

# Sisters of Life

## Love *is* POSSIBLE

**L**OVE IS THE LIGHT-  
and in the end, the only  
light that can always illuminate  
a world grown dim and give us  
the courage needed to keep  
living and working. Love is  
possible, and we are able to  
practice it because we are  
created in the image of God.  
To experience love and in this  
way to cause the light of God  
to enter into the world-this is  
the invitation I would like to  
extend to you."

Pope Benedict XVI  
*Deus Caritas Est*

**B**efore God created you there was a space of nothingness, a void. God literally loved and willed you into being. You have life by an intentional, loving, creative act of God. You exist because God wanted to give you the two most precious things He is: LIFE and LOVE. Your life is sacred because you came from the Heart of God. God loves what He creates. He made you like Himself: beautiful and true, a being of flesh and spirit designed for love - TO LOVE AND BE LOVED.

You were created to love without limits; and thirst for a love that is true, total, faithful and fruitful. Yet we are haunted by the appalling limits of our loves. Why? The answers are as surprising as they are true: Because we are blessed by our Creator to be unique and unrepeatable human persons. And because of sin.

Sin attacks the communion of persons brought together by Love. You were made for union, yet arriving at that blessed communion with another, and others, is often fraught with difficulties. We live in a culture which codifies in law and upholds in social life all that separates/divides persons from each other. (Interestingly, the word

"diabolical" comes from the Greek meaning "to separate or divide.") Many in innocence or desperation accept something less than the love for which our hearts long. Witness an epidemic of adults opting to live together rather than marry, contraception, abortion, pornography, divorce, adultery, the heartache and loneliness of so many. Sacred human love is under attack.

You no doubt, are ready to hear a word of good news about the possibility for authentic human love. Read on. For the joy and freedom and fulfillment found in Christ-centered marriage and community life is the fundamental Christian witness that "love is possible."

This special issue of our newsletter highlights the manifold ways that the vast teachings of our beloved Pope John Paul the Great on the human love, known as the *Theology of the Body*, permeates our lives as Sisters and is the basis for participation in 'the new evangelization'.

May the Lord of Life bless you,

*Mother Agnes Mary, S.N.*

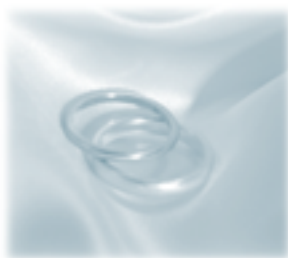
◀ Cameron was born at our Holy Respite over three years ago. His mother, Cammy, recently married in January! The family currently resides in Manhattan.

Just over one year ago, the whole world was rapt in attention as God called our “Papa” home. Like any father, John Paul the Great left his children a patrimony. The gift he left us – a gift in many ways still waiting to be discovered- **was memory.** He reminded the whole world – one heart at a time – of what it means to be a human person, made in the Image of God. He helped us to remember our great dignity, rooted in the fact that each of us is willed and loved into existence by God, with the call and capacity to participate in the love of the Blessed Trinity. And he reminded us all that this capacity to love has been redeemed in Jesus Christ, who is full of mercy. Pope John Paul II loved us enough to educate us on the deepest desire of the human heart: love. He did so through the very way he loved us, to the end, and through the vast teaching he left us on **The Theology of the Body.**

# DESIRE of the *Human Heart*

## What is the Theology of the Body?

College students are drinking it in, parents are holding study groups in their homes and dioceses are sponsoring seminars on it. If you mention it to those who know it, eyes light up and conversation picks up speed. The “Theology of the Body” is sweeping across the country with its liberating message of the truth and meaning of human sexuality – really of human existence – educating, healing and inspiring. Introduced to the world by the newly elected Pope John Paul II in a series of 129 Wednesday audiences, the Theology of the Body expresses what God reveals about Himself and the human person in and through the body. Made in the image of God, each of us is called to communion



with Him through a total gift of ourselves, a.k.a., love. We have been created to participate, in and through our very bodies, in the dynamic inner communion of love in the Trinity,

poured out by Christ on His Bride the Church. Stamped into the very structure of our bodies is this call to mutual self-gift, to communion. Every time a man and a woman come together in a “one flesh” union, their whole persons -

all that they are - ought to be in communion, poured out for one another in total, free, fruitful and faithful love. Since the body communicates who we are, it is in a sense, a language, and as with any language, the body can lie. The Theology of the Body is liberating

people as they come to see what the body longs to communicate in truth, and recognize in their own experience those lies that have cheapened their relationships. This “Gospel of the Body” contains not only the truth, but also the real hope for a total renewal in the way we think about and carry out our human loves.



# LIFE & LOVE

I always wanted to be a missionary. After high school I joined NET (National Evangelization Team) hoping that with my team, I would draw young people across the country to Christ. I found, though, that it wasn't so much my words that influenced them, but the way the team genuinely cared for each other. I recognized in these teens a longing to witness Christian love really lived authentically, and shared that longing. I realized that my call to proclaim Christ was to be lived out, not through preaching in foreign lands, but through fidelity to love in my daily interactions. The sacredness of human life and love became my passion, and over the next few years I felt the Lord calling me to become totally His as a *Sister of Life*.

macy. I've been amazed by the power the witness of communion has to draw people to God. I've seen this most dramatically while participating in our missions assisting vulnerable pregnant women, who feel abandoned by those they hold dear. It is truly a privilege to watch the Lord restore hope to each woman through the embrace of a community of love and support. She then experiences as a reality in her life the truth that God is a communion of love, and that the Church is His family.

- Sr. Mary Clare, S.V.



Through community life, lived in union with Jesus, I have experienced a joy greater than I could have ever imagined. This joy then testifies to the world that, whether in marriage or religious life, only the love that comes from God can satisfy our deepest longings for inti-

## Retreatants comment on recent Theology of the Body retreats:

*"I am leaving with a deep sense of my sacredness and dignity. It has been healing to reflect on God's purpose for male-female relationships."*

*"The sound of the Sisters' prayer still flows through my memory causing me to give thanks for the blessing of the two weekend retreats I experienced at Villa Maria Guadalupe. It has changed the way I look at everything in Life. I felt the sweet touch of Christ!"*

*"I have spent a lot of time over the past few years reading and reflecting on John Paul II's Theology of the Body. But, until the retreat...I never had the time and quiet space to bring it all to God in prayer, and experience the Theology of the Body in the context of the sacraments. The retreat gave me a renewed sense of the gift of life and marriage, and how our bodies enable us to love."*

▲  
*Little Joseph and his twin sister Julianna were born at our Holy Respite in Manhattan and are turning One in May!*

## LIFE & LOVE

### Villa Maria Guadalupe

Only a short drive from the noise and distractions of metropolitan New York, Villa Maria Guadalupe Retreat Center, a sanctuary of prayer, offers a place to experience anew the transforming presence of Jesus. Those who spend intimate and prolonged time in communion with Life and Love Himself are changed; returning to their day-to-day lives, they radiate something of the Christ dwelling in their hearts.

For more information about upcoming retreat opportunities go to: [www.sistersoflife.org](http://www.sistersoflife.org), or to schedule a private silent retreat call: 203.329.1492 or fax 203.329.1495.



Rarely do people think about the literally millions of women and men who suffer, all too often silently and alone, the detrimental effects of past abortions. At current rates, about one in three American women will have had an abortion by the time she is 45 years old.

Our monthly Entering Canaan post-abortion retreats and follow up gatherings continue to draw women and men from the New York area and beyond, serving as a vehicle through which Our Lord heals wounded hearts. In collaboration with diocesan priests, the Friars of the Renewal and our long-time co-worker Theresa Bonopartis, the mission has recently expanded to include retreats specifically designed for men.

For info about upcoming retreats call Theresa and our co-workers at (877) 586-4621 or email: [Lumina@postabortionhelp.org](mailto:Lumina@postabortionhelp.org).

One can only marvel to see the Holy Spirit at work, drawing together people from all walks of life to participate in a common mission: building a culture of life, one heart at a time. Over the last six months we have conducted two Co-Workers of Life training weekends in which the Sisters shared our approach of non-abandonment and reverence, seeking to love each woman with the Heart of Christ. The charism is being magnified through our Co-Workers! Several have assisted women by accompanying them to appointments, by committing to pray for them daily, helping to move their belongings, and inviting them to live in their homes.

## BEAUTIFUL IN HIS EYES

When I sat down to interview "Susan," a woman who has found hope and healing through our Entering Canaan post-abortion mission, I knew I would hear a powerful story of God's mercy and grace. Speaking of her painful past, I could see the turmoil play out on her face. As she revealed the freedom and joy found in encountering and surrendering to Jesus a weight seemed to lift from her shoulders. We thank God for the victories of grace shared below. -Sr. Mary Elizabeth, SV

### What were you looking for in your relationships?

I wanted someone to be in love with me. But I didn't know what real love was all about. I wanted what society tells you real love is. I gave myself away and I was empty afterwards. I knew in my heart that I was doing wrong, that I was hurting myself. I needed attention, someone to tell me that I was important, that I was special. And I guess guys wanted the same thing from me.

### What led to your abortions?

The abortions were a consequence of my not knowing what I was actually searching for, searching for love, for someone that would fill me. My 1st abortion at age 15, changed my life completely. It destroyed me. I became pregnant again 6 months later. Why did I do this again? I didn't think...I was afraid. I realize now that I was trying to replace the baby, to make up for the abortion; but when I was pregnant again, I went back to my fears.

After the abortion I took an overdose. I didn't want to kill myself, I just wanted to sleep for a long, long time, to forget about myself, forget about my family. To end whatever was going on inside me. I was in total darkness. I was looking for happiness, for joy from alcohol, sex and drugs. It was like a poison. I was destroying myself. Only by the grace of God am I here.

### How did you find healing after your abortions?

I was dating a very abusive, violent guy. I thought that was what I deserved. But no matter how much darkness there was, inside me there was God. I realized that there was a Catholic Church behind where I worked. It was just a grace. Either I was going to turn to God or I was going to end it all. I started to go to Mass and confession. I met my spir-

itual director - he has changed my whole life. He sent me to the Entering Canaan retreats with the Sisters of Life. My healing came in Christ, through the Eucharist. I don't always feel the consolation, the butterflies, all the time; but I now have a certainty in my heart that I am loved.

### How would you describe the Entering Canaan Retreats?

The retreats are like an oasis, an oasis of peace. The talks are so helpful and Jesus is exposed in the Blessed Sacrament for the whole weekend. It is a safe place where we can cry, share, and talk. Abortion is supposed to be so good for women and yet no one talks about it because it's so painful and there is so much shame. It's good to know that I'm not alone. There are so many women going through the same thing.

I remember the first Day of Prayer and Healing that I attended. I was running late and I saw one of the Sisters in front of the convent praying her rosary. When she saw me she said, "Oh, Susan, thank God you're here!" To think that someone was praying that I would come - that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I was important to someone. Someone cared. Someone knew how painful it was and they wanted to help me and I wanted a way out.

### How did you hear about the Theology of the Body?

A friend invited me to a Theology of the Body Seminar with Christopher West. I was blown away. I thought, "This is it!" Everything started to become so clear. It was so amazing for me to think that sex is good, that my body is good. Understanding that in God's plan, sex is meant to be a total gift of self; that's beautiful.



## How has the Theology of the Body changed your life?

I found freedom and it's true. My brother said the Church is stuck in medieval times. Recently, he asked me, "How do you like having someone tell you how to live your life – what to do or not do?" I said, "For ten years I lived according to what society told me, what the culture of death said and where did that take me? I was deceived and was living in darkness." I tried to explain to him how great the teachings of the Church are. It is not just a set of rules and regulations, there is meaning, there is something behind it, it's the path to true freedom and joy.

## Can you describe the freedom that you have found?

It's the fact that I know that I'm living in truth. It took a long time and a lot of tears and I had to die to who I was before. I discovered that I am really a child of God. That is the freedom that I was able to find. Tears come to my eyes...in accepting God's forgiveness, in accepting His love for me, knowing that no matter what I did, I'm beautiful in His eyes. He has healed me so much. Sometimes I wonder, "Why does he care for me so much?" Sometimes I feel like I'm nothing. But no, in His eyes, I'm Susan - made in His image and likeness. If someone



wants to judge me because of what I have done, it's OK, the important One knows. The important One has been with me through all of these years and He knows what I've gone through.

It's that peace that I find in His presence, in the silence. It's the freedom of knowing that I don't need to go out and give myself away to someone. Because I have God to love me. I have Jesus to fill me up. And that is true freedom.

Last Saturday I went to a party. I saw myself before in the way people were acting. It hurt me because I know what they are looking for, what they desire. They just don't know where to find it. They don't know that they're searching for God. They don't know that they're searching for deep, true love. I don't want to go back to that. No matter how exciting or how much fun it looks like, I know it's not true. It will never fulfill me, it never did, it never will.

## If there was something that you would wish for everyone, what would it be?

It would be that they understand, well not really understand, but rather that they have a conviction that they are a child of God, of the Creator of all, of the All-powerful. He created us out of love. He gave everything He had and then Jesus sacrificed Himself out of love for me. That's the greatest gift that I've received - to know in my heart that I am a beautiful child of God - and not just me, but everybody.

*Josenia, Fanta and Kathleen  
with Our Lady of Fatima* ✦

## LIFE & LOVE Holy Respite

Seeing St. Sebastian's Catholic Church on her way to the abortion clinic, Josenia slipped in the back just as Mass was ending. A group began to pray the rosary and she decided to join in. Crying "rivers of tears", she poured out her heart to Our Lady hoping against hope for a miracle. She felt Our Lady urging her to speak to the priest who ultimately put her in touch with our Sisters at the Visitation Mission. Within days Josenia was enrolled in full-time university studies and living with our Sisters at Sacred Heart Convent.

After sharing her story of grace with the other guests at the convent, Josenia suggested that they all pray the rosary together in the evening for one another's intentions because "the Virgin Mary intercedes for us and she always answers our prayers". All the guests (Catholic and non-Catholic alike) agreed.

Kathleen says it has changed her life. She "never realized how powerful the rosary is. I feel the grace from it. As you are saying it you are overwhelmed with peace, calmness and serenity." She finds that praying together is helpful and has made her feel more connected and united with the other guests. Jelena has attached a rosary to her baby carriage. She has never slept better since she began praying the rosary at night, "meditating on the mysteries has changed my thinking and brought me hope". Fanta, a non-Catholic, looks forward to the evening rosary because it "relaxes my soul and gives me more faith that things will improve".

Returning from a difficult day Josenia states, "If I didn't pray the rosary last night, I wouldn't have been able to get through today. I couldn't do it by myself. The Virgin Mary brings peace and is molding my heart to be a good mother".

*(Josenia's baby is due on August 15th  
and she has decided to name him Sebastian.)*



**F**or several years now, the Family Life/Respect Life Office, under the direction of the Sisters of Life has been seeking to nourish the Culture of Life from its roots by promoting the Theology of the Body in multiple venues throughout the Archdiocese of New York and beyond. A major initiative of this past year has been the implementation of an additional marriage preparation day in the Pre-Cana program dedicated to the Theology of the Body, thereby introducing over 8,000 engaged people annually to the profound “why’s” behind Church teaching on marital love. The new program is blessed with numerous presenters who are both educated and on fire with this transforming teaching. Among them are Damon and Melanie, who tell us here the story they share with the couples to whom they speak. They know it well, for it is their own.



*Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. This is why Christ the Redeemer “fully reveals man to himself.”*

- Pope John Paul II

**M**elanie and I have a heart for couples. Our apostolate for the last 13 years has been to engaged and married couples witnessing the truth, beauty, and sacredness of love, sex, and marriage through natural family planning (NFP) and the language of the Theology of the Body. We are prodigals, however. In fact, God’s call came while we were still steeped in sexual sin and brokenness, and quite far from Him.

Our journey back to Christ began with what we now simply call

### “The Question”:

“Melanie, what if we stopped having sex?”

It is funny how different a question can be asked (or heard) with just a slight change of tone, or emphasis, or inflection. I intended to start an interesting conversation. This had not been an issue of debate or even conversation between us, so I offered the question not as a proposal to stop, but as a hypothetical-California graduate student-latte sipping-cosmic-what if. Neither of us had any idea what Our Lord had in store for us.

Though growing up on opposite coasts, we both grew up in very similar Catholic

## The Longing *to be loved and cherished*

by Damon Owens

families. We attended Mass regularly, went on retreats, and participated in youth groups. At 13, I had a profound experience of God on an Antioch retreat that played a significant part in helping me remain chaste and drug-free through high school. Melanie’s childhood memories are filled with songs from Catholic family summer camp, and piling in the station wagon with seven brothers and sisters.

When we met as new graduate students at the University of California, though, we were both recovering from spiritually dark college years distant from God and immersed in self-destructive experiences. During my undergraduate years at Brown, I partied, rarely attended Mass, and,

drawn by gospel choirs and organs, dabbled in other faiths. Melanie suffered in relationships during her college days at UC Santa Barbara, but continued to attend Mass regularly, though more out of habit than desire. So, when we began dating, there was not much virtue left for us to draw on to be chaste.

Melanie “wowed” me the first moment I



met her. What a smile! What a beauty! What a sweet soul! We could talk effortlessly for hours— and we did. I wanted to share everything with her. I wanted to know everything about her. I wanted to protect her. I wanted to love her, and I thought I did. Then, I asked...The Question.

Melanie, my new beloved, cried. I didn't know what was going on. Is she hurt? Is she pregnant? Or, is she just emotionally unstable? What did I do? After ten inconsolable minutes, she simply said, "Yes". Yes? Yes, what? Oh, no! Did she think that I was proposing we stop?

Well, while my dulled conscience had been thinking our sexual intimacy was deepening our love, Melanie had been tortured with the reality that something was very, very wrong. When she tried to explain, it was as hard for me to hear as it was for her to speak. She knew I loved her, or at least was trying to love her, but sex made her feel used. After months of keeping it to herself, I now brought up the subject and it was too much for her to bear.

So much for the cosmic what-if. After many tears, words, and hugs, our decision to stop was made.

For months, we struggled to stop on our own, and we continued to fail. We experienced the power of sex, even in its misuse. Fed up, Melanie suggested we speak to a priest for help. Tough times, tough measures. We found a priest whose counsel would lead us to a redemptive understanding of sex, love, God, and eventually, marriage. Through counsel, confession, prayer, and much struggle,

Melanie and I began a new, chaste relationship. Far from hurting our relationship as we feared, chastity drew us closer than we ever thought possible. Our intimacy deepened, as well as our intimacy with God. The temptation and passion to be physical remained, and perhaps intensified, but we now had strength - grace - to love, instead of simply seeking self-satisfaction. Melanie no longer felt used.

She knew I was with her for her, and her dignity blossomed. We experienced the power of Love, real and true.

After 2 1/2 years of chaste love, we married with such divine confidence (literally "con" "fide": with faith) only possible in a state of grace. Our struggle

for virtue was neither in vain nor expired on our wedding day. The chastity we lived as abstinence before our marriage is the chastity we live now as faithfulness within our marriage.

For the past 13 years, Melanie and I have shared our story to well over 10,000 couples preparing for marriage with the hope of affirming the chaste and calling the unchaste and broken to conversion. We live, teach, and promote natural family planning and Theology of the Body as a most excellent training to learn and grow marital love.

"SHE KNEW  
I WAS WITH HER  
FOR HER, AND  
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BLOSSOMED.  
WE EXPERIENCED  
THE POWER  
OF LOVE,  
REAL AND TRUE."

We encourage you to dive into the riches of Christ offered in the teachings of the Theology of the Body and, after you do, tell anyone and everyone about its liberating truth! Every human heart is made for it, and waiting for it. Be not afraid!

For a bibliography and links go to:  
<http://www.FLRL.org/Theologyofthebody.htm>



### **Damon & Melanie Owens**

*serve as the NFP Coordinators for the Archdiocese of Newark (NJ) and are co-founders of NJ Natural Family Planning ([www.njnfp.org](http://www.njnfp.org)). Damon is also the founder of Joy-Filled Marriage NJ ([www.joy-filledmarriagenj.org](http://www.joy-filledmarriagenj.org)) and speaks nationally on marriage, NFP, Theology of the Body, and Theology of the Family. He can be contacted at [damonowens@comcast.net](mailto:damonowens@comcast.net).*

*Our Girls - the Fruit of our Love*







## WHAT DOES LOVE MEAN?

This question was posed to a group of four to eight year-olds. The answers given were deeper and more hilarious than anyone could have imagined.

When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth."

Billy - age 4

When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love." Rebecca - age 8

Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other." Karl - age 5

Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your french fries without making them give you any of theirs."

Terri - age 4

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