, with God. We often seek refuge in prayer when we no longer know what to do with our human abilities. We've really experienced a number of miracles. Providence never left us helpless, neither materially nor spiritually, when we sought to do the will of God. We have lived an overwhelmingly fulfilling marriage, fatherhood and motherhood. Our greatest suffering, not being able to have children, turned into a grace because it opened our eyes to our true vocation. We can only thank God!

# A Good Foundation

*For many years, Noelia and Jonathan Marichal were among the most faithful youth of our mission in Florida, Uruguay before they said I Do in 2015. Under the guidance of our Fr. Luis, they made an intense preparation—amazingly resolute for a country in which few Catholics practice the faith.*

**Jonathan:** We met at the Family of Mary summer camp in 2009. There, you could say, we immediately fell in love. We were still very young though, I was fifteen and Noelia sixteen. I looked at her and thought, “I’d like to marry her.” Then I got to know her better and thought all the more, “I’d like to marry her.” Yet, until that point, I had never asked what God actually wanted from me.

**Noelia:** At the time, I was well aware that there are more possibilities than just marriage. I was also really open for consecrated life, had God shown me that as my vocation. Yet, I felt something special with Jonathan and fell more and more in love with him. Nevertheless, I told him right from the start when we began writing texts to each other, *“If it becomes serious between us, then we have to live a good relationship and renounce intimate contact until marriage.”*

To my joy, Jonathan immediately agreed, something which is rare in this country because there are many young people here who even make a game out of “having a new one” each week.

**Jonathan:** Since Noelia lived in the town of Florida, I on the other hand in the capital Montevideo sixty miles away, we could only see each other on the weekend. Of course, this was a sacrifice. Still, we were careful not to spend too much time alone or do things with just the two of us, but rather to hang out with the others at the youth meeting in the mission station. The most important resolution toward making a final decision was, naturally, prayer, especially the Rosary, but also regular conversa-

tions with Fr. Luis. In 2013, we were engaged. With that, one could say, our intense spiritual life began.

**Noelia:** We prayed more for one another, especially the Rosary. To bridge the spatial distance between us, we agreed on a concrete time, daily at 9 p.m., in which each one of us, wherever he was, united spiritually to the other for a decade of the Rosary. Additionally, I started going to Daily Mass.

**Jonathan:** Noelia then motivated me to go to Holy Mass every day and regularly to Confession. In that, and through prayer, I found the strength to make the sacrifice of chastity, which was not easy.

**Noelia:** Yes, it was difficult. It was helpful that we could not see each other so often, as was frequently repeating, *“I simply do not want to offend God.”* If one of us became weak and wanted something more, he apologized to the other. That’s how we helped one another.

When Fr. Luis celebrated our wedding on the Feast of the Holy Family 2015, we were joy-filled and grateful that we had been so well prepared for marriage. The experience of struggling for faithful prayer, sacramental life and little sacrifices of love is very precious to us. We have to practice all that now much more in married life as we try to honor each other by holding our tongues or doing what the other likes. We learn every day, and the spiritual life helps us. We also have to protect ourselves because the world is constantly trying to pull the two of us into its tracks. That’s why

we do not have a television. If we did, we would surely watch a lot of unnecessary things.

**Jonathan:** The internet is dangerous too. You feel how consumerism wants to drag you along. With-

out God, without Faith as a foundation, it would be very difficult to build up a relationship as a married couple. Why should anyone deny himself and make sacrifices? God is the firm guarantee of our mutual love! And this guarantee never expires!

## *I Find Him in God's Heart!*

*There is no marriage in which the choirs of angels are constantly singing. A young French couple had to learn this too. Yet, Elizabeth and Damien Ricour did not want to see suffering as something that just had to be endured.*

*Even on the day when they joyfully made a covenant for life and placed God at the center of their marriage, they consciously chose a reading from Sirach:*

*“When you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials.*

*Be sincere of heart and steadfast.”*

*T*hese two could not have been more opposite. On the one side, Damien Ricour, an unwanted only child from a broken home who plummeted in his youth and later became a passionate actor and artist; on the other side, Elizabeth d’Hautefeuille, from an aristocratic family with a master’s degree in Management and Marketing.

**Damien:** In 1993, stranded in Paris without a dime, I dreamt one night about the theater. I had loved the stage since the first time I stepped foot on it when I was eight years old. I think it’s safe to say that the theater saved me back then because through it, at the age of twenty-one, I found my way back to God! It was to be my path of healing, my path to meet Him. This way was not easy, but

God gives me the grace day by day to live my vocation.

**Elizabeth:** Born in beautiful Champagne, France, I was a girl “like they are supposed to be”, raised well with many siblings in a family from Paris’ upper society. I regularly helped the homeless at the Catholic organization “Sowers of Hope”. I met Damien there for the first time in 2003. He had the zeal of a convert.

**Damien:** Actually, I didn’t have anything to do with the organization. I just went there because I was “hunting” for my future wife. I checked out all the ladies working there and chose the most beautiful of them all. I was very attracted to Elizabeth

because she was so joyful and natural in dealing with the homeless. Since she was taking an acting class, I offered to give her private lessons.

**Elizabeth:** That’s how our story started. I was very surprised in the beginning because I never thought I would marry an actor. My “type” was more the one who wore a tie every day to the office. “*Is it even possible to make a living as an actor?*” was, therefore, the first thing I asked Damien. When I brought him home with me, an actor who only performed occasionally, my parents were a little skeptical. They had a long way to go before they accepted Damien and started to trust him. So, the period of our engagement was a little difficult, but in September 2005, we had a beautiful wedding. Damien and I had the same wish, to follow the Lord and to help one another grow in our love for God. It is a lifetime choice, with strong consequences for family, friends and career. Striving together is a source of joy, but it also means sacrifice and trial. We were no exception. Of our eleven years of marriage, Damien was sick half the time.

**Damien:** The trial did not come right away in our marriage. What came first were our children, one after the other—a thrilling experience! We began everyday life which we wanted to place fully in

Alone on the stage, without any other means than his simple presence, Damien preferentially embodied saints like Pier Giorgio Frassati, Francis, Charles de Foucauld or, as seen here in the picture, the Good Thief on the cross. Acting was the way in which this highly sensitive, unbelievably expressive, dynamic artist encountered and transmitted God. “Since Faith is part of my life, I actually pray before every performance; above all, I pray a lot for the audience who often bring non-believing friends with them: ‘Lord, touch them now!’ Applause, success and money are not important to me. I don’t look for any of it because God is at the center.”

uring an evening meditation at the Notre Dame des Victoires Basilica in Paris, the Ricour couple gave a touching testimony in June 2016, seven months before Damien died of cancer: **Damien:** Right before I went on tour with the theater in August 2014, I opened the Bible to the words, “*Nothing is impossible for God*”, and that made me think at the performance in Avignon, “*Everything will go well.*” Today, I would complete the expression, “*Nothing is impossible for God. His love can go so far as*

the service of God. Everything went well until 2009, when suddenly the first, painful trial started.

**Elizabeth:** We were expecting our third child when Damien found himself in a great inner need. After we bought a house and moved to Compiègne in 2010, my husband fell into a serious depression lasting four years.

**Damien:** I tried to read, to work, but I just couldn’t anymore, nothing at all! You think you are at the bottom. I was plagued by the feeling: I am just a burden for my family and my job is at a stand-still. Even living the Faith was terribly difficult during my depression. There was only one thing which brought me peace—knowing God is there at my side. And so, I never stopped speaking with Him.

**Elizabeth:** I could no longer reach my husband who had a contorted, broken image of himself. In the beginning, I made the mistake of wanting to supervise everything Damien did. He called me his “little police officer”. It was straining on me, oppressing for him and wearisome for us as a couple! There was something positive about the whole thing though—we were constantly forced to live in the moment, especially the happy moments. Without ever denying his illness, Damien accepted it and recognized his frailty. I grew from this humility!

*to make cancer a gift.*” Yes, I had “the lucky draw”—after depression, now cancer.

On stage, I suddenly could no longer read my lines with my left eye. Everything was black! It’s strange, but rather quickly I accepted this trial as a gift from the good Lord. Some people understood, others did not. Even if I wasn’t happy about soon losing an eye, I nevertheless clearly felt that Jesus is with me. Behind everything is His love. I was very calm. It didn’t seem important to me to figure out the why and how of this tumor. I only

knew that Jesus went so far in His love as to allow something like this for me.

**Elizabeth:** When Damien called me from the festival in Avignon, I was pregnant with our fourth child about which we were so excited. Then he said, *“Elizabeth, I have cancer.”* I was shocked, and yet, I believe that God also gave us special graces in this situation.

**Damien:** Yes, something very important happened there in my life and in the life of my wife. Such trials unite a couple very much. It resulted in a much deeper encounter with God, but also with my wife, children and others who were suffering. For me, it was worth losing an eye if it meant growing in love for God, for my wife and for my children. Elizabeth and I have often spoken very calmly about what might all happen with this cancer, including metastasis and death. We were deeply united in this “adventure”.

After adjusting to a glass eye, I joyfully took up again my acting career, even though I wasn’t in the best condition after months of chemotherapy.

**Elizabeth:** One year passed. In October 2015, metastasis was found in the liver, in his bones, on his lungs and in his pancreas. Medicine was powerless. I still remember well, we were sitting in a café and I had to say the most difficult thing I have ever said in my life, in our whole marriage, *“Damien, your life is going to end soon.”*

It hit him hard, but he had to hear loud and clear what the doctors did not directly want to say. In the whole two years of his illness, however, Damien never rebelled against God. Sure, my husband has a temper, and he could become upset with people, even me and the children, but he was never angry at God.

**Damien:** Elizabeth said I am brave and accepting. No, I do not have many merits, not much courage, not much strength because, before I met Elizabeth, I was not always so faithful in my relationship to God. Nonetheless, I have Elizabeth to thank that for the last ten years God has been able to imprint his face upon me.

I can recognize God’s love through the love

of my wife. It isn’t hard to love a child. To love each other as spouses is a fight, but it is the most beautiful fight. I would not have been able to deal with my cancer if I had a woman at my side who tempted me to deny God or to rebel against Him. I am so thankful to the Lord, because he has used my wife in a unique way for the holiness he wants to build in me. God patiently and very concretely shows me His love every day. I see it in Elizabeth’s love and I hope that it is the same for her! Alone, we cannot do much.

**Elizabeth:** Many people ask me, *“Why does it have to be Damien, who is still so young at age forty-four, that has cancer? Why, why ... your children are still so small. That is so unfair! What kind of God lets something like this happen? What did you do to deserve this?”*

We never asked ourselves these questions. I never found it unfair because I thought of how the apostles also asked the Lord about the man born blind, *“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* Jesus answered loud and clear, *“Neither he nor his parents sinned.”* Then the Lord said something extraordinary, which I apply to Damien, *“It is so that the works of God might be made visible through him.”* I believe that God manifests Himself through Damien: how he lives with his illness, how the whole family and, with us, our circle of friends support him and how we all mutually carry one another in prayer.

God gives us His strength because all this is beyond our strength and Damien’s as well. He deeply manifests His glory in Damien! Today, he is the one who encourages and carries me. It is incredible. It has to come from our dear God. It is a sign from God, His concrete work in our lives!

**Damien:** My condition has stabilized through the palliative treatment. I tell myself, *“How lucky I am! Soon I will see my God! I want to go straight to paradise to see God face to face. If purgatory, then I prefer to suffer still a little here.”* Yes, it is and remains a great challenge to prove God’s love to my wife, my children and my friends in everyday life, in the midst of

misunderstandings, when nothing works out and mistakes become visible. I openly told the Lord, *“Perhaps it honors You more if You leave me here on earth a little longer. I have a wonderful wife. We are one heart and soul. You speak to me through her.”*

Yes, she helps me to be faithful in my relationship to God. Without her, I wouldn't be speaking like this, and it's true, I am lucky to have such wonderful children. I simply tell the Lord, *“Everything is in Your hands.”*

The children have not fully realized that their dad has died. Their simplicity has made a gap. The two youngest live completely in the present. Six-year-old Marguerite said at her dad's death, *“Dying is like moving. You dwell in God's*

*heart, but you live anyways.”*

Sometimes Damien's absence as father and husband pulls the carpet out from under my feet. Now, I have to make decisions on my own. I cannot share the responsibility with my husband anymore. The tenderness, our understanding each other without words, the humor, being united in body, an adult conversation after dinner, I miss it all.

Our marital unity as a couple no longer exists, but our relationship of inner trust continues. The spiritual bond which united us on earth remains in heaven. In my prayers, I prefer to converse with Damien. If I am exhausted or at wit's end, I turn to him as the intercessor for our family. Damien lives on in God's heart, and knowing that I will meet him again someday gives me hope.

Elizabeth entrusted to us a secret of her heart which is so precious to her: “If there is one thing that has carried me through the last few years, it is my prayer for the sanctification of the priests. I've always held firmly to this. It makes me happy and gave meaning to all the struggles our family went through. Damien knew about this and he always encouraged me to continue. He offered up his suffering for his family and his children; I offered mine for the priests and their sanctification.

## *A Wedding for Two*

Andrea and Stefan Dorr live in a little Austrian town close to the border of the Czech Republic. Andrea works in a cardiovascular rehabilitation center, and Stefan runs a lumbar yard and cuts down trees with a harvester. They met in 2000, fell in love and moved in together. Andrea related, *“For my thirtieth birthday, Stefan threw a surprise party. All our friends and relatives were invited. It was a wonderful evening, which only became better... He made a romantic proposal to me in front of all the guests; I, of course, said Yes.”* The two of them euphorically began to plan the wedding, and one thing was certain: *“We want to marry in the Church.”* The whole family was involved in the preparations. Since none of their siblings had married in the Church, everybody was anticipat-

ing an outright pompous wedding. The two of them bought a house at the beginning of 2014 and started renovating it right away. That meant, however, putting off the wedding because there was no time for it. They kept thinking it over: how should the wedding be, who should they invite, where should it take place...? Endless questions. One day, Stefan and Andrea set a goal, *“We'll get married in 2016! Yet all the planning was so stressful that we nearly wanted to give up again.”* Andrea's mom, who had been sick with cancer for fourteen years, would be unable to attend. Then they had another thought: Why not marry alone? No stress, no big plans; and if mom can't be there, then nobody should. That was the solution: a wedding for two, only with witnesses! Stefan thought that the pilgrim church Our Lady

of Consolation in the Czech Republic would be the perfect place for the wedding. On the internet, they found the telephone number of a German-speaking priest, Fr. Georg Josef Erhart. Andrea took matters in hand, *“When I called, I knew this priest had to be the one to do our wedding. Although I did not know him, I felt a trust in him after our first phone conversation.”*

The following Sunday, Andrea and Stefan drove to Holy Mass at Our Lady of Consolation to meet Fr. Georg Josef. He was open and friendly, but he informed the couple that a load of paperwork was awaiting them since the Czech Republic was not their home country. Then Fr. Georg Josef told them the conditions under which he would do their wedding: *“A wedding has to be prepared well, and you have to know what you are getting into because it is a path you are taking with God.”* Preparation was to take four months. Fr. Georg Josef wanted to do a one-day, catechetical retreat each month, and they should receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And they had to live chastely until their wedding day. *“That was no little thing, so the priest gave us some time to think about it. But it was clear to us right away that we would accept these conditions because we felt we had*

*hit upon something which, in the depths, we were seeking. We spent a lot of time at Our Lady of Consolation. It was a very unique spiritual experience to study the Sacrament of Matrimony so intensely. You see everything differently; and, above all, it strengthened our decision to marry alone in order to prevent this spiritual atmosphere from becoming watered down through too many superficial things.”*

On October 15, 2016, Stefan and Andrea said *“I do”* to one another before God and the sisters, *“until death do us part.”* They do not regret their decision. *“We can only recommend to all couples who marry in the Church not to plan it according to the expectations of others. This is the most important day in the life of a couple since they take God as the third member of their union.”*

*Although we had already lived together for sixteen years, it is still an incomparable feeling to be married. Our relationship to one another has become much stronger; and, above all, we now go regularly not only to Holy Mass but to Holy Confession as well. Every time our sins are forgiven, it feels like someone has swept the house from top to bottom!”*