One step at a time, one choice at a time
we ascend the way of holiness
we are ennobled, we are changed
choosing love, even with sacrifice,
choosing trust, even with surrender,
that His life may be lived in us
to a destiny of eternal glory.

Sisters of Life
YOU ARE A GIFT TO US

How often as Sisters we have found ourselves regaling each other with remarkable stories, in the lives of those we meet and serve. Over time, we have come to realize that these stories of God’s grace must be shared. And most especially they must be shared with YOU! --For these stories involve YOU.

Your generosity has made it possible for us to be the hands, the smile, and the providence of Christ for the young women profiled in these pages and for hundreds of others through the year. You are a part of the beautiful work God is accomplishing, which could not happen without your support.

We want to THANK YOU for your goodness and for your participation in the building of a culture of life one heart at a time.

May God bless you!

ATTAINING HOLINESS
one step at a time

Life’s lessons come in unexpected moments, and in unexpected places. As a young woman my idea of a great vacation was spending a week with friends climbing the tallest peaks of the White Mountains. Each day we hiked up to twenty miles through incredibly rugged terrain which blessed us with spectacular, breath-taking views of God’s creation. One day as we were completing our climb in the lengthening shadows of the late afternoon, the weariness in my limbs made me hope that the Appalachian Mountain Club’s “hut” which had a meal and a bunk awaiting each climber, and was the day’s destination, was as close as it appeared on the map. Close yes, but the final half-mile was a nearly vertical ascent. Assessing my situation as impossible, I said to a fellow climber, “I cannot make it. I’ll stay here.” Knowing that was no solution, she replied in an authoritative voice: “Stop looking up! And just put one foot in front of the other.” One step at a time made possible a summit which seemed unattainable.

We desire holiness – all of us – faithful young adults, career oriented New Yorkers, seminarians, mothers and fathers of families, and hope we will have the courage and strength to choose the greatest good as the saints did. For most of us holiness of life still seems far off, and for you and for me – as for the friends whose stories you will read in this issue of our newsletter – we are given opportunities to participate in the holiness of God in how we respond to the unanticipated circumstances of our lives. This is the drama of human freedom.

It begins with the small, seemingly trivial decisions of daily life: choosing the greater good one decision at a time. Where that will lead, God knows. But He is with us every step of the way and assures us: **Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, what God has ready for those who love Him. So keep climbing!**

In Christ our Life,

Mrs. Agnes Mary, 86

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All human beings, from their mothers’ womb, belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow whose days are numbered and whose vocation is even now written in the “book of life”.

-Pope John Paul II
Gospel of Life
Everyday we’re faced with decisions. Most of them are of small matters, made spontaneously. These are decisions to be kind, or not, to be patient, or not, to speak the truth, or not. Then there are decisions that weigh a bit heavier, usually made with a little deliberation. Will I allow my child (or myself) to watch that movie? Will I visit that elderly neighbor? We tend to think that these aren’t very serious matters. But the serious matters come, too, in each life. When we are faced with these choices of gravity, whose outcome to some degree determines who we are, how we see ourselves, and how we think God sees us, all the little decisions we made up to that point weigh in. Yes, each choice we make in freedom, no matter how big or small the matter seems, affects us, changes us. And this is the drama of human freedom, and the call to moral greatness. Every decision, for good or for ill, makes the next good decision easier or more difficult. And each time we choose the way of Jesus, dying to our selfishness, we give Him more room to breathe in our lives, paving the way for His resurrection to take place in us.

A closer look at: Prenatal testing.

Pregnancy is always a sacred time. It’s a time of re-orienting one’s priorities, of making room for another; it’s a time of special intimacy and bonding between a mother, father and their growing baby. These days, however, many couples find that they are expected to judge their child according to standards of physical perfection. If their child doesn’t “pass the test,” parents are encouraged to end the life of their baby before birth.

From early on in the pregnancy, women are offered a series of pre-natal tests. Some are non-invasive, like blood tests and ultrasounds. Others, such as chorionic villus sampling (CVS) and amniocentesis, are invasive and carry with them the risk of miscarriage. On one hand, these tests offer to assure parents that their unborn child is healthy and thriving. On the other, they offer to alert parents to the possibility of increased risks of potential disabilities. With few exceptions, the only medical “solution” offered in these cases isn’t medical, it’s eugenic. Statistics show that between 85-90% of children pre-natally diagnosed with Down syndrome are aborted. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) has recently endorsed the Cystic Fibrosis screening test for all pregnant women. CF has no known cure, and HMO’s are on record as saying that the tests “pay for themselves” since most positive diagnoses result in abortion, thereby saving any medical costs that would be incurred by the person with CF throughout his or her life. We all applaud efforts to eradicate disease. We can never do so for efforts that attempt to eliminate disease by killing the patients.

When there is the slightest question of any abnormality in a child (and at times these diagnoses are not correct), couples are often made to feel that the responsible thing to do would be to have an abortion. The pressure can be terrible, especially for those who are unprepared for such a trial. Those who garner their interior resources and make the choice to receive the child God has given them as a gift, may face difficulties but they always emerge victorious, regardless of the outcome.
FIGHTING FOR CLAIRE

Every expecting parent hopes for a healthy baby. But what happens when that is not the case? At our convents we often receive calls requesting information and prayers from parents who have received an adverse prenatal diagnosis. When Mimi and Tito Citeralla, long time friends and Co-Workers of the Sisters of Life, found themselves in this situation, they felt as if they were “in the epicenter of the culture of death.” The following story chronicles their experience on the other side of adverse pre-natal diagnosis.

BATTLING NOT A DISEASE BUT A CULTURE

“Pretty baby, yes, you are so pretty!!!” Three and a half year old Olivia gently moves her face very close to her newborn sister, gives her tiny fingers a squeeze of affection, murmurs words that seem too big for her little frame, then switches back to three year old time and hops around the floor on one foot. Two year old Nicholas whispers, “Baby Cl-aire...” before announcing, “I want to fly like Dumbo!” His dad, Tito, promptly swoops him up into the air for a simulated flight, and the room is filled with squeals of delight and requests for more flying time. Soon the bright sitting room is transformed into an airport, and then, a wrestling match as the two older children pile on their dad while Mimi, their mother, watches with a smile, holding the baby in her arms. Welcome to Sunday at the Citarella home.

As the children scamper about, it quickly becomes evident that Claire is much-loved by her siblings. Dashing through the room on her way to make Play-Doh cookies, Olivia smiles and waves at the little one; Nicholas, as if on a timer no one else has set, every now and then meanders over to kiss the baby before returning to his play. Tito shakes his head in disbelief and looks at Claire in her bouncer seat. “Who would have thought a year ago...”
It was a parent's worst nightmare. Arriving at her local hospital for a routine, 18-week ultrasound in late April of 2006, Mimi Citarella “knew the minute they put the machine up to my stomach, I could see in their eyes, something was wrong.” It seemed that the baby had encephalocele -- a condition where a portion of the brain is outside the skull. The doctors provided pictures of children with severe abnormalities, informed the Citarella's that they had a few weeks to decide what to do, and set up a genetics counseling session.

And the battle for Claire began.

Every person has moments in life – challenges, sufferings, trials - that are, on a deeper level, invitations to become more like God in our love. These are situations that bring us to our knees, because they are simply beyond our control, beyond our capacity. And the way we respond to these moments determines whether or not we become great in our love. Mimi and Tito were blessed with a foundation that gave them the tools to respond well to a personal trial beyond what they could ever imagine. They had faith, a lot of faith-filled friends, and each other. Together, through the crucible of trust and surrender, they chose love, they chose the road to moral greatness. They chose to love their child, regardless.

As they undertook the whirlwind of doctors visits, first to a local specialist and then to high risk pregnancy specialists in Manhattan and onto a nationally recognized genetics specialist, the Citarella’s began to recognize that the more specialized and acclaimed the doctors were, the greater was the pressure to “terminate.” One perinatologist at their local hospital, who was supportive after the couple stated their conviction to give life to their child, pulled them aside and described how, today, doctors have to be so careful with the words they choose with expectant parents, because the wrong wording to describe an abnormality as minor as cleft palate or a club foot can mean the difference between life and death for the child. And the Citarella’s came to experience first hand the inner anguish that accompanies poor word choice.

Doctors to tell her “the glass is half full,” the reality was that, anything they did for her baby “would be like re-arranging deck chairs on the Titanic.” He then proceeded, with great ‘compassion’ to take her hand and to assure her that he would get her “through this.” This solution? Abortion. Another doctor, knowing what the Citarella’s had decided, when Tito was not present, turned to Mimi and said, “Think of the burden you are placing on your other two children...” As delivery approached, this doctor advised Mimi, rather than have a Cesarian which might save the child, to deliver naturally and “let nature take its course.”

Sitting in the office of the genetics specialist, listening as he spoke soothing words that were all wrong to her, Mimi realized with a sinking feeling that she was in the “epicenter of the culture of death.” “I had heard that phrase before, but I had never experienced what it felt like.” Her heart saddened and troubled by the ‘compassionate’ but cavalier attitude some medical professionals had toward her child and her pregnancy, and the condescension some showed toward her after she and Tito made clear that they would bring their child to life, she began to ask questions. During one examination, with the technician yet again bringing up “the big T” (termination), Mimi couldn’t help but ask, “What's going on here? Are you people Nazi's or something?”

Together, through the crucible of trust and surrender, they chose love, they chose the road to greatness. They chose to love their child, regardless.
The horrifying consequences of what was being advocated was made real to Mimi. Waiting in the reception area for her next appointment, she found herself consoling a woman who also had received an adverse diagnosis. The woman had been told her baby had Down syndrome and an abortion was performed, only to discover that there had been a misdiagnosis and the baby had been perfectly healthy.

As the medical saga proceeded, Mimi found herself going to Mass everyday, receiving the Eucharist and begging the Lord to touch her child and heal her with a miracle. While Mimi prayed with fervor and great faith, Tito prepared for whatever the Lord would allow. They surrounded themselves with friends and family who shared their conviction that their baby was a precious gift from God regardless of her medical condition, and who prayed for Mimi and Tito’s strength and consolation throughout the ordeal. And the Lord became very present to the Citarellas. So much so that, looking back, Mimi can call it a “special time.” “If you told me years ago that we would go through this, I would have thought I would have gone crazy. I couldn’t do it. But once we were in it, then strength that was not of us was given to us. It wasn’t about having a positive attitude. It was about purifying my heart so God could be present and to allow myself to believe in His power.”

And then the time drew near for Mimi to deliver the baby. A C-section was planned at the specialized Manhattan Hospital, but God had other plans. Mimi went into early labor and was rushed to her local hospital, where, amidst the fear and stress of the unknowns contained in high-risk pregnancies, she delivered by C-section a healthy baby girl, to everyone’s amazement. Every newborn is given an APGAR test, which measures the physical health, reflexes, etc., of the baby on a scale of one through ten. Little Claire Marie Citarella, the “hopeless” case, scored a 9.9!

There was, at the base of Claire’s head, a small sack that was surgically removed two months after her birth. Whether Claire’s story is a miracle worked by God in the womb of her mother or whether the multitude of specialists simply got confused by the sight of the small sack and offered a severe misdiagnosis, we may never know. But Mimi and Tito Citarella know that they chose the good in the face of trial—loving and accepting their child regardless of any medical condition—and that will have eternal rewards.

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For information on post-abortion healing visit our website: www.sistersoflife.org

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“...The cultural change which we are calling for demands from everyone the courage to adopt a new lifestyle, consisting in making practical choices -- at the personal, family, social and international level--on the basis of a correct scale of values; the primacy of being over having, of the person over things. This renewed life-style involves a passing from indifference to concern for others, from rejection to acceptance of them. Other people are not rivals from whom we must defend ourselves, but brothers and sisters to be supported. They are to be loved for their own sakes, and they enrich us by their very presence.”

- Pope John Paul II

Celebrating the baptism of Claire with the family and friends.
That they might have life.

1. Bridget sewing her habit
2. Our “extended family” (The two precious boys were born at Sacred Heart)
3. Celebrating Our Lady of Guadalupe
4. Wonder & Awe
5. Adoration in the Novitiate
7. Sister’s conference with Mother Agnes
8. A new mom at Sacred Heart Convent
9. Cooking in the convent
10. Serving retreatants at Villa Maria
11. Making the Liturgy beautiful
Food for the Journey
Getting ready for the trip of your life.

We can all bring to mind that trip we’ve only dreamed of: maybe it’s that journey to Rome to see the brilliance of St. Peter’s and a glimpse of the Vicar of Christ; or Switzerland and its snowcapped, glittering mountains; or maybe you’ve longed to travel to some unknown exotic island filled with rare birds and spilling over with lush vegetation. Whatever your dream, everyone knows to make it reality, you need to prepare, to take action that will set you on the right course.

And so it is with the spiritual life. Our goal is heaven. Better than any tropical island and beyond our wildest dreams of happiness... heaven awaits us. So how do we get there?

Every day is a step on the journey. There are road signs, travel maps and companions to guide us. The beauty of nature, art and music open our hearts to the infinite. Prayer, good spiritual reading, and the grace of the sacraments nourish us along the way.

We may hit a bump in the road or find ourselves detoured. Let’s face it, striving to be authentically Catholic today is counter-cultural. We all need to know what the Church teaches and seek to understand why. Be not afraid! The Church is our Mother, she’s a lot older and wiser than we are, and has been in the business of guiding people safely home for centuries. Stop for directions - say a prayer, ask a priest, or get a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

In addition, we all need places to go where we can learn more about the good, where our potential for holiness is affirmed and where we can take time to look at the progress we’ve made and the ways we desire to grow in the future. Faith-filled friendships, formative seminars and annual retreats can all aid us on the journey.

The Retreat Mission at Villa Maria Guadalupe

Hundreds of men and women have spent time at Villa Maria Guadalupe Retreat Center since its opening two years ago. They know that the privileged time of retreat with the Lord can be life-changing - a little taste of heaven on earth.

Evenings of Recollection; educational seminars on life issues; theology of the body, pro-life, young adult and post-abortion healing weekend retreats have left those who have ‘come aside for awhile to rest’ with Jesus nourished and renewed in strength.

For a listing of Fall retreats at Villa Maria Guadalupe check our website: www.sistersoflife.org or
to schedule a few days of private, individual retreat call: 203/329-1492.
The Visitation Mission and the Co-Workers of Life

For the last two years, our Sisters on the Visitation Mission have invited lay Co-Workers to participate in our service to women who are pregnant and vulnerable. Our training days encourage and equip our New York area Co-Workers to join us in building the culture of life, one heart at a time. For those of you unable to attend, this new column will offer thematic snapshots (albeit very abridged) of what is offered on our Co-Worker training days in the hopes that they will be a gift to you, too, in your efforts to build the culture of life.

One retreatant at Villa Maria described his experience:

“I began to really discern my life’s purpose. God touched me, spoke to me, led me…and began something that has continued to grow deeper and more meaningful and exciting. I am stronger in faith and surer in purpose; as if being remade from the inside out.”

- Charles

The Family Live/Respect Life Office of the Archdiocese of New York

Our Sisters at the Family Life/Respect Life Office have brought on board a new Young Adult Coordinator for Archdiocese of New York, helping connect Catholic young adults with one another and with everything from lectures and retreats to cultural events and Holy Hours. The monthly young adult Mass at the Cathedral now welcomes several hundred.

The FL/RL Office also brings together those who are beyond the young adult years. A weekend seminar on Ignatian Discernment in Daily Life with Fr. Tim Gallagher, OMV, and the annual Respect Life Institute proved by the numbers and enthusiasm of those in attendance to be a source of encouragement. You can find out about upcoming events by visiting their website: www.frlr.org.

Window into the Charism:

Understanding the heart of a vulnerable pregnant woman

The reason any woman we serve is moving toward abortion is because she feels this pregnancy means that her life is “over”. It is seen as a threat to her self-identity, it shatters her sense of who she is, how she understands herself, and her plans for her future - college, career, marriage. She feels she has no real choice. She either saves her own life or the life of the child. She needs to have these fears addressed first. That is why making practical resources and emotional support available to her is so important.

Often, everyone she depended on for support has abandoned her. Those she has placed her trust in the most: her boyfriend, family and friends misguidedly encourage and at times demand abortion as the only solution. This sense of being totally alone can only be overcome by encountering genuine concern for her together with an alleviation of her practical needs. Our hearts must be ready to meet her time and again with renewed reverence, compassion, patience, and generosity.

One of the great challenges in this situation is to help a woman to recognize the deepest desire of her feminine heart, to love and to be loved. We strive to serve her with the Heart of Christ, enabling her to experience her own goodness, her unique beauty, and to believe in her ability to love through all her fears. If she is supported in this way, in time, her heart will naturally turn to her child. Delight in her!

“Perfect love casts out all fear.” (1Jn 4:18)
ENNOBLING DECISIONS...

...that transform fear into hope, sadness into joy, and death into life.

When Racquel came to our convent about five years ago, she had made a choice for life. Despite the difficulties surrounding her pregnancy, she had decided to walk the route of truth. As she watched God provide for her, and witnessed her own growing capacity to love and rejoice in the way her life was unfolding, she was able to spontaneously reach out to others with that same hope for victory. She, and four others, will never be the same.

How did you find out that you were pregnant?

I was not supposed to be able to have children because of physical problems. I went to the doctor because I thought I was sick from the shrimp I ate at a little Chinese restaurant in the city. When the doctor told me I was pregnant I didn’t believe him. I told him that was impossible. I asked him to do another test and paid extra for them to rush it. I sat right by the doorway of the lab where they do the blood work. I was nervous and scared. The test confirmed that I was pregnant and I was in shock. I said thank you and left. I was in a daze. Then I walked and walked and walked from Flatbush to Bedford-Stuyvesant.

I was saying in my head, “I don’t want to have this baby. This is not the way it’s supposed to be. This wasn’t how my life was supposed to turn out.” My Mom and Dad instilled high ideals and hopes in me. I was their princess. I was going to get married and have a house on the Hudson with the automatic garage door opener, kids and a dog named Rover if I wanted it.

As I was walking up to my apartment, debating with myself as to what I should do, I got the strength to accept this baby no matter how difficult it would be.

How did you come to know the Sisters of Life?

I had a good job but I got sick during my pregnancy and was in and out of the hospital so I couldn’t work. My mother was in Trinidad at the time when my money ran out. She had been a social worker in New York and had the Sisters of Life in her Rolodex. Finally, I broke down and called the convent because I was too proud to go on welfare. They invited me to come over and talk with one of the Sisters — she had the gentlest eyes I’ve ever seen. It was great to talk with her. She made me feel good and strong in the decision I had made to have this baby. I was doing the right thing.

Ever since carrying Lyam it’s been amazing, the nicest things happen to me. The Sisters say it’s God’s providence. Like the day I was going to talk with the Sisters, I had no money so I had to ask someone to swipe me in with their metro card to get on the subway. When I got off, I was
What was it like to live at Sacred Heart?

The Sisters open their doors to a bunch of women in very difficult circumstances and basically say, “We love you. We care about you. We’re here for you.” At first I thought they were crazy, then you begin to relax – eat, sleep and come up with a plan for the future. By the end you see that it’s a beautiful expression of what it means to be a woman on the deepest level. Women who didn’t know me could look at me and say, “Come and stay with us,” and ask, “What do you need? I’m here for you.” They clothed me, fed me, held my hand and gave me a hug when I needed someone. I thought, “If they could do that for me, a grown woman; I can do it for my child.” My sacrifice is nothing in comparison with the gift of my son. He’s not only my child; he’s a child of God.

What I feel now towards the Sisters is more than thank you. What I have been given is beyond that. Now I have moments where I will meet people in need, and I don’t have much, but I will reach out and give what I can. Not because I really know them, it’s because someone has given me so much, that I have to find somewhere to give it back to somebody. For example, I made a quilt for a young woman in my building who is having a baby on her own. Where did I learn how to make quilts? Sr. Mary Karen taught me. Every time I pick up a needle and thread and sew something - who do I think of? I think of Sr. Mary Karen. Then there is Sr. Mary Clare and her giggle. She looks like she’s about 12 and she is so refreshing to be with because we live in a world that has lost so much of innocence. Everything can seem contaminated, so it’s refreshing to know that there is a spot somewhere where you can just relax and take off all your armor, sit down, and if you have to cry for two hours, so be it. If you want to laugh for two hours or just be alone, so be it.

How has Lyam changed you?

If raising Lyam is my sole purpose in life – I’m happy. I would not have been able to say that before. I had big plans that were always connected to material things. This blessing right here (Lyam) is so big, sometimes I don’t even know where my heart gets the room to love my fiancé because I love my son so much. The job of making him grow and discover who he is made to be is so special, so serious. Who cares if I’m wearing five-year-old sneakers or if my jeans have a little hole. What is important in my life is totally different now. Before it was Macy’s, Bloomingdale’s, Lord and Taylor. My mind set has changed and set me on a new course. In my heart I know and can say I would die for my child with no problem, without even a hesitation. I didn’t think I could ever be that unselfish. This journey of becoming a mother has purified me. I’m more open to other people now too. I know that they may be suffering and I try to do what I can to help out.

I hear that you had a life-changing elevator ride while you were pregnant. Can you tell me about it?

I was in the hospital elevator on my way to a doctor’s appointment. Another woman got on with me; I said hello and she burst out crying and told me that she was pregnant. I said, “Congratulations! I’m pregnant too.” She explained that she just couldn’t do it right now; it wasn’t the right time. Then I felt Lyam move and I placed her hand on my belly, “Do you feel that?!”
TO ALL MOTHERS:

“Part of this daily heroism is also the silent but effective and eloquent witness of all those brave mothers who devote themselves to their own family without reserve, who suffer in giving birth to their children and who are ready to make any effort, to face any sacrifice, in order to pass on to them the best of themselves.

...We thank you, heroic mothers, for your invincible love! We thank you for your intrepid trust in God and in his love. We thank you for the sacrifice of your life...In the Paschal Mystery, Christ restores to you the gift you gave him. Indeed, he has the power to give you back the life you gave him as an offering.”

- John Paul II
The Gospel of Life

Happy Mother’s Day!

Precious in His eyes.

A few of the babes at Sacred Heart Convent just “lounging around” together.