

A PUBLICATION OF THE SISTERS OF LIFE SPRING ISSUE

IMPRINT

Ocean

[of His mercy]



Aerielle and her daughter, Onyx,
born Dec. 13, 2013



God's mercy can make even the driest land become a garden, can restore life to dry bones (cf. Ez 37:1-14). Let us be renewed by God's mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth.

-Pope Francis

Mercy always brings hope

We live in a society that often times is led by a misguided compassion — in a culture seeking to swiftly eliminate suffering at any cost, and calling it “mercy.” Seeing suffering as a personal failure and the greatest evil has led to choices of despair with destructive results. All Christians follow a Savior who suffered to bring us life, and life in abundance. Having great trust in the Lord of mercy and life, the Sisters seek to help carry the crosses of others and to walk in solidarity with them — through the suffering and pain to an experience of new life and hope.

Mercy in Mission

We have the great privilege of watching God's powerful gift of mercy unfold in the lives of those that come to us. We rejoice with those weekend retreatants at Villa Maria Guadalupe who discover the power of God's mercy in an encounter with His healing love. We marvel as mercy ushers

women out of the despair and hopelessness experienced in crisis pregnancies and into acts of faith — in herself and in the God who promises His love and care both for her and her unborn child. We stand in awe as we witness His infinite love descend into the pain of abortion, and bring to all those who carry this wound to Him forgiveness, healing, and new life.

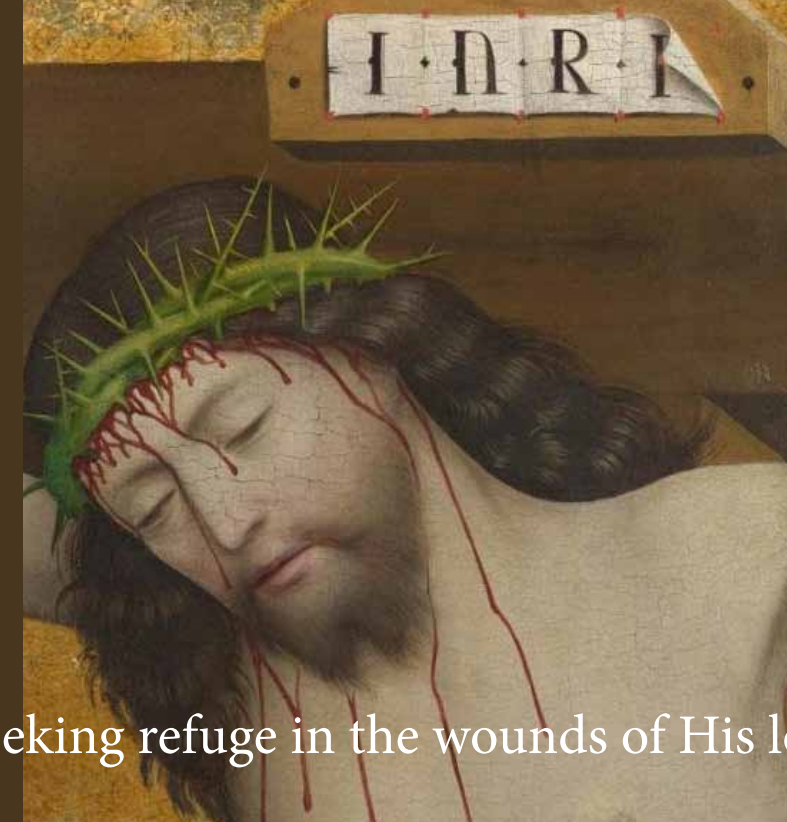
I hope you enjoy this issue of Imprint. May you, too, experience the ocean of God's tender mercy within your own life. And may it inspire you to extend that same mercy to your family and to all those you meet.

In the Merciful Heart of Jesus,

M. Agnes
Mother Agnes Mary, SV

Superior General of the Sisters of Life

Seeking refuge in the wounds of His love.



Walking into a church one day I saw a large crucifix, and I thought, “This is a man who can understand me and my suffering — a God who won't mock my wounds.”
-Anonymous

Mercy Himself

The God Who is with us

Our Search / The Answer

WE LONG. In the heart of every man is the longing to be whole, complete, and undivided. And yet, one doesn't have to take too many steps down the path of life before this desire is hindered and frustrated. The experience of sin empties us. The event of death brings loss and pain. And the heart twists, turns, and agonizes as it encounters suffering and the endless shades and colors that it can paint on the canvas of human life.

Equal to the pain, has been man's search for a remedy, and through the centuries man has learned it is not to be found within himself. No matter how great the determination, how brilliant the thought, how rich the indulgence in pleasure or distraction, or how much we allow our hearts to become numb to the wounds we carry through denial and pride — the pain, loss, and darkness cannot be overcome. This is because the remedy can only be found by turning our hearts and minds back to the One who made us.

He took on our human experience.

When Adam and Eve fell from grace in the Garden of Eden, God the Father went to work devising a new way for man to rise and claim His dreams of love, fulfillment, and eternal happiness. God, a Father, so in love with His creation, when the time was right, sent His own beloved Son to answer man's cry for restoration. Incarnating the love of His Father's Heart, Jesus Christ came down from Heaven. By ascending to the arms of the Cross on Calvary, He descended into the depths of all the suffering, death, and sin of humankind. Man's debt was paid. A new justice was established. Jesus assumed the whole of the human experience, and therefore redeemed it. And the name of this love? Mercy.

“The cross is like a touch of eternal love upon the most painful wounds of man's earthly existence.” -Saint John Paul II

the prodigal son in all of us

Like the prodigal son,
do we turn to the Father
in humble repentance
when we fail and fall and
allow His merciful gaze
to heal and change us?

What is True Mercy?

◆ Mercy is not a blanket of acceptance or false reassurance that fails to challenge us. It calls us to live faithful to the life and love God has created us for.

◆ Mercy enables us to confront our weaknesses, turn away from sin, and lean on Jesus, the One who is capable of bringing us back to life, wholeness, and peace.

◆ Mercy is that generous, tender love willing to take on another's pain and suffering. It is able to reach out in a way that does not humiliate but rather "restores to value."

◆ Mercy draws good from evil. It is the love that does not allow itself to be conquered by evil, pain and suffering, but overcomes evil with good. It is the love that is more powerful than sin and death.

We see the event of mercy beautifully revealed in the gospel parable of the prodigal son. We all know the story, because we know it's our story. And yet how do we, like the prodigal son, find our way home to our Father's house – restored, redeemed, and strengthened to live in the truth of who we are? The prodigal son reveals to us humble repentance as the key to unlocking the transforming power of mercy in our lives. Then we turn to the Father, who invites us into the embrace of true mercy and the gift of conversion it gives. True mercy restores us to the truth of ourselves. It draws us to see once more our deepest identity as beloved sons and daughters of God the Father.

Made for more

Within the parable of the prodigal son we find a distinct turning point. Clothed in rags, envying the feed of pigs, the prodigal son paused to consider his situation. Scripture tells us, "he came to his senses," and remembering his father and his homeland, he realizes what pride had prevented him from seeing before; even the servants in his father's house live better than he does. His way, his decisions, his actions left him destitute and lacking. He knows that he is made for more. This realization sets him free. He rises out of the poverty to which sin led him, and decides to entrust himself to the justice of his father.

As he crests the final hill towards home he is spotted by the searching gaze of his father. Moved by compassion, the father runs to him, embraces him, and kisses him, confirming the truth that first began to draw the son's steps towards home – indeed, he is made for more.

Wrapped in the arms of mercy, the son rests his head on the heart of his father and hears what so many years of sin had drowned out – the steady beat of his father's heart, the beat of a love for him, a beat of infinite and ever-faithful love holding out to him an invitation to the life he is called to share in. And as the son finds the courage to meet his father's eager gaze of love, he sees reflected in his eyes the unalterable truth of his worth and dignity. Finally, as he is dressed in new clothing and sits down to eat and drink at his father's table, he recognizes both the inheritance of true life and love to which he is called and the betrayal his prodigal life was to his dignity and identity. Let us follow after the prodigal son, and rise from all the places of darkness, sin, and pain that touch our lives, and go to our Father.

forgiveness

the springboard to a deeper relationship with Him

Nothing, absolutely nothing, is beyond the love and mercy of Jesus Christ. No sin is too big for Him, no darkness too great. His mercy is so abundant, so overflowing, that He wants us to not only be recipients of His mercy, but channels of His mercy to others.

Being able to admit our faults and ask forgiveness from someone we've hurt takes a lot of humility and grace and can be the springboard for a deeper, more honest relationship. It also sets our hearts free, because it means that we are not denying, ignoring, or excusing our sin, but facing it honestly.

5 things you need to know about forgiveness

Let's be honest. Forgiving somebody who has hurt us may be the hardest thing we ever do. We may have suffered a serious offense, but often it is the daily grievances or misplaced words that are the sticking point in our hearts and minds. We can struggle for days, even years, with anger, confusion, sorrow, and bitterness after someone has wounded us, offended us, or betrayed our trust.


Jesus knows and understands. Jesus knows our struggle, so much that he entered into the pain of our wounds as He hung crucified on the Cross. Yet, He doesn't want us to remain there in the darkness - He desires us to experience the glory of His Resurrection, where His wounds are transformed into marks of victory and our sins are redeemed into channels of grace. Jesus taught us to pray to the Father: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Forgiveness doesn't mean being a doormat. It doesn't mean justifying or ignoring an offense, excusing the offender of responsibility, or taking the blame upon ourselves. We need to acknowledge the wrongdoing and to live in accordance with our dignity in order to truly forgive the other.

Forgiveness is letting go. Forgiveness is choosing not to hold the offense against the one who has hurt us. It means letting go of resentment and revenge — not lowering ourselves to the level of retaliation, but rising to the level of merciful love, in imitation of the God who forgives us "seventy-times-seven times."

Forgiveness is not a feeling. It is a decision. It is intentional and voluntary. Of course, "it is not in our power not to feel or to forget an offense, [but if we give our hearts to the Holy Spirit], He can turn injury into compassion and purify the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession." (CCC 2803) Forgiveness may not take away the pain, but it will transform it. Every time the memory of the offense comes to our minds, and every time we choose to forgive, we become freer, more whole, and more like our Heavenly Father.

THE GOAL: The goal of forgiveness is that of restoring, or reconciling, man to God and to himself. The scar might still be there, but forgiveness gives freedom. We no longer let our hurts define our identity or the identity of those who have hurt us. **To forgive another is a mercy to that person, but also to ourselves.**



"I was clutching onto the steering wheel with both hands. I was holding onto a 29-year-old sin that was strangling me. I didn't know where to begin." -Carey

A story of hope after abortion

The day my healing began

After two abortions Carey was filled with shame and sorrow. She felt like she was living in a fog, and fell into unhealthy relationships and away from the Church. She later married her husband Mark*, but the abortions haunted her and she decided she would take her secret to the grave, for fear that his response would confirm her belief that she was unforgivable.*

Years later, Mark began a journey of conversion back to the Catholic faith. After his devout mother's death, he started going to Mass on his day off, and Carey noticed a miraculous change - he stopped drinking and smoking - battles he had fought for years. He finally approached Carey and asked if she would be willing to have their marriage blessed by the Church. Terrified of going to Confession, she thought she would have to divorce him rather than be the obstacle to his return.

*Names changed for anonymity.

When your husband Mark approached you about getting your marriage blessed by the Church, what did he say?

Mark outlined the steps necessary to have our marriage blessed by the Church. You know, just the usual, "Confession, go to church every Sunday, etc..." "All I heard was CONFESSION. I was thinking, "Are you kidding me!?" But he was so excited, like something finally had meaning to him. In my heart, I felt the Lord was saying, "Now you can do it right." My husband then handed me a pamphlet on "How to Make a Good Confession" and told me we should pray the rosary too. I had never prayed the rosary in my life! He was so immersed in the whole thing; I had never seen him like that before.

He took me to see the church he had been attending, where he wanted our marriage to be blessed. Before we knew it, people started coming in for the Saturday Vigil Mass. Instead of leaving, we decided to stay. When the gospel was being read, I distinctly heard, "Pay attention; this is important." I had never listened to the Gospel with such intent. "Strive to enter through the narrow gate." I had no idea what was happening, but those words lit my heart on fire and pierced me. Suddenly, I wanted that gate...I just didn't know how I could enter it.

What led you finally to tell Mark about what was holding you back from the Church?

After praying the rosary every day for a week using my new iPod app, I felt it was time to tell Mark everything. There we were in the kitchen before dinner, and overcome by tears, I confessed, "I did something that will prevent you from being able to get back into the Church. The unforgivable — something horrible -- when I was 18 years old." I cried and gasped for air, telling the whole story in 30 seconds. "Can I ever be forgiven?"

His merciful response stunned me. He held me and told me with great conviction that everyone is forgiven when they come to Jesus and ask Him, "even abortion, even you." He said, "So that's what you've been holding in for all of these years? No one should go through something like that all alone." It all made sense to him then — my previous relationships to men who didn't fit my persona, my moodiness, everything I did in the past was now making sense. He told me we needed to get to a priest so I could go to Confession and all would be well.

When did you receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

The very next morning! I woke up and called the rectory as soon as it opened. "Father is available right now; can you be here 10 minutes?" Yes, yes, yes!

I was clutching onto the steering wheel with both hands and praying through tears the "Hail Mary" all the way down. "Hail Mary, full of grace," over and over. I started hearing whispers in my mind, "You don't have to do this. What about the second abortion? Are you going to tell him about that one? You don't have to, you know. Why make this so difficult for yourself?" I was fighting so hard through this, crying and praying the "Hail Mary." I felt like the woman with the hemorrhage in scripture who reached out to just touch Jesus' cloak; if I just touch it I will be healed. I was feeling so much conflict and terror because I could not get over the second abortion. Where is this coming from? I lashed back, "No! I want to heal! Hail Mary, full of grace!"

I finally arrived at the rectory. I hadn't made a Confession in 20 years and I had never made a good one. I was holding onto a 29-year-old sin that was strangling me. I didn't know where to begin. Father gently walked me through the Commandments, one by one, as I made my Confession through tears. When I was finished, he made a motion with his hands, as if picking up a lamb and carrying it on his shoulders. He told me that all of heaven rejoices when the one lost sheep is found. I knew I was that lost sheep, who was no longer lost. He then said, "Now you need to heal." He told me about the Sisters of Life and what they did. When I walked out of the rectory, the sun came out of the clouds for the first time in four days.

How did you feel after you went to Confession?

For the first time I can remember, I felt alive, on fire and in love. I praised Jesus and threw my arms up in the air. My heart sang! I drove as fast as I legally could to my husband's work place to tell him. I ran up to him and said, "I did it! I made my Confession!" We hugged each other and praised God. It was so amazing!

When was your next step toward healing?

I knew the healing would come and I wanted it to. I asked Jesus to help me heal, and to be gentle with me. But after a few months, I started to feel unforgiveness creep into my heart. A light went on and I was given the grace to realize I was harboring grudges and guilt. This helped me begin to forgive.

I wanted to "bear fruit." That phrase kept coming up in scripture, on TV programming, within my own heart. I needed help knowing how. I wanted to give what I had experienced to others, so that women who were thinking about an abortion wouldn't go through with it, and those who had experienced abortion would come to reconciliation and healing, putting an end to their silence and shame. I wanted to show my thanks to Jesus for His mercy. I wanted to be able to say "yes" to God when He asked, to be what God had intended for me before that day when my first abortion changed my life.

When did you meet the Sisters of Life?

For two months I had been carrying around a crumpled Hope and Healing pamphlet I found at the back of the church and was finally ready to reach out. Of course, I didn't have the nerve to call, so I sent an e-mail. I mentioned that I had two abortions and the second one was really hard to get over because I was older and working. I was received with such compassion, such mercy that, I knew I had come to the right place.

Can you describe your experience at the Day of Prayer and Healing?

It was on a freezing-cold January morning, after a blizzard. I kept asking the Blessed Mother to help me the whole way, and almost turned around three times. I walked up to the door and rang the bell, "Here goes nothing." The door opened and I was greeted by Sr. Marija Joseph. She was warm, welcoming, and without an ounce of judgment or ridicule.

As I walked into that chapel with the sun streaming in through the stained glass, I knelt down and let out a sigh of relief. I felt a warm blanket of love wrap around me as if I were home. I could have knelt there all day. For the first time in a very long time, I knew I was safe, and I knew this is where I belonged to be healed.

My first Day of Prayer and Healing was emotional and intense. It forced me to look deep inside myself, which I had avoided for all those years. I wanted to break those barriers that I had built over my shame and pain. I was also beginning to learn how to put my trust in Jesus. The biggest grace I received during that time was the realization that I made such a mess of things when I tried to control everything in my life. I decided to give what life I had left to God, putting my path in His hands, whether it was another year or another 20 years, my life would belong to Him.

Being in the presence of other women who had shared the sin of abortion helped me so much. I wasn't alone anymore! All of us had different backgrounds, stories, ages, and marital statuses, but we were all there because we'd had an abortion ... or 2 or 3 or 5 or more. I finally let myself remember my pregnancies. Each one was so different. Each one was such a blessing. All those years of refusing to acknowledge their existence only added to my pain and regret. The Sisters helped me to think about my children, to ask them to pray for me, and to offer my prayers for them.

When you consider your journey, what stands out to you?

It took me 29 years of silence, fear, regret, and pain to get here, but as scripture reminds us in Joel, God restores the years "eaten by the locust." I never look at it as lost time. Jesus continues to heal me with His mercy and love; it's so amazing. He is so gentle. I've also realized that if I held on to my pain, or did not forgive, or didn't allow Him to love me and show me where He wanted me to go... I would miss the opportunity I have now to show Him how much I love Him and my gratitude for what He did for me!

How can you be the face of Mercy?

By the age of 45, one in every four women in our nation has had an abortion. Helping our culture to heal from the wound of abortion is a need of our times. Here are ways to be an instrument of God's mercy:

- 1. Before we can be instruments of healing, we have to be healed ourselves.** Pray and reflect about how abortion has affected you - your friends and family members. Bring these places to the Lord. Invite Him to bring His healing, light, and perspective.
- 2. Seek to cultivate a heart of mercy.** Receive the love and mercy of Jesus in the Sacraments through Confession and Holy Communion. Come to know Jesus by reading the Gospels. Cultivate habits of mind and heart that imitate He who is Mercy.



Why do we fear Confession?

No sin is bigger than Jesus. But let's just put it out there – walking into a confessional can be an intimidating thing. Sweaty palms, knocking knees, sudden overheating – the whole lot. Maybe we haven't been to Confession in years, or we're scared of what the priest might think, or we're not exactly sure what to say when. Or maybe it's just that admitting our own sins out loud is a big deal.

The struggle is real, but His grace is more real. We're not meant to live in bondage. When it comes down to it, sin is the ultimate self-limiting behavior, because we become less of who we really are and more captive to the sin we choose. Sin is its own punishment. It's a burden that nags at us, takes away our peace. No sin can beat the power of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus longs to pour His Mercy into each one of our hearts. He desires to take the burden of our sins from us, to heal us, and to set us free.

In every Confession, Jesus descends into those places of darkness within our own hearts and raises up new life. He is the Divine Physician. He restores our souls: His divine life heals us and fills us with new grace. In the book of Isaiah, God says to each of us: "Though your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white as snow" (Is 1:18). Jesus gives us the hope we need to get up after a fall and run trustingly into the arms of our Father.

It may have been a long time since we have gone to Confession, but we don't have to be afraid! The Lord welcomes us back home with open arms and a look of infinite tenderness.



Q&A

Did you ever wonder...

Where did the Sacrament of Confession come from anyway?

Jesus. On Pentecost He said, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (Jn 20:21-23). Those weren't just idle words. At that very moment, He gave His power to forgive sins to the apostles and their successors. He made the Church His instrument of forgiveness on earth. It's a reality that hasn't changed in over 2000 years.

Why do I need to go if I didn't hurt anyone?

There is no such thing as a "private sin." Every sin, however small, wounds the Body of Christ. When one person sins, everyone is affected and is weighed down because we are all connected.

Why should I go more than once a year?

Just as we work hard to keep our bodies healthy, so too it is important that we are attentive to the state of our soul. Sin leaves our soul weak and sick. Through the power of Confession, however, we are freed from the burden of sin and reconciled with God. Our soul is made pure. And we are given strength to overcome temptation in the future.

Why can't I go directly to God?

Why not baptize ourselves? Because we know that Jesus instituted the Sacraments and works through the mediation of His ordained ministers. Just as Jesus acts in and through the priest during Mass to bring us the Eucharist, He is really present in the person of the priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Here we truly encounter Jesus' merciful Heart.

What virtue does it foster?

Humility. It helps us to look honestly at our faults and to be truly sorry for our sins. A priest can help us to be more objective and he can give us a concrete plan of action to avoid falling in the future.

Why am I putting it off?

We can spend years weighed down by nagging guilt from regrettable choices we've made. We can convince ourselves that it no longer matters to God or that He's long since forgotten our sins. But the truth is, deep down we really don't believe that, and we feel uneasy that we don't have resolution. We keep our distance from God — just in case He's still angry. The reality is that God is looking upon each of us with deep tenderness. He longs for us to be healed. There is no replacement, no substitute, for the powerful, healing grace of Confession. We need to hear: "I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen."



Fr. Rees Doughty is one of our weekly chaplains who serves the community at Annunciation Motherhouse

Stories of Unexpected Grace

God's plan for our salvation is always more beautiful than we can imagine. He uses all things, including our sins, for our good. It isn't in our strengths, but in the places of our weaknesses, faults, and sins that we actually best come to know God's love. It is sometimes said that the greatest sinners make the greatest saints. The following are stories of four individuals who found grace in unexpected places.

Communist Russia

1

SERVANT OF GOD REV. WALTER CISZEK, S.J. (1904-1984)

Fr. Walter Ciszek, born in Shenadoah, Pennsylvania, was a man of great gifts; he was talented, athletic, and self-disciplined. He entered the Jesuits, was ordained a priest, and volunteered to be sent as a missionary to Communist Russia. He had not been ministering long when he was arrested by the Communists and put in solitary confinement in the infamous Lubianka prison. For months his interrogators wore him down, demanding that he confess to being a Vatican spy. Finally, in a moment of weakness, he gave in and signed the confession. Now totally broken and

overcome with shame, he cried out to God. Fr. Ciszek wrote later that this was the moment of his true conversion, when he finally learned to trust in God instead of his own strength. Receiving God's mercy in the time of his greatest failure gave him the courage to face the next 20 years in Soviet prison camps. He performed back-breaking labor while ministering to his fellow prisoners with serenity and total confidence in God's plan. His cause for sainthood is now open.

SEEING *for the first time*

2

DR. BERNARD NATHANSON (1926-2011)

Dr. Bernard Nathanson, an atheist and one of the world's leading abortionists, made headlines in the 1970's when the advent of ultrasound changed his mind and he became an outspoken defender of the unborn in the pro-life movement. But by that time, he had witnessed over 70,000 abortions including that of his own child. Wracked with guilt and struggling with severe depression for decades, he was first given hope that there might be a God by the love that he saw in the faces of Christian pro-life activists. Ultimately, it was the attraction of a merciful God and his desire to be free from his sins which led him to be baptized in New York City at St. Patrick's Cathedral by John Cardinal O'Connor. He spent the remainder of his life working for the cause of life, side by side with those pro-life advocates whom he had once so vigorously opposed.



3

SERVANT OF GOD DOROTHY DAY

(1897-1980)

Dorothy Day was living a radical, bohemian lifestyle in New York City as a socialist journalist, aspiring to save the world while caught up in the social rebellion and loose morals of the time. After suffering an abortion, which failed to save a doomed love affair, she found herself far from God. Though she had feared that He would punish her with barrenness for her sin, a few years later God brought light into her life, granting her a child with the man with whom she was then living. It was the joys of motherhood which drew her back to God, and the desire for eternal happiness for her daughter which gave her the courage to seek Baptism for both of them, even though it meant leaving the man she loved. Dorothy later turned her restless desires toward improving the conditions of the working poor and to founding the Catholic Worker Movement. It is no coincidence that after her conversion she dedicated her life to promoting the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, returning in her work with the poor the mercy she had received. Her cause for sainthood is now open.



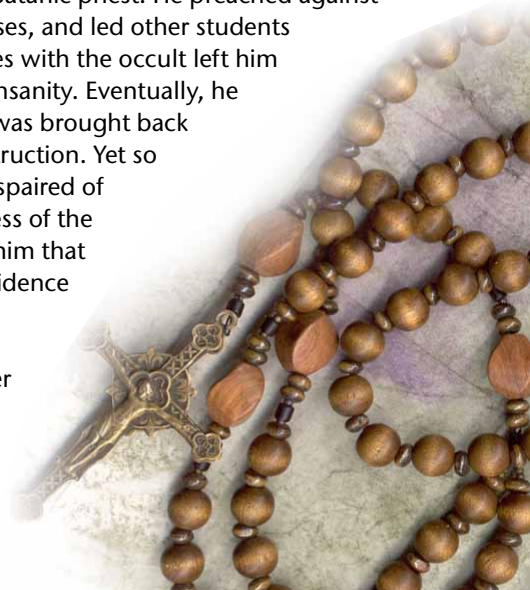
Set free from the occult, he became—

Our Lady's man

4

BLESSED BARTOLO LONGO (1841-1926)

Bartolo Longo was born in Italy to a good Catholic family devoted to the Blessed Mother. At University, he drifted from the faith of his childhood and fell into the anti-Catholicism and "spiritism" popular in his day. He even went so far as to be ordained as a Satanic priest. He preached against the Catholic faith, performed black masses, and led other students away from God. But soon his experiences with the occult left him drained, confused, and on the edge of insanity. Eventually, he sought help from a Catholic priest and was brought back to the faith by Confession and good instruction. Yet so deep had been his ties to evil that he despaired of his eternal salvation. It was the tenderness of the Mother of Mercy that finally convinced him that even he could be saved. He put his confidence in Our Lady's promise that her devotees would never be lost. He became a Third Order Dominican and a tireless promoter of the rosary among the poor and suffering. He was beatified in 1980 by Pope Saint John Paul II who called him "Our Lady's Man."





Comunita Cenacolo

A school of life for those suffering addictions

Cenacolo has a message

that the world longs to hear: with God's grace it is possible to begin anew. Since 1983, Cenacolo has been a powerful instrument in the Church and the world, bringing about resurrections in the lives of young people living the darkness of drug addictions. Cenacolo is a "school of life" that teaches addicts to live in the embrace of God's mercy and to rely completely on divine providence. The community was founded by Mother Elvira Petrozzi who was fearless in her conviction that prayer has the power to heal and transform lives. Since its humble beginnings in an abandoned villa in the northern Italian town of Saluzzo, the community has grown to 60 houses around the world. There, they invite those who live in darkness to welcome the healing light of Christ into their lives.

The Cenacolo community in the United States is directed by Albino Aragno (pictured with his wife Joyce).



Cenacolo proposes the mercy of God as the means to heal broken lives and change despair into hope. It is living proof that God can make all things new. Through a rigorous schedule including daily prayer, personal sacrifice, manual labor and communal living; lives are transformed. The presence of Christ experienced in the unconditional love and acceptance found within the friendships forged within community gives birth to hope.

The community in the United States is directed by Albino Aragno, who entered the community in Italy as a young man after struggling with addictions. After his life was changed through encountering Jesus and years of prayer and discernment, he became the director of the houses in North and South America. While living in the United States, he met and married his wife Joyce who serves the community in many ways. They are a dynamic team who face the difficulties and tragedies of life with the healing light of Christ.

We asked Albino, Joyce, Erin, and Ryan to share their experience of God's mercy while living in Cenacolo.

Albino: I was one of them so I know their story well; only with the mercy of God can we change. When you embrace a person for who he is, when you love a person for who he is, not denying the problem or hiding anything, just seeing him as he is and loving him, this brings freedom, this brings joy. This is mercy.

Joyce: God's mercy is the whole experience of the community; it permeates everything. That is what attracts people, the love, the joy, and mercy. It is not the hammer. We live the experience of being seen in all our faults and weaknesses and defects; being seen in that and being out there in the open, unmasked, we see that we can still breathe, that we are still liked and still loved. We are still embraced and we are accepted. We experience being embraced in God's mercy. We know that we are sinners, yet we live in the embrace of forgiveness, love, and mercy. That is healing. That frees us, and allows us to be loved, and it expands our hearts to love.

Erin's story

Coming to Cenacolo was the best decision I have ever made. God turned something destructive and terrible in my life into something so beautiful. I hit rock bottom when I was 25 years old after using drugs daily for six years. I came to the point where I knew I was either going to die or come here. I tried every option and I finally surrendered. When I entered, I had no faith. I was lost and I didn't want to have anything to do with God. Slowly over time, I started to believe that God existed. It was a wakeup call for me when I heard that Jesus loves the poor, the drug addict. In my mind, the drug addict was rejected from society and was the cause of all problems. It was powerful for me to hear about Mary Magdalene. I thought God only loved those who were doing well in life and were well behaved. I began to understand that even though I was an addict and I did bad things, inside of me, I am still good and there are good intentions.

Every Saturday night, we all wake up and pray from 2:00 to 3:00 am. We dedicate an hour of prayer and adoration to pray for all the addicts around the world, because it is an hour that we were always out, using drugs, drinking, losing our dignity, giving ourselves away, and living in darkness. My first adoration, I was so touched because I thought 'here I am: I am a fruit of this prayer!' It is powerful for us to face that moment, and to pray in that hour, replacing the darkness with something good to help someone else. I have had very powerful moments in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, knowing that I am so poor, seeing all my weaknesses, but at the same time experiencing that I am loved and accepted by God.



photo credit: Lisa Olschewski Photography



photo credit: Lisa Olschewski Photography

Ryan’s story

Ryan entered the community five years ago after struggling for years with addictions and emptiness. After failed attempts at rehab centers he came to Cenacolo.

My mother was able to come to visit me for a few weeks while I was living in the community in Italy. It was spring-time and we were in the hills of the Alps. A moment that stands out in my heart from that time took place while we were working in the garden pulling weeds and raking. She said to me, “Ryan you are a completely different person than the person who entered this community.” I didn’t say anything and thought about it for a while. In my addiction, I would have loved to hear something like that. A few hours later I said, “I don’t think that is true. I don’t think the community has made me a different person. I think it gave me the tools to be the person I always wanted to be, the person God intended me to be.” I still have all my shortcomings; I can be impatient, selfish, and I have all my struggles. But I have learned through prayer and with the help of the guys around me to be the best version of myself. So, after five years, I don’t feel 100% different. I feel like I am who God intended me to be. I feel like I am who I always knew I was inside but didn’t know how to live as this person.

I see miracles here every day. I experience God’s mercy when I see a guy who was really bad off start to come around, when I see him start to come alive, when he makes the decision to suffer himself for the good of the people around him. This is my motivation when I fall and when I have rough days or do a silly thing. It reminds me that the same mercy is here for me and I don’t have to beat myself up. I don’t have to dwell in that negativity. I remember that I am forgiven, and maybe more importantly, that I am loved.

Knowing that I have had the opportunity to be here when there are so many people in need keeps me very humble and grateful. I am preparing to exit the community and I have trust in God’s plan. I know there is a need to reach out, to take this next step to be in the world, and to continue to live this way of life that has given me so much.

“IT IS JESUS THAT YOU SEEK WHEN YOU DREAM OF HAPPINESS;

He is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; He is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is He who provoked you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is He who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is He who reads in your heart your most genuine choices.” -Saint John Paul II



THE STORY OF MY NAME

-Sr. Faustina Maria Pia

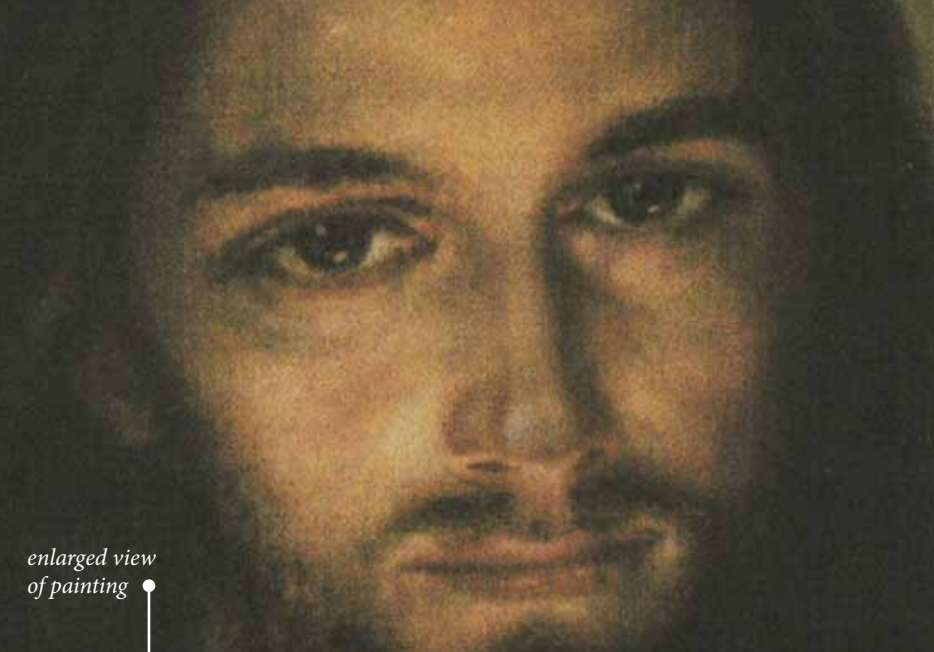
I was on a five day silent retreat, preparing to receive the religious habit and a new religious name. I was excited yet nervous, specifically because I didn’t know what name the Lord was calling me to submit to our Mother Superior.

While on retreat I noticed a Sister from another community continually smiling at me as if she knew me. The retreat ended and Sr. Mary Ann came up to me and said, “I remember meeting you when you were 5 years old at the Divine Mercy Shrine with your parents. You’re from a big family and have a twin sister, right?” Surprised, I nodded affirmatively. She continued, “A Sister in our community had written a book on St. Faustina, so we were all delighted to meet a little girl with that uncommon name, and we wondered what might become of you!”

When Sr. Sophia arrived to pick up Sr. Mary Ann, she handed me a signed copy of her book on St. Faustina. I asked for her prayers, saying that in a few weeks I would become a novice with a new name. Suddenly, Sr. Sophia stopped me and firmly said, “Don’t you dare!” And with that, I knew. I knew that there was some special connection between this saint and myself, and that I was meant to keep her name.

Over the next two weeks as I read her book, St. Faustina became alive to me as never before. All the things that she didn’t write about herself, I was finding out — how she was a redhead and freckled, how she loved to tell stories and debate, even how she dressed fashionably as a teen and had a great sense of humor. She had weaknesses and failings too, and yet did not become discouraged. I was encountering her anew, not far off in heaven, but as a real person.

I believe that saints choose you. They walk with you throughout your life and desire that you come to know them and pray to them. We have so many friends in Heaven waiting to meet us. I encourage you to do a little research on your patron saint and make the connection that they made with you on your baptismal day.



enlarged view of painting



When I began to read St. Faustina’s diary, I learned the real depths of the Lord’s mercy for each one of us.

Jesus’ words to Saint Faustina in her diary:

“I have opened my Heart as a living fountain of mercy. Let all souls draw life from it. Let them approach this sea of mercy with great trust... Whoever places his trust in My mercy will be filled with My divine peace at the hour of death.”



About Saint Faustina and the Divine Mercy Devotion

The devotion to Jesus as the Divine Mercy is based on the writings of Saint Faustina Kowalska, a Sister of Our Lady of Mercy in Krakow, Poland, who in the 1930’s received revelations about God’s mercy, which are recorded in her Diary. Jesus declared the Sunday after Easter to be Divine Mercy Sunday, on which He desires to pour out His mercy upon souls. He longs for us to experience that His mercy is greater than any and all of our sins. He desires us to trust in His mercy and to let it flow through us to others.

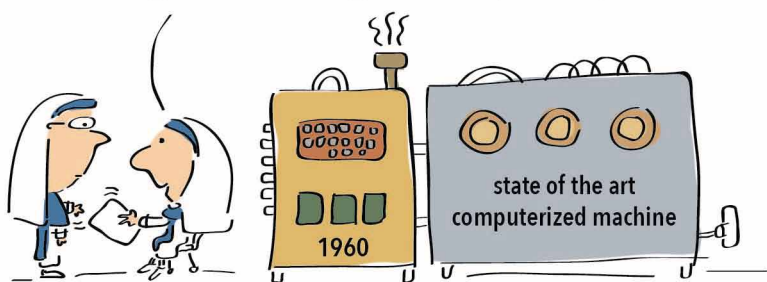
The Image: *When Jesus appeared to Saint Faustina, He asked that she have His image painted. He said, “I am offering people a vessel with which they are to keep coming for graces to the fountain of mercy. That vessel is this image with the signature: Jesus, I trust in You.”*

Powerful prayer: *Jesus entrusted to Saint Faustina the Chaplet of Divine Mercy as a powerful prayer through which He would release unimaginable graces. He said, “When they say this Chaplet in the presence of the dying, I will stand between My Father and the dying person, not as the just Judge but as the Merciful Savior.”*

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