

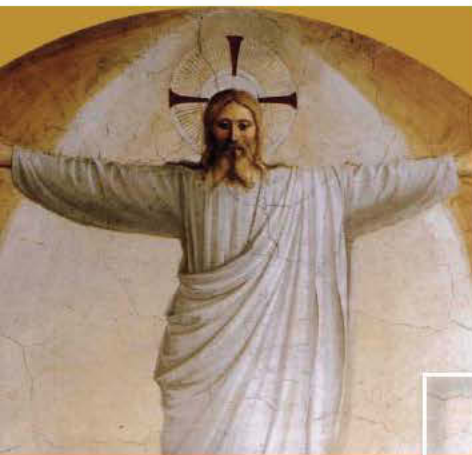


stepping out in trust

Accompanying Christ, remaining with Him requires a "stepping outside," a stepping beyond. Stepping outside of ourselves, of a tired and routine way of living the faith, of the temptation to withdraw into pre-established patterns that end up closing our horizon to the creative action of God. God stepped outside of Himself to come among us, He pitched His tent among us to bring the mercy of God that saves and gives hope.

-Pope Francis

SISTERS OF LIFE

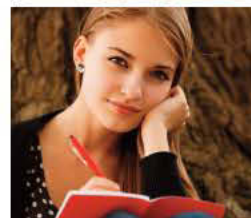


"For I know well the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

-Jeremiah 29:11

Come.

This passage from the prophet Jeremiah (29:11) is one of the most comforting in the Old Testament, and one of the most challenging. After all, we spend most of our life planning. From an early age our hopes, dreams, efforts and energy revolve around our future – where we will study, what our work will be, who we will surround ourselves with – in short, our idea of success. But the Lord's plans, His idea of success, can be different than ours. While we so easily get caught in the snares of things that don't matter – looking 'good' in the eyes of others, being richer, smarter, more talented than our neighbors, having a neat and predictable life, God cares about what really matters: our true identity, our potential to love, eternal life. And He is always calling us, gently, into His plans for our life.



Everyday, our God calls us. The Lord comes to us in the most unexpected places – He surprises us with His presence. In the midst of our daily plans, our day-to-day life, He comes and beckons us towards the greatness He has in mind for us. He may not come walking on water, as He did to the apostles, but He comes nonetheless and He says to us as He said to St. Peter: "Come." Never mind that the wind and waves are fierce. Never mind that the circumstances seem impossible. Never mind that this situation is not what I would have chosen. "Come." "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened and I will give you rest..." (Mt 11:28) Only in stepping out of the boat in trust do we find the rest Jesus promises. Close to Him, even in rough waters, we find a strength beyond our own, a peace the world cannot give, a shelter from the storm. Through trust, and only through trust, we find our Savior who has come to set us free and bring us home.

In the following pages you will meet some of our friends who have come to rely on the promises of Christ in the midst of the unpredictable storms of life. I am confident that you, like me, will find their witness an encouragement in the daily effort to trust God more completely, and to allow His plans for our lives – down to the smallest detail – be received with joy for, indeed, He knows well the plans He has for us, plans for blessing and not woe.

As the Lord holds out His Divine hand to you, know that the Sisters and I pray for you and all your loved ones.

In Jesus our Life,

Mother Agnes Mary, SV
Superior General of the Sisters of Life



"Let the risen Jesus enter your life, welcome him as a friend, with trust: He is life! If up till now you have kept him at a distance, step forward. He will receive you with open arms. If you have been indifferent, take a risk: you won't be disappointed. If following him seems difficult, don't be afraid, trust him, be confident that he is close to you, he is with you and he will give you the peace you are looking for and the strength to live as he would have you do." -Pope Francis



living on the fence

CAN WE TRUST?

"The human being does not trust God."

Benedict XVI boldly states in a homily from the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. He goes on to unmask our conflicted inner situation in such clear terms that it may make you uneasy:

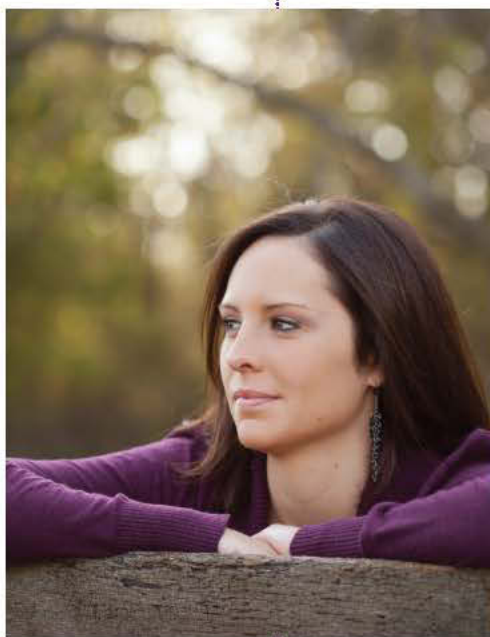
"We have a lurking suspicion that a person who does not sin must really be basically boring and that something is missing from his life: the dramatic dimension of being autonomous; that the freedom to say no, to descend into the shadows of sin and to want to do things on one's own is part of being truly human... that we should put this freedom to the test, even in opposition to God, in order to become, in reality, fully ourselves."

In a word, we think that evil is basically good, we think that we need it, at least a little, in order to experience the fullness of being... We think that a little bargaining with evil, keeping for oneself a little freedom against God, is basically a good thing, perhaps even necessary."

If we look, however, at the world that surrounds us we can see that this is not so; in other words, that evil is always poisonous, does not uplift human beings but degrades and humiliates them. It does not make them any the greater, purer or wealthier, but harms and belittles them."

We find ourselves tempted with the suspicion that God wants to take something from our life and we really don't want to miss out on anything. So we hold back—and end up missing out. Or we may have an unnamed fear of this God who is willing to personally embrace suffering and death in order to bring good out of evil. So we hold back—fearing what He may ask of us. Will I follow the voice of the tempter or will I move beyond fear and dare to believe that God is trustworthy? This choice is the turning point of every human life: "Will I entrust my life to Another or remain grasping, preferring the illusion of self-sufficiency and control?"

Too often this question goes unanswered. Times of great suffering or personal crisis have a way of helping us to see that only in an encounter with God, the living God, who has revealed His face in Jesus Christ, do we find the ability to respond and to trust. Jesus is near and is eager to be invited to walk with us and share our burden.



Jesus shows us the only path to the true freedom and lasting joy we seek—the way of love. We find our true self, our best self, by giving ourselves away, by making a gift of our self to another. As wonderful and fulfilling as human love is, it still leaves us wanting. Even after I have experienced the liberating power of love and have been awakened to the wonder of living in a world in which I am prized and sought after; and have achieved the momentous task of redirecting my heart outward towards another, living in a way that I truly desire the good of another above my own—even then, I experience the limitations and fragility of human love. No matter how beautiful, this love cannot be the ultimate foundation of my hope because this love is subject to death.

Benedict XVI points the way to the love we long for, the great hope that does not disappoint. "Man's great, true hope

which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God—God who has loved us and who continues to love us 'to the end,' until all 'is accomplished'... The human being needs unconditional love. He needs the certainty which makes him say: 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:38-39). If this absolute love exists, with its absolute certainty, then—only then—is man "redeemed", whatever should happen to him in his particular circumstances. This is what it means to say: Jesus Christ has 'redeemed' us."

Do we hold back, never really getting off the fence, or do we let go and step beyond into a whole new world?



walking away

FROM OLD HABITS THAT NEVER FULFILL

The Sisters sat down with Ashley to hear her share the story of God's love and mercy in her life and her pursuit of purity. The conversation began with the recognition that as women we have a deep desire for authentic love, it is imprinted on our hearts and in our being. As we learn to trust in God's promises, we begin to experience the love that fills us completely.

Were you raised in the faith?

I was raised in a culturally Catholic home and went to Catholic elementary and high schools but my family wasn't really practicing the faith. My faith came alive when I went on a retreat toward the end of high school. I began to know God and I heard the Scripture verse, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). This touched me deeply and stayed with me for years. One of my youth leaders encouraged me to guard my purity. I knew what I was supposed to do, but all of my friends were dating and I didn't trust God would give me the relationship that would make happy. My parents had a difficult marriage and my father was away from our family for part of my life, so I always had this fear of being abandoned by men. It was a real insecurity. During college, I dated different people and deep down, I didn't believe I deserved someone who would treat me really well.

When I was in my 20s, I learned the story of my birth and at that point I knew that God's hand was always on me. My mother became pregnant with me when she was in her early 40s. My parent's marriage was really rocky at the time. The doctors told her that there was a good chance I was going to have Down syndrome or be handicapped and they recommended that she have an abortion. She gave in to their pressure and fear and scheduled an appointment. When she was walking into the abortion clinic, a woman stopped her, spoke to her, and encouraged her not to have an abortion. Thanks to that woman, that angel, I am here. God's hand has always been on me.

What were you looking for in life?

I was a good student. I wanted to do well, get a good job, and have a happy life. I see now that I was always searching for love. After I graduated from college, I fell in love with a man, and I really wanted him to be the one. We were attracted to each other and had a great time together. I hoped that we would get married one day. So it seemed logical at the time for us to move in together. We had what looked like the perfect life. We lived in a house by the beach and had plenty of money. For a while it was great, but soon I started to notice some serious faults in him. But I overlooked them and held on to the hope that we would get married. I kept waiting for him to propose to me. We would talk about it from time to time, and he would always say he wasn't ready yet.

So I waited on what was a false hope. After a few years, I started to think - this is not working. I realized that I was empty. I began to pray, "Lord, I really care for this man, but he doesn't know you. He is so lost and I am lost." I knew I needed to end the relationship. I cried out to God for help, "I need you. I can't do this on my own." I got down on my knees and begged God for strength because it was going to hurt to walk out. I finally surrendered and said, "Let it be." And I moved out.

Did you feel like you had a new start once you ended the relationship?

I started to pray more often and go to Mass. But I was angry and filled with resentment because I wasted so much time. I had nothing to show for

*Ashley's name has been changed for anonymity.

those years. I fell into another bad relationship because I was so lonely. I realized these relationships did not fill me as much as God does. I prayed, "God help me! I don't want to continue this pattern."

I knew I had to surrender. I felt like I had to just stop and listen to God. Once I opened myself to Him even a little, I began to see how much He loves me. I realized I was broken and that I had a deep need for love. I had nothing left, I had to trust that God was going to be there for me. He gave me the strength to say, "I am getting off this ride, the roller coaster of trying to do things my way, because it is making me sick."

I felt like I had the weight of the world against me, the weight of sin, but God was with me even when I went astray. I had this mentality, this attitude of wanting to do things my way, even when I knew it was wrong. I was looking to secure happiness for myself. This attitude still sneaks up on me, but I am learning to be obedient to God's plan.

Obedience is not a popular word, how do you see it as something important in your life?

I see how much time I wasted just doing things my way. I think if I had only trusted in God, that He had a plan for my life. Instead I was grasping for happiness, for love, and it left me so empty. I wanted to limit God to going to Mass on Sunday. I didn't want to let Him into all aspects of my life. Now, I want to have a real mature relationship with God and an open heart to hear His voice.

As I was growing in my faith, I found a young adult group of faithful Catholics who were striving to live purity. We studied Pope John Paul II's teachings on the Theology of the Body and I learned about God's beautiful plan for marriage rooted in His love. The world is full of lies on this topic. I was blinded. I see now that for a marriage or any relationship to work, God has to be at the center. I went on a retreat and made a commitment to live a life of purity and to wait for God to provide a spouse. I surrendered everything to the love of Christ. He can not be outdone in generosity. He gives Himself completely, and supplies abundantly.

How has your faith grown?

I see things so differently now. My faith is not about following a set of rules - it is about being in a relationship with God who loves me. It is realizing my dignity as a beloved daughter of God. I wake up each day knowing that God has a purpose for my life and a plan filled with His eternal love. I know now that I am beautiful in His eyes and that He wants the best for me.

All my life I have been searching. For what? For whom? For this love. I finally realized at the end of my search that His love was always there. I felt as though God said to me, "Stop searching, the love, the mercy you desire it is here. Just receive. It's free!" He is teaching me to relax and receive: "You don't have to work so hard to secure this love, because I know the plans I have for you." There is nothing like a relationship with God. If someone leads me away from God, it is not real love.

How do you stay faithful to what you now know to be God's plan?

On my knees, begging God to help me be faithful. It's not always easy, I still have temptations. I need God because, "The devil is prowling like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour" (1Pt 5:8). I need a lot of support to stay strong. I feel like God is carrying me along and cheering me on saying, "You can do it, just stay with me!"

It's a journey to the cross at times and I entrust myself to Our Blessed Mother to lead me to Jesus. I count on her to intercede for me because I don't want to lose everything I worked so hard for or betray the Love that fills me completely. There is a wound in my heart that God is healing. This love I was longing for can only be found in Christ. He always brings his light and love right into our circumstances.

"He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God" (Ps 40:2-3) I searched the world for love and I was left empty but God never left me. Now, I find that I am filled with His love, a love that doesn't compare to anything that this world has to offer. I trust in God, that He will provide for me.

Cohabitation: Think about it...

It is a lot easier to get into a cohabiting relationship than to get out of one. Couples often report that moving in together "just happened" there was no discussion, decision or commitment made. But the choice to move out is much more complicated, there are financial, social and psychological consequences. Think about it, in addition to splitting the rent, typically furniture and other items have been purchased together and couples share the same friends, not to mention all of the time and energy that has been invested in the relationship.

Research has shown that women and men have different unvoiced expectations of cohabitation. Women tend to believe it is a step toward marriage whereas men view it more casually or see it as a way to "test" the relationship.

Fascinating Facts:

- Fewer than half of cohabiting relationships end in marriage.
- On average, marriage preceded by cohabitation is 46% more likely to end in divorce.
- The risk is greatest for "serial" cohabitators who have had multiple relationships.
- Cohabitation puts children at risk. 40% of cohabiting households include children. After five years, one-half of these couples will have broken up, compared to 15% of married parents.

Taken from: foryourmarriage.org
nationalmarriageproject.org





two tremendous blessings in our lives

Benedict & Grace

A certain anticipation marks Sunday mornings on the East Side of Manhattan for the Sisters living at Visitation Convent. Each week, after Mass, we encounter two children, radiant with a purity close to heaven, and their delightful parents. It all started a several years ago, when a lovely couple, Kathleen and Jack Markey, began to purchase candles for the children to light before the statue of the Blessed Mother. The Polvani family, Lorenzo and Chiara, Benedict (9 years old) and Grace (6 years old) welcomed the Sisters to join the group and the event has developed into a beloved tradition. We all kneel before Our Lady as Benedict and Grace lead us in prayer.

Benedict often regales us with highlights from his religion class. Transported in the glee of his latest lesson, he frequently throws back his head with his eyes shut tight in silent laughter, and hits his knee. He regularly punctuates his enthusiasm with a hand on your shoulder, as you are crouched to meet his gaze, "Omnipotent means that God can do things that men cannot do – He can do anything! Can you believe it?" Often, the certainty of his faith increases our own faith. On another occasion, Benedict shared that he learned about the tender mercy of God;

The mercy of God became tangible as he described the way God loves each of us. Little Grace recently decided that she is planning a journey to serve the poor...when she is 25 years old. She plans to get a bus and ask many people to join her in helping the sick, disabled, and dying. Each Sister has received a personal invitation to be a part of the journey. Grace tells how she received the inspiration one day after receiving Holy Communion and has not been able to get the idea out of her head since. "Jesus gave me the ideal!" she says.

Their joy for life is not inhibited by the fact that Benedict and Grace have the same undiagnosed genetic syndrome that has meant multiple, major surgeries for each of them. What, at first sight, could appear to be a burden of limitation, is in fact the very means given by God which communicate their exceptionality. The quality of their love is so spontaneous and pure, unfiltered.

Even in the face of a daunting prognosis, pressure from the medical community and a lack of support, Lorenzo and Chiara chose to surround their children with love and prayer. Holding on to a filial trust, they share their journey of faith.

How were you able to entrust yourselves to God initially after receiving the adverse prenatal diagnosis?

Chiara: This is the gift God gave me - I know that I am loved. So if the Father is giving this to me, that means it is His plan, and He knows best. I had to work on being humble by recognizing that I really didn't know what was best for me, and that I would not necessarily understand His reasons. In trying to pray the rosary, I couldn't go past, 'Thy will be done.' I remember asking Lorenzo, "How are we going to take care of this baby?" His response was so consoling, "We are going to do our best. Who else would the Lord give this child to? God knew we would take care of him."

There were very difficult days, especially just after Ben was born, and everyday I had to say, "yes." The peace that came and comes with this yes is hard to explain. It doesn't mean there is no pain. The suffering is there and it is deep. But in saying yes, I know God is going to give me the means. I have learned never to pray that this be taken away from me. This is His will, and that is why Jesus came, to do His Father's will. He loved us, and I want to love Him back. I don't think we can do it by ourselves, but we can with His grace.

Lorenzo: The image for me at the time was the sacrifice of Abraham, with his son Isaac. The bottom line of that scripture passage is that the Lord will provide. I think of that as my motto: *Dominus Provide*. At some point you realize, there are things that are beyond you. Many parents are paranoid about getting their kids into fancy preschools, etc. I wonder whether my children are going to be alive. It helps me see things in the right perspective. Then, there is the side of accepting God's challenge. You didn't know you could do that, but now you know you can. You are able to be content at having accomplished such a difficult thing, with God's grace.



As Benedict and Grace got older, how did you see the Lord's plan revealed in the beauty of their lives and personalities?

Lorenzo: All of the doctors are amazed. Usually children with their condition have profound delays.

Chiara: Even now, pediatricians say, "If you had told me, no, even if you were to tell me now, I will never believe how well these children are doing!"

They have very different personalities: Ben is more thoughtful and precise, and Grace is very generous and affectionate. They complement each other beautifully. The fact that they have the same syndrome helps them because they understand each other perfectly, often times more than Lorenzo and I will ever be able to. We have to give the children a

lot of credit, because they have really worked hard, in and out of the house for therapies and so many surgeries; it is hard for them, but they just want to live. And as they grow up, they ask more and more questions. Grace has a list of things that she is going to ask Jesus. She says, "When I go to heaven, I am going to ask Jesus why my hands are like this, or why am I different from other children?" He will know, I don't, but He will tell me.

What has been the typical response of those around you?

Chiara: After Grace was born and I would take her to the doctor with Ben in tow, I felt the stares of people. But as time goes by, I don't pay attention to them anymore. Sometimes on the playground, when other children make fun of the way they look, Ben and Grace turn it around, "Yes, I have this... do you know why?" And the children gather and listen to their explanation.

I also see they have a way of touching people, and they are so outgoing. When you see the children with the Sisters every Sunday, you see how they are like magnets, drawing goodness out of people. God is glorified in front of my eyes by the love they bring out of people. It makes it all worth it. They make others love God even more. That's what they do for me. They give you a taste of what it will be like with God.

What would you say is the foundation of your ability to accept the Lord's Will?

Chiara: This journey has given me a much deeper encounter with the Lord. Not that I wasn't close to God before, but after this, it became a different kind of presence. He was now so close and He was asking so much. I can say I felt His love much more, along the lines of "to those who have, more will be given."

Lorenzo: God knows everything and sees everything. In fact, He loves us! What we can imagine is so much narrower than what God can imagine. You have to accept the possibility that your children may not be what you planned. But what the Lord wants, the Lord picks. And we are happy He does! We just need to attune ourselves to that.

Trust seems to build on a knowledge of God's love. What are the steps, would you say, to develop greater trust?

Chiara: Prayer is the first thing. Even if you have never prayed before, try to do that. Staying with Him is the only way to get to know Him. He will help you understand and give you the gift of love. Once you know you are loved, you can trust. St. Therese said that when God stretches out His hand, it is not to ask from you but to give something to you, and that is so true. We just need to trust Him.

Lorenzo: It is like getting married - at a certain point you have to jump. Trust builds on itself. As the Lord asks you, He delivers. He doesn't go back. It is not just in theory, but in practice- He delivers. Like St. Paul said, "Even if you are not faithful, He will remain faithful because He cannot deny himself." You see as things come. Sometimes it happens in a way you do not expect. He gives you the sense you are on the right path, with confirmations along the way.

What would you say to encourage another facing a similar challenge?

Chiara: I would say, choose to love. The idea of love is very distorted these days. I was taught that love is not infatuation, and indeed, it is not! Love is sacrifice, and it is an act of will. Look at Jesus on the cross! So no matter what, that is your call, self-sacrifice. That is what you are in for. It costs a lot and it is always worth it, no matter what.

What has been your greatest joy in the journey thus far?

Chiara: The greatest joy is the real joy and serenity that you feel when you say "yes". It is a gift that He gives when we are able to say to the Lord, "Here we are, your worthless servants,



and here is Your gift back. You have asked this of me, and I am doing my best with what You have given me. It is in Your hands – You work it out!"

Lorenzo: The greatest freedom this gives us is freedom from worry. If you trust the Lord, suddenly the burden of having to be successful, smart, rich, having to do this and that, is lifted. It is very liberating to let God be in charge.

How have the children brought you joy? Or changed the way you look at life?

Lorenzo: Benedict and Grace are for sure a delight to be with, but I think there is nothing special about them. Most parents would say that about their children. Every human being reflects the beauty of the Creator. So this is not about Ben and Grace in particular, but what they have taught us. They taught us to be able to see God's face in every person, which is the reason why every human being, no matter how sick, deformed, young, old, rich or poor is infinitely worth love.

Questions we asked Benedict and Grace:

Q: When you have a big surgery, how do you turn to God in prayer?

Benedict: I speak to God and ask Him for help. And I usually pray to my guardian angel and ask him to turn to God, to ask Him to help me.

Grace: When I have surgery, I stay with Jesus on the Cross. I pray in my heart for Mama, Dad and Ben.

Q: What would you say if you met someone and they said, "Why do you believe in God, and how do you know Him?"

Benedict: Come to think of it, nobody ever asked me that. But if somebody would ask me that, I would answer that God is my Father.

Q: If someone said, "I have a hard time trusting God." What advice could you give?

Benedict: I just believe what He tells me.

Q: What is a sacrifice for you?

Benedict: A sacrifice is a gift made out of love for God.

Q: What happens when you make a sacrifice?

Benedict: The angels and saints jump up and down in heaven.

Q: What would you say is the most beautiful thing in the world?

Grace: Mama.

On February 11, Cardinal Dolan dedicated our Motherhouse chapel and consecrated the altar. It was a magnificent Mass at which many of the volunteers and benefactors of the chapel joined the Sisters in prayers of gratitude and joy for such a beautiful place of prayer now totally consecrated to God for His praise and glory.



DEDICATION OF OUR NEW MOTHERHOUSE CHAPEL

Chapel of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist



The fact that I am an artist makes me sensitive to the reality that there is much more there than what the eye can see...a deeper reality. -Henry Artis

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS TO



*Henry Artis is a member of
Communion and Liberation -
a Movement in the Catholic Church.
With a passion for beauty, he
comes to work each day at the Metro-
politan Museum of Art in NYC, ready
to breath in it's vast riches and ex-
plore more deeply the questions of the
human heart. Henry will be the first
to admit, He loves to ask questions!
And he encourages others to ask in
pursuit of truth. For it is in probing
the depths, that we can find ourselves
on a journey and encounter the One
who reveals the very meaning of each
of our lives.*



THE QUESTION: WHO AM I?

Henry, you have said questions were vital in your journey to meeting Christ, where did it begin?

Absolutely! Yes, questions were vital in my journey to meeting Christ. I was born in South America and I came to the U.S. with my mom and siblings in 1968 when I was eight years old. It was hard for us because we didn't know the language. My mom is a wonderful person but she's not religious, so I didn't grow up with a faith. But being an artist made me realize that everything I saw wasn't enough; but God wasn't really a figure I thought about and if I did at all, it would be in a kind of nebulous way.

When I was 15 I started studying martial arts because I lived in a bad neighborhood in Queens. I used to get into fights every day and since I was tired of getting beat up, I started studying karate! My Sensei was a great fighter and since he was a Zen Buddhist, I started studying Buddhism because I wanted to be a better fighter. I wasn't interested in enlightenment, just in survival!

What did you think of Buddhism?

I loved it especially since its goal was to eliminate suffering! One of the things that impressed me most about Buddha is his "human genius", a genius reflected in the "Four Noble Truths". Those "truths" – pay attention to that word – demonstrate a profound awareness of the importance of desire. But, I know from experience that Buddha's solution to the "problem" of suffering - eliminating desire - does not ultimately satisfy the human heart because it is, in the end, impossible to eliminate desire.

That's why, to this day, I am moved whenever I see a crucifix. I vividly remember the day when I understood that that man dying on the cross was God. I said to myself, "This God experientially knows what I go through." In fact, yesterday, when I was praying the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary, I was once again moved by the fact that Jesus knows all about loneliness, rejection, and suffering from the inside and not just as an outsider.

What changed things for you?

Years went by and one day when I was meditating I had a thought, "Isn't the desire to have no desire a desire?" I said, wait a minute, this doesn't make sense. So I went to my Sensei with my question and he told me to forget about it - it's just an illusion. But I could not accept this. I knew there was something wrong. It was like a chink in the armor.

Where did that question lead you?

It opened me up because it reawakened my desire for certainty and truth. Soon afterward, my friend James asked me to go see a movie with him, "Brother Sun, Sister Moon." It's a really terrible movie but St. Francis fascinated me, there was something about him that really fascinated me.

The next day, I was a messenger at the time, I was near St. Francis of Assisi Church on 34th St. in Manhattan and there was a flyer on top of a garbage can that said "Come to St. Francis of Assisi Church and learn about the Catholic Faith." I didn't really care about the Catholic Faith, but I wanted to learn about St. Francis. So I went and met a great old Franciscan priest, Fr. Gerard McDonald because he gave the classes the flyer spoke of.

After the year was over, Fr. McDonald asked, "Are any of you interested in being baptized?" And I said, "No." Here is where Christ is sly because Fr. McDonald said, "Ok, I see you have questions, let's meet to talk about your questions." So we met together once a week for two more years, which is amazing now that I think about it.

I was bombarding Fr. Mc McDonald with questions, so much so that he said to me, "I am going to introduce you to Saint Thomas Aquinas. You're going to like him, he has a lot of questions and answers!" Father gave me a copy of the Summa. But first he had to teach me how to read it, because it's not simple. When I started reading it I thought - this is great! It backfired on

Father though, because it brought up more questions. I can't tell you I totally understood what I was reading, but it was amazing. What I loved about Thomas Aquinas is that he was not afraid of questions! And this really inspired me.

When did you become Catholic?

After I finished studying with Fr. McDonald, I said, "Ok I'm ready to be baptized." So Father told me to go home and ask my mother if I had ever been baptized. My mother said yes; they thought I was going to die because I was born premature, so they baptized me right away and confirmed me two days later! So, even though I was upset that I wasn't going to experience the "ontological change" I had read about, I realized that Baptismal grace really works. In fact, I began to understand certain perplexing aspects of my life; like why did I know that atheism was wrong? Since I had been baptized, Fr. McDonald offered Mass and I received Holy Communion and that was it. From that day on, I have studied something about the faith almost every day of my life, even today.

It sounds like you were learning a lot about Christ, when did you experience Him as a Person?

When my marriage fell apart! I realized I knew a lot about Christ, but through that experience I really met Him.

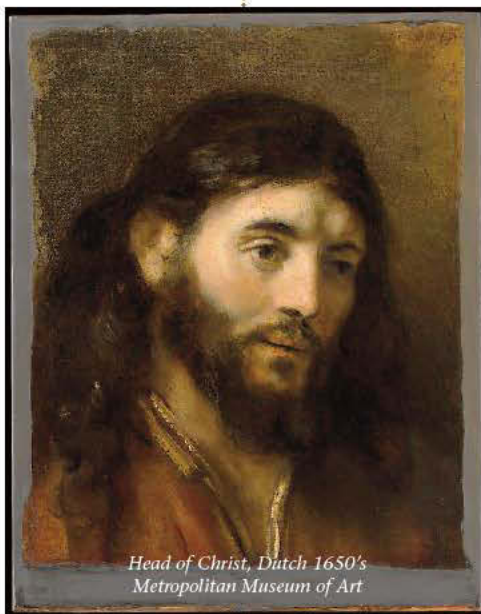
Perhaps some background will help. I met my girlfriend when I was nineteen and we moved in together quickly. As my faith deepened, I realized that it was important that we get married. People say there's really no difference between living together and being married, but I know there is a big difference. When we were just living together, I always had one foot out the door because I knew that I could leave whenever I wanted, and she did too. So there was an unknown, unrecognized, consequence of living together - we hid our "true selves" from each other because we were afraid the other person would leave. And this mindset continued to be the background music of the marriage, but we did not know it. In fact, I can tell you the moment when I realized it. I was in Barnes and Noble on my wife's birthday because I wanted to surprise her with a novel, but I really didn't know what to buy her. I suddenly realized that I did not know what her real interests were. When I got home I told her what happened because I wanted to discuss "the problem." But she just looked at me and left the room. At that moment I realized that our marriage was in trouble.

A lot transpired after that moment in Barnes and Noble and my marriage eventually fell apart. So my desire to be a good follower of Christ by being a good husband crumbled. And I was really, really angry at Christ and felt completely let down. I said, "I am doing all this, what are You doing? Why aren't you helping me save my marriage? You really didn't keep Your end of the bargain, did You!" I didn't know what to do. I was in a lot of pain and when you're in a place of pain, it's interesting what happens to you because my questions became cries, authentically human cries: "What's going on? Why is this happening? Who am I and who are you God?"

Although I was tempted to abandon Christ, I couldn't do it. So I retraced my steps trying to understand what went wrong. You see, at the time, I considered myself a super-Catholic because I

went to Mass daily, I prayed three rosaries a day, etc. and these things gave me the illusion that I was following Christ, but I was following a Christ that I created for my convenience.

I came across a book I had purchased years before but had not read by the servant of God, Fr. Luigi Giussani. When I read it struck me so much that I said: "Wow, if this true, I want it!" It was a spontaneous desire that dragged all of me with it. In fact, I see that moment as one of the greatest graces of my life because it was precisely at that moment - the moment of my greatest pain, my greatest confusion, my greatest failure - that Christ flooded my life with His magnetizing presence.



*Head of Christ, Dutch 1650's
Metropolitan Museum of Art*

How was your experience of Christ transformed?

My ideas about Him changed and how I experienced Him changed. He entered my life and said, "I know you can't fully choose me right now, but I'm showing you that I'm choosing you. I'm going to help you make a step forward." Not through a discourse, but through an event; an encounter with Him in and through a specific part of His Church.

Christ's action changed the trajectory of my life completely, and, from that point on I started to follow Him in and through the way He chose to "incarnate Himself" to me; that is, through the charism called Communion and Liberation (CL). It was in CL that I began to understand who He is as a Person, a Person present in reality that longs to encounter me. I now experience Jesus as a present Presence that truly embraces and saves all of my humanity. I no longer experience Him just with my intellect, although I believe our intel-

lect is very important because we are made to know the Truth - but the Truth is Christ Himself and He is more than formulations about Him, much more.

I have experienced the certainty that Someone is always looking out for me, more than I'm looking out for myself, is difficult to believe at times. But I want that certainty; I want to live that way always. That's what I ask, I ask Him to teach me to trust the way He trusts, even if it's sometimes a halfhearted prayer.

What role do questions play in coming to know Christ?

They are crucial! If I declare that I am in love with a woman and I don't want to learn everything about her, that is, if I don't ask questions so I can get to know who she really is, then am I really in love with her? Well, the trajectory of my relationship with Christ followed this truly human path. For example, I first started with questions born from the claims His followers made - Is He really God incarnate? Did He really rise from the dead? Did He really establish a Church and where is it today? I then tried to understand what He means to me. Today, my questions are born from my amazement at His love and mercy! For example, "Who are You, O Christ, that You are deeply, passionately, and unconditionally in love with Me? Who are You that You show me that I am preferred through the love shown to me by my friends? I remember Fr. Giussani saying something really beautiful at a retreat: "If you doubt that Christ loves you, go to Mass because there you will see that He comes for you!" Isn't that amazing?!

And so, it is precisely through these questions, questions born from attentiveness to what He is doing in my life now, that Christ actually takes a hold of me again!

Evangelization trips in the last several months have taken the Sisters across the country and the world. Speaking on University campuses, at Women's Conferences, Young Adult Events and on retreats they have had the joy of bringing God's message of life and love to thousands.

The photos below give a snapshot of the major events from our recent trip to Australia: the iWitness Young Adult Conference (a fruit of WYD in Sydney), Theology on Tap, and a Women's Retreat. The Church is alive and young!



OUR LADY OF CZESTOCHOWA & ME

wounds that heal

Our Lady of Czestochowa has become a patroness for those suffering after abortion. So often in the culture, women are not validated in the sorrow, loss, and pain they carry in the aftermath of this wounding event. Rather, there are endless attempts to "cover over" their experience, as if it never happened. "Let it go, move on, it wasn't anything, you had to do it." But the scars remain and surface, crying out for recognition and the tender touch of solidarity and hope.

After two abortions over 30 years ago, Rosemary decided to attend a Mercy Weekend Retreat at Villa Maria Guadalupe, seeking a spiritual healing. She recounts hearing about Our Lady of Czestochowa for the first time: "I cried and cried. Her wounds kept coming back, just like mine. I've always been eternally grateful to Blessed Mother. She knows the loss of a child. She knows the pain in my heart, and the regrets I have experienced from day one."

Many feel overwhelmed by the gravity of what has been done, and fearful of the judgment of God and others. One of the greatest tools used by the evil one to paralyze and discourage those seeking healing are lies of isolation, "You are alone. You are unlovable. Keep this hidden."

Rosemary names it, "It was at the point of my abortion that distrust entered my life. I could not trust anyone; I could not trust myself, my boyfriend or my own decisions. My self esteem was low. I would go into rages. I went through cycles of depression. At the time, my niece said, 'You lost your spark'. And that's what abortion does to you."

Finally, after marital challenges, she found her way back home to the Catholic Church and returned to the Sacraments. Rosemary was given the grace to unite her sufferings to those of Jesus, through the intercession of Our Lady.

According to tradition, the **icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa**, said to have been painted by Saint Luke, was discovered by Saint Helena in the Holy Land and given to her son, Emperor Constantine. After centuries, the image, also called "the Black Madonna," was finally enshrined in Poland. The face of Our Lady bears three scars. One was the result of an arrow, dating back to an invasion in the 14th century, while the other two were inflicted by slashes of a sword, intentionally desecrating the icon. When artists attempted to repair and cover over them, they inexplicably reappeared.

"One night, while praying the rosary, I drifted off to sleep. I saw a bloody wound. It was so clear; I was not intimidated, but wanted to study it in detail. I asked the Lord, "What are you showing me? Where is this wound?" I intuitively knew it was the wound in His side. It was still fresh. There was so much love there, and I knew it was Jesus, in all His fullness, expressing His love in the most precious and intimate way. I knew instantly that He felt my pain and He wanted me to experience His infinite mercy. I united all of my wounds to His Wound."

It is no wonder that Our Lady's scars refuse to remain hidden. When wounds are brought into the light, the power of darkness is dispelled. We come to see, as if for the first time, our truest and deepest identity. Blessed John Paul II, who entrusted himself and the Church to the maternal protection of Our Lady of Czestochowa, proclaimed, "We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of His Son."

"Although I know I did something really bad, I also know I am forgiven. And I am never alone. I always feel that I am accompanied, and my Beloved walks beside me on one side and Our Lady on the other. I don't feel the shame. I know that He is totally in love with me, and I didn't know love before. Only Jesus went to the cross for me. I've had these relationships and they all betrayed me. Jesus won't. It has been a wonderful journey."

As a social worker, I recognize the Lord is using me in beautiful ways to help other women who are suffering. Whenever they thank me, depending on the situation, I often smile and say something like, "You're welcome, but I didn't do this on my own." I say to myself, "Mary take me by the hand to Jesus." And it has been a wonderful journey.



Sisters of Life
Annunciation
38 Montebello Road
Suffern, NY 10901

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Written and designed by the Sisters of Life.

"Sister, I noticed just a few things with the car. The gas gauge says "empty", but it's full. Sometimes the entire dashboard lights up like a Christmas tree. Don't be alarmed. It's been doing that for two years... Oh! DO NOT, I repeat, DO NOT open the hood unless absolutely necessary...um, just don't. Sr. Mary Gabriel tied the front passenger door shut with rosary wire – watch that, it'll open on ya when you least expect it. One last thing, if the radio suddenly turns on, good luck. It's on some disco station and I couldn't get the volume down...little embarrassing at the light. Hee, other than that, it's in pretty good shape. So where ya headed?"



We're on a car hunt. Can you help?

I'm sure you've been there. The car is dying and the bike just won't cut it with a family. With seventy-five Sisters and missions that take us all over New York one day, and on an evangelization trip the next...we need reliable cars! And although we take good care of them with routine check-ups and a lot of t.l.c. (we affectionately name each after someone we love – Joseph, Sheen, B16, Little Flower...), they eventually do die (it is part of life). And that's been happening...unfortunately, quite a bit lately. If you, or someone you know, would be interested in donating a used car in good condition to the Sisters of Life we would be so very grateful. AND, we'll even let you name it! Thanks in advance for helping us and for spreading the word!

SV Directory

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(Motherhouse: Generalate and Novitiate)
38 Montebello Road
Suffern, NY 10901
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Main Fax: 845/357-5040

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Bronx, NY 10465
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Co-workers of Life call: 347/843-8900

Villa Maria Guadalupe

(Retreat House)
159 Sky Meadow Drive
Stamford, CT 06903
203/329-1492 Fax: 203/329-1495

Sacred Heart of Jesus Convent

(Holy Respite)
450 West 51st Street
New York, NY 10019
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New York Visitation Mission

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257 East 71st Street
New York, NY 10021
Pregnancy help call:
212/737-0221 toll free: 877/777-1277

Toronto Visitation Mission

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St. Catherine of Siena
1099 Danforth Avenue
Toronto, ON M4J 1M5 Canada
Pregnancy help call:
416/463-2722
Fax: (416) 463-1687

St. Joseph's Convent

172 Leslie Street
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