

IMPRINT

A PUBLICATION OF THE SISTERS OF LIFE WINTER ISSUE

...y to the world the Lord has come, Let earth receive her

*We rejoiced at the birth of these precious ones,
whose mothers graced our lives at Sacred Heart of Jesus Convent*

Christ has come.
He comes.
God is with us.
This is the great fact
we step into when
we open our hearts
in prayer and encounter
the same God who
first showed His
human face over
2,000 years ago in
a darkened stable
in Bethlehem.

JOY TO THE WORLD

Christ has come. He comes. God is with us. This is the great fact we step into when we open our hearts in prayer and encounter the same God who first showed His human face over 2,000 years ago in a darkened stable in Bethlehem. God came as a real human being, a carpenter born of Mary, a person one could look in the eyes, recognize and welcome with delight. This human being was also God in the flesh. And He was with us.

What would it have been like for you, for me, to have passed the pregnant Blessed Mother on her daily errands?

And if we had been in Bethlehem at the time of the census – would we have noticed something different about the Holy Family if we were behind them in line?

Christ moved among teeming crowds of people from the time of his earliest days until His Passion and death. Many heard Him preach and teach, many saw Him along the shore or passed Him on the busy streets of Jerusalem. Only some took the time to be “taken” by Him – those who did were eternally changed.

Jesus comes today. He passes us each day, whether we notice or not.

There is an eternal happening beneath the surface busyness of our everyday activities. This is true for each of us, no matter our worries, distractions, past or present failures. These are what we think will keep God at a distance from us, but Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” Nothing can separate us from the love of God. The start of prayer is not personal perfection. The start of prayer is a heart willing to be interrupted by Jesus, willing to welcome Him even into the poverty of an interior manger.

Hear the words of St. Paul anew for you: “The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:5-7). This Christmas, give yourself the gift God longs for you to receive: the peace and joy His Presence alone can bring. “Joy to the World, the Lord has come!”

Many Christmas blessings to you and your loved ones!

In Jesus our Joy,

Mother Agnes Mary
Superior General of the Sisters of Life



Have you ever knelt in prayer, and thought, “Am I doing this right? Should something be happening right now? Is this what it’s supposed to be like?” Or have you watched another pray and wondered, “What is she saying? Is she hearing anything back?”

What is prayer?

It’s all about letting God love you.

Life is messy. But the consoling truth is that all of history revolves around the moment when the Son of God was born in a smelly stable, at midnight, in Bethlehem, in piercing cold. Jesus loves to come into our mess! Nothing is too much for Him. Come as you are...no need to try to clean up your act before approaching Him. He knows us intimately and loves us passionately, even when we find aspects of ourselves that make us feel unlovable. Many of us go for years believing lies about ourselves. All the while, Jesus stands at the door of our heart and knocks, awaiting a response. It is in prayer, this meeting with Christ, that we become whole, and truly ourselves.

God was born in a smelly stable.
God doesn’t mind our messiness.

We live in a culture of distraction and instant gratification, a society of fad diets, workout programs, and minimal requirement spiritualities, with answers to almost any question at the tap of a screen or the click of a mouse. We want responses, results, a measure of success and a reward for our efforts – it is easy to transfer these expectations to our prayer life.

We can only learn to pray by praying. There is no shortcut or one-size-fits-all method, and this is for our benefit. Prayer is a gift to be received. Simply put, prayer is “letting God love you.” It means intentionally stirring up a heightened awareness of His presence and providence, daily. It is a grace, and we need to ask for it.

Here are some thoughts to help you in prayer. ►

Prayer tips:

Permit yourself to picture what is real but unseen, recognizing that God is looking upon you with tender love and can hear you, whether you speak aloud or interiorly. Before you were conceived in the womb, He knew you.

The relationship

[and the meeting of hearts]

Prayer is not necessarily a “feeling” experience.

God knows everything about you. He understands why you act and react, and wants you to experience His loving concern in a way that is deeply personal. This is not necessarily an experience within the realm of “feelings,” nor will it necessarily have immediate effects, but it is no less real. Faith is strengthened as we begin to live what we believe to be true. Like a woman who does not “feel” the presence of her unborn baby in the beginning stages; the hidden child is no less present and growing. So too, the Christ life within us grows quietly and secretly.

God is not a faceless power. He has a Name.

Many people today consider themselves to be spiritual, saying they believe “in a higher being” or “a power greater than themselves.” And truly, God is beyond us! But it is a difficult thing to be in relationship (a mutual exchange of love and communion), with a nameless, faceless, formless “power.” As Christians, we acknowledge that God has revealed Himself as a communion of Love. Our loving Abba, Father, sent His only Son to become one of us, dying “powerless” on the Cross to rescue us from the slavery of sin and death, reuniting us with Him. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can call our Lord by name: Jesus! And we can contemplate His face.

Be real and simple in prayer.

Jesus used a child as the example for His apostles, saying: “The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.” It is best to be little in prayer, saying the simple things to Him that children are taught: “I love you;” “Thank you;” “Help me;” “I’m sorry;” “You are the best in the whole world!” Pray using words that express love, gratitude, petition, contrition, praise and adoration.

Only God understands you completely.

We will never be completely understood by another human person. It is impossible to fully express those things within you that are most sacred, painful, or intimate. This is God’s divine prerogative; He understands you completely at every moment, in every circumstance. To use St. Teresa of Avila’s turn of phrase, “God alone never changes.”

Events that remind us of our reliance on God.

There is more to life than what we see and touch, and certain experiences confirm this, such as birth, death, love, illness, or loss of any kind. These events can strip us of any sense of personal achievement or control. They lead us more deeply into the life of prayer because we are faced with something infinite, or inexplicable. We find ourselves humbled, poor, and reliant on God.

No sooner than we say the name of Jesus, He comes. And this coming is unique, using our attractions, touching on our needs and insecurities. A word of scripture may hit you as if hearing it for the first time, intended just for you. He can come in the kindness of a stranger, in a homily, witnessing a mother’s gentleness with her child, a moment of undeniable peace before the Blessed Sacrament, the poverty of a man with “no place to lay his head,” a song that stirs you in the aisle of a grocery store! He comes to prune and mold, to forgive and purify, to console and teach, to heal and strengthen - in a word, He comes to love you.

Here are some unique places we meet him ➡

4 places God meets you.



Joe: If I don't go to Communion, I'm not right.

"In college I drifted away from the faith. When I was 25, I got married to JoAnne. A month after we got married, my brother Bobby, who was my best man, was killed in a car accident. Six months later, my wife, who was pregnant, was killed in a car accident by a drunk driver. She was a nurse coming home from night shift on New Year's Day. In prayer I was asking Jesus for a sign that JoAnne was okay. I lit a candle at her gravesite on a windy March day, and that night when I went back in the snow and rain, it was still lit. That period of my life was like the poem

"Footprints in the Sand" – the Lord carried me through. JoAnne and Bobby brought me back to the faith more than anything. It took a long time and a lot of healing to come out of that. A couple years later, Jesus introduced me to my wife Maureen, at a Valentine's Day party.

I began to go to daily Mass right after 9/11. I saw so many friends lose their loved ones, and that was something that I had experienced twenty years prior so I knew where they were. I would come back from receiving Communion, and I would have this unexplainable, emotional gratefulness, to the point of crying and trying to hide my tears in the pew. I was just so grateful. You leave Mass and your day is changed. The days with the bumps aren't bad. Even relationships are changed. I would feel so warm inside, and it would be flowing out of me. You want more of that!

Mass is the first thing for me every day. If I don't go to Communion, I'm not right. After years of going daily, the relationship grows and expands – like how you're praying. How do you pray after Communion? A priest advised me, "Tell the Lord you love Him." Ask His forgiveness, for help for yourself and others to do His will. Pray for the people you're in Mass with and for everyone on your prayer list. You become inclusive of others. Now I have Maureen to go with me all the time too. It's the most important thing in the day. When your best friend is there all the time, it's pretty easy.

People wonder why I'm so happy. Those who know me know why! It doesn't happen every day or every week, but I do find myself crying because I am so in love with the Bread of Life. It's just so special. The best part is how the relationship develops more and more. It's not like you get to a point where... that's it! I find that amazing. He's just pouring out love everywhere. More love than all the hurt in our lives."

– Joe Emmert is a general contractor who volunteers regularly at our Motherhouse, where he helped in the renovation of the chapel. His own humble, joyful manner of service points to a deep, personal relationship with the Lord.

The Eucharistic Christ is the same Christ placed in the manger by his mother because there was no room in the inn. It is the Christ that had no place to lay His head; this is the Christ placed in the tomb by Joseph of Arimathea. It is the same Christ! It is the same Christ! - John Cardinal O'Connor

1

The Eucharist

The Eucharist is perhaps the most powerful way we can encounter Jesus on earth. Many of us grow up knowing that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist: body, blood, soul and divinity. But it can be hard to take the step from this knowledge about Him to a personal relationship with Him. He humbles Himself to become vulnerable in the forms of bread and wine, to become one with us in Holy Communion and to dwell in our hearts. This is why the prayer of Eucharistic Adoration deeply heals and transforms us. In Adoration, when the Eucharist is exposed in a monstrance, we are face to face with Jesus, who offers His Heart to us at every moment. He comes to us in this way so we can approach him unafraid. He remains little and vulnerable to show us we can safely reveal our weaknesses to him. Gazing upon Him, we meet His loving gaze upon us.





Jillian: The priest said, “Welcome home,” and I got full body chills.

“During a Spring Break Retreat two years ago, I experienced this draw towards Confession. I felt like it was an invitation...but I had no idea what was going on. I hadn’t been to Confession for 12 years, since my First Communion. It was something I feared, but I knew I needed to go. I knew God was calling me, and He wanted me to be closer to Him. I felt dumb - I didn’t know what to say or do. I felt like the worst person, and I was crying when I got into the Confessional. The priest said, “Welcome home,” and I got full body chills. It was so powerful to confess my sins to another person, a person with authority in the Church. I confessed my whole life... and it was life changing! I felt chiseled to the core of who I am. I was relieved of the heaviness I had been carrying for so long. I felt like an entirely new person. I could not stop smiling. From then on, I had a different outlook on life. I knew God’s abundant love and mercy. He will always forgive.”

— Jillian Stockley is from New Jersey. After the Spring Break Retreat she transferred to the Franciscan University of Steubenville, where she is now a junior pursuing a degree in communications.

2 Confession

In the Sacrament of Confession, we encounter the merciful love of Jesus. When Jesus gave His apostles the ability to forgive sins in His name, He did so to forgive, heal and free us. In this Sacrament, Jesus desires to remove the burden of our sins and set us free to love and to be loved by him. Speaking about this Sacrament, John Paul II taught: “Confession is an act of honesty and courage - an act of entrusting ourselves, beyond sin, to the mercy of a loving and forgiving God.”



Sandy and Clarke : Stepping out of yourself is worth it, because that’s where God meets you.

“Sr. Magdalene called and asked if we could host Laura,* an 18-year-old single pregnant woman, for a weekend, and we ended up inviting her to stay and live with us. We had never done something like this before, but we raised four children, so we thought, how different can it be? We decided to trust our Lord and

go one step at a time. Our experience hosting Laura confirmed the same things in our life that were happening in hers, such as a desire to grow in our own faith and trust, to know God’s merciful love and to strive for deeper conversions. Not only did God pursue Laura, but He also pursued us through Laura. Our hearts have been opened more – the fearfulness has been wiped away and replaced with trust. We’re just hoping that this will be an eternal chain reaction of goodness that will never end. Stepping out of yourself is worth it, because you will never know how many people are touched by your yes. And that’s where God meets you.”

– Clarke and Sandy Herbert reside in California and have opened their home to young pregnant women we are serving in our Visitation Mission.

3

Charity—Reaching out

Jesus dwells in a unique, hidden way in those whose lives are forgotten, ignored, and vulnerable. It can be easy to remain closed in on ourselves, within the comfortable boundaries that we set for our relationships and lives. But the Lord invites us to take the risk of self-giving love of others, trusting that He is there.

In our society today, there are countless ways to serve the vulnerable, such as volunteering at a pregnancy center or visiting with residents at a nursing home. Ask the Lord in prayer for guidance. Share with Him your desires to take a step of faith and you may be surprised where you find Him.

* Name changed for anonymity.

Monica: Focusing on that one piece of Scripture calmed me down.

"When my husband and I found out we would have a hard time conceiving, I was tempted to feel rejected by God. I found it difficult to pray with so much anxiety. A priest suggested I reflect on a Scripture passage that encouraged me, Isaiah 41: 9-10, where the Lord says: 'I have chosen you.... I am with you, do not be dismayed.... I will strengthen you and help you and uphold you with my victorious right hand.' I can't even begin to tell you how much that Word spoke to me. Focusing on that one piece of Scripture calmed me down. My relationship with Christ became richer and richer. Through my experience, I learned that God wants to talk to us in an extremely personal way, love us in a personal way. How do you come to know that? You don't automatically feel the connection. It is grace. I think the only way to come to know that is to give Scripture a try. I know now that the Word of God is a love letter to each human being. We come to know that clearly when we read the Scriptures."

– Monica Herber and her husband Nathan are actively involved in the leadership of Frassati Young Adult Fellowship, based in New York City. She works as a nurse and serves in music ministry for various events.



4

The Word of God

Even though we hear the Word of God every Sunday, the idea of personal prayer with Scripture can be intimidating. Yet when we open our hearts and desire to encounter the Lord here, we find Him, especially in the Gospels. God's Word is alive, and He desires to speak to us personally in the nitty-gritty aspects of our daily lives. Read a section of the Gospel and notice what strikes you, then let it sink in and nourish you. Jesus speaks to each one of us now, today, through His Word.

Try this with Scripture:

Prayer can be fueled by meditating on instances in the Gospels where men and women encountered Jesus in person. Noting His response to their weakness and desires, we can see how easily the Heart of our Savior can be won over by trust and good will! Taking their words from these single encounters with Him, I make them my own, and begin a new conversation with Jesus, today.

Martha: "Lord, do you not care...?" (Lk. 10:40)

"The one that you love is sick." (Jn. 11:3)

Philip: "Show us the Father." (Jn. 14:8)

Blind Bartimaeus: "Have pity on me... I want to see." (Mk. 10: 47,51)

The man with the demoniac child:

"I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:24)

The good thief: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Lk. 23:42)

Simon Peter: "Lord, you know all things; you know I love you." (Jn. 21:17)

The rich young man:

"What must I do to gain eternal life?" (Mk. 10:17)

The disciples who left:

"This saying is hard; who can accept it?" (Jn. 6:60)

The Blessed Mother: "They have no wine." (Jn. 2:3)

The anointing of Jesus: tears of repentance (Lk. 7:37-50)

If you prefer to have Jesus address you, He poses many questions to our hearts, or lends us the means to receive His gifts.

"What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk. 10:50)

"Who do you say that I am?" (Lk. 9:20)

"Stretch out your hand." (Mt. 12:13)

"What are you seeking?" (Jn. 1:38)

"Your sins are forgiven." (Mt. 9:2)

"Do you believe I am able to do this?" (Mt. 9:28)

"Do you love me?" (Jn. 21: 15-17)

"Why are you weeping?" (Jn.20:15)

"Do you realize what I have done for you?" (Jn. 13:12)

w e l c o m i n g

Our new

Maria Cristina Duque De Seras

Hometown: Seville, Spain

College/Major:

University of Seville, Biology

Before entering: I was a Quality and International Logistics Manager at a solar plant in California.

Fun Facts: I've known how to dance the Flamenco since I was four.



Anne Marie Warner

Hometown: Needham, MA

College/Major: Bentley University, BA Corporate Finance & Accounting; MA Accountancy

Before entering: I worked in public accounting and was also involved with Pure in Heart, a non-profit young adult community.

Fun Facts: I love to travel and studied abroad in Barcelona, Spain.



Beth Wenck

Hometown: Allentown, PA

College/Major:

DeSales University, BS Nursing

Before entering: I was working as a night shift RN at Lehigh Valley Hospital on a cardiac unit.

Fun Facts: I've been riding horses since I was 10 and spent most of my time in grade school at the barn.



Cara Benninger

Hometown: Durham, Ontario, Canada

College/Major:

University of Guelph, BA Classical Languages

Before entering: I was working at a library and tutoring various subjects, including Latin.

Fun Facts: I have been playing the harp for 10 years.

Christen Furka

Hometown: Secaucus, NJ

College/Major: St. Peter's College, BA English & Philosophy; Rutgers School of Law: Juris Doctorate

Before entering: I was practicing corporate law in NYC.

Fun Facts: I'm an identical twin. My mother did not know she was having twins until two weeks before she gave birth.

Margaret Schuetz

Hometown: Raleigh, NC

College/Major: Franciscan University of Steubenville, BA History & English Writing

Before entering:

I was studying hard and playing tennis! I graduated in May 2013.

Fun Facts: I gave tours of an 18th century governor's palace, dressed in costume!

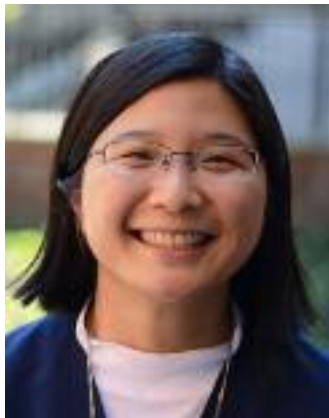
postulants

Jordan Rehder

Hometown: Kennewick, Washington
College/Major: Washington State Univ.
BA Elementary Education
Before entering: I was teaching
3rd grade at a Catholic school.
Fun Facts: I have 54 first cousins.

**Mega Wiyana**

Hometown: Sydney, Australia
College/Major: University of Sydney,
BA Gender Studies & Religion /Social Work
Before entering: I was a case manager
working with children in foster care.
Fun Facts: I was a sushi chef.

**Sheena Byrne**

Hometown: Albuquerque, NM
College/Major: University of St. Thomas,
Houston, TX, BA Psychology/Marketing,
Before entering: I was a missionary
with the Fellowship of Catholic University
Students (FOCUS) for almost 4 years.
Fun Facts: I'm the oldest of 7 children.

**Megan Rhodes**

Hometown: Whitesville, KY
College/Major: Murray State Univ.
BS Chemistry/Biology
Before entering: I was teaching
Chemistry at Owensboro Catholic H.S.
Fun Facts: I'm named after the
actress who played Anne in Anne of
Green Gables. I love square dancing
and playing bluegrass music!

Jessica Langrell

Hometown: Sydney, Australia
College/Major: Univ. of Notre Dame,
Australia, BA Theology
Before entering: I was working as
Chaplaincy Convenor (campus ministry)
at the Univ. of Notre Dame, Australia.
Fun Facts: I walked the Camino
de Santiago de Compostela
with a friend and it changed my life!

Jillian Wayland

Hometown: Faribault, MN
College/Major: University of St. Thomas,
BA Catholic Studies, Theology minor
Before entering: Before university I was a
part of NET (National Evang. Team)
Ministries, and traveled the country
for two years leading retreats for teens.
Fun Facts: I spent a lot of time riding
around on a ripstick—a cross between a
skateboard and a snowboard.

Sacred Heart of Jesus Convent in Manhattan:

A place of hope and compassion for pregnant women in need

Manhattan. Few other places in the world crowd so much into so little space - extremes of sights, sounds, colors, cultures are found here, in close quarters. Seeming contradictions are everywhere: modern skyscrapers press up against historic architecture; passing fads press up against timeless beauty; sin presses up against grace.

Our street is no different.

One corner of the street boasts a window front with two pink chairs perched below a sign: "Psychic Readings \$10." The other corner is taken up by a windowless building with a large lighted pornographic image mounted above. Two doormen whisk costumers through black doors with red tacky hearts. Between these scenes of confusion and allurements, in the middle of the block, are two warm, glowing red lights that never go out. One, flickering next to a gold box in Sacred Heart Church, can be seen burning, steady and unchanging, from the street. The second, ablaze before the Eucharist in our convent, is hidden from view, yet just steps away from passersby. Jesus remains, waiting, loving, calling, in the midst of darkness.

There is no place the Sisters of Life would rather be. Here a ray of the light and gentle power of Christ shines. Here we welcome young mothers and their children, here we see neighbors pause for a moment to pray before the statue of Our Lady in the garden, here we learn the names of countless homeless men and women, here we meet those caught between two corners, longing for the light. God comes, He remains, He waits. What a privilege it is to wait with Him.

Casey's Story ▶

The night I gave my life to the Baby Jesus
and left the club forever

*"We all have some of these knots and we can ask in our hearts of hearts:
What are the knots in my life? 'Father, my knots cannot be undone!
It is a mistake to say anything of the sort! All the knots of our heart,
every knot of our conscience, can be undone. Do I ask Mary to help me
trust in God's mercy, to undo those knots, to change?" - Pope Francis*



Christmas Caroling outside Sacred Heart of Jesus Convent: The Sisters with the mothers and their children who live with us.

Casey's* Story by Sr. Faustina

I looked up through the trees that lined the street to the small patch of sky above our convent on the west side of Manhattan. No snow. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the city, the night sky was still and peaceful, and it filled my heart with an anticipation of what would be here in a few short days – Christmas, the birth of the baby Jesus.

With the glow of the Christmas lights, the smell of hot chocolate and homemade cookies, we gathered on the sidewalk outside our front door to sing Christmas carols. A woman walking by stopped to take in the sight. Her hair was dyed bright pink but there was a sad searching in her eyes. I greeted her and asked her name. "Casey," she responded.

Talking about familiar carols segued into conversation about how much her life had changed since she'd sung those songs as a child. She was working as a "dancer" and shared some of the pain and burdens she was carrying and the lack of confidence she had in herself, in life, and in God. And her eyes spoke further, of her desire to know it could be otherwise.

I was happy to be with someone with such an open and searching soul. It's a strikingly beautiful thing in this world, and I told her so. I prayed, "Dear Lord, love through my eyes, my words, my presence. Help her to know how precious she is!" We spoke about Christmas and Mary as a mother who always leads us to the baby Jesus. "Do you know that you can talk to her like you've talked to me? That she knows your heart and wants to take care of you?" Casey was listening with a smile and glistening eyes. I spoke about praying the Hail Mary and the power of the rosary. She asked if I had one for her. Reaching into my pocket, my heart sank.

Just a few weeks prior, my father had given me his rosary –

Two weeks later, the doorbell rang; it was Casey. She explained, "A couple of weeks ago I came by, the night you were all singing, and a Sister gave me her rosary. Would you mind telling her...that night I left my job at the strip club, and gave my life to the baby Jesus."

a beautiful wooden one with a large crucifix. I loved it. Yet in the moment when Casey asked, I knew it was for her. Placing it in her hands, I said, "This belonged to my father, but it is yours now." Hesitating, she took it, and I invited her to walk with me to the crèche in the little garden next to our convent. We paused, looking at the simple figurines.

"Where is the baby Jesus?" Casey asked. "Oh," I said, "He'll arrive in the manger on Christmas day, although it sure feels empty without Him... Jesus may not be in the crèche now, but He lives in our hearts. He desires for Christmas to happen in our hearts. We only need to say, 'Yes, come Lord!'"

After we spent some time in silence there I thanked Casey for entrusting her story to me and assured her of my prayers, leaving her alone in front of the rustic scene. After a few minutes of quiet she slipped out into the night.

Two weeks later, the doorbell rang; it was Casey. She explained, "A couple of weeks ago I came by, the night you were all singing, and

a Sister gave me her rosary. Would you mind telling her...that night I left my job at the strip club, and gave my life to the baby Jesus."

Four years later, just last week, I was in Manhattan walking near Bryant Park with a group of Sisters when a woman approached looking happy to see us, and asked us to pray for a heart procedure she was about to undergo. As she spoke I recognized her face - and yet she was so changed. I placed my hand on her shoulder and said, "I know you, I know you!" Casey looked at me with a smile and replied, "You gave me the rosary! I still have it and pray it everyday. And I know that God loves me."

For those who are searching, Christmas is only an invitation away.

* Name changed for anonymity.



i am Angela

Comfortable in his “Angelo Skin”

Something we all want.



Can you tell us a bit about life before Angelo Pio?

Gina: In my former life, I was a journalist. I started at CBS News, worked for the newsmagazine 48 Hours, was a TV reporter for a local news station in West Virginia, a traffic reporter in New York City and in early 2001, I started working for ABC News: World News Tonight as a Desk Assistant. The real starting point, in many ways, was 9/11, because I was sent as part of a large team of people to Ground Zero that day. I was there until early the next morning and really had a sense of "You don't know what's going to happen when you wake up the next day." I had always been very

driven, but after 9/11, I suddenly felt this urgency that I needed more balance in my life.

What did you do to try to find that balance?

Gina: I decided to take a vacation by myself to Italy. I had always wanted to go to the Vatican and was very drawn to Pope John Paul II. On this trip, I met someone whom I instantly fell for. Although there were a lot of problems in this relationship, it continued on and off for years. When it seemed that things were starting to come together, and we were talking marriage, I became pregnant, and at the time we both were really happy.

What happened during your pregnancy?

Gina: When I was about three months pregnant, I received a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome. It was shocking and heartbreaking. I remember not sleeping during those days and when I would sleep, I would wake up to this tidal wave of despair and sadness and fear. It just strangles you. I was getting pressure to end the pregnancy from a number of people - my doctor being one, but my child's father being the most painful. It is heartbreaking when they are telling you that your baby should not be born especially when you are so vulnerable.

So, you were being pressured to have an abortion. What did you do?

Gina: In the midst of it, with all the pressure, I made an appointment to have an abortion. After I hung up the phone I remember having this intense heaviness inside - almost suffocating; it was just this absolute despair and brokenness. I don't have the words to describe it any better than that.

What changed your mind?

Gina: The other people in my life definitely stepped it up a notch. One in particular was a wonderful priest, who would not leave me alone. Now I know that there were a lot of people storming heaven for me and my baby. The power of prayer should never ever be underestimated, because in my heart, fear was winning. I was completely broken down. You know those little cartoons with the angel and the devil on someone's shoulder? It's really like that. The evil one was whispering in my ear, saying things like: "This can all be over. Once you have



the abortion, life can go on. Things will be normal again. You don't have to deal with this. You can have another baby." It went over and over like a broken record. A priest suggested that I call the Sisters of Life. I did and talked to a Sister. There was a lot of back and forth for a few weeks - a battle. But then, finally, I finally received a huge grace. I left my boyfriend, and I moved into Sacred Heart of Jesus Convent.

What made you move into Sacred Heart of Jesus Convent?

Gina: I needed to be able to hear God speaking to me... I needed to know: "God, are you really asking me to be a single mom of a child with Down syndrome?" You know, when you live at Sacred Heart, your prayer life does ramp up, whether you want it to or not. And I was wanting that. I distinctly remember when I did make the decision to move into Sacred Heart, I got that feeling you get when you just say "yes" - this lightness and peace... I guess that's the reward for surrendering, right?

How were you able to accept being a single mom of a child with Down syndrome?

Gina: The Sisters suggested I go on a silent retreat. My first morning there I went to the cafeteria and the staff was cleaning up. At the time, I was still really sensitive about anything related to Down syndrome. I was still coming to terms with it all. So there I was in the cafeteria figuring out what to eat, and I looked up, and who did I see behind the kitchen window? A guy with Down syndrome, mopping the floor! I was like, "Are you kidding me?" I don't remember exactly, but I was a little awkward because I was very pregnant, and I dropped my tray... as I leaned down to pick everything up, the young man with Down Syndrome came over to me and put his arm around my shoulders, and just hugged me.

He didn't say anything?

Gina: Not a word. I remember freezing for a moment. He was just a regular, tall, strong kind of guy. I don't know how long we stood there. Not more than a couple of seconds because then his boss spotted us and quickly came around and said to him, "You don't know her. You're not supposed to do that. What are you doing?" She turned to me and said, "I'm so sorry. He's never done any-

**She turned to me
and she said,
"I'm so sorry.
He's never done
anything like that
before." I sat down
and immediately
knew, "That was
Jesus. Jesus just
hugged me!"**

thing like that before." I left the cafeteria needing to be alone. I sat down and immediately knew, "That was Jesus. Jesus just hugged me!" I was startled, because I was absolutely sure that that was Jesus; I was certain. And the question about parenting my child - I already kind of knew before the retreat, but it was definitive at the end. I had that same lightness, you know.

Would you be a different person today if it wasn't for Angelo?

Gina: Honestly, I thank God everyday because Angelo has saved me, he really has. It is so important to talk about how a child with a disability does not weaken us - it strengthens us - the individual and the community! I can't imagine how I would be the person that I am today, as strong as I am and knowing God the way that I do, if it wasn't for Angelo.

Do you feel like you're seeing life from a different perspective?

Gina: Definitely. He's made me more compassionate, sensitive, patient, and obedient. I never saw myself as motherly, although I always wanted to be a mom. It's almost like there was a part of me that was dormant, and that has just lit up in my caring for him. I've discovered things in myself that I didn't know... a silliness, a quirkiness. And he's got that, too, and we go back and forth. It's almost like something has come alive, we just fit. With him there is always a bit of joyfulness just below the surface.

How do you think Angelo has changed the way you approach the world?

Gina: With Angelo in my life, many things are so much clearer and simpler. Almost on a daily basis, I am stopped on the street with somebody saying how cute he is or "I like those glasses," or he says "hello," or something. The day in and day out struggles I have are interspersed by these moments that I have with him. For example, we now know all of the local doormen by first name because of Angelo. He calls out: "Hi Steve!;" "Morning, Carlos!" If it wasn't for Angelo, I wouldn't have known Steve and Carlos

and their stories. I mean, Carlos, in particular, can be on the phone with someone in his building and he'll see Angelo waiting to say "hi" and be like "Oh! Gotta go! Gotta go say hi to my friend!" It's like Angelo is helping to create the kind of world that should be, if there wasn't all the brokenness, problems, competition, ugliness and everybody racing around.

Do you feel like you see beauty?

Gina: I do...and I also really do see the benefits that come from suffering. Angelo has an eye for the most downtrodden person that we see. On our way home there is a group of poor people in wheelchairs that gather frequently on one corner. We always stop and say "hello." You know, I never would have stopped for a moment before. I wasn't comfortable with disability in my other life. That was another thing I was fighting with God about: "Of all things, you're going to give me a child with a disability? You know I don't like disability! I'm not comfortable with that - give me something else!"

How has your perspective on suffering changed?

Gina: Now, when I see somebody suffering, I recognize something there. I think people who are suffering must know God pretty well. You know, I now question if “the easy life” is such a gift. Angelo’s been through a lot of pain because he was recently diagnosed with arthritis. Because of the Down syndrome, he’s spent hours and hours of physical therapy, speech therapy, and occupational therapy. For kids that have these challenges – and they have them from Day 1 – they have a very different childhood. I am thankful for all the therapies, because you want that, but at the same time, although he doesn’t have the easy life in many ways, he’s often the most joyful kid in the room. He’s really strong. Angelo enjoys life.

How do you think Angelo sees the world?

Gina: The world is a delightful place for him! You know, daily life for Angelo is pretty good! He’s really confident. His teachers and therapists have commented on this over the years - how comfortable he is in his “Angelo skin.” He’s got more self-confidence than I ever had. He’s really secure, and that makes me happy. It’s just uncomplicated, the way he is, what he embodies. It’s simple, you know: “I like you. You like me.”

When people meet Angelo, I wonder if they think, “He has something I want.” He’s not worried about rejection. Do you think people are drawn to that?

Gina: Yes, even for me, there’s a freedom that has made me more authentic. There have been times on the train where he and I are just being playful and goofy, and

I’ll stop and look, and people are staring. They’re looking at me like: “Is she really that happy? Or is she crazy? Because how can you be that joyful and free? Look at her kid. Those things don’t go together.” In today’s culture, having a child with Down syndrome does not equal happiness. But my son, without question, is the joy of my life. Today I have a strength, an understanding and a meekness that I can’t imagine I would have had on my own. By meekness, I mean a teachability, an obedience that did not exist before. Now I know the profound joy that comes when you do God’s will.

What do you feel the Lord is calling you to in all of this?

Gina: In my relationship with Jesus, I feel like He is asking me to continually surrender. I now recognize God’s handiwork in my life. Our Lord will never interfere with our free will to choose the path that we want to choose, but I do believe He will do anything and everything He can to try to save one of his precious children which we all are. I am continually amazed at how much God loves me and the tangible ways He is working in my life since I began this path of abandonment to His will. The Lord had a different plan for me than I ever had for myself, and, without question, what He delivers is higher and better than anything I could have come up with. In my “other life,” I never imagined being the mother of a child with Down syndrome, but today I see how perfect God’s plan is. Honestly, I can’t believe that God gave Angelo to me to be his Mommy... I’m not sure how I could have been so lucky.



Working Men’s Retreat 2013

Each year we host a weekend retreat for men at Villa Maria led by the Friars of the Renewal. There is prayer, fellowship and lots of heavy lifting!



*Printed through the generosity of the Knights of Columbus.
Written and designed by the Sisters of Life.

BEGINNING ON
CHRISTMAS DAY
THE SISTERS WILL PRAY
A NOVENA OF MASSES
FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY.

Sisters of Life postulants / Fall 2013



Annunciation

(Motherhouse: Generalate and Novitiate)
38 Montebello Road
Suffern, NY 10901
Main number: 845/357-3547
Main Fax: 845/357-5040

St. Frances de Chantal Convent

(Postulant House, Vocations)
198 Hollywood Avenue
Bronx, NY 10465
718/863-2264 Fax: 718/792-9645

Villa Maria Guadalupe

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

Sacred Heart of Jesus Convent

(Holy Respite)
450 West 51st Street
New York, NY 10019
212/397-1396 Fax: 212/397-1397

New York Visitation Mission

to Pregnant Women
257 East 71st Street
New York, NY 10021 Pregnancy help call:
212/737-0221 toll free: 877/777-1277
Co-workers of Life call: 347/843-8900

Saint Catherine Laboure Convent

(House of Studies)
11809 Claridge Road
Wheaton, MD 20902
301/946-1249

Toronto Visitation Mission

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

St. Joseph's Convent

172 Leslie Street
Toronto, ON M4M 3C7

Hope and Healing After Abortion

toll free: 866/575-0075
hopeandhealing@sistersoflife.org

Website: www.sistersoflife.org

