

## The Lord chose

to become one with us in every way,  
flesh and blood, one who suffers  
with and for us. In Christ and in  
Christ alone, suffering no longer  
has the last word,  
but love does.

BY HIS  
WOUNDS  
YOU ARE HEALED

(1 Peter 2:24)

# Don't Waste Your Suffering

United with Him, Christ pours mercy and healing from his wounds through ours, out onto a thirsty world.

**Lent greets us** with the exhortation: “repent and believe in the Gospel!” and, with a smudge of ashes, a necessary reminder of the passing emptiness of all that is not of God. The added prayers, fasting and almsgiving are a call to conversion, to clearing the paths of our heart that we may embrace reality more truly. Lent is a time of purification and a time of renewed memory - not just of our sins and shortcomings, but of remembering God’s answer to our desperate need: his Son, Jesus Christ. In coming to redeem us, the Lord chose to become one with us in every way, flesh and blood, one who suffers with and for us.

Suffering is the inevitable result of sin – original, social and personal. In abolishing the reign of sin, the Lord chose to take suffering up as a weapon of love and obedience—defeating sin and death through His Cross. In Christ and in Christ alone, suffering no longer has the last word, but love does.

And yet, how we still suffer! We suffer even the fear of suffering and try to avoid it at almost any cost. And it finds us anyway. Each of us carries a cross - almost always unexpected and seemingly too much. Whatever its cause, suffering is an evil – a lack of the good that ought to be. The good news is that now this evil does not have the last word. In Christ, suffering finds its meaning. Each of us is made to become a gift, and our sufferings, too, can become a gift of love, transformed into a source of life-giving redemption for ourselves and others. In the deepest depths of our pain, our failures and sorrows, the risen Jesus desires to love us with great intimacy, broken heart to broken heart. United with Him, He pours mercy and healing from his wounds through ours, out onto a thirsty world.

One of the most powerful sources of untapped energy in the world is found in suffering. Cardinal O’Connor used to exhort: “Do not waste your suffering!” Each silent offering of pain, vulnerability, abandonment releases a powerful dose of merciful and healing love into the world, converting hearts, giving strength, drawing people back to God and each other.

“Suffering passes, having suffered never passes.” If lived with reliance on Christ and supported by others, “having suffered” is one of the surest ways to human understanding and empathy. Passing through the

inevitable fires of sufferings, one can almost wish to suffer again, if only for the blessings, graces and growth in character, the capacity for love and wisdom which accompany suffering when lived with Christ.

In this edition of our newsletter we share stories from some of “our heroes” – those for whom suffering has been the royal road to God; the inevitable journey one must take to find peace of heart; and, the path which has led to reconciliation, solidarity and love in marriage and family life. Each of the articles opens our eyes to the power of God’s presence to hold us up in our suffering, and the potential suffering with grace holds to transform our hearts and our lives. Suffering is but prelude to healing, wholeness and strength.

Together let us live Lent well, that we may rejoice in New Life at Easter!



*M. Agnes*

One of the most powerful sources of untapped energy in the world is found in suffering.



# MY BROTHER, Harold

When you  
are weak,  
It is then  
that you  
are strong.

**A brilliant mind,** a generous loving heart, blazing zeal, and an utterly mischievous sense of humor are the marks of my brother. He also happens to have Duchene Muscular Dystrophy, a degenerative disease, which weakens all the muscles starting from childhood. I have witnessed his physical suffering, but amid bearing a heavy cross, the strength of his spirit and the joy he radiates would state otherwise.

While many experiences and moments of grace have paved the way for me to seek a deeper union with Christ, I know it is in large part my brother's witness of faith, love and deep trust in his Creator that allowed me to open my heart to God's call and continues to give me the strength and courage to persevere.

~Henrietta (Sisters of Life postulant)

## What was life like for you growing up?

I was diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy when I was five years old, but it wasn't until I was 7 or 8 that I started to notice a difference between me and the other kids. I was slower and couldn't run or jump. A lot of people would tease me and make fun of the way I would walk. School was horrible for me. I started to want to be separate from others because they didn't understand me.

## How did your disability affect you and the way you viewed yourself?

In high school I became depressed because I had difficulty dealing with my disability. It affected me emotionally, socially, and worst of all spiritually. I began to medicate my pain with sin. I thought no one, including God, wanted anything to do with me and had temptations to despair. During this period of darkness I cultivated habitual mortal sin. I would go to confession out of habit whenever my mother encouraged me to go but I didn't go with contrition. I had the attitude that I would continue to sin and I could go back to confession. It frightens me now when I look back at this.

## What shook you out of this darkness?

One day about ten years ago, Mom called a priest from our parish to talk to me and to hear my confession. I was totally blown away. After the priest heard my confession we talked about each sin and he addressed the root of the problem. This was the first time anyone ever took the time to help me see what was habitually leading me to sin. I felt sincere contrition that I had not felt in a long time. After my confession the priest gave me Holy Communion. He held up the Host before me and said, "Harold, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." My jaw dropped because the priest said it with such conviction. Suddenly I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that this was God. I didn't realize before that it was truly Jesus' flesh. It is Him! When I said 'Amen,' I began to weep. Then the priest asked if he could give me a hug; I felt like God was embracing me. When he left, I just sat there weeping profusely. I didn't want to sin again. I felt like I was clean, like someone who is off drugs.

## How did this experience of God's love for you change how you viewed yourself?

I had a friend who was Muslim with whom I would discuss the Faith. To him the Incarnation was blasphemy, that God would humiliate himself by becoming a human being. But I

saw this as a sign of His love, that because He is almighty, and all love, He would become so little for us. People may say God doesn't know what I am going through; without the Incarnation, they might be justified in saying so. God is all-powerful and yet He is willing to get his hands dirty. He proves His greatness by becoming weak and small. He chose to suffer with me: Emmanuel, God with us. He knows everything that I am going through. We are never alone. After I realized Jesus is in the Eucharist, my doubts and difficulties began to subside. I began to love myself.

## When did you understand that suffering has meaning and can be redemptive?

In the year 2000, my family and I made a pilgrimage to Lourdes; it was the greatest experience of my life. In

Lourdes, people with disabilities are like the VIPs. No one had ever shown me such dignity before.

When we arrived, a young man with a disability walked over to me, smiled, and gave me a bottle of Lourdes water. I felt that it was Jesus Himself welcoming me to Lourdes. The Lord was shining through him to me. He seemed to say to me, "In spite of this, I can still be joyful...I can love. Go and do the same." I was moved to tears.

While we were there, a priest gave a homily on redemptive suffering. He began by saying, "There are a lot of suffering faces here. I want to explain why God allows innocent people to suffer."

I was so happy; this was the question I needed an answer to! He said God only allows suffering in order that a greater good may come out of it. I was stunned. This became the key to my understanding.

## How did you learn to accept your suffering?

I realized it can be profitable. I realized it has meaning. The priest spoke of Jesus on the cross, and it dawned on me that the worst thing that ever happened is depicted on the crucifix. God was murdered by His own creation. Why did God allow this, this most painful death? God wanted our redemption to happen in this way, through suffering. I learned in that hour, God allows suffering for a greater good to come from it.

I know that God reveals Himself to me in my sufferings. If I could walk, perhaps I would not be able to find God in the same way. I discovered God because of my disease, because

**Suffering, which is present under so many different forms in our human world, is also present in order to unleash love in the human person, that unselfish gift of one's "I" on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer. The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for... another world: the world of human love.**

(JPII, SD #29)

of the struggles that I went through. Our suffering can make us holy. If the Eternal Father allowed Jesus to suffer on the cross, it was to bring about the greatest good that ever happened. God allowed the worst thing to happen so that the greatest good could come out of it. "If we suffer with Him we will rise with Him." If we suffer we can be with Jesus on the cross, and if we are with Jesus on the cross, then our suffering also can be used to bring about the greatest good, saving souls.

### **So your suffering has drawn you closer to God?**

I am in a wheelchair precisely because God loves me. In Lourdes I learned about identification with Christ, not just imitation. "I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me." In my suffering Jesus allows me to be like Him on the cross. My disability is my cross. It is how I enter into the mystery of redemption.

I realized our vocation, the mystery of human life, the reason for existence, is Jesus Christ. We live to be Jesus. God allowed me to suffer that I might become a saint. It is ultimately the love of God, what more could He do for me than make me a saint?

### **How do you live out this vision of redemptive suffering in your daily life?**

St. Therese has helped me with that! This little girl, who was only 24 when she died, did little things with great love. Who would have thought, little things would be a way to holiness? When I drop my books for example, it's difficult. But it's not the worst thing that could happen to me. The worst thing that could happen to me is losing my soul.

When I am suffering I think of Our Lady...everyday I say to God, 'I am all yours and everything that I have is yours.' Christ gives value and meaning to everything. We can offer everything to Him. When I have nothing to offer Him, I offer Him that nothing. When I fail or do not suffer well, I offer Him that as well. I finally realized that this whole time I had something of tremendous value. It's something amazing, something redemptive. My sufferings can be beneficial for someone else. At Mass I consciously offer my sufferings with Jesus through the Holy Spirit to the Father.

### **Often people will pray for something and if it does not happen, they think God does not hear them.**

I still pray for a physical healing if that is God's will, but not my will but His be done. I have come to realize that Jesus always answers our prayers, just not the way we would always like. He sometimes says no, or not yet. When I went to Lourdes I prayed for a physical healing, but I was given something much greater, a spiritual healing. After confession I went to the baths; I prayed, 'Thy will be done. Please give me whatever you want to give me.' I felt interiorly healed and free. I felt completely transformed and at peace. I was still suffering, but I was healed spiritually because I

could finally accept my suffering and see in it my path to holiness.

### **What has been the most difficult part of living with your disability?**

The hardest part is letting others help me. Especially for me as a man I want to do things for other people; it is intrinsic to my nature. So when people do things

for me, to some extent, it's humiliating. I am weak, but being in Jesus, when I am weak, I am strong. Jesus shows me how to love. To love is not wimpy. By offering my sufferings I am loving. I am doing a very manly thing in Christ.

### **What would you say to someone else who is suffering?**

I want other people who suffer to realize there is tremendous meaning and value to be found in it, and that they have great dignity and that God loves them. God wants them to identify themselves with Him. If you let Him enter in, He will make it light. We carry our yoke with Jesus, He takes one side and even when we don't feel Him, He is there. I want others to know that there is hope. Your suffering is going to go away and we are going to have eternal happiness where there will be no more suffering. This life is like a race, and God wants us to become champions. But you can't become a champion if the gold medal is just handed to you. What merit is that? Live Christ! If we live Christ, He will get us there. He is the victor over sin, suffering and death. If we are in Him we are also victors. He doesn't want us to be sore losers. I want to run the race to win.



**F**or more inspiration visit Harold's blog at: [www.chariotfire.com](http://www.chariotfire.com)

# Why Suffering?

**This question** pondered for millennia by saints, sinners, philosophers and ordinary folk seems beyond human comprehension.

What we do know is that in the beginning God created man with the capacity to love in freedom, but with that came the responsibility to choose wisely and the ability to choose wrongly, to act against our true and ultimate good and the good of others.



Suffering found entry into the world through the sin of our first parents, who doubting God's goodness and failing to place their trust in Him, chose instead to abuse the gift of their freedom and turn away from their Father and Creator.

The painful consequences of every one of our personal sins affects not only the one who commits it, but ripples out touching many others. It has been said, "God whispers in our pleasures but shouts in our pains. Pain is His megaphone to rouse a dulled world" (C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*). This voice of pain calls forth repentance, conversion, penance and reparation.

## God's Response:

Christ wishes to answer man from the Cross...The answer which comes through this sharing in the sufferings of Christ... is above all a call. It is a vocation...

Before all else, He says: "Follow me!

**Come!** Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world!"

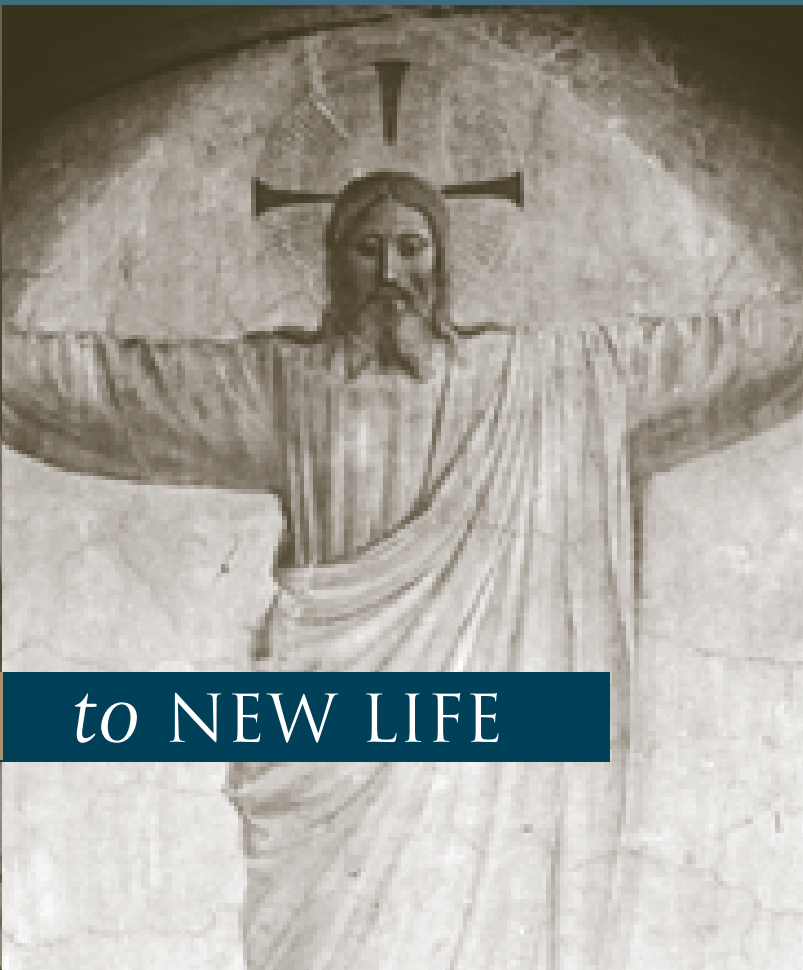
(JPII, On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, #26)

## FROM DEATH

There is also a more troubling type of suffering, that of the innocent: children born with disease, sufferers of accidents or natural disasters, victims left scarred by the sinfulness of others... and the list goes on and on. Certainly, God does not send suffering to us; in itself it is an evil. But in His Providence, within which each of us is always held safe and secure, He permits it to happen. In permitting, He also assures it will never be the worst. God will bring goodness out of suffering. Isn't this why the crucifix is the most powerful symbol in Christianity? Out of the greatest evil, God brings the greatest good.

**"Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies it bears much fruit." Self-giving love is the highroad to transformation, new life beyond imagining, and ultimately resurrection.**

When faced with suffering, a wise old priest once said, the ultimate question is not, 'Why?' but 'What?'. What am I to do in response to this suffering? What is the Lord asking of me in these particular circumstances? And then the work of faith and hope and love begin.



to NEW LIFE

## Divine Mercy

The message of Divine Mercy is simple... God desires to pour His merciful healing love into our hearts. It is part of our human nature that we want to put our best foot forward or present only the lovely wonderful parts of ourselves to God. Yet, our sin and our misery is what He longs to redeem. He can heal the most wounded broken parts of our hearts if we approach God with humility and openness. His mercy is greater, more abundant, and more powerful than our sins.

The Chaplet of Divine Mercy is a new devotion that calls upon the Father of Mercies through the power of the Passion of Christ. Our Lord assured St. Faustina that those who pray the chaplet will be embraced by His mercy during their lifetime and especially at the hour of their death. A plenary indulgence may be obtained on the Sunday after Easter, Divine Mercy Sunday. For more information on this devotion visit: [www.thedivinemercy.org](http://www.thedivinemercy.org)



## Coming Home

by Carol Stockley

**I hadn't been to confession since high school.** Having grown up in the 70's I was of the thinking that I didn't need a priest to forgive me of my sins. I could just ask God each night before bed. I didn't think about it as the kids were growing up and then I was too ashamed and embarrassed to go because it had been so long.



The Pope was in New York and we were at a prayer vigil in Manhattan when Richard, my husband said, "Lets go to confession," and I said, "I don't think so." I was in a cold sweat. I was so nervous, and yet, I knew if I didn't go then, it was over. I would never go.

So I went and I realized that the priest is only there to help me, to help me return to the state of grace. It was such a great feeling to talk to him. He was comforting. I walked out of there and I wept. It was like I had come home, like a burden had been lifted and I had been freed. I felt clean.

"Every time you go to confession, immerse yourself in My mercy, with great trust, so that I may pour the bounty of My grace upon your soul. When you approach the confessional, know this, that I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest, but I myself act in your soul. Here the misery of the soul meets the God of mercy... If their trust is great, there is no limit to My generosity."

(Jesus' words to St. Faustina,  
Divine Mercy in My Soul #1602)

Jesus I trust in you.



### Sacred Heart of Jesus: Holy Respite

Those we serve come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Through the journey of motherhood and living in the spiritual setting of the convent, many women come to know the Lord. This Easter we will have the great joy of welcoming four women and their babies, who have been our guests at Sacred Heart, into the Catholic Church.

Phillipa, a former guest from 2003 now working at the Family Life/ Respect Life Office, entered the Church this past October. Sr. Mary Loretta, her proud godmother, witnessed Phillipa receiving the sacraments of baptism, holy communion and confirmation all at the same Mass.

### Phillipa reflects on her new life:

"I was inspired by the Sisters and my daughter; I wanted to offer her what I was not brought up with. Now that I am in the Church, my values are completely different. In receiving the sacraments, I have a much deeper understanding of my own goodness, and my life is centered on Christ. I know I missed out on a lot growing up and I have been given a second chance, and I want to offer all of this to my daughter.

It all began at Sacred Heart, seeing what it means to be Catholic. When I received the sacraments I felt the grace penetrate me. I felt like I was given a new life. Knowing the Sisters has changed my life. When I went to Sacred Heart, I was scared and alone and had nothing. I left with everything, my daughter, my faith, and friends. I have been given so much. My pregnancy was the beginning of a whole new world.

Now, in my work, I have the opportunity to help pregnant women. Each time I speak with a pregnant woman, I can see myself in her. I understand completely her fears and her confusion because I have been there; and I am able to offer her hope."



### Visitation Mission

Our Visitation Mission has the privilege of serving more than 500 pregnant women each year. The Sisters and our co-workers provide these women with the practical, emotional, and spiritual support they need throughout their pregnancy and after.

### We could use your help!

In order to serve these courageous women, we could use: maternity clothes, gift cards for groceries and for maternity clothes, gift bags, baby strollers and baby carriers. Donations can be sent or brought to our Visitation Convent in Manhattan.

### Villa Maria - Women's Retreat

Recently we began a new series of retreats for young women ages 18-35 at Villa Maria Guadalupe retreat center. One young woman who attended commented, "For me the women's retreat was a revelation of God's love. I used to view my sin as a hindrance to God, and I would hide that part of myself from Him. I clung to it and didn't allow God to love me there. I came to know the unconditional love of God, and it changes everything. I now have a deep desire for prayer and a much greater awareness of His presence, in everything and everyone." - Jacinta Schmid (Calgary, Canada)



## Hope and Healing Post-Abortion Retreats

At current abortion rates, it is estimated that one in three women in the United States will have had an abortion by age forty-five. 8 in 10 women obtaining an abortion report a religious affiliation: 43% are Protestant, 27% are Catholic, 8% are another religion. But it isn't just women who are affected: the list includes spouses, fathers of the child, children, other family members, and friends. Most of us know someone who has been affected by an abortion. But too often the grief is shrouded in shame and secrecy, and those affected feel utterly alone.

We would love to gather all those suffering after abortion and bring them into contact with Jesus, the Divine Mercy, through our Hope and Healing Retreats! We have learned over the years, that it is in the presence of the merciful gaze of Christ, that true and lasting healing occurs.

The following are two stories of such healing.

# THE JOURNEY OF HEALING together

We had been married a little over two years when my wife "Ashley" and I were at a self-help seminar. In order to strip yourself bare of any encumbrances, you had to tell someone you love something about yourself that was never revealed before. Ashley came up to tell me her secret and said, "Before I met you, I had an abortion." I remember being shocked, but I replied, "It doesn't matter." I didn't realize how much it would matter. I just pushed it into the back of my mind. Soon we had a baby and continued our life as a family.

We had met through an acquaintance, dated, fell in love, and decided to get married. But there was always something that made me feel that she was holding back. Having worked in the field of counseling for many years, I assumed that the "holding back" was due to her family's alcoholism. It was due to the alcoholism, and so was the decision Ashley had made to abort her first child. We discussed the situation and I suggested that she get involved in AL-ANON. We both felt that this would be the cure-all. But there was still that nagging unmentioned thing that always haunted us.

Then one day we attended a pro-life rally at a local park. There was a lot of negative talk about women who had abortions. Unfortunately, there wasn't any mention of the possibility of forgiveness or God's mercy. When we returned home I will never forget my wife's reaction – she threw herself into a chair, curled up in a ball, and screamed, "I am a murderer! I killed my baby, I killed my baby!"

I didn't know what to do or say. I reached out to Ashley and held her without saying a word. We made an appointment with the priest who ran the Project Rachel program in our diocese. He spent a great deal of time with us. As part of the healing process my wife named her child, wrote a letter to him, and had a Mass offered for him. She also, for the first time in many years, availed

herself of the beautiful Sacrament of Reconciliation. I supported her through the healing process, not so much helping with the decisions, but being there with her to listen and offer support.

Despite her involvement with Project Rachel, and the referrals they gave us for counseling, there was still something drastically wrong. One day while discussing this my wife confided that after realizing what she had done to her first baby, she could not bear the thought of marital intimacy. I felt rejected and hurt. After some time and more conversation I finally started to understand. Ashley still did not feel God's mercy and forgiveness.

Then by what I consider to be a miracle, a very dear friend of ours, who didn't know anything about Ashley's past, invited her to go to a day of recollection conducted by the Sisters of Life. Because of the love and care she experienced, my wife seemed to be making a breakthrough and started to finally be at peace. She began to feel the merciful forgiveness of our loving God. At one of the days of recollection with the Sisters, she heard an amazing woman, Theresa Bonapartis, tell the story of her own abortion. My wife could then say: "I am not alone," and the healing process finally began in earnest.

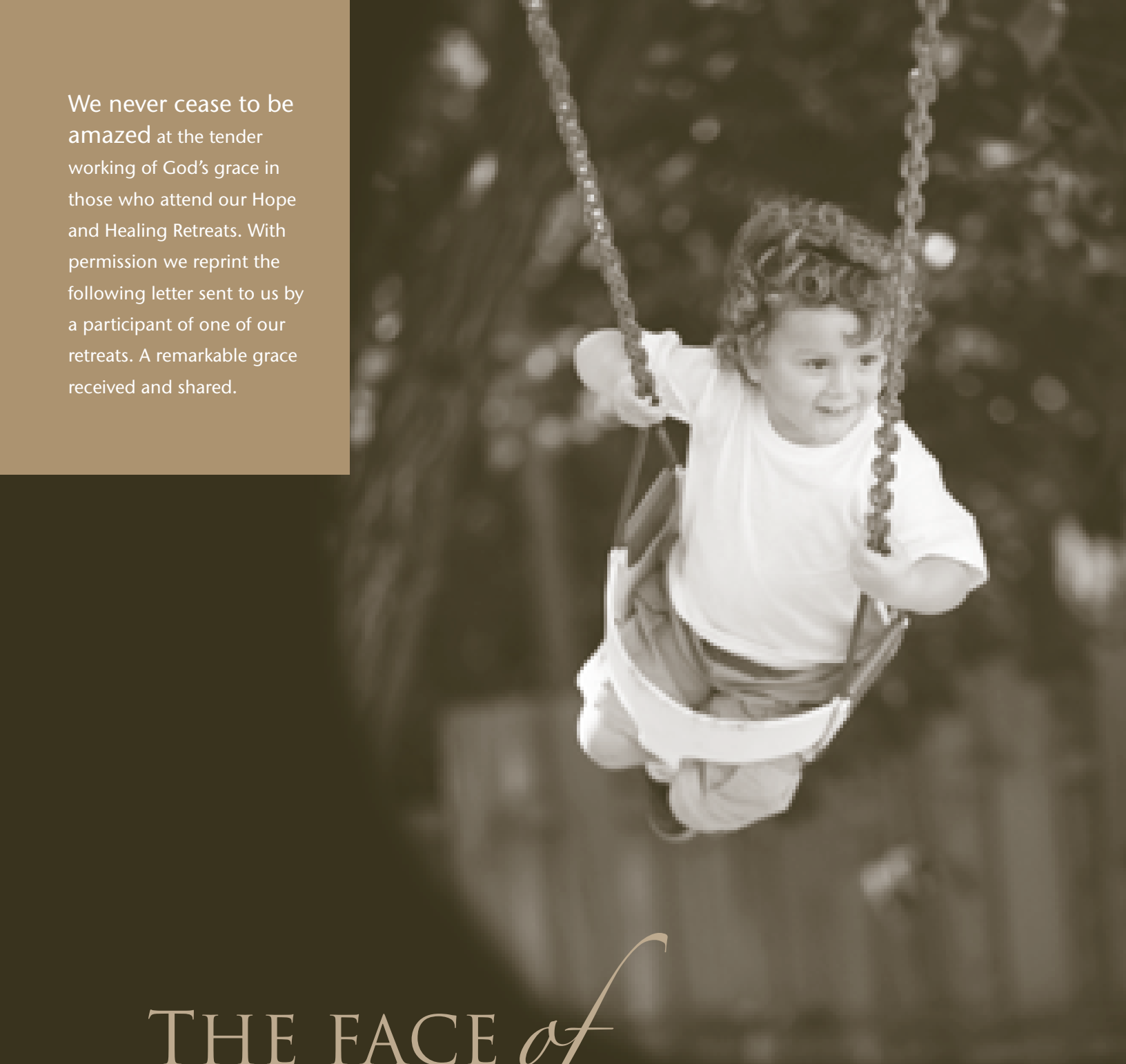
You may say what does this have to do with you, a husband who didn't take part in his wife's past abortion? My answer to that question is: everything. One thing I have discovered during these 29 years of marriage is that something that affects one of us affects both of us. I take my marriage vows seriously, "in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health...to love and honor...all the days of my life." We had to make this journey together.

(Reprinted with permission. Lumina: Hope & Healing After Abortion.)



SIMON LIFTED THE CROSS OFF JESUS' SHOULDERS, AND HELPED HIM BEAR THE HEAVY BURDEN.

We never cease to be amazed at the tender working of God's grace in those who attend our Hope and Healing Retreats. With permission we reprint the following letter sent to us by a participant of one of our retreats. A remarkable grace received and shared.



# THE FACE *of* THOMAS CHRISTOPHER

When God consoles us in our grief and regret

**“When** I was pregnant with my oldest child, I had some very detailed dreams. I dreamed about a beautiful boy who was around three years old. I can still remember his sparkling blue eyes and blonde ringlet curls. He had a delightfully happy smiling face. I even remember his dimples. Somehow I knew that his name was Thomas Christopher. He was in a swing – one of those homemade ones hanging from a tree and was being pushed. Every time the swing drew near, he giggled with joy.

As my pregnancy progressed, I became convinced that I was having a boy and I knew his name. But when I gave birth to a girl, I was bewildered. She was long and lean with a mass of dark, straight hair, and I had no idea what to name her. Of course, I loved her beyond telling, but I remembered my dreams. I had been so sure that I was having a boy; after all, I had seen his face many times in my dreams.



Several years later, I realized I had been dreaming about the child that I had aborted. At the time I was pregnant with my daughter he would have been around three years old. I have come to believe that it was not me pushing my child on that swing. My totally innocent beautiful baby boy was being taken care of by our mother, Mary. In my dreams, I could see hands pushing the swing and Thomas Christopher gazing

at her with pure happiness. My child has been raised in heaven by the perfect mother. I am eternally grateful to Mary. She, with her profound and perfect love, took my child when I had refused to let him be born.

The bitterly profound loss is all mine. I will never feel the touch of my son's hand in mine. I won't see him gaze into my face or feel his arms around me loving me so completely. I cannot nurture him, love him or watch him grow into the man God created him to be. I can barely remember the reason why I chose not to let him live, but I live each day with the loss. My soul yearns for him. My heart grieves and my sadness is inexpressible. Yet in spite of all my pain, I know I have been given a gift. I know my son's face – I have seen it. Thank you, Jesus; thank you, Mary, for showering me with so much undeserved generosity.

Years later, a friend of mine gave me a gift. She was the type of person who entered the gift shop and immediately prayed, “Dear Lord, Blessed Mother, please show me the gift you want my friend to have.” As my friend presented me the gift, she apologized saying, “knowing that you are a convert to the Catholic faith, I wanted you to have something more traditional, but something kept drawing me back to this”...as I opened the gift, she apologized again, saying, “this is not my taste – the frame is

contemporary and the Blessed Mother looks like no other that I have ever seen but I am sure that this is the one I'm suppose to give you.”

The silver framed “contemporary” Madonna and child shows Mary from a side view embracing the child Jesus close to her heart. The baby's eyes are contently closed. He is safe in His mother's arms. Around His face you can clearly see wisps of golden curls.

I am sure that Mary chose this gift for me, through my faith-filled friend, to let me know – mother to mother – that my son is safe with her.”

**For more information  
on Post Abortion Healing**

or to register for a retreat call the Sisters of Life:  
(toll free) 866.575.0075  
or email: [postabortion@sistersoflife.org](mailto:postabortion@sistersoflife.org)

“I would now like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of Mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord...”

-Pope John Paul II (The Gospel of Life #99)

## SISTERS OF LIFE

St. Paul's Convent  
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And he saw and believed.  
-John 20:8

May you and your family this Easter  
experience the joy of the Resurrection.

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