

Triumph of the Heart

MOTHERS FOR PRIESTS

Family of Mary

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*“I was not even a year old when I lost my mother.
I have especially my father to thank, therefore,
whose life as a widower became a life of constant prayer.
There were nights when I awoke and found my father
kneeling on the floor, like I had always seen him kneeling in church.
We never spoke together about vocations or the priesthood,
yet for me, his example was in a certain sense my first seminary,
a type of home seminary.”*

Pope John Paul II

Mothers for Priests

That is what this issue of our magazine is about, since spiritual motherhood for priests lies at the very heart of our community. Although fundamental and vitally important, the vocation to be a spiritual mother for priests is far too unknown; it is barely understood and, therefore, lived too little. It may also be because this vocation, firstly, is very interior, invisible to the eye, given to share spiritual life. Above all, this issue is about a womanly, motherly vocation; the men, however, are certainly in no way excluded! Our Pope is an especially nice example of this; he wrote those words of thanksgiving to his father which you read on the opposite page.

“What I will be and what I am, I have my mother to thank!”

St. Augustine

*U*nrelated to age or social status, not only the mother of a family can become a mother for priests. It is just as possible for someone who is ill, for an unmarried girl, or for a widow. It is especially relevant for missionaries and religious

sisters who give God their whole lives for the sanctification of others. Even a child, Blessed Jacinta from Fatima, was thanked by nobody less than our Holy Father for her motherly help in his vocation to the papacy. Yes, it is a fact

that a mother precedes every priest; Pope St. Pius X rightfully said, "Every vocation to the priesthood comes from the heart of God, but it goes through the heart of a mother!" You see this very well in the life of St. Monica. Augustine, who lost his faith at 19 during his studies in Carthage, later wrote in his famous "Confessions" about his mother:

"For love of me, she cried more tears than a mother would over the bodily death of her son. Nine years passed in which I wallowed in the slime of that deep pit and the darkness of falsehood. Yet that pious widow desisted not all the hours of her supplications, to bewail my case unto Thee where her prayers entered into

Thy presence." After his conversion, Augustine said thankfully, *"My holy mother never abandoned me. She brought me forth in her flesh, that I might be born to this temporal light, and in her heart, that I might be born to life eternal."*

*F*or his philosophical discussions, St. Augustine always desired to have his mother present. She listened attentively and sometimes intervened with such fine intuition that the scholars who had gathered were astounded by her inspired answers to all the open questions. Who should be surprised then that Augustine described himself as her "disciple of philosophy!"

Born to New Life

*T*he sacrifices and prayers of a mother of priests benefit especially consecrated souls who have gone astray or who have given up on their vocations. For this, Jesus appoints in his Church countless praying women, like the Capuchin Consolata Betrone (1903-1946) from Turin, for example. Jesus said to her, *"Your life-long task is for your brothers. Consolata, you will also be a good shepherdess and go in search of your brothers and bring them back to me."*

For "her brothers", priests and others consecrated to God who were in spiritual need, Consolata did everything. As she worked in the kitchen, she prayed continuously in her heart, *"Jesus, Mary, I love you, save souls!"* and she consciously made every little service and obligation into a sacrifice. Of this, Jesus said, *"These are all meaningless things, but because you bring them to me with such love, I confer immeasurable*

value to them and allow them to stream down on the miserable brothers as grace for conversion."

*O*ften, the convent was entrusted with very concrete, heavy cases by telephone or in the mail, for which Consolata overtook each time the corresponding suffering for them. Sometimes she suffered weeks or months on end in dryness of spirit, abandonment, meaninglessness, inner darkness, loneliness, doubt, and the sinful state of the priests.

She wrote once to her spiritual director during her struggle, *"How much the brothers cost me!"* Yet Jesus made her a magnificent promise, *"Consolata, it is not one brother alone that you will lead back to God, but ALL. I promise you, you will give me the brothers, one after another."* And so it was! All the priests entrusted to her she won back to a fulfilling priesthood. The exact testimonies of many cases were recorded.

Saved at the Last Minute

*F*rom the life of Alessandrina da Costa (1904-1955), who was beatified on April 25th last year, an impressive example shows what transforming power and visible effects the invisible sacrifice of a helpless, sick girl can have. It was the year 1941. Alessandrina wrote to her spiritual director, Fr. Mariano Pinho, that Jesus had asked her, “*My daughter, a priest living in Lisbon is close to being lost forever; he offends me in a nasty way. Call your spiritual director and ask his permission that I may have you suffer in a special way during the passion for this soul.*” Once Alessandrina had received permission from her spiritual director, she suffered horribly. She felt the severity of this priest’s errors, who wanted to know nothing about God and was close to damning himself. Poor Alessandrina experienced for herself the hellish state this priest was in and prayed urgently, “*Not to hell, no! I offer myself as a sacrifice for him, as long as you want.*” She heard, in fact, the first and last name of this priest. Fr. Pinho wanted to get to the bottom of

the issue and asked the cardinal in Lisbon if, at that time, one of the priests of his diocese was of particular concern. The cardinal openly confirmed that he was in fact very worried about one of his priests. When he even named the priest, it was the same one that Jesus had said to Alessandrina.

A few months later, Fr. Pinho’s friend, Fr. David Novais, recounted to him an unusual incident. Fr. David had just held a retreat in Fatima where a modest gentleman had also participated. This gentleman’s exemplary behavior made him pleasantly attractive to all the participants. On the last night of the retreat, this man suddenly had a heart attack. He requested a priest to whom he confessed and received Holy Communion. Shortly thereafter, he died, fully reconciled with God. It turned out that this man dressed as a layperson was actually a priest—the very priest for whom Alessandrina had fought so much.

A Cardinal’s Dream

Nicholas Cardinal von Cues (1401-1464), Bishop of Brixen, was not only a great Church politician, reputable Papal legate and reformer of spiritual life for the clergy and people of the 15th century, but also a man of silence and contemplation.

He was very impressed by a dream in which he saw the spiritual reality from which priests and we all live to this day: the power of the self-offering, prayer and sacrifice from spiritual mothers hidden in convents.

Hands and Hearts in Offering

...They entered a small, ancient Church decorated with mosaics and frescoes from earlier times, and there the cardinal saw an amazing sight. A thousand or more nuns were praying in the little church. They were so slender and had such a compact composure that

everybody had a place even though, as a community, they were packed together. The sisters were praying, but in a way like the cardinal had never seen. They were not kneeling but standing straight up; their gaze was not so far into the distance but rather fixed on something nearby

which he could not see. They held their arms out to the side with their palms facing up, not in order to receive, but rather in offering. What was astonishing is that they carried in their arms and thin hands men and women, emperors and kings, cities and countries. Sometimes several pairs of hands joined to hold a city. A country, recognizable by its national flag, rested on a whole wall of supporting arms, and yet even there there was a space of silence and isolation for each person praying. The majority of sisters, however, carried their fellow men and women in their lone and tender hands.

In the hands of a young, skinny, almost child-like nun, Nicholas saw the Pope. You could see how heavy this load was for her, but her face was radiating a joyful gleam. Standing in the hands of one of the older sisters was he, Nicholas von Cues, Bishop of Brixen, and Cardinal of the Roman Church. He saw himself with the wrinkles of his age, he saw the blemishes of his soul and his life in all their clarity. He looked with wide-open and shocked eyes, but his fright was soon mixed with an unspeakable bliss. The woman guiding him whispered into his ear, *“Now you see how sinners, who in spite of their sins have not given up loving God, are held up and carried.”*

“What about those who do not love anymore?” he asked. Suddenly he was in the crypt of the church with his guide, where once again a thousand or more were praying. Whereas above those entrusted to them were carried in their hands, here in the crypt, they were carried in their hearts. Somehow, they were deeper here, with holy seriousness, because the eternal fate of undying souls was on the line. *“So you see, Your Excellency,”* his guide said, *“that also those who have given up loving are still carried. It happens occasionally that they become warm again through the embers in their heart which are consumed for them—occasionally, but not always. Sometimes, in the hour of their death, they are taken from these saving hands into the hands of the Divine Judge, and they have to answer to the sacrifice that has been made for them. Every sacrifice bears fruit. However, when the fruit offered to somebody is not picked, the fruit of corruption ripens.”*

The cardinal was captivated by the women who made an offering of their lives. He always knew they existed, but it had never been revealed to him like now what they mean for the Church and the world, for the nations and every individual. Now it was startling clear. He bowed deeply before these martyrs of love.

Translated from: P. Ferdinand Ritzel OSM,
Liebe und Sühne, Parvisverlag/CH 1979, pg. 31

My Priesthood and a Stranger

Wilhelm Emmanuel Freiherr von Ketteler

We all have the prayers and sacrifices of others to thank for us and for our vocations. In the case of the famous "Social Bishop" Ketteler (1811-1877), one of the leading figures of the German episcopate in the 19th century and one of the prominent founders of Catholic social teaching, it was a simple religious sister, the lowest and poorest lay sister in her convent.

The year was 1869 and the bishop of one German diocese was sitting together with his guest, Bishop Ketteler from Mainz. In the course of their discussions, the diocesan bishop came to the topic of his guest's extremely blessed work. Yet Bishop Ketteler clarified to his host, *"Everything that I have accomplished with God's help, I have the prayer and sacrifice of someone I don't even know to thank. I can only say, I know that somebody has offered his or her whole life for me to our loving God, and I have this sacrifice to thank that I have even become a priest."*

His friend looked at him with surprise. He continued however, "Originally, I wasn't planning on becoming a priest. I had already passed my bar exam and thought only about finding an important place in the world as quickly as possible to start raking in honor, prestige and money. An extraordinary experience held me back from this direction and guided my life onto a different track.

"One evening I was alone in my room, considering my greedy dreams and plans for the future. I do not know what happened then. Was I awake or asleep, did I really see it or was it just a dream? One thing I do know, it brought about a change in my life. I saw Jesus very clear and defined standing over me in a radiant cloud and he was showing me his sacred heart.

A nun was kneeling before him, her hands raised up in prayer. From his mouth, I heard the words, 'She prays uninterrupted for you!' "I distinctly saw the appearance of the sister, and her traits made such an impression on me that she has remained in my memory to this day. She seemed to be quite an ordinary lay sister. Her clothing was very poor and rough, her hands were red and calloused from difficult work. Be what it was, whether a dream or not, it was extraordinary in any case for me. It so shook me to the core that from that moment on, I decided to consecrate myself to God in the service of the priesthood.

"I withdrew to a monastery to do a retreat, and I talked about everything with my confession father. Then I began studying theology at the age of 30. You know the rest of the story. And when you believe something good has happened through me, now you also know who really earned it. It is a religious sister who prayed for me, maybe without even knowing me. I am convinced, I was prayed for and I will continue to be prayed for in hiddenness, and that without these prayers, I could never reach the goal that God has given to me."

"Do you have any idea the whereabouts or who this person is that has prayed for you?" asked the diocesan bishop.

"No, I can only ask God each day that, when she is still on earth, he bless and repay her a thousandfold for what she has done for me."

The sister in the stall

The next day, Bishop Ketteler visited a convent of sisters close by in the city, and he celebrated Holy Mass in their chapel. He was already distributing Holy Communion to the last row of sisters when one of them suddenly caught his eye. His face became totally pale. He stood there, motionless... finally regaining his composure, he gave Holy Communion to the sister kneeling there in recollection, unaware of the bishop's hesitation. He calmly finished the Holy Mass. The bishop who had invited him over also came to the convent for breakfast. At the end, Bishop Ketteler asked the Mother Superior to present him all the sisters of

the house. Before long, she had gathered all the sisters together and both bishops went to meet them. Bishop Ketteler flew threw the greetings and searched through the rows of sisters. Yet it seemed that he could not find what he was looking for. He quietly asked the Mother Superior, "Are really all the sisters here?" She looked over the crowd of sisters and then said, "Your Excellency, I called them all, but, in fact, one of them is not here." "Why didn't she come?" "She cares for the stall," answered the superior, "and in such an exemplary way that, in her zealousness, she sometimes forgets other things." "I would like to see that sister," requested the Bishop.

"I do not want to know whom God rewards"

A little while later, the summoned sister stepped into the room. Again Bishop Ketteler turned pale, and after a few words to all the sisters, he asked if he could be alone with the sister who had just come in.

"Do you know me?" he asked her.

"I have never seen Your Excellency before."

"Did you pray once for me, or offer up some good deed?" he wanted to know.

"I do not recall that I have ever heard of Your Excellency."

The bishop was silent for a few minutes and then he asked suddenly, "Do you have a particular devotion you like to pray often?"

"The devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus," was the response.

"You have, it seems, the most difficult task in the convent," he continued.

"Oh no, Your Excellency" the sister countered, "but I cannot lie, it is unpleasant for me."

"And what do you do when you have such temptations?"

"I am accustomed now, whenever it costs me to overcome something, to tackle it with joy and zeal for love of God. And then I offer this up for one soul on earth. To whom God chooses to be gracious as a result, I have left completely up to him and I do not want to know. I also offer up my time of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament every evening from 8 to 9 for this intention."

"Where did you get the idea to offer up all your merits for someone totally unknown?"

"I learned it while I was still out in the world," was the reply. "At school our teacher, the pastor, taught us how we can pray and offer our merits for our relatives. Besides that, he thought that we should pray a lot for others who are in danger of being lost. Since only God knows who really needs prayer, then it is the best to put your merits at the disposition of the Sacred Heart of Jesus so that they can benefit the one whom the All-knowing and wise finds best. That is how I did it," she concluded, "and I always thought that God would find the right soul."

Birthday and Day of Conversion

"How old are you?" Ketteler wanted to know. "Thirty-three, Your Excellency," she answered. The Bishop paused a moment. Then he asked her, "When were you born?" The sister stated her birthday. An exclamation escaped the bishop; her birthday was the day of his conversion! On that day, he saw her exactly as she was before him now. "And have you no idea whether your prayer and sacrifice have been successful?" he asked her further. "No, Your Excellency." "Don't you want to know?" "Our dear God knows when something good happens, and that is enough," was the simple answer. The bishop was shaken.

"So continue this work in the name of the Lord," he said. The sister knelt down immediately at his feet and asked for his blessing.

The bishop solemnly raised his hands and said very movingly and emotionally, "So I bless you with the strength and authority that a bishop has to bless. I bless your soul, I bless your hands and their work, I bless your prayers and sacrifice, your overcoming yourself and your obedience. I bless you especially for the last hour and ask God to assist you with all his consolation."

"Amen," the sister answered calmly, stood up and left.

A Teaching for Life

*T*he prince of the church, interiorly shaken, stepped over to the window and, after regaining his composure, looked out. Some time later, he said good-bye to the Mother Superior and returned to the apartment of his bishop friend. He entrusted to him, "Now I found the one I have to thank for my vocation. It is the lowest and poorest lay sister of that convent. I cannot thank God enough for his mercy because this sister has prayed almost 20 years for me. God accepted her prayer in advance, and on the day she first saw the light of the world, he worked my conversion knowing her inter-

cessory works and prayers. "What a teaching and a reminder for me!" he added. "Should I become tempted by a certain success or by my works become vain before people, then for the sake of truth, I must hold before me: You have the prayer and sacrifice of a poor maid in the convent stall to thank. And when a small and lowly task appears less valuable to me, then I will also remember the fact: what this maid does and sacrifices in humble obedience to God and in overcoming herself is so valuable before the Lord Our God that this merit of the Church has inspired a bishop."

Immediately following Bishop Ketteler's death, the Vienna magazine "Fatherland" wrote:

"Bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel was the reformer of his diocese." Ketteler, who used every private means he had for social purposes was able, in fact, during the 27 years of his episcopate, to renew his diocese from the ground up. For example, he brought a new spirit into the Catholic schools by giving the teachers retreats regularly. Usually two-thirds of all the Catholic teachers in the diocese came.

Mother Eliza Vaughan

*It is a fact that vocations to the priesthood must be prayed for;
Jesus speaks about it himself in the Gospel:*

“The harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few;

so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest” (Mt. 9:37-38).

*An unusually nice example of a through and through priestly oriented woman and mother,
who prayed a lot for vocations,
is the English family mother Eliza Vaughan.*

*E*liza came from a strong Protestant family, that of Rolls-Royce. Yet already as a girl, she was deeply impressed during her education in France by the exemplary efforts the Catholic Church made for the poor. After she married Colonel John Francis Vaughan in the summer of 1830, Eliza, despite the resistance of her relatives, converted to the Catholic Faith. During the time of the English Catholics' persecution under Queen Elisabeth I (1558-1603),

the Vaughan's ancestors preferred imprisonment and expropriation to being unfaithful to their beliefs.

Courtfield, the ancestral home of the family, became a place of refuge for priests during the decades of terror in England, a place where the Holy Mass was often celebrated secretly. By now, nearly three centuries had passed, but the Catholic profession of the family had not changed.

Let us give our children to God

*E*liza was one of those who really converted with all her heart, so much so, that in her religious zeal, she even proposed to her husband that they give once all their children to God. Moreover, this notable woman made it her habit to pray for an hour each day before the Blessed Sacrament in the house chapel at Courtfield. There she prayed to God for a large family and for many spiritual vocations among her children. And her prayers were heard! She

gave life to 14 children and died shortly after the birth of the last child in 1853.

Of the 13 children that lived, six of her eight boys became priests: two priests in religious orders, one diocesan priest, one bishop, one archbishop and one cardinal. From the five daughters, four became sisters in religious orders. What a blessing for the family and what an effect for all England!

Cradle of vocations

*A*ll the Vaughan children had joyful childhoods because their holy mother understood so well in their education how to unite, in a very natural way, the spiritual life and religious obligations with amusement and cheerfulness. Thanks to their mother, prayer and

daily Mass in the house chapel were just as much a part of everyday life as music, athletics, amateur theater, riding and playing. It was never boring for the children when their mother told them stories from the saints, who little by little became trusted friends.

Mother Vaughan happily let her children accompany her on visits to the sick and needy of the area. On such occasions, they learned how to be generous, make sacrifices and to give away their savings or their toys. Shortly after the birth of her 14th child, John, Eliza died.

Two months after her death, Colonel Vaughan wrote in a letter that he was convinced divine providence brought Eliza to him.

“I thanked the Lord in adoration today that I could give back to him my dearly beloved wife. I poured out my heart to him, full of thankfulness that, as an example and a guide, he gave me Eliza with whom I am still now bound by an inseparable, spiritual bond. What wonderful consolation and what grace she brought me! I still see her as I always saw her before the Blessed Sacrament: her inner purity and such human kindness which reflected from her beautiful face during prayer.”

Laborers in the vineyard of the Lord

*T*he many vocations from the Vaughan family are really a unique legacy in British history and a blessing which came especially through Mother Eliza.

When Herbert, the oldest son, shared with his parents at age 16 that he wanted to become a priest, their reactions were very different. His mother, who had prayed a lot for it, only smiled and said, *“Child, I have known it for a long time.”*

The father, however, needed a little time to come to terms with the decision, since the inheritance goes to the oldest and he placed a lot of hope in him, thinking he would make a brilliant military career. How should he have known that Herbert would one day be the Bishop of Westminster, founder of the Mill-hill Missionaries and cardinal? Yet the father also bowed to his wishes and wrote once to his friend, *“When God wants Herbert, he can have all the rest as well.”*

Whereas Reginald married, as did Francis Baynham, who inherited the family possessions, the Lord did call, in fact, nine other Vaughan children. Roger, the second oldest, became a Benedictine Prior and later the beloved Archbishop of Sydney, Australia, where he had the Cathedral built. Kenelm was a Cistercian and later a diocesan priest; Joseph, the fourth son, was also, like his brother, a Benedictine Prior and founder of a new abbey.

Bernhard, the most lively of them all, who loved dancing and sports and went along with anything fun, became a Jesuit. It is said that the day before he entered the order, he still went to a ball where he said to his dance partner, *“This dance that I dance with you is my last, because I am becoming a Jesuit.”*

Shocked, the girl replied, *“Oh please, you want to become a Jesuit? You who love the world so much and are such an excellent dancer?”*

His ambiguous, but beautiful answer was, *“Therefore I am consecrating myself to God.”* John, the youngest, was ordained a priest by his oldest brother, Herbert, and later became the Bishop of Salford, England.

Four of the five daughters in the family entered convents. Gladis entered the Visitation Order, Teresa became one of the Sisters of Mercy, Claire became a Poor Clare, and Mary was a Prior of the Augustinians. Margaret, the fifth Vaughan daughter, wanted to be a religious sister, but her ill health prevented it. She lived at home, also consecrated to God, and lived her final years in a convent.

Convinced of the power of silent, faithful prayer, Eliza spent an hour in adoration every day in the house chapel praying for vocations in her family. The mother of six priests and four religious sisters, she was heard over-abundantly. Mother Vaughan died in 1853 and was

buried on the grounds of her beloved family possession, Courtfield.

Today, Courtfield is a retreat center for different groups of the English diocese Cardiff. In consideration of Eliza's holy life, the house chapel was consecrated as the shrine "*Our Lady of Vocations*" by the bishop in 1954 and confirmed as such in the year 2000. During a personal summer retreat at the age of 16, Herbert Vaughan decided to become a priest.

He was ordained a priest in Rome at the age of 22 and later became the Bishop of Salford, England and founder of the Millhill Missionaries who work all over the world today. Finally he was made a cardinal and the third Archbishop of Westminster. It is written in his coat of arms, "*Amare et servire!*" "*Love and serve!*" Cardinal Vaughan said, "*These two words express my agenda: Love must be the root from which all my service buds forth.*"

A Priest Work for the Renewal

Already some 120 years ago, Jesus began to reveal his plan for the renewal of the priesthood to consecrated women living in convents and in the world. He entrusted this so-called "Priest Work" to spiritual mothers.

*B*lessed Maria Deluil Martiny (1841-1884) is a forerunner of this work for the priests. Mother Maria Deluil Martiny said about this great intention of her heart, "*To offer yourself for souls is beautiful and great... but to offer yourself for the souls of priests is so beautiful, so great, that you would have to have a thousand lives and offer your heart a thousand times... I would gladly give my life for Christ to find in the priests what he is expecting from them. I would gladly give it for just one of them to fully realize the divine plan!*" She did, in fact, seal her priestly motherhood with the blood of her martyrdom at age 43 (see *Triumph of the Heart* #28). Her last words were, "*This is for the work, for the Priest Work!*"

*L*ouise Margaret Claret de la Touche (1868-1915) was also prepared by Jesus for years for her apostolate in the renewal of the priesthood (see *Triumph of the Heart* #28). She was in adoration on June 5, 1902, when the Lord appeared to her, "*I prayed to him for our little novitiate. I begged him to give me a few souls that I could form for him. He answered me, 'I will give you the souls of men.' Completely surprised at these words, whose meaning I could not understand, I remained silent.*

Then Jesus said, 'I will give you priests' souls.' Still more astounded, I said to him, 'My Jesus, how will you manage that?' He showed me then the work that he was preparing to warm up the world with love."

Jesus explained to her that he wants to go, therefore, to the priests, "*Just as I was able to renew the world 1,900 years ago with 12 men—they were priests—so also today I could renew the world with 12 priests. However, they have to be holy priests.*" Consequently, the Lord let Louise Margarit see concretely the Union of Priests. "*This is a special union of priests, a work, which encompasses the whole world,*" she wrote. "*If the priest wants to fulfill his sending and proclaim the mercy of Jesus, then first he must be penetrated in his heart by Jesus and enlightened by his spirit of love. Priests should cultivate unity among themselves, be of one heart and soul and never hinder one another in their work.*" Louise Margaret wrote so strikingly about the priesthood in her book "*The Sacred Heart and the Priesthood*", that many spiritual people thought that the author must have been an experienced priest. A Jesuit even exclaimed, "*I do not know who wrote this book, but one thing I do know, it is not the work of a woman!*"

Maria Sieler (1899-1952)

*“You shall be a sacrifice for my Church,
for the renewal of the priesthood.”*

All the spiritual directors of Maria Sieler— beginning with Fr. Lenz OP, Prelate List, the spiritual director of the seminary in Graz, Austria, and Fr. Ferdinand Baumann SJ— agreed in recognizing the divine origins of her interior life. In Rome, her interior life was examined by two well respected professors of theology, both of whom were experienced specialists in the field of mystics. One of them was Fr. A. Merk SJ, an exegetic at the Gregorian University; and the other was Fr. R. Garrigou-Lagrange OP, a professor at the Angelicum, the Dominican’s theological university in Rome, who wrote a book about mystics. Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange wrote six expert opinions. In the one from December 18, 1943, he wrote, *“Maria Sieler’s spirituality is really good. Since she is a poor girl without special schooling, it cannot be explained that she can express herself so surely about the mysteries of the Faith without a special light being given to her. It seems that God desires an important work for the formation of the clergy in the present moment and for the good of the Church.”*

*T*his modest girl with a simple elementary education grew up with her four siblings on a farm in Styria, Austria where she led a laborious, inconspicuous life. Maria Sieler became very sick at the age of 20 with a lung disease from which she was weakened for the rest of her life.

After several attempts to join convents, she returned home humiliated. Jesus had other plans. He wanted to form from her a sacrificial soul for the Church. This was a bitter battle for the 24-year-old, and Jesus said seriously to her Maria Sieler (1899-1952) *“You shall be a sacrifice for my Church, for the renewal of the*

priesthood.” on December 8, 1923, *“If you do not want to overcome yourself, I will find another soul. At my disposition are a thousand other souls to whom I can give my grace.”* Then she concurred decisively, *“As you will.”*

From 1924 on, Jesus gave Maria Sieler new mystical graces and began for the first time to speak to her about the renewal of the priesthood. *“I will pour out the spirit of my heart anew in the Church, and you shall be my instrument. Through you, I will let totally new graces stream out for the priesthood and consequently for souls.”*

*M*aria Sieler left her homeland forever in 1937 at the age of 38. Her path brought her briefly to Feldkirch, Austria and then to Rome for the last 13 years of her life. Her life was unsure, unappealing, poor and constantly dependent on the compassion of others; she had many changes of address and had to write many letters begging to be allowed to stay. This caused her to suffer a lot. *“I do not know where I will be living at this time next week,”* she wrote in her diary.

Often misjudged, this holy woman saw nothing of the realization of this priest work, for which she labored so hard in Rome. Maria Sieler died unexpectedly at 53, as she had one time feared, *“... in a strange land, without ever seeing my homeland again, without love and without souls standing by me.”* Her spiritual director, Fr. Baumann SJ, found her dead on July 29, 1952, kneeling before her sofa where she commonly prayed into the night.

Spiritual Motherhood

*M*aria Sieler wrote in her spiritual diary, “Like a mother carries within her everything that is inherent of her child, so is this priest work founded, enclosed and prepared in me... The Lord has given me a grace of spiritual motherhood for the Church. All the graces of my interior life are simultaneously property of the

priesthood. The priests may draw from it... Interiorly, I am sure that my life and all the graces I have received from God are for the renewal of the priesthood... Through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, these new graces flow through the soul of a woman to the priests.”

The Work of the High Priest

*J*esus explained to Maria Sieler, “This work comes forth from the depths of my heart. I am the founder of this work.” He promised, “The priest work will begin a triumphant march around the whole world.”

Maria Sieler wrote, “This priest work will become a ‘mustard seed’ for the Church, ‘yeast’ which will leaven all... Jesus begins small, with a few, like he did with his apostles, but his work will become so strong, that it will penetrate the whole Church with renewal through its deepest mystery: Faith. Faith will transform the individual priests and eventually the whole Church... It is a work of his mercy for our times.”

Maria Sieler wrote an explanation of Our Lady’s unique role in this priest work. “She is the mediator of all graces in this priest work. It is her heart’s affair, by which she stands and fights. She will prove herself still today as a strong woman, and her dignity and power as the coredemptrix will oppose the corrupted spirit of the times.”

*T*his work of the High Priest is still hidden. Yet it will come because the Lord wants it; he promised Maria Sieler in 1944, “The last and definite way that it will be realized, I keep as my secret. My divine providence will guide everything.”

Mother Conchita of Mexico (1862-1937)

Maria Conception Cabrera de Armida, Conchita, is a modern saint whom, alongside her vocation as spouse and mother, Jesus prepared many years for a spiritual motherhood for priests. She will have a great importance one day for the whole Church. (See Triumph of the Heart #13 and #28)

A Priestly Soul without Ordination

Jesus clarified once to Conchita, “There are souls, who through ordination receive a priestly anointing. However, there are... just as priestly souls who, though having neither the dignity nor the priestly ordination, have a priestly sending. They offer themselves united to me... these souls help the Church in the spiritual sense very powerfully.” “You will be the mother of a great number of spiritual children, yet they will cost you heart the death of a thousand martyrs.” “Bring yourself as an offering for the priests. Unite your offering with my offering, to obtain graces for them.” “I want to come again into this world... in my priests. I want to renew the world by revealing myself through the priests. I want to give my Church a powerful impulse in which I will pour out the Holy Spirit over my priests like

a new Pentecost.” “The Church and the world need a new Pentecost, a priestly Pentecost, an inner Pentecost.”

When Conchita was still a girl, she often prayed, visiting the Blessed Sacrament, “Lord, I feel so incapable of loving you; therefore, I want to marry. Give me many children so that they love you more than I can.” From their very happy marriage, nine children came forth—two girls and seven boys, all of whom she consecrated to Our Lady, “I give them to you totally as your children. You know that I am not capable of raising them. I understand too little what it means to be a mother. But you, you know it.” She had to experience the death of four of her children, all who died in a holy fashion.

My priest son Manuel

Conchita became very concretely a spiritual mother for the priesthood of her son, about whom she wrote, “Manuel was born in the same hour as a priest, Fr. José Camacho, died. When I heard that, I prayed to God that my son could replace him at the altar... When little Manuel began to talk, we prayed together for the great grace of a vocation to the priesthood... On the day of his First Holy Communion and on all the major feasts, he renewed this prayer... At the age of 17, he joined the Society of Jesus.”

As Manuel, her third child, born in 1889, shared this decision with her in a letter from Spain, she wrote back to him, “I give you to the Lord with all my heart, without ever withholding you from him! Forget creatures and forget above all yourself! I cannot imagine someone consecrated to God who is not a saint. One cannot give only half of himself to God. Be generous to him!” She met Manuel in Spain in 1914 for the last time because he never returned to Mexico. In this time he wrote, “My dear little Mom, you have

shown me the way. Luckily, I have heard from your lips since my earliest years the challenging and saving teaching of the Cross. Now I want to put it into action."

His mother also felt the renunciation, "I took your letter to the tabernacle and told the

Lord that I accept this sacrifice with my whole soul. The next day I was carrying your letter close to my heart when I received Holy Communion and, in this way, renewed my total offering."

"Mother, teach me how to be a priest!"

One week before his ordination to the priesthood, 33-year-old Manuel asked, "Mother, teach me how to be a priest! Tell me about the immeasurable joy of being able to celebrate Holy Mass. I put everything back in your hands, as you held me to your chest as a very small child, teaching me the beautiful names of Jesus and Mary and introducing me to this mystery. I really feel like a baby asking for your light, your prayer and your sacrifice... As soon as I am a priest, I will send you my blessing, and then I will receive yours on my knees" (July 23, 1922). At the same time Manuel was being ordained to the priesthood in Barcelona on July 31, 1922, Mother Conchita awoke in Mexico where, because of the time change, it was the middle of the night so that she could participate spiritually in his ordination. She was overcome by the awareness, "I am the mother of a priest! ... I can only cry and give thanks! I invite all of heaven to give thanks in my place because I am incapable of doing it, I who am so wretched." Ten years later,

she wrote to her son, "I cannot imagine a priest who is not Jesus, even less so in the Society of Jesus. I pray for you that your transformation into Christ expands from the moment of the Holy Mass, that you are Jesus day and night" (May 17, 1932). "What would we do without the Cross? Life without pain, which unites, sanctifies, purifies and attains grace, would be unbearable" (June 10, 1932).

Fr. Manuel died a holy death in 1955 at the age of 66.

His mother Conchita, who died in 1937 at the age of 75, understood from the Lord about her apostolate, "I will entrust to you a different martyrdom: you will suffer what the priests undertake against me. You will experience and offer up their infidelity and wretchedness." This spiritual motherhood for the sanctification of the priests and the Church consumed her completely.

The Priest of her Life

Berthe Petit (1870-1943)

The kind Belgian expiation soul Berthe Petit, a great mystic, has remained relatively unknown to this day. Jesus showed her clearly and distinctly the priest for whom she gave up her own plans and even guided the two of them together.

The “Price” of a Holy Priest

Already at the age of 15, Berthe prayed for the celebrant at each Holy Mass, “*My Jesus, do not allow your priests to displease you!*” When she was 17 years old, her parents lost everything they had in a failed consignment. And so a confessional father explained to Berthe on December 8, 1888 that her vocation was not to the convent but to stay home and care for her parents. The girl accepted this sacrifice with a heavy heart. She asked Our Lady in the church however to be her intercessor so that Jesus, in place of her sacrificed vocation in a convent, would at least give a zealous, holy priest. “*You will certainly be heard!*” assured the confession father whom she told.

She could not have known what took place just 16 days later. A 22-year-old lawyer Dr. Louis Decorsant was praying before a statue of the Sorrowful Mother. Suddenly, and completely unexpectedly, he had an inner certainty that it was not his vocation to take the girl he loved as his wife and to establish himself as a notary. Instead, he understood very clearly that God was calling him to be a priest. The call was so obvious and urgent, that he did not

hesitate for a moment to give up everything immediately.

When he finished his studies in Rome, where he did his doctorate, he was ordained to the priesthood in Paris in 1893. Berthe, at the time, was 22 years old. That same year, the new 27-year-old priest concelebrated at the Midnight Christmas Mass in a church outside Paris. This fact is so significant because at the same time Berthe, participating at midnight Mass in another church, solemnly promised the Lord, “*Jesus, I will be a sacrifice for the priests, for all priests, but especially for the priest of my life.*”

When the Blessed Sacrament was exposed, the young woman suddenly saw a big cross with Jesus crucified, below were Mary and, to the left, John. Then she heard the words, “*Your offer has been accepted, your prayer heard. Behold your priest... you will be able to meet him one day.*” And Berthe saw that John had the traits of a priest whom she did not know. This priest was none other than Fr. Decorsant. Only in 1908, 15 years later, would she meet the priest and recognize his face.

Led together by God

Berthe made a pilgrimage to Lourdes where the Blessed Virgin confirmed, “*Now you will see the priest whom you asked for 20 years ago; you will meet him soon.*”

As she was taking another trip to Lourdes that year with one of her friends, a priest stepped into their train car at a station in Paris looking for a place for a sick person. It was Fr. Decorsant. He had the features which St. John had when Berthe saw him 15 years earlier. She had prayed so much and even offered up her physical suffering for him. Yet

after a couple of friendly words, he left the car. Exactly one month later, Fr. Decorsant also finally undertook a pilgrimage to Lourdes because he wanted to entrust to Our Lady his priestly future. Still carrying his suitcases, he ran into Berthe and her friend, recognized the two women and invited them to Holy Mass. When Fr. Decorsant lifted up the Host, Jesus spoke innerly to Berthe, “*This is the priest for whom I accepted your sacrifice.*” After the Holy Mass Berthe realized that the “*priest of her life*”, as she called him from then on, was staying in the same hotel as they were.

A shared task

Shortly thereafter, Berthe opened up to him about her interior life and her mission for the consecration to the Sorrowful Immaculate Heart of Mary. From his side, Fr. Decorsant understood that this precious soul had been entrusted to him by God. He accepted a position in Belgium and became a holy spiritual director for Berthe Petit

as well as an untiring support for the realization of her mission. An outstanding theologian, he was the perfect mediator with Rome and the hierarchy of the Church. For the 24 years, until his death, he accompanied Berthe Petit who, as an expiation soul, was often very sick and suffered especially for priests who had given up on their vocations.

Source: Irmgard Hausmann, *Berthe Petit und das Schmerzvolle Herz Mariens*, Stein am Rhein 1969, Christiana Publishing

From Aerobics to Self-offering for Priests

Margit Beck from Germany shows through her testimony how today a wife and modern family mother can still find her way to a spiritual motherhood for priests.

My life was running pretty chaotic; I did not think a lot about God. For years there were a lot of worries, suffering, and even separa-

tion. Our marriage—I married when I was 21 years old—even went as far as a separation. Both our children suffered a lot from this.

It was not a good time. I worked as an aerobic trainer and a spinal column therapist “*with body and soul*” as they say. I was always very active, full of energy and drive. For me, something was always going on. Back then, I loved loud music, to have many people around me, and to always have a change of scenery. I rearranged my apartment at least once a month. I was bursting with the desire and strength to do things. Our house was always open for everybody.

Suddenly a time came though when I was uneasy innerly; I could not handle the music anymore and so many people was too much for me. I could not sleep anymore at night. I was terribly restless and displeased. In my despair, I took a cross and hung it up in my aerobic studio so that I could always see Jesus while I was exercising. I began to pray the Rosary more, something that until then had always seemed so boring.

After this, things started happening blow by blow. It was almost dramatic! The studio participants cancelled their memberships one after the other which resulted in a big financial problem. It seemed that God had another plan for me.

After 12 long years of separation, God guided my husband and me back together again. Slowly but surely a new life began, especially when I made my first spiritual retreat. I will never forget it!

When I look back, it seems like this was all preparation. Some three years ago, I received the crushing diagnosis of a terminal illness. I had to quit my job and the exercising which I loved so much. I cannot manage my housework alone anymore. If I still lived my life today like I did earlier, I am sure I would perish from the current situation. I could have imagined anything for my life—with the exception of becoming sick.

Yet through God’s grace, with the guidance of my spiritual director and carried by my new-

found, strong faith, the inconceivable took place. From the beginning, I have sought to make a prayer and a sacrifice out of everything: every pain, every doctor appointment that did not seem to end, the many nights without sleep and even the problems that suddenly arose in the family.

In the hours where prayer is no longer possible because of the pain, I pray a simple heart-prayer or listen to a Rosary cassette. Naturally, I experience depression, fear and inner weakness where there is only one thing I can do: contemplate the wounds of Christ on the nice cross which hangs directly over my bed. Then I am simply with Jesus, totally quiet, and I contemplate Him. I am far away from myself and very close to him, no longer in my pain but in his pain.

It gives me a lot of courage and strength and it consoles me to know that other people can live and profit spiritually from my self-offering. I am convinced about it. Since for a long time I have had an extremely deep love for priests and also for our Holy Father, I would like to offer Jesus everything for the sanctification of priests and consecrated people. I know from the prayer group of young people which I lead how difficult it is for young believers today, and especially when they take their vocations seriously. Therefore I give so readily all my prayers to the seminarians and priests, those whom I know personally and many whom I do not.

The happiest days of my life were the births of my two children. And yet I experienced a still greater joy at the priest ordinations last October in Fatima and December in Loretto. I cannot be thankful enough!

What I never would have imagined earlier is that my whole day is now arranged around the Holy Eucharist; it has become the center of my life. Only through this do I understand now much more clearly how precious a vocation to the priesthood is and how much responsibility we have that new vocations come! Without priests, there is no Holy Eucharist!

And without the Holy Eucharist, one cannot persevere! I have experienced this myself.

In this final, valuable time of my life, I can understand so deeply that we must not continually ask God for something, but rather we should want to make him happy. What I never did before, I do now. From the bottom of my heart, I would like to give Jesus my life in every

moment, sick or healthy, visible or hidden. I only have one wish now—when visitors come, I want them to feel totally at home, especially befriended priests and young vocations. I experience again and again, they are not looking for advice necessarily and they do not need criticism. It is better to be quiet, to listen and to pray something together. Yes, I hope to have this mission as long as God desires.

“Lord, Give us Priests again!”

From Ust-Kamenogorsk, our missionaries in Kazakhstan travel to the neighboring villages and cities to care for Catholics who have made themselves known.

The city of Syrjanowsk, lying 5 hours to the east, is also within their parish boundaries.

Our missionaries met 86-year-old Anna Stang there in 1995.

She suffered a lot during the Communist persecution, and, consequently, from her youth on, she treasured even more her Faith and above all the work of the priests.

After so many years, she has also matured into a priestly person.

She wrote down a few impressions from her moving life at our request.

“We have remained without pastors!”

Anna Stang was born in 1909 to a believing family with many children living in the German area of the Volga in Russia. She began to feel the persecution of the Faith already as a nine-year-old schoolgirl. She writes, “In 1918, in second grade, we still prayed the Our Father before class. One year later, everything was forbidden and the priest was no longer allowed in the school. People began to laugh at those of us who believed, showing no respect to the priests anymore and the seminary was destroyed.” When she was 11, Anna lost her father and several siblings to the Cholera epidemic. When her mother died only a few years later, Anna, who was just 17, had to raise her younger brothers and sisters. However, not only the members of her family died. “Our priest also died in this time, and many religious people

were arrested. So we remained without a pastor! That was so difficult... In the neighboring parish, the church was still open, but there was no longer a priest there either. The faithful gathered for prayer, but without a priest, the church was very cold. I could only cry and could not hold myself together any longer. Earlier, so much had been sung and prayed in this church! Everything seemed dead to me now.” Impressed by this deep spiritual need, Anna prayed from that moment on especially for priests and missionaries. All the suffering which she endured in the coming years she consciously offered for the priests—even when the Communist came one night in 1938 and arrested her brother and her husband to whom she had been happily married for seven years. Neither one of them ever returned!

Entrusted priestly service

Anna, now a widow, was deported with her three children to Kazakhstan in 1942. "It was hard, arriving in the bitter cold of winter, but we lived to see spring. In those days I cried a lot and I also prayed a lot. It was always as if somebody was leading me by the hand though. Some time later, I found some Catholic women in the city of Syrjanowsk. We secretly congregated on Sundays and feast days to sing songs and pray the Rosary. I prayed so often, 'Mary, our beloved mother, see how poor we are; send us priests, teachers and pastors again!'"

The persecution diminished somewhat after 1965. "When a church was even built in Bishkek (the capital of Kirgizstan), my friend Veronika and I went there once a year to participate in

a Holy Mass. It was a long way, more than 600 miles, but we were so happy to do it. We had not seen a priest nor a confessional for more than 20 years! The priest there was old and had spent 10 years in prison for his Faith. While I was there, somebody lent me a key to the church and I spent a lot of time in adoration. I never thought that I would one day be so close to the tabernacle again, and in my joy, I knelt down and kissed it." Before her departure, Anna always received Holy Communion for the Catholics in her city who could no longer come. *"With the mandate of the priest, I baptized the children and adults in my city for 30 years, I led couples to the sacrament of marriage and buried the dead until my health no longer permitted it."*

Hidden prayer... that a priest comes!

You cannot imagine how thankful Anna was when we came to visit for the first time in 1995. She cried for joy and said so movingly, "Jesus the High Priest has come!" At 86 years of age, she, who had prayed for decades for priests and missionaries, did not believe she would ever see them again. When Holy Mass was celebrated for the first time in her apartment and she received Holy Communion, she ate nothing the rest of the day out of reverence and joy. "If I was still young," she entrusted to us once, "I would go with you immediately, it does not matter where."

Unfortunately, it is not possible. Because of the wide distance, we can only visit Syrjanowsk three or four times a year. Anna, however, consciously offers up this heavy sacrifice *"that one day a Catholic priest and a church will come to my city."* This great woman of prayer even wrote down the times we normally celebrate Holy Mass so that she can unite herself innerly for each Holy Mass we celebrate. In our mission, we really feel carried by her prayers and we can only thank God that he brought us together with such a wonderful woman and priestly soul.

I simply believe so much in the power of prayer

Our great love began when I was 16 years old; Armin was 17. We were totally in love. It did not turn out to be a flame that went out after a couple weeks. We were inseparable friends for seven years and we spent every free

minute we had together. In the eyes of all who knew us, we were a dream couple. And we were.

We both came from good Catholic families. In our youth, however, about the only thing

that remained from our Faith was the obligatory visit to Sunday Mass. Over the years, we stopped going to Confession and we never prayed. When I was about 18, I read a book from Little Therese for the first time, and I thought, I would also like to help Jesus carry the Cross for sinners. That is what I thought even though I myself was a sinner. At the same time, however, I knew that it was unthinkable because I had Armin. I could never hurt him. Still, the thought kept returning, and so I told God, *“If I am supposed to live for you, you must make it possible.”* Although my love for Armin was really great, it did not fill me completely. It was similar for him. Therefore we began, encouraged by one another’s example, to pray the Rosary, regardless of where we were. We enjoyed always more praying together. Armin had finished his studies and his civil service. We were 22 and 23 years old, and it seemed that the time had come to consider whether we should get married. Even though we loved each other so much, there was some unfathomable obstacle.

One day—we were making one of our typical pilgrimages to Altotting—Armin said to me, *“Maria, I feel so strongly that I have to become a priest”* In the first moment I thought, *“Yes, Lord, now you have done it. You have found a way for me to give myself totally to you.”* When I entrusted to Armin my heart’s wish, which only in this moment had really become clear to me, he answered, *“I have seen that for you for years.”* From that point on, everything changed. We continued on together, but in a totally different way. We helped one another to go the way of our vocations. Armin started the seminary in Passau, Germany a half year later. One year after that, I came here to the convent.

The convent was the only thing I wanted because I had always felt called to live a hidden life. And here I can help Armin much more intensively. He always says, *“Knowing that you are in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament gives me great confidence for my priestly work.”*

I am always here for him before the Lord, and I want to do everything for him before the Lord which will help his vocation. When daily life demands my self-denial, I give these moments for his priesthood and all priests who need this help of grace. I simply believe so much in the power of prayer and sacrifice. Naturally, I profit very much from Armin as well. Because he may celebrate the Holy Mass and is so close to the Holy Eucharist, I also receive an always-deeper relationship to the Holy Eucharist.

In the beginning, it was not so easy for me to live with this pain of separation in the convent. God guided it that we had no contact with one another for about two years. That was very important for me to get a foothold here. I had to let everything go. However, when I was ready to give the Lord everything that he desired from me, I received everything back, but in a different way, without being dependent.

When the earthquakes in 1997 caused severe damage to our convent, Armin called to see if everything was okay. From then on, we have spoken now and again on the telephone or written to one another with permission from my Mother Superior. At my profession in the year 2000, he was present as a deacon. This was naturally an indescribable joy for everyone. Mother Veronika revealed our mystery, *“These two could have also been married now.”* A few months later he was ordained to the priesthood.

I still love Armin, but now it is a spiritual love. I cannot care for him in a material way. This does not sadden me, however, because I know there is an ever after, heaven. All that we do now, we do for Jesus and therefore the exterior separation becomes always easier and the love always deeper. I find it wonderful that God gave a vocation to both of us. Like before, we can go our way together, separated and yet spiritual tied. Armin was the love of my life and the Lord gave my beloved the greatest gift on earth, a vocation to the priesthood.