

# I M P R I N T

A PUBLICATION OF THE SISTERS OF LIFE FALL ISSUE



Are we authentic?  
Standing by our yes.

Holding fast to our yes  
not looking back,  
but living beyond ourselves, for the other;  
steadfast in what we promise,  
and living lives of real authenticity  
walking the walk, seeking the good and true  
and not taking our eyes off Jesus.

**It's when we are most ourselves.**

# It's never too late.

to turn back to Him.



In 1962, an Italian wife, mother and medical doctor decided to risk her own life by foregoing medical treatment that would endanger the life of her unborn child. When asked again about her decision, she definitively and simply stated: "I wish that my child should live." She gave birth to a healthy daughter, her fourth child, but died soon after. We now know this mother as Saint Gianna Beretta Molla. She's not a Saint because she gave up her life for her daughter, but rather because she had come to know the truth of God's love and her whole life reflected that truth to others. Her statement – "I wish that my child should live" – is one that emanates from God the Father and from the Heart of Jesus for each of us throughout every moment of our existence.

God wants that we should live. He has chosen us. He is for us. The book of Genesis tells us that, as the Lord completed each aspect of creation, He gazed on it as an artist would and affirmed each: "It is good." Yet when it came to the pinnacle of creation, the human person, the Lord said something different, and we can almost hear the delight, the Divine exclamation point: "It is *very good!*" The first and last word about me from the Lord, in creation and in Christ Jesus, is His unshakable, unbreakable yes to me. He has made me in His image and given Himself totally that I might be with Him forever. This is what actually defines me, a possibility, a hope that meets me wherever I am, regardless of my past or any frailty I experience in myself or in my family history. The Lord is always waiting with arms wide open that we might see ourselves as He sees us and thereby live more fully in His peace and as a reflection of His love.

In this fallen world, however, God's divine proclamation to us, "You are *very good!*", is too often progressively smothered by lies accumulated through life. These lies are from the Evil One, who is bent on keeping us from the destiny our loving Father desires for us. They clutter our minds and hearts and interrupt our relationships with the Lord and with others.

They have us waste precious interior energy on worries and concerns that are not based in truth. They disable our capacity to trust others and commit to the hard work of love. They distract us as we walk this pilgrimage to Heaven. Though these lies are from the Evil One, they often work on the subconscious level: if only I work enough to make this or that aspect of life "perfect" *then* all will be well. If I keep things in control, please others, am better than others, am skinny, rich, savvy, funny, then I will be satisfied. Often we don't recognize lies from the Evil One because they come through our minds in the first person: I will never really make it, I can't be loved for who I am, I don't deserve to be happy, I'll never change, I'm *not* good.

When these thoughts infiltrate our inner lives, we can easily begin to build our actions and attitudes on them, instead of on God's love and mercy. We begin looking at others differently, blaming them for our own dissatisfactions. We can begin making concessions to mediocre, self-centered and even self-destructive patterns of behavior and feel further and further away from the possibility of receiving God's transforming love.

But it's never too late. His arms await us. All it takes is a simple turn of the heart towards Him; a gesture of humility and repentance, a request for forgiveness, a willingness to forgive others and move ahead on the path to Heaven. Our God loves us and has great plans for us. As we pay attention to the thoughts on which we are building our actions and attitudes, as we intentionally reject the lies and live out of the truth at the root of our existence, our lives will correspond to who we actually are: God's emissaries, His children, His very life on earth. As we open ourselves to love, the voice we hear is the voice of truth, the voice of God, resounding in our hearts and minds - a proclamation of decisive victory. **And He says "I wish that my child should live."**

So you're wondering, why did we name our magazine **Imprint**?

**Man bears within himself an imprint of God.**

-cf *Evangelium Vitae* #35

**As one Sister of Life wrote:** It's as if the Blessed Trinity kisses us at the moment of our creation, and our souls remember that kiss of the Divine. His love is forever, and God is no foolish lover. He knows that for the rest of our days, we'll be searching for that which corresponds to this memory buried deep within us.

**We were made for heaven.**

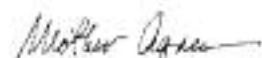


On the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6th, Sr. Giovanna Mariae, Sr. Mariam Caritas, Sr. John Mary and Sr. Marita pronounced their definitive “yes” to the Lord as they professed perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and to protect and enhance the sacredness of human life.

## We stand on the Yes *of so many others.*

We stand on the ‘yes’ of so many others. It’s easy to forget this, to not notice the gifts that come to us through choices made by our parents, grandparents and ancestors – both biological and spiritual – so long ago. But if we’re attentive, there are moments when we see it. Suddenly, surprisingly, we see it, and time seems to stand still. In that moment touching eternity, we remember how close we all are, that indeed we are loved, and that love never dies. Those who came before us were asked, as we are, to say yes to love in the midst of the unexpected and messy realities of life – the mix of joys and sufferings and the inevitable weaknesses and sins that plague us all. And they said yes – to God, to life, to truth, to faith, to forgiveness, to each other, without any knowledge of who would benefit from their yes beyond their immediate circle. Love matters. And any yes to authentic love, any fidelity to the promptings of love, bears fruit that lasts. We stand on the yes of so many others. And we, too, are invited – urged! – to let our own lives, whatever our vocation, become a yes that will resonate throughout the Body of Christ for generations to come. Every yes we make to God, each act of service we give another person, each humble request for forgiveness, each stand we take for truth, for the good, the beautiful – for that which lasts – throws a lifeline of courage, strength, possibility into the future to one we may not yet know but will one day meet. In this edition of IMPRINT, our friends and Sisters share their own witness to saying yes to life and love. May their stories become gifts for you and your family.

This past August 6, four of our Sisters professed perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and to protect and enhance the sacredness of human life and four of our Sisters professed their first vows. These young women stand on the yes of those who have gone before them and now, more than ever, every ounce of their lives will become solid ground for those who come after them. May the Lord of Life be glorified through their generous and joyful yes! We ask you, our friends, to pray for these Sisters and our entire community that we may live our yes to Jesus with fidelity and fearlessness. Know that we pray for you and your loved ones and are daily inspired by your many and generous choices for love.

  
Mother Agnes, SV

*I have been blessed to see the joy and fruitfulness of Duncan & Mary's marriage over the years. I am inspired to live my own vocation as faithfully as they have and trust the Lord will make my love as spiritually fruitful. The faces of my nephews and nieces capture the joy that I hope each person experiences when they encounter the presence of Christ in me through the charism of life.*

**-Sr. John Mary**



*My brother Greg and his family continue to witness to me what it truly means to give a daily gift of one's very self. They've taught me how unconditional love and a steadfast faith allows you to embrace and flourish in any circumstance life presents. They say a mother's love is like a garden. If so, I'm eager to see in heaven the glorious array of "roses" Dana's love has bloomed.*

**-Sr. Mariam Caritas**



*I am so blessed to have grown up knowing my beautiful grandmothers, whose joyful and loving witness of faith has nourished and strengthened my own. Their daily "yes" of faith laid the foundation for my own "yes" of love to the Lord.*

**-Sr. Giovanna Mariae**



*My parents faithfulness in marriage has been a tremendous inspiration for me. They have shown me what selfless love is all about.*

**-Sr. Marita**



*I was reminded of the importance of commitment, as I watched each Sister make Vows. I thought of the words of Cardinal Pell, "Only commitments bring fulfillment" – it was clear during the Mass of Professions that a clear yes to Jesus' invitation will always bring fulfillment. I was encouraged and reminded of this truth, and the need to respond to Jesus with faith and courage in whatever He asks of me. **-Claire***



*Professing Temporary Vows on the Feast of the Transfiguration were: (from left to right) Sr. Marie Veritas, Sr. Gianna Maria, Sr. Monica Marie Therese, and Sr. Regina Immaculata. Mother Agnes Mary and His Excellency, Archbishop Samuel Aguila join them.*



*As the Church invokes the intercession of the Saints, the Sisters prostrate in front of the altar as a sign of their total surrender to the Lord; laying down their lives that others may live.*



*The entrance Procession at the Basilica of St. John the Evangelist in Stamford, CT*

The Bishop, with love's gaze, is able to recognize a hidden potential. He willingly takes a risk, staking a claim into the heart of Jean Valjean with these words, "Remember this, my brother - see in this some higher plan. You must use this precious silver to become an honest man. By the witness of the martyrs, by the passion and the blood, God has raised you out of darkness: I have bought your soul for God." -Les Miserables



See in this some higher plan

The bishop and Jean Valjean | Jenna and Alicia

## Changing the course of history with One act of Love.

In the classic story *Les Miserables*, written by Victor Hugo and set in France in the 1800's, Jean Valjean is convicted for stealing a loaf of bread for his sister's starving child, and spends the next nineteen years of his life enduring slavish, manual labor. Finally, he is released on permanent parole, only to be chained to the stigma of an ex-con, and distrusted by employers and inn keepers. Condemned to the streets, he is taken in by a Bishop, who invites the ravenous man to a meal at his own table, and gives him a bed for the night.

Valjean cannot sleep. Anxiety about his present state and the temptation to steal overcome him. Taking the silver from the cupboard, he escapes into the foggy darkness. Authorities find him, beat him, and drag him back to the home of the Bishop. Returning the bag of silver, they scoff, "He had the nerve to say you gave him this!"\* The Bishop surprises them all and replies, "That is right...you forgot I gave these also," and picks up his pair of silver candlesticks from the table. Jean Valjean is freed, and left alone before the Bishop. Stunned with disbelief, his eyes turn to the one he has just betrayed, searching for the meaning behind this inexplicable and unprecedented act of mercy.

The Bishop, with love's gaze, is able to recognize a hidden potential beneath Valjean's disfigured dignity. He willingly takes a risk, staking a claim into the heart of Jean Valjean with these words, "Remember this, my brother- see in this some higher plan. You must use this precious silver to become an honest

man. By the witness of the martyrs, by the passion and the blood, God has raised you out of darkness: I have bought your soul for God."

In the following scene, Jean Valjean, staggering over the blow of this piercing, pure, and unmerited gesture, turns to Jesus in prayer, "...why did I allow that man to touch my soul and teach me love? He treated me like any other. He gave me his trust. He called me brother. My life he claims for God above. Can such things be? For I had come to hate the world; this world that always hated me... He told me that I have a soul, how does he know? What spirit comes to move my life? Is there another way to go?"

This very scene plays out on the sets and stages of human hearts around the world. In a particular way, in each Christian soul, whose redemption was won by the blood of God's Only Begotten Son. Knowing our great dignity and whose image we bear, Jesus frees us from the grip of darkness, bestows on us a treasure, and shows us another way. In St. Peter's words, "You were ransomed from your futile conduct, handed on by your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a spotless unblemished lamb." (1 Peter 1:18b-19)

It takes great courage to *receive* such a gift, knowing that I cannot both receive it and remain unaffected. I am no longer

the same person. This “yes” will require all that I am and have, transforming me therein. In receiving mercy, Jean Valjean was utterly reborn, and a new man emerged that fated night, the man he was made to be. As a result, he spends the rest of his life as a response of gratitude. The lives of so many were relying on *this* yes...unbeknownst to him.

Many of the women we serve experience similar fears over their circumstances, temptations and uncertainty as to where to turn for help and support. They find themselves swarmed by the negativity of those closest to them, and unable to see the possibilities, begin to believe they have no choice, except the one they never wanted to make.

**When Jenna\* first called the Sisters,** she was six weeks pregnant. Pressured to have an abortion by every member of her family, she had even received money to cover the cost from the father of the baby. She had already suffered once, and knowing all too well the regret of that decision, knew she didn't want to go down that road again. So scared of the thought of raising a baby on her own, she recounted that it was the fear of being alone that drove her to schedule an abortion. After talking to the Sisters for hours, Jenna still felt uncertain. Could the Sisters be trusted? Would they just leave me after? “I wanted to talk to someone who knew my experience.” The Sisters put her in contact with two of our former guests, women who had lived with us at Sacred Heart Convent, and were now each raising their child as a single mother. These conversations moved Jenna powerfully. “Looking back, a few things really struck me. One said, ‘There are so many women in the world unable to have children, and God picked *you* and gave you this baby. You have been given this chance for a reason, and God wouldn't give you something you couldn't handle.’ What she said was true, and you can't take back an abortion, because you never see the baby again. I began to realize there were other options too.”

The next day was the scheduled abortion, and Jenna describes the mysterious working of grace that changed her life: “Something came over me that morning. I was about to walk out, and something kept me. I couldn't walk out the door. I just couldn't do it. Hearing their stories helped me a lot. I became strong enough at that point to decide I couldn't live with that reminder, wondering every day what she would have looked like.” For Jenna, the truth resounded and settled firmly on her heart and she knew, “God had chosen me, and wanted me to have this baby, and it was such a special thing.”

Throughout the next two and a half months, Jenna found the courage to rise above the opposition and fully embrace her maternity. When she was 20 weeks along, her sonogram showed she was carrying a baby girl. Feeling overjoyed and excited, they assured her all was fine. The next day, at her routine check-up, Jenna's world was rocked. The month prior, the doctor had taken a blood test, without telling her what it was determining. Now, the results were in, and she was shocked to be informed that the test had come back positive for spina bifida. They recommended a follow-up to confirm, eventually suggesting that she see a genetic counselor.

**If you ever have  
another woman  
who needs to talk  
to someone,  
I want to be  
that someone.**

*-Jenna*



Heartbroken, knowing what they would likely recommend, Jenna felt within herself a need to protect her little one from further harm. She was adamant and said, “I'll do one more sonogram...but after that no tests. I'm not having an amnio. If she has spina bifida.- she has spina bifida. Even the sonogram isn't going to change that. And if she does have it, that's how God made her. She is still my child.” The doctor, not knowing what to say in response, asked pointedly, “What are you going to do?” Without a moment's hesitation, she replied, “I am going to be a good mother- that's what I'm going to do! I am going to love her and raise her.”

When later asked how she could surmount such incredible odds, she said, “Everything was for her. I did it for her. I had to fight for her my entire pregnancy, and she kept me going.”

At her check up the following month, the doctor approached her with news that still brings tears to her eyes, “The test was a false positive.” Her baby was healthy!

Days before the birth, Jenna told the Sisters, “If you ever have another woman who needs to talk to someone, I want to be that someone.”

Weeks later, that other woman stepped into our lives. Nineteen and pregnant, Alicia\* had made and cancelled multiple abortion appointments. The Sisters called Jenna, who in-

stantly recognized herself in this young woman and reached out to her. "I've been through it. I know that speaking to someone who has been through the same thing helps so much. When everyone is pressuring you, and when the father of the baby is not with you, it is so hard. I felt like I could give her advice, because I had now experienced both decisions."

Jenna had suffered her abortion at 19, and was calling Alicia just two days before her scheduled abortion. Alicia's mind was telling her to have the abortion, but her heart was urging her to have her baby. Jenna told her calmly, "You have to go with your heart...what you know to be true. You can't worry about everyone around you, and you can't make that life-changing decision based on what they think. You are the one who lives with it...they don't. They move on, that day. And you live with the guilt, always wondering. I think about it every day. It's not their baby, and it's not their body. You know what's best for you."

When Jenna didn't hear from Alicia on the day of the appointment, she called the Sisters in a panic, thinking that she had gone through with it. After a few days, something told Jenna to reach out, and she called again. Alicia picked up and said, "I cancelled it! I didn't go." She had decided to have her baby, and was even opening herself to the possibility of adoption. Jenna was ecstatic, and called the Sisters, "I've never been so worried about someone I didn't know. I know it's all because I'm a mom now."

Reflecting on her experience, Jenna shares, *"The love between a mother and a child is beautiful and unbelievable. It's a bond, and one of a kind. How you can love someone you've never met before? People say, 'Life is over'...but, life is just beginning. Everything happens for a reason. What if I had gone the other route when God had this plan for me? What if I had had the abortion? Or if something had happened to me? I feel like God sent this baby to draw me to good. Becoming a mother has changed everything- my whole outlook on life. And not in a bad way, in a good way! I grew up. I'm a new person. Honestly, before, I was party central. I don't even care to go out anymore! You want to do better for your child. Even my appearance has changed and the way I represent myself, because I represent my child too. Before pregnancy, it's only about you. Now, it's all about her. She comes first. It is really hard work, but rewarding.*

*Women need to know it gets better; it gets easier. There is support. They're not alone. Other women have been through the same thing. You have to have hope. Believe in yourself and be strong. Even if you have just one person to support you...that's all it takes. Anyone. One is all you need. If you can't find someone, if you have no family, the Sisters are here!"*

Just as Jean Valjean, who, having been entrusted with something so great responded with the decisive choice to live for others, so too Jenna gives generously and freely what she has herself received. Her own baby girl was relying on her mother's heroic yes, but without knowing it, so was Alicia, and her little one. How many lives will be touched by this one woman's yes?

\*Quotes taken from the Universal Pictures release of the movie Les Miserables in 2012. Directed by: Tom Hooper. Screenplay written by: William Nicholson, Alain Boublil, Claude-Michel Schönberg and Herbert Kretzmer

Names have been changed for anonymity.

## What's New in Blue?

### Entrance to the Novitiate, June 24, 2013

Sr. Claudia Marie, Sr. Sophia, Sr. Naomi Marie Magnificat  
Included are Msgr. John Gallagher, Mother Agnes Mary and  
Sr. Charlotte Marie (Postulant Director)



## OUR NEW HOUSE OF STUDIES Washington D.C.

On August 14th we opened our first House of Studies outside of Washington, D.C. as part of our program of ongoing formation and education for our professed Sisters. The Sisters will be earning advanced degrees from the John Paul II Institute and the Institute of Psychological Sciences in order to serve the Church and in our missions with greater knowledge, depth and competence.

*Sisters Missioned to the House of Studies:  
Sr. Marita, Sr. Mary Concepta, Sr. Giovanna Mariae,  
Sr. Mary Rose (not pictured)*



On August 6, 2005 I professed Perpetual Vows as a Sisters of Life; fulfilling my deepest desire to give myself totally and forever to the Lord, and to share the Charism of Life with the world – bringing His love and mercy to every person I meet, and saying to them, “You have been willed and loved into this world by Almighty God! Your Life has tremendous meaning! Open yourself up to Him!

The world desperately needs to hear that.

-Sr. Elizabeth Ann



# THE LEAP



Growing up in Milwaukee Wisconsin, we had five pools in our neighborhood and about thirty kids who lived in those pools every summer. We were a close-knit group, spending our days constantly scheming up new ways to entertain ourselves. I can still remember the summer we turned my family’s brown paneled station wagon into a vinyl-padded-sauna. Pulling out every piece of winter clothing we could find from the closet, we vested over our swimsuits, and climbed into our wagon wearing snowpants, scarves, gloves, wool hats, ski jackets and snow boots. Then rolling up the windows we waited. Sweating. Sweating until the beads rolled down our over-heated faces and Ronnie Sprenger felt like passing out. Then someone screamed, “NOW!” At which point we flung open the doors, peeled off the winter garb in less than five seconds flat (leaving it strewn across our front lawn) and one by one took one large leap into the unheated waters of 60°. Pure joy. Those were the days filled with simple desires and uncomplicated dreams.

When I look back on those funny snapshots of early years, I can’t help but think about the deeper, more profound desire resting and growing in my heart over the years. The desire to do something beautiful with my life, with my love. And the hope to give that love to another and to be loved passionately in return. Whether we realize or not, each of us longs to know we are perfectly, unconditionally loved – with all our faults, all our weaknesses, all our limitations, and for all that is unique and delightful about us too. In short, we each long for God.

That awareness, that thirst for Christ, began opening the door for a more mature relationship with Him as I entered high school and then college. However, it wasn’t until my first job,

that I began to ask those deeper questions in life that simply never entered my consciousness at age ten, suspended above the icy blue waters of the pool in the shape of a cannon ball. What were God’s plans for my life? Where was He leading me? Where was the place for my restless heart? Although I asked the questions, I quite frankly was already convinced of the answers. And I was certain God’s plans were the same. My vocation was marriage. This I never doubted. That is, until the day Pope John Paul II’s plane landed at Denver airport in the summer of 1993 for World Youth Day.

The only way I can describe the life-changing experience is to call it a grace that traveled with the speed of light through the T.V set, landing like a bomb on the living room floor, before shattering into a million pieces and piercing my heart. For two days I hardly left that couch. With a few crackers and a can of Coke for survival, I was utterly glued to the scene of 500,000 young people with the Holy Father in the Rocky Mountains proclaiming to the world that Christ was the center of their existence. I prayed and sang with them. I laughed, I cried, I was moved by their boldness and courage and joy. It was a sea of young people celebrating the goodness of life and I felt invited into this beautiful communion of love and solidarity. When it was over, I sat motionless between the fibers of that couch. I was convinced that if I looked into the mirror at that moment, I might not even recognize myself. I had been deeply touched by the Lord’s love and I knew that I was changed, forever.

And then it happened. I heard a voice within whisper those three fateful words, “Will you come?” I instantly knew, without ever considering the thought before, what the Lord was asking, and my heart dropped, landing in my stomach with one loud thud. Fear replaced the joy, and I suddenly felt sick to my stomach.

Now you have to ask yourself why all the drama and dread? I imagine it is the case with any vocation, we often make assumptions and conclusions based on preconceived ideas that are far from reality. Like the notion that in marriage each spouse can completely fulfill the other. Which is of course an impossibility since God alone can fulfill the human heart completely. In my case, I had so much misinformation swimming around in my head regarding religious life and the source and meaning of happiness, sacrifice, joy, and love, that the only proper response was to RUN. The thought of never laughing again, never watching another movie (who comes up with this stuff anyway?), never eating another McDonald's hamburger (there's nothing like a year of home cooked meals to cure that one) and then the thought – I'll never see my family again, was just too much. It's amazing how the evil one subtly suggests a thought, a lie, that he knows will paralyze us.

And it went deeper. The thought of letting go. Letting go of those things that I thought defined me. It's always surprising to see how these lies can lay tightly entrenched and undetected in your sub-conscious until you are asked to let them go. We live in such a secular world that has convinced millions into believing their value and worth, their very identity lie in what they wear, what they look like, what they do. Now I wish I could say that I was completely unaffected by these false messages in our mixed up world, but that was simply not the case. It seeps in so subtly and affects us all—in a million different ways.

My confusion and fear went even deeper. I thought the Lord knew me. Why would He ask me to offer up so much for a life void of joy and happiness? This unresolved fear convinced me that I needed to ask the Lord for some time. Time, to uncover for Him another plan that might work a little better. And His response in prayer? "Take all the time you want." His calm, gentle response melted my heart and the anxiety slowly faded. I promised in return I would sign up for Eucharistic Adoration at my parish once a week and spend more time with Him.

Now, there was no question in any of our little kid's minds in those summer days of long ago, that the most effective way to increase our desire for that pool in 70° weather was to spend some time in that vinyl padded station wagon turned sauna. And I can tell you, there is no better way to increase your love for the Lord and realize your true desires than to spend time with Him in Eucharistic Adoration. The more time I spent, the more the Lord opened my heart to see things with new eyes. He shared with me so much of Himself and revealed to me insights into my own true identity and goodness. I began to really talk to Him heart to heart as never before. And the more I opened myself up, the more I felt confident that He was receiving me completely. No judgements, no agendas. Crying with me. Laughing with me. Delighting in my joys, and grieving with me in my sorrow and regrets. My love for the Lord deepened and filled my world.

And I began noticing that the more faithful I was in my time with the Lord, the more I desired to reach out in love to others – and with that I experienced a real spirit of joy. I started recognizing the different spirits speaking within me too -- if only we could know the unseen, but very real, spiritual battle waging for each of our souls! In the midst of a busy day, I would suddenly hear a voice within speak words such as, "Did I not make your heart? Do I not know then what will most fill it? I am with you. I love you and I have beautiful plans for you. Trust

me. We will walk together." They were words so consoling, I knew it must be the Lord. I felt encouraged and strengthened. At other times, a thought would come, seemingly my own, that made me fearful and restless, "You'll never be happy in that life. Listen to those fears. Think of everything you will be losing, leaving behind. It will be painful. You can't do it." And even more subtle and deceptive, "Enjoy yourself. Forget about it. You're a good person. Isn't that enough? There's always tomorrow. Just enjoy yourself today. Always tomorrow." It was a classic case of the father of lies planting seeds of doubt and discouragement to keep me from the freedom I longed for; leaving me continually vacillating, looking back and lamenting on what I thought would be lost.

However, with temptation and trial, the Lord always provides the grace to overcome it if only we ask! (Why do we not always persist in our asking?) There came that day when, after pleading with Him to give me the grace to want whatever He planned for my life, I suddenly stopped looking back. Moving with my heart, I firmly fixed my eyes on the Lord, broke free from the fear and never turned back again. With this definitive choice, this definitive yes, the Lord opened a new door and I can honestly say, as I stepped inside, I felt reborn.

And today? As I kneel before that same Lord who called me to Himself over sixteen years ago, I am filled with tremendous gratitude. Every promise He made to me has been fulfilled a thousand-fold. When I think of my "Yes" made years ago, I think of those "yesses" He asks of me in less dramatic ways each and every day as a Sister of Life. It's an opportunity to continually renew and recommit my love to Him, and the vows I have made. When I think of what I left behind? The inescapable reality is that to say "yes" to one good, always means to say "no" to something else. It's part of life and love. The good news is that it doesn't end there. There is much more! What I came to realize is that by letting go, with God's grace, of those attachments that kept me bound, and in choosing to radically commit myself to self-giving love in the vocation the Lord was calling me, I received in return what I thought I had given away in the offering. True freedom. A freedom filled with passion and tremendous purpose. My life suddenly had profound meaning and I was overwhelmed by the gift the Lord was offering me.

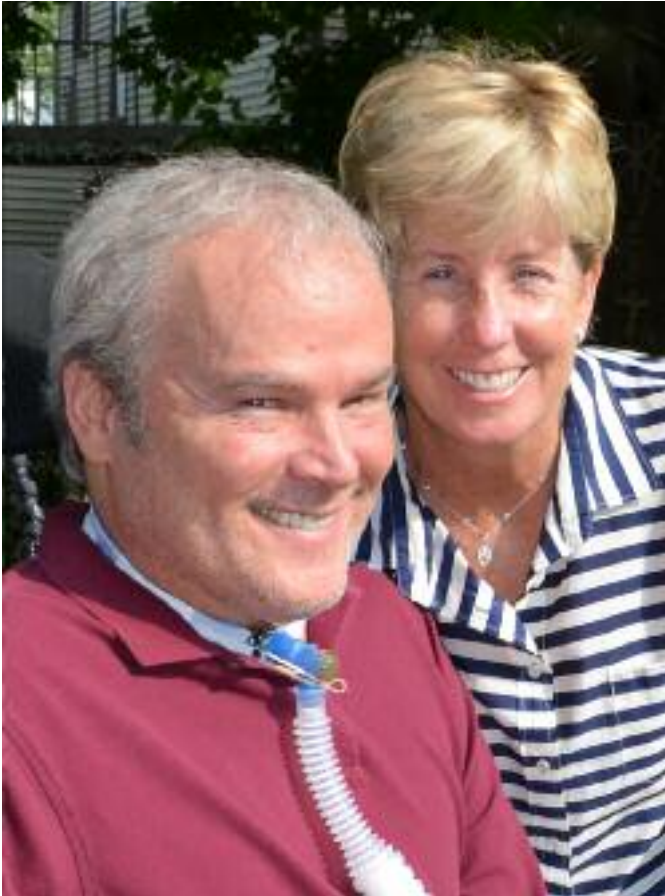
You know, the leap into the five foot swimming pool of my youth is a nice memory to be sure. But the leap into the ocean of God's love and mercy – I will spend the rest of my days plummeting those depths. And the beautiful truth of this reality? There is room for everyone, whatever their vocation. It just requires a letting go.

*Sr. Elizabeth Ann with some of her nieces and nephews at "the pool"*



# When a Love Runs Deep

## *Steven and Patti Ann's Story*



**Twenty-seven years ago**, while working as a police officer in Central Park, Steven McDonald was shot several times and was paralyzed from the neck down. At the time, Steven and Patti Ann were married only eight months; Patti Ann was twenty-four years old and three months pregnant. For months Steven struggled to live, each day Mass was offered at his bed side and his family and friends surrounded him in prayer. Steven and Patti Ann spent their first wedding anniversary in the hospital. Though Steven was still unable to speak, Patti Ann read his lips as they renewed their wedding vows: their commitment to one another and to God.

Cardinal O'Connor became a close friend of the McDonalds. He described them, "They are ordinary New Yorkers...But they are extraordinary too, imbued with the spirit of forgiveness, faith and fidelity to each other beyond earthly measure... their conscious effort to conquer death and hatred with the spirit of life and love ennobles them."

Their son, Conor, born six months after Steven was shot was baptized by Cardinal O'Connor in the hospital chapel, filled with family and friends. After the Mass, the media was eager to hear from Steven, who was still unable to speak. Patti Ann read a statement that left everyone in the chapel stunned. She thanked everyone for their love and support through a tremendously difficult struggle. Through tears Patti Ann read Steven's words: "I thank the people of New York for making me a part of their family and for helping me more than I ever could have helped them as much as I tried. I forgive [the boy who shot me] and I hope that he can find peace and purpose in his life. I ask that you remember the less fortunate than I am who struggle for the dignity of life, without the attention and without the helping hands that have given me this life. God bless you all."

The impact of Steven's words of forgiveness will ring out into eternity. Twenty-seven years later, the McDonalds have spoken to thousands sharing the power of forgiveness and faith in Jesus. In 2009, following in his father's footsteps, Conor chose to join the New York City Police Department with the dream of helping people and serving society.

Upon meeting Steven and Patti Ann, you are moved by the strength of their fidelity to each other. It makes you want to be a better person because you see in them what you always dreamed possible - a noble love capable of enduring the crucible of suffering. Called through circumstances beyond their control, they have met the challenges of life together, strengthened by their faith and their love and commitment to each other. Their fidelity is not an old, musty virtue; it shines sterling and beckons you higher.

Patti Ann never thought to go back on her yes. She chose not to consider the options the world held out to her. She knew what authentic love demanded, and went for it, and in turn has gained the prize of a beautiful life with no regrets. We had the privilege of interviewing the McDonalds at their home in Long Island.

**Steven, tell us about your experience of being hospitalized for such a long time.**

**Steven:** It was an intense spiritual experience. My hospital room turned into a chapel. There were Masses offered for me daily and family surrounded me praying the rosary. Jesus was with us in that hospital room. I have come to believe that in life there are no such things as coincidences only “God-incidents.” Blessed John Paul II said, “In the designs of Providence there are no mere coincidences.” I believe in Jesus because I was raised to; but I know Him because I experienced God in action in those days. God used so many people as His instruments. Always, Patti Ann was there with her loving support.

**How did you come to a point where you could forgive the boy who shot you?**

**Steven:** Cardinal O’Connor encouraged me to open my heart to the grace that was there to forgive. I know that forgiveness is something you have to work for at times. You have to live forgiveness every day. The only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart. Such an attitude would have extended the injury to my soul, hurting my wife, son, and others even more. It took time to forgive and things have evolved over the years. But I can say this: I have never regretted forgiving him.

**Patti Ann:** When this happened, we never spoke of revenge. None of our family members did either. None of us went to the trial. Our job was to be there with Steven. Through faith, I saw that God had a different plan for all of this. There was a bigger purpose for this senseless act of violence.

There are times when you get into a disagreement with family members and honestly, it is harder to let go of that. Cardinal O’Connor encouraged us to be willing to accept the grace that was there for us to forgive. We have seen people destroyed from the inside out when they hold on to anger or hurt. I learned long ago that in order for us to get along as a couple, I had to let go of anger.

**You have been invited to speak to thousands of people, what do you share with them when you speak?**

**Steven:** I speak about the precious gift of forgiveness and pray to receive it. I also share how the moment I was shot, my life changed completely. But people do not have to wait for unusual circumstances to begin a life of faith. I encourage them to grow in their relationship with God and our Blessed Mother. I tell others that their life is important and has meaning, that they are special and a rare creation of God with enormous value. God created them with a purpose and through all eternity no one will love exactly the way they do.

**Many people struggle with commitment, especially in marriage. How have you remained faithful to one another and to God?**

**Steven:** We help one another on the journey. It wasn’t always easy. Patti Ann will tell you there were times when I was a real knucklehead. There have been days that are great and others are a struggle. Patti Ann told me early on, we didn’t get married to be divorced. She had a strong upbringing and went to Catholic schools; she was taught well and she stayed on the path Jesus had chosen for her. When we were first married, Patti Ann said we had to go to church. I knew that if I was going to succeed as

a husband, a father, or a police officer that I had to come back to the Church. I had to be close to Our Lady. Looking back on the journey, I believe that this is what God intended for us.

**Patti Ann:** I never thought for a moment not to be with Steven. When I said yes, it was “for better or for worse.” We have been married 28 years and spent it supporting each other. I think it is so important for couples to encourage and help each other be the best they can be: always thinking of the other and what makes that person happy.

I think a lot of problems arise in marriage when couples don’t look for the good in the other. We are always changing and growing and you need to help each other in a marriage. Being at home or working outside the house, spouses have to support each other in what they are doing. Help each other become the best person they can be.

I think for any relationship, any friendship, but especially in marriage, communication is critical. We make a point to discuss what the other is going through. It’s so important to have the lines open and let each other know what your thoughts and feelings are. I can tell when Steven withdraws or is thinking, and I have learned when to give him space and when to talk.

We share each other’s lives deeply, listening and giving thoughts, feelings, and directions - working together and talking about whatever is going on. For example, when my father passed away 17 years ago, Steven knew my sorrow. He was very supportive and loving and caring.

**What would you say to someone who might be going through a trial or struggling to say yes to life in difficult circumstances in life?**

**Patti Ann:** It’s going to be ok. When something like this happens in your life, you don’t think it’s going to be ok. I never imaged we would be having a normal life out of an abnormal situation but we do. We walk by faith and not by sight.

**Steven:** It takes faith and it takes work. Practicing your faith makes all the difference in life. I don’t want to be separated from God, I want to listen to his voice. Over the years, I know that having accepted my suffering, I received a message of forgiveness and have been able to share it with others.

**Through the years you have touched so many lives.**

**What do you make of it all?**

**Steven:** People have come to experience God through us. Sometimes God uses us, without us even knowing it. I know that people have come back to the Church or come back to the faith after hearing us. Others have quit drinking or tried to forgive. Back in 1987 when I came home, I knew my life was going to be very different. And it has been. It’s been very helpful in my journey. Life is so fleeting and then there is eternity. Life is so short.

We are sent here to do good with our lives. Love is the way. It is good to be alive. It is very good to be alive. I love my family. I have lived such a wonderful life. I am so grateful I could be with Patti Ann and Conor all this time.



My top religious news story of 1986 is in Bellevue Hospital this very moment, Police Officer Steven McDonald has been lying in a hospital bed now for more than five months, with his bride of thirteen months constantly at his side, always encouraging him, always praying with him....

They accept what they see as the permissive will of God, when so many understandably would be shaking their fist at God, threatening God, hating God. They have accepted what God has permitted to happen with no bitterness, no rancor towards the assailant, no resentment, no cries of revenge. Now how can you do that without faith? It's as remarkable as any faith I have ever seen.

**-John Cardinal O'Connor**  
*Christmas homily, 1986*

### **Planned Giving**

Making a planned gift through a will or estate plan gives donors opportunities to provide future support for the Sisters of Life as well as opportunities for short and long term tax benefits. For more information about planned giving please contact: Sr. Dorothy Guadalupe at 845.357.3547.

### **What do we pray for each day?**

*In our local convents each day, the Sisters pray four hours together, participating in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, chanting the Liturgy of the Hours, praying the rosary, and in Eucharistic Adoration. During these sacred times, we lift up all the intentions of those working to build a culture of life, those who have supported our missions and our religious lives, families, those who have asked for prayer and those most in need. We implore the Lord for mercy, that He renew in our country and the world a deep sense of the sacred gift of every human life, the treasure of married love, and healing in families and in society.*



# Spring Break

## The New Alternative:

College students longing for something more.

### New Travel Outlook:

"Newness always makes us a bit fearful, because we feel more secure if we have everything under control, if we are the ones who build, program, and plan our lives...this is also the case when it comes to God. It is hard to abandon ourselves to him with complete trust, allowing the Holy Spirit to be the soul and guide of our lives. We fear that God may force us to strike out on new paths and leave behind our all too narrow, closed and selfish horizons in order to become open to his own...the newness God brings into our life is something that actually brings fulfillment, that gives true joy, true serenity, because God loves us and desires only our good. Let us ask ourselves today: Are we open to God's surprises? Do we have the courage to strike out along the new paths which God's newness sets before us, or do we resist, barricaded in transient structures which have lost their capacity for openness to what is new?"

-Pope Francis

*This past March fifty college students from all over the country came to Villa Maria Guadalupe Retreat Center for an alternative Spring Break. Though unsure of what Spring Break with Sisters would hold, they decided to risk the "yes," forego typical fun-in-the-sun Spring Break destinations, and brave the chilly spring weather of Stamford, Connecticut. Stepping off campus they entered into a week of life-changing encounter with Christ, returning home surprised by grace, transformed by joy, and made new by His love.*

**"I still can't find words to describe [my boss's] face, when I told him why I was headed to a convent in Connecticut."**

Molly wasn't the only Spring Breaker to meet the surprise of others when she shared her 'alternative' Spring Break plans. As other students arrived at Villa Maria Guadalupe Retreat Center, they added to the list of reactions: "quizzical looks," expressions of shock that "nuns still exist," and disbelief that any college student would "give-up" the opportunity for a beach getaway. Needless to say, fifty students from campuses nation-wide took a leap of faith, ready to embrace a Spring Break transcending the ideals held out by the culture, and open to 'God's surprises.'





The ten-day 'alternative' Spring Break experience was packed with talks, day trips to New York City, time for service, fun and prayer. While a snowy St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York City, juggling workshops, and a Coffee House hosting brilliant performances sent the Spring Breakers home with memories to last a life-time, what the students came to cherish most about their experience was en-

*Spring Break changed my life forever. -Melodie*

countering Christ in prayer and in one another. "Spring Break changed my life forever," Melodie shared. "I have never felt so much love or joy. There was an abundance of grace I can't even begin to describe. My relationship with God grew tremendously." Allison added, "God worked through the people I shared my Spring Break with to show me that I am a special individual who is loved by a wonderful God. It was like we became a family."

Villa Maria quickly became a "home-away-from-home" as Sisters and students worked, prayed, and lived each day side by side in a deep spirit of unity. Immersed in daily Mass, Eucharistic Adoration, and prayer, the students watched the burdens of the semester, insecurities, and fears give way to a freedom and joy in being oneself, a renewed capacity to rejoice in the gift of another, and a deep realization of the sacredness and beauty of their own lives. As one student reflected, "For so long, I couldn't see past my own fears...I couldn't reconcile Christ with what I saw and felt inside. I also could not imagine that Christ could love me personally. Deep down I was afraid to let the Lord in. For the first time, I let Him in completely - and as I gave Him more room, I felt so loved. My prayer became honest. The Lord alone fulfills."

A day of service called the Spring Breakers to step out as one in discipleship bringing Christ's love to a local parish community devastated by Superstorm Sandy. Lauren described, "The Sisters taught me to bring the presence of Christ wherever I go. I really felt inspired to pitch in with every fiber of my being for our neighbors in Christ, but most importantly for Christ Himself." Angie added, "I loved the fact that during the service day, the Sisters were working right there along side us. After several hours of smashing up tiles and taking heavily loaded plastic bins full of debris we were able to have holy hour. This event had such an impact on me because it reminded me of how Christ comes to us where we are in life. He wants to be in the midst of our "mess." And together we can pick up all of the broken parts, lest one of the pieces be lost. If I give Him the pieces, He will put them all back together again." - Angie

*The Sisters of Life host a variety of retreats throughout the year for men and women of all ages. For a current listing of retreats visit: [sistersoflife.org](http://sistersoflife.org)*

As the week came to a close the Spring Breakers marveled at the abundant gifts, and surprising graces of choosing the 'alternative.' Dan explained that his "views changed in a big way. I've never been one to enjoy silence, hold still or do anything not done at breakneck speed. Spring Break really hammered home the importance of slowing down, reflecting, and spending time in prayerful contemplation."

When asked what they would say to other college students considering an 'alternative' Spring Break at Villa Maria Guadalupe, without hesitation a Spring Breaker asserted, "Go! It was the best of all my college Spring Break experiences! Expect to be transformed by joy!"



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*Summer 2013 Teen retreat for girls at Villa Maria Guadalupe*



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