

Triumph of the Heart

THE PRIEST AND THE MOTHER OF A PRIEST

Family of Mary

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Dear Readers and Benefactors

At the end of the Year for Priests, we would like to give you something special through this issue of *Triumph of the Heart*. In a time when the priesthood is under attack, in which we hear and read so many bad things about priests and the Church, we would like to tell you about some priests who lived a truly priestly life. They represent many good shepherds who serve faithfully and zealously, but whom no one notices.

At the same time, we would like to present a very important topic about which very little is spoken and perhaps foreign to some people,

namely spiritual maternity for priests. Today, if we want to help the priests and the Church, then we have to know how to do our part effectively. We can learn from the example of many priest mothers.

Following the example of Jesus and Mary, the divine High Priest and his Immaculate Mother, we can learn what constitutes a priest and how we can accompany him in a divine way. Therefore, this issue should enrich our readers, the priests and those who want to support them. Let us strive together for the goal of giving the Church happy and holy priests.

You are a Priest Forever!

Fr. Paul Maria Sigl

Each Holy Mass makes the solemn hour of Holy Thursday present, reliving the first Holy Mass celebrated by the divine High Priest in the Upper Room on the night before his suffering and death. He took bread, gave thanks and praise, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, “*Take this all of you and eat it. This is my body which will be given up for you.*” When supper was ended he took the cup, again he gave him thanks and praise. He gave the cup to his disciples and said, “*Take this all of you and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood ... it will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me.*”

In this sublime and yet simple way, the Lord instituted the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and made his Apostles the first priests of the New Covenant. He sealed it shortly thereafter with his blood as the humble Suf-

fering Servant and Redeemer. On Calvary, we see the divine High Priest who offered himself to the Father as an infinitely precious sacrifice on the altar of his dying body. Yet, he was not alone! His mother, the Coredemptrix, as Padre Pio and many saints have called her, stood beneath the Cross. Strengthened by the Holy Eucharist, she, as the priest mother, offered up her son like a host through a “*Marian Per Ipsum*” – “*a Marian through him, with him, in him...*” Through this offering she was completely united in a unique way with the sacrifice of her son that we may call it the mutually offered redemptive sacrifice.

Their victory together pervades all times and comprises all peoples. Pope John Paul II spoke often about this spiritual reality, for instance on February 12, 1984, “*Mary is present on every altar*” or on June 5, 1983, the Feast of Corpus Christi, “*every Holy Mass places*

us in a deep, inner unity with her, the mother, whose sacrifice becomes just as present as her son's sacrifice during the words of consecration which the priest prays over the bread and wine."

The beloved German mystic Barbara Pfister (1867 – 1909) expressed similarly: "Oh, how often I have seen how Our Lady

accompanies the priest to the altar, how she guides and leads him, watches over and protects him... She is always there. She cannot be separated from the Savior. In the same way as he did not want to celebrate his sacrifice without his mother, so too no priest should approach the altar without the Sorrowful Mother."

She preceded her son

*T*he decisive Yes of the Immaculata was given long before Calvary and even before Jesus' birth. Only after she spoke her Fiat so full of love and trust in Nazareth did the divine Son enter the world. In the womb of Mary, the Redeemer's priestly heart began to beat and so the priests are also entrusted to her motherly womb.

From that point forward, maternity for priests, the priesthood and the Holy Eucharist became inseparable forever. The priest mother spiritually bears the priest, and the priest

brings forth the Holy Eucharist. Mother Ida, the visionary from Amsterdam, heard the following words following Holy Communion: "A church and a nation without a mother is like a body without a soul" (May 31, 1965).

"Understand this well: Also the Lord stood in need of His Mother in order to attain life. It is through the Mother that life comes. Hence she must be brought back into your churches and among the nations and you will witness the revival" (March 25, 1973).

John, the model of a priestly heart

*I*n a free choice of grace Jesus elected his first Apostles, called them individually by name and, thereby, to follow him most closely. They responded, left everything and followed him. To this day, the same magnificent, personal call of the Lord goes out to men to give themselves to him completely and forever as priests. Like a bridegroom awaits the Yes of his bride at the altar, Jesus awaits the free Yes of each priestly vocation, a Yes which should be spoken out of love: "Adsum!" – "Here I am!"

What must it have meant for John to be called to the immediate nearness of Jesus! He was allowed to listen to the words of his master for hours and became an eyewitness to the love which the Lord lived to the extreme, the healing and the miracles he worked for all

those in need. The "disciple whom Jesus loved", who had the privilege of resting on the Lord's heart, desired especially to know and imitate the inner meek and humble love and to become always more like his divine teacher in his merciful thoughts, words and actions.

Therefore, St. John is a radiant example for every priestly heart! He is particularly exemplary for priests who suffer because during the Passion the Apostle took refuge in Mary. John would never have been able to go along on the Way of the Cross and remain faithful in the Passion to the foot of the Cross had he not remained like a child close to Mary, carried by her so to say.

How decisive that is for everyone even today, especially for priests. From the Cross

the Redeemer confirmed the importance of remaining with Our Lady, because in his most difficult hour he entrusted the newly ordained priest, or better said the young, now consecrated Bishop John, and in him all priests and nations, that which he loved most on earth. “Behold your mother!” (Jn 19:27a)

And from that trying hour on, John took Mary to himself.

Yes, the Mother is given to us for the difficult hours and in a particular way as a priest mother for all priests who, in turn, are called to remain by the people with maternal love in their difficult hours.

To become a gift of love

A priest does not have to have first and foremost organizational talent, be a manager or a financial expert. He is not even expected to give perfect homilies. What people really want most from a priest is that he is a man after God’s heart who reflects the Lord’s goodness in his priestly life, who does not speak unkindly or react arrogantly. He should be able to forgive, to console and advise, to be compassionate and judge with mercy. He should give of his time and always have an open door and an ear for the concerns and needs of those entrusted to him. Above all, he should gladly administer the Sacraments and through them show the people the way to God. The priest not only offers the sacrifice but is made capable, through the strength of the divine food, the Holy Eucharist, of making himself a “gift of love” to God and the others.

The greatest secret of a priest’s pastoral success is the selfless offering of himself in union with Christ. As soon as the priest

starts looking for his own advantage and becomes comfortable, avoiding the sacrifices that are a part of daily pastoral life, he loses his very priestly identity.

Consider the priest who freely sacrificed even his life, St. Maximilian Kolbe (see *Triumph of the Heart* #24). At the end of July 1941, the commander of the extermination camp Auschwitz, Mr. Fritsch, randomly chose ten prisoners for the dreaded starvation bunker because one of the other prisoners had escaped.

Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward and, pointing to the distressed family father Franz Gajowniczek, asked to die in his place. “Who are you,” asked Fritsch bewildered. “I’m a Catholic priest.” Fr. Maximilian’s simple answer expressed the deepest motivation for the sacrifice he was making. In this way, he completed his mission of offering his life out of love for the Immaculata, being a seed which died in order to bear fruit for his spiritual family, his enemies and the whole Church.

An indelible mark

The essential moment of an ordination consists of the bishop laying his hands on the deacon’s head and praying in complete silence thus allowing Jesus to work, changing the newly ordained in the depths of his being. His soul is given a permanent priestly seal and he receives the dignity and sending of

an “alter Christus” – “another Christ” to act in Jesus’ authority.

This is—despite the priest’s human limits which remain—something so sublime that the St. Cure of Ars exclaimed, “Oh, how great is the priest! ... God obeys him. He speaks two phrases and, at his command, the Lord

comes down from heaven and encloses himself in a little host... The priest is the one who continues the work of redemption on earth... The priest holds the key to the heavenly treasures; he is the one who opens the door... Let a parish go 20 years without a priest and the people there will adore animals... The priest is not a priest for himself; he is one for all of you."

The indelible priestly mark was received in a quite unique and very touching way by 24-yearold Eugene Hamilton from the Archdiocese of New York. On January 24, 1997, Bishop O'Brien rushed to the home of the Hamilton Family where the seminarian Eugene was struggling to breath and could no longer speak.

On his deathbed, he was ordained a deacon and immediately afterwards a priest. Three hours later, Fr. Eugene died. He *"never offered Mass, never absolved, never preached a homily, and never blessed. Yet his life and death were a priestly sacrifice united to that one perfect sacrifice of Jesus"* as his father, a permanent deacon at St. Patrick's Cathedral, said during his funeral.

Gene, as they called him at home, had just started studying theology in the fall of 1995 when they showed him an x-ray of his lung at the hospital. *"I found myself staring at a large mass in the center of the chest cavity, a tumor placing pressure on my lungs and pushing against my heart... I knew I was looking at cancer."* It was the beginning of a total of 16 months of suffering with chemotherapy, radiation treatment, operations and pain without complaining until the doctor finally estimated

how long he had to live: a few months.

"We left and went across the street to the church," his mother Margaret recalls after the diagnosis. *"Gene knelt at the altar rail before the Blessed Sacrament and I prayed during that time. Then Gene came and sat beside me. He placed his head on my shoulder. We talked about death and separation and how important it was to stay open to the will of God. I wished that I could take his place, so that he could live."*

*T*erminally ill with cancer, Gene entrusted his priesthood to his role model, the Servant of God, Terence Cardinal Cooke († 1983) from New York whose beatification process has been opened. The Cardinal patiently carried his suffering from cancer for 19 years, and he faithfully lived his vocation according to his bishop's motto, *"Thy will be done!"* Gene also took these words to heart and prayed them frequently. Although he still had three and a half years of theology to study, he had an inner certainty that *"God wants me to be a priest."*

*O*n January 1, 1997, 23 days before his death, Gene wrote a letter to Pope John Paul II which he gave to a fellow seminarian to take with him to Rome: *"Holy Father, please pray for the miracle that I might recover and be ordained a priest in order to serve the faithful in my diocese. I unite my suffering with Jesus' suffering on the Cross and offer it for your intentions and for vocations to the priesthood."*

"God's call did not hit me like a lightning bolt. No voices, no revelations. Rather, he provided me with a consistent, constant, 'knowing' about my vocation."

Subsequently, a reply came from Rome with the personal blessing of the Holy Father on Gene's picture. Pope John Paul II let the dying young man know that *"toto corde"* – *"with all my heart"* was his blessing for the dispensation allowing an early ordination. Gene was overwhelmed when he found out about it on

January 20. They immediately made plans for his deacon and priest ordinations, but his final agony unexpectedly began. How characteristic were the final words of the dying seminarian shortly before his ordination which was held still earlier than planned, *"All I want to do is God's will in my life."*

Priest Mothers

St. John Eudes (1601-1680), named the *"Prophet of the Heart"* by Pope Pius XI, worked untiringly for 45 years as a French missionary, spreading devotion to the hearts of Jesus and Mary. Since the saint understood these united hearts, he also knew about the depth of unity between priests and priest mothers. *"The sacramental priesthood is so great, so divine, that it does not seem possible to have a greater or more divine one. And yet there is a priesthood which, in a way, surpasses that of the priests: it is the vocation to work for the sanctification of the priests, where the rescuer is saved and the shepherd pastures; in which light is obtained for those who are the light of the world and they sanctified who are the sanctification of the Church."*

Each vocation to the priesthood is carried and supported by spiritual mothers who selflessly help him so that he may grow in his love of God and love of those who are entrusted to him. Being a spiritual mother for priests can take on a variety of forms. It may mean offering up bodily pains or psychological suffering, but even our daily service or generosity, our faithful prayer and carrying a spiritual weight for others when we endure an inner darkness, for example.

The entire history of the Church speaks to us about such "holy couples", beginning with the divine High Priest himself who drew strength

and consolation through the inexpressible, profound unity with his mother. Think about Benedict and his sister Scholastica, Boniface and his relative Lioba, Francis and Clare from Assisi, the holy bishop from Geneva, Francis de Sales and his "daughter and mother" Jane of Chantal.

Similarly, Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena and Lidvina of Schiedam gave advice, guided and expiated for popes. Anna Maria Taigi, a great saint and family mother from Rome, was an enlightened adviser for five consecutive popes of her day. In the 20th Century, many of us witnessed personally how often John Paul II called Mother Teresa and took her by the hand to express his thankfulness and respect.

After the assassination attempt, the Pope knew he owed a debt of gratitude to a child, namely the shepherdess Jacinta. He emphasized this during her beatification on May 13, 2000 in Fatima: *"And once again I would like to celebrate the Lord's goodness to me when I was saved from death after being gravely wounded on May 13, 1981. I also express my gratitude to Bl. Jacinta for the sacrifices and prayers offered for the Holy Father, whom she saw suffering greatly."*

Blooming Rosebush - Invisible Roots

Let us never forget that wherever we see a growing number of vocations and a richly blessed apostolate, where the Church is blossoming, there is always a firm foundation of prayer, suffering and sacrifice from people who offer their lives in hiddenness so that others may produce beautiful fruit.

God created a similar principle of life in nature. We have only to consider the impressive beauty of a blooming rosebush. If we dig it up, however, we would find hidden in the dirt a shaggy, unsightly rootstock which, nevertheless, is vitally important for each and every glorious rosebud. You could say that whatever lasting, important development we visibly see, always has invisible, unsightly roots.

A beautiful example is an apostle to the Indians, Fr. Anton Sepp (1655- 1733) and his younger sister Sr. Maria Elizabeth Sepp (1666-1741). Anton, an enterprising young priest from South Tyrol, now northern Italy, was fascinated by the missionary spirit of the Jesuits and joined their order.

His sister, who was 11 years younger, was accepted with the name Sr. Maria Benedicta by the Benedictines in the Saeben Convent, impressively situated atop a large rock often called "*the holy mountain of Tyrol*". She clearly understood that it was her vocation to offer her life behind the cloister walls for her brother who was finally able to depart at the age of 34 to work as a South American missionary in the

famous Jesuit settlements for the Guarani tribes in Paraguay (see Triumph of the Heart #29).

For 42 years he worked with untiring missionary zeal in the settlements, huge village communities with thousands of Indians. For all 42 years, his sister Maria Benedicta prayed and sacrificed for him in the convent. With great interest she would read Fr. Anton's lively mission reports and also his letters to their parents.

One time he wrote so humorously, "*A priest here has to be everything: cook, business manager, shopper, doctor and nurse, builder, roof tile burner, carpenter, baker, miller, smith, weaver, gardener, painter, choir director and any other office which is necessary in an orderly public community. Now, anybody would tell me that this is impossible and that one priest alone cannot do it all, but I'm sorry to say that it's all true. It is possible for God's arm to do much more through a human hand!*"

With a cheerful spirit, Fr. Anton wrote when he was older, "*My head is still full of new ideas!*" With determination, he built a new settlement with 700 families and he cared for them all.

Until his death at the age of 78, he dedicated himself with all his heart to the Indians who all called him their "*great father*". However, he always had a childlike gratitude to his sister who was a spiritual mother for him. A good seven years later, on the Feast of Our Lady of Expectation 1741, she followed him to the eternal homeland.

A Helpful cousin

Nobody around Count Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916) would have ever imagined that this non-believing, rich playboy,

soldier and explorer (see Triumph of the Heart #33) would one day become a priest. Yet there was one person who always believed that he

would convert: Marie de Bondy, a cousin eight years older than him who since childhood was a second mother for her orphaned, unhappy relative. Despite years of debauchery and persistent sin, she never criticized or gave up on him; rather, she accompanied him with understanding through her prayers. She would also be the one who, through their lifelong friendship, had considerable spiritual influence on him.

His heart was closed and he had rejected any belief in God. She never tried to convert him, however through religious discussions. Marie, a faithful Catholic who went to Holy Mass every day and lived the faith unobtrusively, was such an eloquent testimony for Charles that, with time, he had to admit that the religion of such an intelligent, noble soul as hers must be real. He wrote later, *“She had such goodness in her that the understanding and respect of what is good, which I had lost ten years earlier, returned to me.”*

In a constantly growing inner struggle, he finally admitted, *“You are happy because you believe. No matter how hard I search for the light, I cannot find it.”* Her simple advice was, *“Pray!”* He frequently found himself saying, *“God, if you exist, let me find you!”*

Eventually, Marie told 28-year-old Charles about her family’s confessor, Abbot Huvelin, whom he found sitting in the confessional the very next day, the *“blessed day”* of his radical conversion. The new convert was greatly enriched by many conversations about the

faith with Marie de Bondy, and she attentively accompanied him to find his calling. When Charles was ordained a priest at the age of 43 and went alone to the Sahara Desert as a missionary, he remained in close contact with Marie. He wrote, *“I want to evangelize through the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, celebrating the Holy Sacrifice, through prayer, penance and charity... In the Sahara, a priest has to be like a monstrosity: He himself withdraws to show Jesus.”*

*T*he *“apostolate of goodness”* which Marie had practiced on him, he now applied to the nomad tribes of Africa. She helped him, for example, by sending Rosaries for his Tuareg tribe in southern Algeria. He had requested them *“... without a cross because I want to teach the Muslims how to pray.”* The *“servant of Jesus”*, as Charles now called himself, was never afraid of entrusting his inner and outer loneliness and suffering to the prayers of his cousin. *“I am like the grain of wheat which doesn’t die,”* he wrote in his pain, having prayed seemingly in vain for 14 years in the desert that other brothers might join him.

Even the last note he wrote on the day of his murder was intended for his cousin and priest mother. Marie received this note in France much later and she preserved it like a relic for the last 18 years of her life. In it he had written,

*“You feel that you don’t love enough, how true that is.
You will never love enough, but the good God knows
from which dust he formed us, and who loves us much more
than a mother can love her child...”*

For the Church and its Shepherds

One expiatory soul who understood how to pray and suffer in silence for the sanctification of priests was Blessed Anna Schaeffer from Germany (1882-1925). After a tragic accident at work at the age of 18, in which she severely burned her legs in boiling lye, she not only had to undergo 30 painful operations, but, even worse, she had to give up forever her wish of becoming a missionary sister. After a difficult struggle initially, the joyous Bavarian girl understood more and more that Jesus had called her to a mission of suffering.

Later on, someone asked Anna if she never thought that she would one day be able to stand up and move around again. She responded with a smile, *“The loving God wants me to be sick now and I conform to his will... Even if I could put an end to my suffering with a single Hail Mary, if it were not the will of God, I would not do it.”* The Lord showered her with his love and consolation though.

Lying in bed for nearly 25 years until her death, Anna developed an astounding zeal for prayer and expiation. In one of her famous visions, she knelt before the high altar in her village church and saw, *“As often as I pleaded for a soul, a ray shined forth from the Sacred Heart of Jesus to the place where the soul was located... and in my dream I prayed, ‘My Jesus, have mercy!’ One time I was surrounded by souls and they all were saying, ‘For me too!’ There were so many that I couldn’t see them all. ...I prayed incessantly, ‘My Jesus, have mercy!’”*

Anna always emphasized, *“To pray and suffer for the Church and its shepherds is the utmost important for me ... I want to pray the most for priests, now and in heaven.”* She really understood that the prayers and sacrifices of a priest mother always go to the most treacherous battle lines where priests are lying wounded and dying in their spiritual life.

Maria Sieler

If we are drawing your attention, dear readers, in this issue of Triumph of the Heart to women to whom the sanctification of the priests was close to their heart, then we need to mention Maria Sieler (1899-1952) from the Styrian region of Austria, a simple young woman with a rudimentary education. She deserves that we learn something about her and her particular calling as a priest mother since she is too little known and often misinterpreted.

Maria Sieler, a farm girl, received her first extraordinary grace at the early age of six. While looking devoutly at the crucifix during

prayer at school, she suddenly heard in her soul, *“Look up to me and pray fervently; from this form of prayer you will converse with me like people speak with one another.”*

This was the beginning of a mystical grace of prayer and a continuous, growing inner familiarity with Jesus, something which remained completely hidden to her family and those who knew her. On the surface, the girl grew up cheerfully and worked diligently on their farm. Although Maria tried from age 16 on to join an order, her desire remained un-

fulfilled.

The Lord had another plan for her and she noted in her diary, *"I should offer him my life and place it entirely at his disposition."* Time passed. At age 24 she lacked courage and hesitated until one day the Lord intervened: *"On December 7, 1923... as I wanted to stand up from the communion rail, I had an unusually strong impression of the presence of the Lord*

who said to me, 'If you do not want to overcome yourself, I will find another soul. There are thousands available to me to whom I can give my grace.'"

She immediately gave her decisive Yes. *"Afterwards I offered everything to Mary at Our Lady's altar and prayed that she help by making me capable, through her, to offer myself properly."*

"I want to pour out new graces!"

*B*eginning in 1924, the Lord gave Maria Sieler new mystical graces and more clearly explained the task for which he had chosen her: *"I want to pour out the spirit of my heart anew into the Church, and you will be my instrument. You should be a sacrifice for my Church, for the renewal of the priesthood. Through you, I will let new graces flow out for the priesthood and thus for souls. The renewal, proceeding from priests, will also include the faithful."*

From the 1930's on, the Lord gave Maria Sieler clear knowledge regarding the decline of the faith. *"A gap has formed between teaching and practice; the priest is no longer warmed by what he studies. The priests no longer believe in their*

priesthood, they look at it in a merely natural way, like any other occupation... When they teach or preach, their heart is not in it. Thereby they transmit knowledge, but they do not rouse any faith or inflame any love." Jesus complained, *"Priests' belief in their priesthood has almost died entirely."*

As a consolation, however, Maria Sieler was shown a group of priests in the future who would be full of faith and the life of Christ. She saw these interiorly renewed priests and how they would be a *"'mustard seed' for the Church, 'yeast' that leavens everything. Jesus starts small, with only a few, like he did with his Apostles, but ... faith will transform individual priests and eventually the whole Church."*

Spiritual maternity for the Church

*T*he pinnacle of Maria Sieler's vocation was her maternity for the priests. On this she wrote, *"The Savior made a precious promise today: He placed me as 'spiritual mother' at the disposal of his Church, especially the priesthood. All that I've fought for and suffered, everything out of the ordinary, my spiritual task corresponding to my union with him, all of this – he told me – is a spiritual treasure for the priesthood. Everything that I've struggled for spiritually will somehow become fruitful in the priests. All the graces of my*

interior life are at the same time the property of the priesthood. The priests can draw from it and all can obtain what they ask for from the Lord because this treasure was earned in advance through my sacrifice in Christ...

"Like a mother hands down her gifts to her descendants, so will my interior life and all the interior graces, such as the unity obtained with Christ, be passed on as an inheritance, become effective in the Church."

Jesus shared more and more of his interior life with Maria Sieler. He desired that she

live a continuation of it in her soul and pass it on to priests. *“In his heart, I saw an indescribable love for priests. Then I saw how Jesus placed me between the priests and himself and how all the love and grace from his heart streamed into mine and through mine into the hearts of priests. In a clear light I recognized how all the graces which were not accepted or even rejected by priests should flow back into my heart and be preserved there until the moment when the priest is ready to receive them anew.”*

Maria Sieler was certain: *“I am sure interiorly that my life and all the graces I have received from God are meant for the renewal of the priesthood... Due to the special intercession of Mary, these new graces flow through a woman’s soul to priests.”*

When she inquired, *“Why do you use a woman’s soul?”* Jesus answered, *“My mother did it. She was the first to overcome her humanity and make herself capable of receiving God.”* And so Maria Sieler thanked Our Lady.

All the treasures of grace pass through Mary’s hands

In addition, Maria Sieler deeply understood the unique task given to Our Lady in the renewal of the priesthood. *“After the death of her son, Mary was the mother of the young Church. She was the one who really introduced the first priests into the spirit and essence of her divine son and fully shared with them the Savior’s innermost being, and fortified them in it... Mary is also the one who rescues and leads the Church in this dark time; she is the spiritual life-giver and mother... the mediator of all grace... It was as if Mary spread her hands and spoke, ‘Everything will be given through my intercession because I am allowed to distribute the treasures of redemptive grace to the Church.’ It is her heart’s desire for which she stands up and fights. She will prove herself a strong woman still today and, with her dignity and power as the Coredemptrix,*

oppose the withered spirit of this time.”

However, since at that time a crisis in the priesthood as we are experiencing today was neither recognizable nor foreseeable, the Church saw no necessity of a renewal. Along with being misinterpreted, her way of life was poor and uncertain until her unexpected death in Rome at the age of 53. The *“Cross of her life”* would always be having the intentions and desires of Jesus clearly before her eyes, but never receiving a confirmation from the side of the Church. Part of the sacrifice this holy woman had to make was to renounce seeing the realization of a renewed priesthood. No matter how this great renewal of the Church through the sanctification of the priesthood will take place, the Lord promised Maria Sieler back in 1944, *“I keep the final and definitive execution as my secret. My divine providence will guide everything.”*

A cardinal and His Mothers

*T*here are two other exemplary women to mention here who were so shaped by the spirit of sacrificing for priests that they became

spiritual mothers for the beatified martyr Alojzije Cardinal Stepinac (1898-1960). The first is his biological mother of whom Cardinal

Kuharic (1919-2002), the late Archbishop of Zagreb, said, “*You cannot understand Stepinac and his heroic life without knowing his mother.*”


Barbara Stepinac, in fact, was the very devout wife of a wealthy, Croatian vineyard owner and the mother of nine children who, with all simplicity, was a wise and inspired woman. When her son Alojzije was baptized in the parish church in Karsic on May 9, 1898, the day after his birth, she made a vow during the ceremony that for the rest of her life she would pray every day and fast on bread and water three times a week that this child might become a priest. Other than her pastor, no one knew about Barbara’s secret resolution; she did not want to influence her son’s choice about what he wanted to become.

She was faithful to her promise for 32 years until the joyful day came in the summer of 1931 when Alojzije celebrated his first Holy Mass in his home parish in Krasic. At that time, the pastor addressed the following words to mother Stepinac: “*Barbara, you can finally stop fasting!*” She answered resolutely, “*Most certainly not! Now I will pray and fast more so that my son may become a holy priest!*”

In the difficult years that ensued when, after the fascists and national socialists, the communists came to power in Yugoslavia, it was particularly the unshakable belief of this faithful and prayerful mother Stepinac that gave her son the strength and courage to remain firm under fire. After she witnessed Alojzije’s ordination in 1934 as the then youngest bishop in the world, 80-year-old mother Barbara went the Way of the Cross with her son who was arrested in 1946, accused of being an enemy of the people and a traitor, and in a false trial sentenced to 16 years in prison with forced labor. His mother passed away two years later during his imprisonment. She was not only a biological mother but also became a spiritual mother.

Over the course of his five years in prison, God gave this faithful shepherd of the Church,

who was always found in his prison cell with a Rosary in his hand, another spiritual mother. Maria Bordoni (1916-1978), the founder of the institute “*Mater Dei*” lived with her sisters in Castelgandolfo close to Rome. Since then proclaimed a Servant of God, with a greatness equal to some hidden mystics, she was penetrated with the priestly spirit to offer herself as a sacrifice for the clergy. She often prayed during the night for the Church, the Holy Father, the priests and persecuted Christians. Our Lady spoke to her soul and took Maria Bordoni many times during the night in bilocation to areas of misery and, during Communism, to countries behind the Iron Curtain to bring consolation to those suffering in prisons and work camps.

he sisters of this institute personally confirmed for us in March 2010 that Maria Bordoni was permitted to visit the imprisoned Cardinal Stepinac in bilocation. Our Lady showed her a priest in prison sitting in a chair. Leaning forward, his arms resting on his knees, he passed the Rosary beads through his fingers and prayed. Then Our Lady said to Maria, “*Do you see him, my beloved son? He suffers so much. Pray much for him, my beloved son. His name is Alojzije Stepinac.*”

When Pope John Paul II beatified the martyr bishop in Croatia in 1997, Maria Bordoni’s sisters in Castelgandolfo recognized his name from the writings and conversations of their founder. They researched the spiritual notes and found the confirmation, in fact, of Maria Bordoni’s “*consoling visit*” to Cardinal Stepinac.

Following his imprisonment, he lived for nine years before his death in 1960, in the city of his birth under house arrest with a strict guard of 30 men. He always had words of forgiveness for all those who had done him injustice.

*“For the Church and the Holy Father,
for all priests and missionaries...
I wish to be like the perpetual candle by the altar
which is slowly consumed before the Lord’s tabernacle.”*

Maria Bordoni

A conscious Yes in serious illness

*A*nother woman who made a silent, but conscious gift for the priests out of her suffering lives in the Czech Republic. Two of our sisters met her at the ordination of Fr. Florian and Fr. Alain Marie on June 29, 2007, in the Monastery of Mercy. They experienced something quite impressive in the guest family where they were staying.

They met the grandmother, Adele, who had suffered a stroke 15 years earlier and now required care at home. This grandma had been unable to speak for nearly ten years, and the last seven she was in a nearly comatose state. Even though she did not show any reaction

sitting motionless in her wheelchair with her eyes closed, our sisters told her about the ordination. At the end, they asked the woman, who seemed not even to be present, “Adele, would you be ready to pray for the new priests and to offer your severe illness for them?”

Unexpectedly, the grandmother opened her eyes and nodded several times. When the sisters repeated their question to be sure that Adele had really understood them, she even tried to answer, but her voice failed her. Her family was speechless. They had never seen such a reaction from her.

A friendship from God

*F*requently our sisters in the Family of Mary are asked, “What is essentially the spirituality of your community?” After their love for the Holy Eucharist and the Blessed Mother, the missionaries always emphasize, “All our prayers, our joys and our daily sacrifices, everything we do where we are assigned, we offer to God for the sanctification of the priests.

Hidden, we want to transmit graces to the priests and thereby become spiritual mothers for them.” The surprised response is usually, “That’s beautiful, but we’ve never heard of that kind of motherhood.”

There was a similar encounter with a Franciscan priest who became a true friend of the community when we first opened a house for

the brothers in Civitella, Italy. Sr. Michaela recounts:

“We came to Civitella in 1994, and the Franciscans there assisted us in word and deed from the beginning. One day before Christmas, an older Franciscan, perhaps in his 60’s, volunteered to show me the way to the florist. Despite my limited Italian, the drive was entertaining, and I thought to myself, ‘What a modest and joyful Franciscan!’

“*F*r. Ulderico was his name and in the course of our conversation he told me, ‘In our monastery everybody does everything.’ When I asked him the superior’s name, he replied quite simply, ‘It’s me,’ and we both had to laugh. That was the beginning of a friendship given by God. “Fr. Ulderico often visited me in the kitchen of our house bringing vegetables, bread or other goodies. He especially treasured taking a little walk together in the garden, praying with one another and sharing something nice about our spiritualities. During one of these spiritual talks, he, a monk from a monastery full of men, unexpectedly asked me, ‘What is actually the sisters’ most important task in this house of brothers?’ “So I began to tell him about priest motherhood and noticed astonishingly how touched Fr. Ulderico was about this unknown spiritual reality that even

a young sister like me, who was 25 at the time, could become a spiritual mother for priests.

“His soul understood intuitively. He was thankful to finally deeply discover what he had been missing for decades. ‘During the seminary,’ he entrusted to me, ‘we received a very different formation. Women were presented as a great danger for priests—best to just avoid them.’

“Now, however, I experienced how the attitude of this aged priest changed. I was so surprised now how well he understood the spirit of priest motherhood, and how humbly he often asked, ‘Please, pray for me!’

“*A*lthough Fr. Ulderico was later transferred to a monastery on the coast, the distance never hindered us from living our inner unity for five more years. After falling ill with cancer, I was able to visit the emaciated Fr. Ulderico in the hospital shortly before his death. As I walked into his room, he cried tears of joy. No words were necessary. I felt pushed simply to ask for confession. This priestly service was Fr. Ulderico’s good-bye gift to me. Two days later, on a pilgrimage to Assisi, I prayed at the tomb of St. Francis for his spiritual son and I asked him to accompany him soon to God. Upon returning home that evening we found out that indeed good Fr. Ulderico had been able to go to his eternal home that very day.”

*“The Blessed Mother will train souls
to continue her life for the priests.”*
*“O Mary, be our Mother and let us be
for dear Jesus a little bit of what you were for him:
most faithful servant and priestly helper!”*

Maria Sieler

“This is my missionary territory”

During the Year for Priests, our community was given the great grace of three new priests; yet, we were also asked to make a special sacrifice to the Lord and give back one of our 44. On January 11, 2010 our beloved Fr. Johannes Franz Kirchner from Niederndorf, Austria died at the age of 48. His priestly patron was St. John Nepomuk, the patron saint of priests.

*F*r. Johannes was born on May 11, 1961, and grew up with his twin brother and eight other siblings on a large farm in Tyrol. He lost his father at the age of 11 and his mother in 2009. After finishing his studies, he joyfully took over the farm. He loved the animals and the land. All this time, however, Franz, the name given to him at baptism, was searching interiorly. He finally decided to go to Ecuador for a few years to help with a development program. He prayed a lot there and the desire grew in him to do more for God. Earlier, he had given some thought about one day becoming a priest. When he returned to Tyrol, he met our community and joined a short time later.

Following his studies at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, Fr. Johannes was ordained to the priesthood with seven other brothers on September 8, 1994, the Feast of the Birth of Mary, in the Cathedral of Roznava, Slovakia through the imposition of Bishop Paul Maria Hnilica's hands. After the solemn celebration of his first Holy Mass in his home village of Niederndorf, the 33-year-old, newly ordained priest moved East. He had always been excited about being a missionary one day in Russia.

Fr. Johannes arrived in Bashkortostan where the only thing in common with his Tyrolean homeland was the fertile fields. He had to renounce the mountains back home for the open range. *“This is my missionary territory! I'm happy here!”* the young priest often confirmed. A country boy, he was thankful that he did not have to live in the large city Ufa but could work in the Russian-German village of Alexejevka

and in the wide spread surrounding villages. He drove as many as 30,000 miles a year to seek out his “sheep”, to administer the Sacraments to them and bring them the reconciliation which he especially treasured and for which he prayed and sacrificed. No distance was too great for him when it came to helping souls!

Everybody loved Fr. Johannes: the elderly who had suffered so much and had not seen a priest for as many as 60 years, the youth with whom he always had new activities and especially the children whom he was so happy to have around.

*H*e was simply good to everybody; he could listen and console as a true father. For that reason, he quickly saw to it that his parishioners received a church.

He was always anxious to work when it came to building something, and therefore Alexejevka is such a nice mission station today (see *Triumph of the Heart #43*). Fr. Johannes joyfully accommodated everyone, whether it was camps for altar servers and youth or retreats for priests or sisters.

The Tyrolean missionary, who joyfully played the accordion, built manger scenes with the boys or went cross country skiing with the children in winter, especially loved to kneel long in silence before the Blessed Sacrament and pray the Rosary. From the Holy Eucharist he drew inner strength and light in dark hours.

It was significant therefore that in the Fall of 2009 Fr. Johannes collapsed at the altar during Holy Mass. Examinations and treatments in Western Europe followed, yet he did not improve. On the contrary, his health deteriorated rapidly in December. Modest as he was, Fr. Johannes, who was becoming weaker and weaker, did not want to cause any inconvenience or be a burden for anybody. *“I am ready for anything, I accept everything. I offer it all for the mission, everything which Jesus entrusts to me in his love.”* Later, when the doctors had diagnosed him with cancer and his suffering was great, he repeated, *“I want to console Jesus, to*

help him.”

In his illness, he remained deeply priestly until the end. He would gladly raise his hand in spite of great pain to give blessings and in the delirium of fever would mumble worries about the children in his mission. He always wanted to pray, and when he became too weak, he prayed along silently.

At Christmas, although he was terminally ill, he rejoiced to read in a letter from Alexejevka that more believers than ever before attended Midnight Mass and practically all of them had gone to confession. They all asked about him and were praying for him.

“My sole joy is being able to love Jesus.”

Diary, December 7, 1991

*T*wo and a half weeks later, on January 11, 2010, our Fr. Johannes, quickly, silently and peacefully passed away without agony. His spiritual father Fr. Paul Maria was at his bedside.

Radion, now 19 years old, for whom Fr. Johannes was a spiritual father for eight years, told the sisters in Alexejevka following his death, *“On Pentecost 2003, I was baptized with my grandma Nina. I will never forget that day.*

When we came with the bus from Novonikolsk to Alexejevka, grandma remained in the bus because she was unable to walk. Fr. Johannes came out of the church, already dressed in his alb and stole, and took grandma in his arms like it was the most natural thing to do, carried her into the church and set her in the first pew. He certainly did not have to do that. Whenever I think of Fr. Johannes now, I envision him before me as a priest with my grandma in his arms.”

*Mother, I love you.
I consecrate myself and my priesthood to you forever,
out of love. My intentions are yours, and your intentions are
mine. Take, O Mother, my nothingness
and make of me what you will.
Amen.*

Fr. Johannes' personal consecration to Our Lady, October 7, 2009

He was and is a brother for me

His Excellency, Clemens Pickel, Bishop of Saratov, Russia relates:

I can remember exactly the last time that I cried, but not the time before that. It must be a while back.

It was January 8; Fr. Paul picked me up at the train station in Innsbruck to bring me to Fr. Johannes in the hospital. Only once I saw him could I accept the thought that he was dying. He reacted when Fr. Paul told him that I had come. He didn't have the strength anymore to move; he couldn't even look over towards me. As I began to tell him everyone who was praying for him, I recognized joy and thankfulness in his face. In the meantime, Fr. Paul and the other brothers and sister who were in the room had slipped out. "Thank you" went through my mind. I desired to pray one more time with Fr. Johannes, and he understood. We began, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." I began to cry like a child before Our Father, his and mine. Fr. Johannes was—and is—a brother to me. I only faltered briefly; then I continued praying to the end. You have given me such a good brother, Lord! Lord you are so good! Then I called the others back into the room. The next day, I gave Fr. Johannes the Anointing of the Sick even though he did not regain consciousness. Six days later we celebrated his funeral at his closed casket—sad, but full of gratitude, hope and trust.

He came to Russia in the Fall of 1994. Back then, we priests met up to four times a year, each time for two days. Our region was called the Volga Deanery, and it had nine foreign priests to cover an area more than 1,500 miles long. I was very happy that Alexejevka now had its own priest, sometimes even two, because a grandmother there had told me in October 1991, that there had not been a priest for 61 years. When I think back on Fr. Johannes, I recall what a quiet person he was, even during our deanery meetings. He was not disinter-

ested or absent minded; rather he listened a lot and spoke only when he thought it was necessary. It was the quietness of a spiritual person, a quietness which not all spiritual people have. He was a man of prayer.

To me it is a sign of his inner strength that he could hold out so long in a village at the end of the world. Others came and went. He was there 15 years, longer than almost any priest in the whole diocese. Russian was not easy for him, but he loved his parishioners and the villagers. That is more important and it brings many blessings. I rarely met such an austere priest, austere with himself I mean. Through this, however, he found time for everything that was important: for the poor, for the children, for ecumenical work, for construction, for his community and for prayer.

I have many memories, but there is one I will never forget, although it may seem insignificant or maybe inappropriate to those from other countries. I would like to recount it nevertheless. At our deanery meeting in a city named Samara in the middle of the 1990's, six priests from the area mentioned above gathered in the apartment of one of the pastors. I think we were on the ninth floor. It was an apartment building from Krushchev's time and Fr. Johannes was new to our group. Three of us slept in the living room, two in the little bedroom and the pastor slept in the narrow kitchen. He did not turn off the lights because cockroaches ran all over the apartment when it was dark. Plugged garbage chutes in the stairwells were the norm, a real paradise for vermin. Fr. Johannes first noticed that such a critter had crept into the ground coffee when he drew his cup to his lips at breakfast. I was sitting next to him. Unnoticed, he removed the cockroach as if nothing had happened. "A hero," I thought! He did not want to offend our host.

He was the only priest with whom I could speak German, and it was a gift for me each time. His example was an incentive for me and his advice precious. When I was to be ordained a bishop in 1998 and become the administrator of both the Caucasus and Volga deaneries, an area the size of Portugal, Spain, France and Germany together, I considered which two priests should lead me during the ordination ceremony. It is a small liturgical practice that is nevertheless significant. For my left I chose a priest from the Caucasus deanery which was still unknown to me, and Fr. Johannes led me on the right.

When he started to build something, he always explained his plans to me. And when I objected to something, he always humbly accepted it, so quiet and honest that I felt bad sometimes about my objections. When, for example, a house was to be built for the brothers and sisters in Alexejevka, I did not want them under the same roof. I could imagine a corridor from the sisters' house to the chapel between the houses, but not from the brothers' house. Too many dumb things are shown on television and it causes peoples' heads to spin, including our believers. In the end, however, I

did not want to make a priest who lived his vocation as clearly as Fr. Johannes walk across the yard at night between the chapel and his house. If I remember correctly, I brought the eliminated corridor back into the plans.

Finally, I would like to mention one other thing which did not come to be, probably since the "*Work of Jesus the High Priest*" received its papal approval shortly thereafter making Fr. Johannes' status comparable to that of a religious: On May 2, 2008, I wrote a letter to Bishop Kojnok in Slovakia, where Fr. Johannes was incardinated, asking permission to propose to the Holy Father that he name Fr. Johannes Franz Kirchner a Chaplain of His Holiness (Monsignor). I never received an answer. The death of Fr. Johannes Kirchner touched me very deeply. Above all, I'm thankful, but I feel how limited our time is. I was born in the same year as Fr. Johannes, in the year that the Berlin Wall was built. Sometimes I smile now when something goes smoothly for me—is Fr. Johannes behind it, I wonder? No, I am not the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Rather, I pray for Fr. Johannes just as I hope others will pray for me one day. I pray to Christ, the Priest, who called us to his life.