

# Sisters of Life

## GOD IS NEAR

*God stoops to meet us;  
he comes close to us and in  
turn brings us closer to one  
another. He makes us one  
great family in the universal  
communion of the Church.  
Truly, those who believe are  
never alone. God comes to  
meet us. Let us go out to  
meet God and thus meet one  
another! To the extent we  
can, let us make sure that  
not one of God's children  
ever feels alone!*

-Pope Benedict XVI

Living in the city, surrounded by people, it is amazing how often one can sense a crushing loneliness in the hearts of fellow New Yorkers. But as Christmas approaches, everything changes. Strangers greet one another – eye contact is unusually common and easy smiles exchanged. Christmas awakens us to the truth that we are never alone! Our “God stoops to meet us” in the ordinary circumstances of life. “His Name shall be called Emmanuel for God is with us.”

God is with us! Through His loving and consoling Presence He seeks to guide us in life. But how difficult it can be to open oneself to that Presence. In the midst of life's trials, it can seem easier to run from the drama of life in fear and doubt. When things are well for us, though not for all, how difficult it can be to open ourselves to that Presence. It can seem easier to run from the needs of others into the arms of our own comforts. Thus exhausted, we miss out on the sheer wonder of experiencing the companionship

of God. Christmas jostles our slumbering hearts with its glorious and sobering truth: We seek not in vain! There is an answer to the question within each of us, and it is found in God's human face. When we kneel in supplication at our own or a loved one's suffering, or step out to help another in need, we are greeted by the loving gaze of the all-embracing “Other.” In Him all of life makes sense, in Him alone we find our peace.

Come to Him anew this Christmas. In His greatness, He has made Himself small, both in the stable and the Host, so that we might not fear to approach Him in our weakness, with our burdens, just as we are. Jesus comes to us as a baby, a vulnerable One, to draw us out from the prison of loneliness into His abundant Life where He is our constant Friend and His people, our family.

May you and your loves ones know the Merciful Presence of our loving God this Christmas and always. He is near!

With our promise of prayers,

*Ms. Agnes Mary, OS*

# You are not alone.

# the joy of Aidan.

A child's ability to put us in touch with the Divine.

**What was your immediate response in realizing Aidan had Down Syndrome?**

**MARK:** I wasn't prepared for that as a possible outcome, and so my reaction was one of shock at first, but then... Aidan was about to go into surgery for a pretty significant thing, so while the diagnosis was a surprise to me, my immediate focus became about him getting through the surgery. The doctor we met with, a well-respected geneticist, painted a very bleak picture about what people with Down syndrome could and couldn't do. She really kind of scared me with the things she was saying. Over the next few weeks and months as we learned more about what having a child with Down syndrome might be like, it certainly wasn't what this geneticist was picturing. At the time, though, I just went to the chapel and put it in God's hands. I told Him I really loved our new baby and wanted him to pull through the surgery and be a part of our family.

**How did people initially react to Aidan?**

**HELEN:** I did have some friends, like one from college who, when I told her that Aidan had Down syndrome, said, "Oh, how awful, how awful!" That's the last thing you want to hear about your new baby. But in general people were really supportive. My neighbor said, "He's going to be fine and if there are two people who would do a great job with a child who has a disability it would be you and Mark, I wouldn't worry about it at all." A couple of people said, "Just love him for who he is" and I embraced that.

**What surprised you about the responses to Aidan's diagnosis?**

**MARK:** What bothered me was that if Aidan didn't have Down syndrome no one would be making predictions about his future abilities or disabilities. When our two other children were born, our doctor didn't come in and say: "There's a 50% chance that Ryan is going to get divorced after he gets married" or "statistics show that Meagan will probably take drugs as a teenager." The doctors didn't look down the road at what the negative possibilities might be for our other kids.

**HELEN:** You can do all the prenatal testing in the world but there's no such thing as the perfect child; people are complicated and everyone has their gifts and their limitations, whether those are obvious or not. Whether you find out your child has limitations when you're pregnant or later, you're going to face challenges. What's important is how you respond to that - not with disappointment, but with



love. For us, being good parents is about helping our children find their gifts and helping them respond well to the challenges life brings.

**How have you changed since Aidan came into your lives?**

**HELEN:** He has taught us so much. When I was pregnant and found out that there was something wrong, I thought 'there has to be some sort of vitamin I can take, or something that can fix this.' Before the delivery my Aunt said to me, "why do we worry so much? You have to put it in God's hands now". I've always remembered that. When I'd pray I said, "I'm in your hands now, we've done everything we could but ultimately this is in your hands. He's yours..." Aidan has definitely helped me to be able to let go like that. It is so easy to get wrapped up in the worry, you just have to hope and have faith that God's going to lead you down the right path. I get a lot of strength from that, that it's not all on my shoulders. God is there supporting us and our family. You really can't do it on your own. I have had to rely more on my faith and my family and realize that that is a gift too.

**Have your other children been affected by having a brother with special needs?**

**HELEN:** Yes and no. Meagan and Ryan just see Aidan as their little brother and they don't think of our family as being different. They love their brother, and because of that, they are more sensitive to anyone who has special needs. They give people a chance because they see the goodness of Aidan. He wakes up every morning with a big smile and his bright blue eyes shining. Everyday. We've all learned a lot from that - to regard each day as a gift, as something special. Aidan also has an amazing ability to connect socially with people for a three

year old. Even when we go into a doctor's office where he's had so many unpleasant experiences, he always gives everyone a big smile and a wave. He says hi, and he makes sure everybody says hello to everybody else. That's very important to Aidan - that everyone says hello to everyone else. He just breaks through the barriers we put up between each other. He has something about him that is loving and kind, it's magnetic. To think that he has maybe ten to twenty words in his entire vocabulary and yet he can go up to anybody and be comfortable.

Last Christmas, we were at the pharmacy waiting for his medication, it was busy and an older man sat next to me and you could tell he was grumpy. Aidan can pick up when someone's having a bad day and he's quick to go give a hug. He engaged the man right away and kept saying "Ho, Ho, Ho!" as he pointed to the Santa wrapping paper...by the time the older man was getting ready to leave he had

tears in his eyes. Wherever we go people are drawn to Aidan. And his siblings notice that. Aidan is a gift not just for our family, but for everyone he meets.

**What is the biggest challenge for you?**

**HELEN:** The biggest challenge for me when I think ahead isn't caring for Aidan; but helping other people realize all that Aidan has to offer. I want him to be in a place where people want him there. He may take longer to learn certain things or he may take a couple of extra minutes to get up the steps, but I want people to give him those couple of extra minutes and to be fine with that. I know that Aidan's going to have a lot of gifts to give. Finding people who are open to seeing them and not just seeing the things that he can't do, that's the challenge.

**Over 90% of people who receive a diagnosis of Down syndrome during pregnancy end up aborting the baby. How does that make you feel?**

**HELEN:** I think the natural thing to feel when you find out that your baby has a disability is fear. The way it's made to seem like this huge burden and not like a child who is full of love and joy, it makes you want to run away from it all or try to change it. With abortion being an option and so quickly offered, that's why it's taken. By refusing to accept these children who are full of pure love we're making the world

a colder place. I think if couples were given the chance to spend time with people who have Down syndrome and their families they would feel very differently. Everyone has those initial experiences - shock, sadness, anger - and then you get to know your baby and those emotions quickly change. You have to give yourself time.

**MARK:** It's sad for those couples. because there's something different that the child with disabilities brings to us, something I would never trade. That's why there are waiting lists of couples who want to adopt children with Down syndrome. There's nothing like when you walk in the door at the end of the day and you see Aidan running up to you with his arms wide open ready to give you a hug. He brings out the best in you. He's our gift.



Your child is first of all God's child; When you look at him in his sweetest moments and are moved to tenderness, you are not alone; God is watching him with the intent, absorbed love of a father. He is around and above and below the child; He is in his heart. He is the apple of God's eye.  
-Caryll Houselander

**The Family Life/Respect Life Office**

Our Sisters at the Family Life/Respect Life Office recently hosted a Pastoral Study Day on Life Issues for the clergy of the Archdiocese of New York. Helen Milligan, a physical therapist at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, was one of the presenters. She, her husband Mark, and their three children reside in Drexel Hill, PA.

To contact Helen and Mark email: [Advancedtherapy@comcast.net](mailto:Advancedtherapy@comcast.net)



After Helen Milligan delivered her third child, she and her husband Mark were informed that their new baby, Aidan, needed immediate surgery to connect his esophagus and stomach. He also had Down syndrome. The couple had anticipated the surgery from ultrasounds, but they hadn't anticipated Down syndrome. As they handed their fears and concerns to God, they came to realize that they also hadn't anticipated the transformative love that Aidan would bring to their lives and their family.

"He breaks through the barriers we put up between one another. He enlarges our capacity to love."




**Suzanne Hamant**

31, from Tempe, AZ  
**Studied at:** University of Dayton  
**Fun fact:** I spent a summer in Africa teaching at a school in a very primitive environment and experiencing beautiful people, some of whom had never encountered Western Culture.  
**Favorite Pastime:** Hiking

**Bridget Heisler**

24, from Lyndhurst, OH  
**Studied at:** Washington University  
**Fun fact:** During World Youth Day in Cologne, I watched Pope Benedict drive by while standing on the roof of a Dominican Priory which was about 100 yards away from the Cathedral.  
**Favorite Pastime:** Volleyball

**Katie Stroh**

22, from Landenberg, PA  
**Studied at:** University of Scranton  
**Fun fact:** I recently caught a 18.5 inch bass at Camp St. Joseph.  
**Favorite Pastime:** Hiking, playing guitar and (now) fishing

**Mary Hollis**

22, from New Orleans, LA  
**Studied at:** Yale  
**Fun fact:** I was present in St. Peter's Square when JP II went home to God and when Pope Benedict was elected. When everyone heard the bells, men in business suits and nuns in veils were running, there was incredible joy.  
**Favorite Pastime:** Irish dancing

**Angela Karalekas**

28, from Ludlow, MA  
**Studied at:** US Naval Academy  
**Fun fact:** I've competed in three Ironman Triathalons.  
**Favorite Pastime:** Traveling

**THE DIARY OF:**

# A THREE WEEK TOUR

BRINGING  
THE MESSAGE OF  
LOVE & LIFE TO



## DAY 1

Monday, Sept. 11, 2006:

Everyone was happy to see us on the plane, especially the woman sitting in the row behind us out of NY. She was nervous, it being her first flight ever and on the anniversary of 9/11. As we boarded we heard her on her cell phone: "God is with me: there's three nuns sittin' right in front of me..." Three rows behind us on our flight to Sydney was a heavy metal rock band, complete with tattoos, piercings and black tee shirts. One of them approached us and asked if he could have a picture with us, saying shyly, "My mother is never going to believe this..." We met the whole band, which was going on tour in Australia and told them we were going on tour too (sort of). As we stood in the back of the plane talking, the bass player left to get a drink and came back reporting that the flight attendant was very

## DAY 6-9

September 17-20: NAPIER & WELLINGTON

Napier, the first city on the globe to greet the rising sun each morn, welcomed us at parishes and schools with wide eyes and open hearts. Gale force, Pentecost-style winds ripped through Wellington - the Holy Spirit was definitely in full effect! On our last day, a student approached and said, "I heard you speak yesterday, but my friends didn't and I wanted them to meet you." She then introduced her friends, and continued, "I just wanted to let you know that when you were speaking yesterday, I believed in Christ for the first time." How the Lord is just aching for people to give Him permission through their witness to draw others to His abundant Life.



## DAY 15-18

September 26-28: SYDNEY

On our first evening in Australia, the Sisters attended a dinner hosted by George Cardinal Pell at his residence. Meeting this brilliant and courageous Churchman was a particular joy. Bishop Anthony Fisher, a young Dominican bishop who was instrumental in the inception of the ProLife Offices in Melbourne and Sydney and the JP II Institute in Melbourne and is now in charge of the 2008 World Youth Day, joined us along with eight others for a rousing and blessed discussion on the Culture of Life. In the course of the next few days we met many people, gave two talks, and saw the beautiful and famous Sydney Harbor.



# New Zealand & the Land Down Under

Though it's not one of our primary missions, when we can do it, there's nothing like hitting the road to share the Gospel of Life. We have been privileged to share our charism and the sacredness of human life and love with students from Princeton, University of St. Thomas, Benedictine, the Kansas University System, Texas A&M and the University of Dallas; parishioners and pro-life groups in NY, NJ, CT, Chicago, Dallas and Fatima, Portugal. Though a reality show would offer a more detail-laden glimpse at life on the road with the SVs, we thought you might enjoy a mini-travel diary of our longest (41 talks in 21 days) and farthest (really long plane trip) evangelization mission this fall to New Zealand and Australia. Sr. Mary Gabriel, Sr. Antoniana and Sr. Mary Concepta experienced the presence of God and the glory of the Church on the other side of the world.



concerned asking if we were trying to convert them! Soon we noticed other passengers were kneeling on their seats, taking pictures of this unusual group of characters. After awhile, holy cards were given out and all returned to their seats. We were very touched when one of them later showed us a picture of his daughter and asked us to pray for her.



## DAY 2-5

September 13-16: AUCKLAND

We arrived at the Tyburn Monastery, where Eucharistic adoration, devoted nuns and gorgeous grounds offered the perfect combination for travel weary Sisters. Over the next few days, we met and prayed with a beautiful and courageous eighteen-year-old Chinese immigrant, pregnant with an anecephalic child and being pressured to abort; attended a 'Celebration of Life' gathering with Bishop Dunn and many faithful NZ friends of Life, and offered an all-day Theology of the Body retreat for 70 young adults.



## DAY 10

Thursday, September 21:

Early this morning, Dramamine in hand, we sailed across the choppy Cook Strait to the South Island. A three-hour ferry ride full of passengers with nothing to distract them was the perfect setting for three roving, evangelistic Sisters of Life! Our encounters included a Hare Krishna couple, a Congregationalist from Connecticut and numerous (very interested) men and women who "grew up Catholic." They were each immediately added to our prayer list. After arriving on shore we drove down the beautiful coast, arriving in Christchurch for the weekend's Family Life International Conference.

## DAY 11-14

September 22-25: CHRISTCHURCH

Being with so many awesome people who love the Lord of Life is like a little slice of Heaven! Each of the Sisters presented talks on different life issues. The conference concluded with a special closing dinner in a replica of Noah's Ark overlooking the South Pacific Ocean. Here, in this beautifully Biblical setting, we gave our final Gospel of Life "feverino" in New Zealand.



## DAY 19-21

Sept. 29-Oct. 2: MELBOURNE

This was a real "Grand Finale" to our evangelization blitz: we gave talks on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, the Theology of the Body, Building a Culture of Life, Discernment and also participated in a ProLife Forum. Good crowds turned up, and new friends were made!



As much as we were thrilled to see Koalas and Red Kangaroos, it was the people of New Zealand and Australia who really stole our hearts! May the Holy Spirit flourish the Culture of Life in these countries and throughout the world!

**Trivia Quiz:** If someone says "Giddy!" to you, it means: (a) "Look out! There's a kangaroo stampede headed this way!" (b) "Free holy water at the cathedral!" (c) "Hello."

Answers: (c)





Every woman is longing to be heard, to be understood, to be believed in, to be seen for her unique beauty and goodness.

# MISSION OF HOPE

by Co-Worker Joanne Connolly

**J**oanne Connolly, mother of six, would never have guessed that she would find herself outside an abortion clinic on a cold Saturday morning trying to convince another woman not to have an abortion. Sure she was pro-life, and a Co-Worker of Life, but normally that entails helping in ways that are ‘natural’ to a person: visiting a pregnant woman at home, or helping with grocery shopping or appointments, or offering professional advice. Staging a rescue mission wasn’t in the plan, but then Joanne met “Melissa.” As she spent more time speaking with this vulnerable pregnant woman, she grew to love her more and more. Joanne believed in Melissa, she knew the decision Melissa made about her child would have eternal consequences. And she knew Melissa didn’t believe in herself. As soon as Joanne heard that Melissa had given up and left for the abortion clinic, love compelled Joanne to act...



What will I say? Will I have the right words? Will Paul be filled with anger? I began to pray out loud while driving, trying to drown out any negative thoughts.

Melissa’s mind was made up. Despite the hours of conversation, she was convinced that this wasn’t the right time to have a baby. Not married, no money. How could she possibly raise this child? Besides, Paul was against the birth and she didn’t want to lose him. Thankfully Melissa’s mother felt differently, but her appeals didn’t seem to be working. She thought I might be able to help. She had remembered me from a prayer meeting some 15 years earlier when Melissa was so young. Now she was 25 and on her way to having her second abortion. “She’ll listen to you,” she said. I was not the skilled pro-lifer she thought I was, but I promised I’d try to help.

In desperation I phoned the Sisters of Life for a crash course in how to assist a woman in crisis. I feverishly scribbled notes as Sr. Magdalene tried to counsel me over the phone. “Delight in her,” she said. “No one really wants to have an abortion, they just believe they need to. Ask her what she really wanted to do with her life before this. Let her know we can help.” And so I had been speaking with Melissa each day for a few weeks. There were many conversations with Sr. Magdalene, with Melissa, with Melissa’s mother, some even three-way.

This was the moment of truth and everyone was praying. Some were praying before the Blessed Sacrament, some at home or at work. Even my 16-year-old son who was home with a cold had the rosary beads going. I was part of the rescue team along with Sr. Magdalene and Sr. Lucy. Yes, we had spent hours on the phone hoping to save Melissa’s baby, but there were no guarantees. I asked Sr. Magdalene what would happen if our efforts didn’t work. “Then we will

mourn with her,” she said. How do they do it? How do the Sisters give up everything for situations like this knowing that sometimes they do not succeed? “Lord, please don’t let this one fail.”

We showed up at the clinic around 9:00 am. By God’s grace Melissa had told her mother where and when she was going. Her appointment was at 10:00 am. She would be coming by train, wearing a white coat, and she’d be with Paul. We waited anxiously. It was now close to 10:00 am but there was no sign of Melissa. I slipped into Sister’s car to call her. No answer. As I put the phone down, I caught a glimpse of Sr. Magdalene looking around. Oh, my goodness, Melissa was already going down the steps into the clinic. I darted out of the car and ran across the street. Out of the depth of my spirit I screamed, “Melissa, it’s Joanne, I love you!” Paul brushed her on down the stairs and then proceeded to approach me.

“Paul,” I said, “What is the problem? Is it money? Is that what this is all about?” As he looked at me I saw a meekness in his blue eyes as he began to unload his reasons why this wasn’t a good time to have a baby. He already had a son whom he owed alimony for. His jobs were spotty and he and Melissa weren’t married. He loved her but questioned her ability to mother a newborn. As we bantered back and forth, he lit up a cigarette and then the tears came. He knew this was not the right answer to all of this. As we traded reasoning, Melissa was already inside. How far did she get during the debate? The Sisters continued to pray and I continued my attempts to make Paul aware of the fact that this would likely bring their relationship to a bitter end while their baby was taken from them.

Then the miracle occurred. Melissa came out of the clinic. They wouldn’t take her insurance. I explained that I had some money for a bite to eat, but not for anything else. And so our rescue team walked with Melissa and Paul to the nearest café where we talked about how we could manage this together. The Sisters explained how they could help and so did I. Despair and fear gave way to hope and loving smiles as the burden lifted from all of us that morning. The Lord had blessed our prayers, our mission, and the truest desires of Melissa and Paul.

Beautiful little Clare was born in September. There is still much to work out between Melissa and Paul, but they are forever grateful for Clare’s precious life and the divine intervention. She is their vision for a new hope.

*Walking together on this journey has enriched both Joanne and Melissa. Their relationship has grown as Joanne continues to support Melissa in her new motherhood.*

## Walking together

**O**verwhelmed with gratitude at all that God has provided for her and her baby Ella, Robin King continues to return to Sacred Heart to “give back”. Her time living with the Sisters at Sacred Heart Convent enabled her to focus her attention on her new motherhood and to become financially secure. “I could save money so that I could provide a home for Ella and myself. Spiritually, I was able to reconnect with God and I became more aware of the importance and beauty of being a woman and grew in confidence in myself.” Two years later, she now wants to be a support and encouragement to women who are facing the same difficulties she went through. The experience has made her realize the wisdom in God’s plan for family life, “every child deserves to have a father and a mother.” It’s not easy being a single mother. “You have to put God first and He will take care of you. You have to share what you’ve learned, the wisdom that God gives you, with others,” she said. She tells the guests that they can call her any time. Asked what she remembers most from her time at Sacred Heart she replied, “A home-cooked meal every night! And hearing the bell ring for prayer and the Sisters singing in the chapel; the laughter in the house; and feeling protected, peaceful and secure there. The Sisters are like family to me.”



### THE SISTERS OF LIFE & OUR CO-WORKERS OF LIFE

#### You are not alone!

For the women who come to us, these words mean nothing if real relationships don’t follow. And that’s what the Sisters and our Co-Workers seek to do: as we receive this woman into our hearts, listen to her hopes and dreams, share her disappointments and difficulties, and walk with her in making decisions she is worthy of, then it is that she comes to tangibly experience God’s presence and help in her life. Then she is strengthened

in hope, because she experiences concretely that she is not alone, that there is someone who really cares, someone she can call on, and that makes all the difference. And in this process we come to see who this woman really is, and we can’t help but delight in her goodness, despite whatever trials and sadness she has been through or what struggles may lie ahead. **We come to love her.**

SISTERS OF LIFE

St. Paul's Convent  
586 McLean Avenue  
Yonkers, New York 10705

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FEAR NOT I BRING YOU TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY.

Beginning on Christmas Day  
a Novena of Masses will be offered  
for you and your family.

\*Michal and his mother lived at  
Sacred Heart Convent five years ago.

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