

Triumph of the Heart

MARY IS ALWAYS WITH US

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*“In our life, we are not alone;
we have the constant help and companionship
of the Virgin Mary... We put everything
under her protection.”*

Pope Francis

Behold Your Mother

*On May 13, 2017, we will celebrate the 100th anniversary
of the Queen of the Rosary’s apparitions in Fatima.*

*During emeritus Pope Benedict XVI’s pilgrimage on May 13, 2010, he said,
“We would be mistaken to think that Fatima’s prophetic mission is complete.”
In the same homily, he also asked: “May the seven years which separate us
from the centenary of the apparitions hasten the fulfillment of the prophecy
of the triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.” This triumph, however,
depends on our cooperation. If we do what she tells us, then she can be our Mother,
conquer evil and shepherd the flock.*

*I*n 1531, Mary appeared in **Guadalupe**, Mexico to a fifty-seven-year-old Aztec Indian, Juan Diego, revealing herself to him as the *Immaculate and Perpetual Virgin, Mother of the true God and Mother of All Peoples*. She showed her loving care with such deep, consoling words that no other Marian apparition to date has surpassed them in tenderness: *“Hear me and understand well, my little son, that nothing should frighten or grieve you. Let not your heart be disturbed. ... Am I not here, I who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need something more?”*

Let us once again become fully aware of Our Lady’s closeness, even if we do not always feel it. Mary is present in every person’s life, whether

they know it or not. She holds nations, actually the whole world and all creation in her hands. She assured us of this during her apparition at the beginning of the *Marian Era* in **Rue du Bac** on November 27, 1830. St. Catherine Laboure saw Mary looking up to heaven while holding a little golden globe which she offered to God. Our Lady explained to the twenty-four-year-old novice, *“The globe which you see represents the whole world, especially France, and each person in particular.”* What a beautiful image of the motherly care Mary has for each one of us!

During this apparition, Our Lady also wore precious rings on her fingers. The jewels of those rings varied in their radiance. *“These rays symbolize the graces I give to those who ask for them. The gems which do not emit any rays are the graces for which souls forget to ask.”* Since the majority of humanity has no idea that

they have a personal Mother in Mary, the “beautiful woman” asked the novice Catherine to have a medal minted and offered as a gift to everyone, believers and non-believers alike. *“All who wear it will receive great graces. ... Graces will abound for whoever wears it with confidence.”*

Within just a few years, millions of medals were distributed; and since Our Lady kept her promise and countless people who wore the medal received consolation, help, conversion and healing, it was soon called the “Miraculous Medal”. With this, God wanted to give Mary to all mankind as its protecting mother before the beginning of the apocalyptic time which, according to words of Pope Pius XII, started in 1917.

*F*ive months before Communism began spreading its errors throughout the world through the Russian Revolution, Mary appeared in **Fatima** to three shepherd children who—let us not forget—could neither read nor write. She revealed to them the spiritual weapons with which they could win this fight: *the Rosary, Communion of Reparation on the First Saturday of each month and, above all, the Consecration to her Immaculate Heart.* Yet, since we did not listen to Mary’s wishes, unfortunately, things came about as she had predicted: World War II broke out and Christians were persecuted like never before.

In the last century, Our Lady has appeared on every continent, to lead us like a general in this spiritual battle and assure us of her presence. In **Amsterdam**—as in Rue du Bac—she gave us an image and a prayer. This image, in which the serpent is no longer visible, and her prayer should be given to everyone, regardless of race or religious belief, because she is truly the Mother of All Nations. Through this *“worldwide action of redemption and peace”*, as she called the spreading of her image and her prayer, she wants to bring all her children under the protective mantle of her rays and help them win the battle against evil.

*T*wenty-four years after the last apparition in Amsterdam, a statue of the Mother of All Nations cried tears 101 times in **Akita**, Japan. Even Bishop Ito, the local bishop at the time,

witnessed blood dripping from the wound in the Marian statue’s right hand and a fragrant sweat exuding from her body. Numerous medical and chemical examinations confirmed the supernatural authenticity of this phenomenon. Bishop Ito gave ecclesial approval to the messages in which Our Lady spoke to a deaf nun named Sr. Agnes Sasagawa on October 13, 1973, about the suffering which would come over all of humanity if it rejected the conversion asked by God:

*“As I told you, if men do not repent and better themselves, the Father will inflict a terrible punishment on all humanity. It will be a punishment greater than the deluge, such as one will never have seen before. Fire will fall from the sky and will wipe out a great part of humanity ... the good as well as the bad, sparing neither priests nor faithful. The survivors will find themselves so desolate that they will envy the dead. **The only arms which will remain for you will be the Rosary and the Sign left by My Son. Each day recite the prayer of the Rosary.** With the Rosary pray for the Pope, bishops and the priests. The work of the devil will infiltrate even into the Church in such a way that one will see cardinals opposing cardinals, and bishops against other bishops. The priests who venerate me will be scorned and opposed by their confreres ... churches and altars sacked; the Church will be full of those who accept compromises and the demon will press many priests and consecrated souls to leave the service of the Lord. The demon will be especially merciless against souls consecrated to God. The thought of the loss of so many souls is the cause of my sadness.”*

Bishop Ito informed the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in Rome, and Cardinal Ratzinger, the Prefect at the time, encouraged the bishop to approve the messages and events as being of supernatural origin because *“the content of the messages of Akita and Fatima are essentially the same.”* The disturbing message which Our Lady gave in Akita concludes, however, with the ever so consoling words, *“Pray the Rosary often. Only I can prevent the disaster. Whoever entrusts themselves to me will be saved.”*

Therefore, dear readers, we hope to encour-

age you with the articles in this issue as we approach the anniversary of these apparitions to live much more interiorly with Mary, to consecrate to

her again and again your worries and joys, your family, the whole world, especially when you hear disturbing news of disaster and war.

The Dancer from Spoleto

Each year, more than two million pilgrims, mostly young people, visit the tomb of St. Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother (1838-1862), whom Pope Leo XIII praised, "Because of his filial love for Mary at the foot of the Cross, he deserves to take his place by the side of St. John, the beloved disciple."

On March 1, 1838, some 650 years after St. Francis, a boy was born in Assisi and baptized that very day and in the same font as the world-famous saint and even received his name, Francis. His father, Sante Possenti, an assessor for the Papal States, was a deep believer and led his family in an exemplary way.

Francis, the eleventh of thirteen children, lost his beloved mother when he was only four years old. This vivacious child, unable to comprehend his loss, went running through the empty house calling in tears for his mother. Nobody was able to console him, save a little statue of the Pieta which he had in his room. This was the beginning of his deep love for Our Lady.

At school, Francis enjoyed a good religious upbringing which the Jesuits continued to nurture during his teenage years. Yet the lively youth, despite his good manners, showed no inclination towards contemplative life. On the contrary! He loved acting, hunting and dancing; he always had to be on the move! And since Francis loved joking, pranks and witty remarks, he was often the center of attention, although that did not always prove to be the best thing for him. The well dressed, impeccably groomed young man with his smile and zeal for life was the ideal partner for the socials frequently held by the upper-class society of which his family was a member.

After his father received a new post in the city of Spoleto, Italy, he even acquired the name, "The Dancer of Spoleto". His father, who cared

for the moral behavior of his children, took them to Holy Mass every day and saw to it that they went regularly to Confession and received Holy Communion.

Deep down, Francis felt God calling him, but each time the seductions of the world were stronger. At the age of twelve and again at the age of sixteen, he fell seriously ill; both times he promised to join a religious order if he recovered, but as soon as he was doing better again, he put the thought off to the side.

Once, on a hunting expedition, the gun slipped from its sling and fired. As he fell, a metal fragment grazed his nose leaving a tiny scar. Once again, the fear rose in his heart when he realized, what if he had died with his promise to become a religious unfulfilled? Yet this time as well, he soon forgot his concern.

In February 1856, cholera broke out in Spoleto, and Francis' favorite sister was among the victims. Her death was a shattering blow and made him aware how fleeting are all the vanities of this world. And yet, even this was not his final turning point.

That day was August 22, 1856. Like every year, a procession was made through the streets of Spoleto with a time-honored image of Mary once given to the city by Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa. That year, it was carried with particular gratitude that Our Lady had brought the cholera epidemic to an abrupt end. As the icon

was carried past Francis, he felt Mary's eyes look right through him. In his heart, he heard the words,

Francis, what are you doing here? This world is not for you. When will you finally keep your promise?"

Francis knew that this was his moment of truth; he fled from the crowd. His confessor, who knew only too well how important theater, dancing and entertainment were for the eighteen-year-

old, told him to seriously consider the sacrifice involved in religious and priestly life. Yet he allowed him to proceed because he knew of his love for Mary. Surprisingly, it was actually his devout father who did not want to let his son go. He refused to give him permission and tried to get his two older brothers to dissuade him. Even his uncle who was a priest tried to convince him otherwise. But Sante, seeing Francis' unmoving determination, finally relented.

Following Mary, I shall not weary

On September 6, Francis Possenti left his father's house and set out for the novitiate of the Passionists, the order founded by St. Paul of the Cross. On the way, he stopped at the Holy House of Loreto and entrusted himself and his future to Our Lady.

After the three-day journey, he arrived in Morrovalle where he was accepted as a novice and began his new life as a Passionist. He was especially attracted to this austere order because of the fourth vow which the brothers make—to promote the veneration of Christ's suffering and Passion as well as that of the Sorrowful Mother.

Francis received the name "Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother", and Our Lady became his teacher on the way to holiness. Gabriel wrote in a letter to his father, who had great reservations about whether Gabriel would be able to endure the hard life in a monastery, *"Oh, my dear father; do not be always so anxious to have news about me. I have a Mother who loves me dearly... I would not exchange fifteen minutes spent with the Most Holy Virgin Mary, our Consoler, our Protectress and our Hope, for a year passed in the glitter and enjoyment of the world."* A true miracle of grace, when you consider what the world had meant to him.

What was extraordinary about St. Gabriel was his ordinary daily life. He resolutely fought to overcome his self-seeking inclinations, and strove to conscientiously and obediently fulfill his daily obligations in a spirit of expiation for the conversion of sinners.

He never left his room without first saying good-bye to Mary, and no sooner had he returned, he would greet her. He lived with her as if he would see her. Back at home, he had had a little statue of the Pieta which he venerated and always attentively adorned with flowers and a burning candle; now in the monastery he decorated Mary's altar with great care. He wanted to help her, the Coredemptrix, save souls; therefore, he was ready to make any sacrifice.

He made the resolution, for example, to renounce eating his favorite fruits before each Marian feast. This was a particularly big sacrifice during the forty-day preparation for the Feast of the Assumption because, especially during the heat of July and August in Italy, there is nothing more refreshing than a slice of watermelon.

He also made a habit of greeting Our Lady with a "Hail Mary" every hour. One of his biographers testified, *"Gabriel lived more in Mary than in himself; he could not speak, think or imagine anything without having her present in spirit."* His spiritual director, Fr. Norbert, confirmed, *"It is impossible to describe how sincere, tender and ardent was his love of Mary and how absolutely it had taken possession of his entire heart."*

In the following lines, which he wrote while he was still in the novitiate, you see how radically Gabriel let his heavenly teacher lead him: *"Dear Father, are you in need of solace? Listen to me. Neither the conversation of your*

fellow men, nor theatres, nor anything that the blind world can offer, is capable of comforting a distressed mind and a sick body. No, dear Father, conversation with Jesus and Mary can alone bring you any consolation. They alone can give you the strength and help you need.”

Gabriel's trust in Our Lady knew no doubts, even in the face of death. The day of his homecoming came much earlier than he expected. Gabriel was still in the midst of studying philosophy and theology in order to become a priest when he fell

ill with tuberculosis.

In February 27, 1862, two days before his twenty-fourth birthday, he breathed his final words, *“Oh my Mother, come quickly! Oh Mary, Mother of Grace, Mother of Mercy, defend us against our enemies and take us to yourself in the hour of our death!”* Then he opened his eyes and turned his head to the right side of the room, where certainly Mary had come to take him. In just six years, she had formed a masterpiece of grace out of this youthful soul.

Source: Jude Mead, C.P., St. Gabriel, A Youthful Gospel Portrait, 1985

Gabriel's favorite books to read were “The Glories of Mary” by St. Alphonses de Liguori and “The Love of Mary” by the Camaldolese monk Dom Robert. From these writings, he put together a “Marian Creed” which he signed with his own blood and carried constantly close to his heart. In it is written: “I believe you protect those who seek you, and even when we do not quickly call upon your name, you hasten to our aid. . . . I believe you were created by God to capture men, and especially sinners, to turn them back to him.”

She Was Always Secretly With Me

Anton Štefánek from Trenčín, Slovakia was a passionate dancer just like St. Gabriel Possenti, and God intervened in his life too.

Yet, it was only with Our Lady's help that Anton was able to say “Yes” to God's will, and since June 18, 2016, he is happily a priest in a parish in Topoľčany, Slovakia.

*A*nton relates: “I grew up in a Catholic family together with my sister, who is two years younger than me. When I was a little boy, my aunt used to bring me with her to daily Mass, and so I became an altar server. Years later, after our brother was born, my mother had to take care of my aging grandma as well, so I was the only one who went to daily Mass. I remember how I loved to serve at the altar. I just felt comfortable at church, and since we had such good priests, who even played soccer with us and offered other interesting activities, I thought, ‘I also want to do something like

that one day. I would like to become a priest.’”

When Anton reached high school, however, his priorities changed. He had less and less free time because he had to study, and he developed other interests, like basketball and volleyball. In the end, Sunday Mass was all that remained, mostly out of habit and a sense of obligation.

Next, a dance school offered a course for students at the high school, and Anton signed up. He liked to dance, and since the dance instructor recognized his talents, she invited him to check out an advanced class. It did not take long before Anton was accepted into the couples' group for

competitive dancing. At the age of fifteen, he was a quick learner and moved with elegance across the dance floor. His training was intense, five times a week and he spent the weekends at competitions. He did not have time for anything else. *“What fascinated me about dancing was*

the interplay of art, sport and music. On top of that, we were always being challenged to improve our condition for the next competition. Even though looking back I would describe it as leading a double life, I found dancing to be fulfilling and it made me happy.”

Grace changed his life

*T*he young dancer started studying engineering after graduation. Everything was running according to plan until Holy Week 2007 when grace intervened. There was no practice that week, and so Anton took time to participate in the Easter Triduum at church where the congregation’s youth were active in the liturgy. He intuitively felt that they had something which he was missing. Spontaneously he prayed, *“Lord, help me to have what they have.”* And Jesus answered him, even though he needed Anton’s cooperation. A short time later, he heard about an event called *“Trenčín needs Jesus”*, which the parish youth were hosting, and he decided he wanted to be part of it. And then it happened:

“I felt how God touched me; I experienced God’s love. While the music was playing and the people were praying, I closed my eyes and listened to the melodies and the text. My head and my heart were filled with thoughts of how much God had given to me, how many talents I had received from him. I was filled with thankfulness that I am healthy, that I have a beautiful family, a home to which I can always return. I experienced myself as the happiest person in the world. My eyes filled with tears; I tried to hold them back, but to no avail. I cried and cried for joy. Then I overcame my shyness and fear, stood up and went to the front where people were praying for one another. I heard each and every word they spoke in prayer for me, and I felt how something flowed into me. I recognized that it was Jesus’ love.

“Since that moment, my life has never

been the same. Even though I continued dancing and everything remained the same on the surface, I saw the world with new eyes, and the way I treated other people was completely different. The grace of Jesus’ love remained present in me for a long time, even on the dance floor. Yet suddenly, I was no longer fulfilled by dancing. I started praying the Rosary and asked Our Lady to help me make a decision.”

That year, 2008, Anton had a particularly gifted dance partner, with whom he was heading towards a highpoint in his career. *“At the same time, however, the competitions seemed more and more senseless to me, and I wanted more time for working with the youth and other people. I spoke about it with my dance partner, but she had little understanding for the matter.”* In February 2009, they finished fifth among the twelve best couples in Slovakia. It was a great success, and consequently, they were invited to tour internationally. *“Although I had decided to give up dancing, I still had to wonder whether this success was a sign from Jesus to keep dancing. Nevertheless, I recognized in prayer that this uncertainty was only a temptation,”* Anton remembers. *“To leave the dance floor after nine years was one of the most difficult decisions of my life. I had the strength to make this sacrifice only through personal prayer, the Holy Mass and the Rosary.”*

Love for Jesus triumphs

Anton wanted to be free to understand what God was calling him to in life. He became involved in youth ministry and frequently sought solitude with God. In this time, the desire to become a priest returned to him. After completing his engineering studies, he was immediately offered a good job in the capital, Bratislava. Yet a mighty battle was raging in his heart.

“I felt as though God was testing me to see if I was really ready to give him everything—the desire to have a family as well—simply everything, and to follow him. It struck my heart whenever I heard a gospel passage about the Apostles following Jesus or hearing about Mary’s ‘Yes’ to the will of God.”

After fasting for a week in order to obtain clarity about his vocation, God gave him a deep peace. Finally, in February 2010, he asked to join the seminary in Nitra, Slovakia and was joyfully ordained to the priesthood on June 18, 2016. His motto is, “God is love”.

Looking back on the years of inner struggle, he admitted, *“In the time of questioning, searching and struggling, the Rosary and especially the example of Mary’s self-offering to God’s will were a big help. I am still learning about Our Lady, but I thank her so profoundly for her hidden presence in my life. From how many dangers she protected me! I entrust to her intercession all those who are entrusted to me, all of my intentions and my very self.”*

In 2013, a two-week city mission took place in Nitra at the wish of Bishop Viliam Judák. The sisters of the Family of Mary invited the seminarians to join them in bringing the “Lady of All Nations” to the people. Anton agreed, and afterwards shared his experience: “I had to overcome my fear of speaking to strangers and step out of my comfort zone. The joy I felt afterwards, however, was incomparable. It was amazing. I understood what I have to work on.”

With the Bororos in the Rain Forest

St. John Bosco, the great youth apostle, was convinced at the end of his life, *“We never took a step which was not shown to us beforehand by Our Lady. Everything in my life was achieved by Our Lady.”* That is why he entrusted the Salesian order he founded and their mission to Mary’s special protection. She was the one who, in a dream, showed him South America, the first place his spiritual sons would do missionary work.

For over one hundred and forty years, St. John Bosco’s Salesians have been working in numerous countries of South America. Brazil, for example, is the fifth-largest country in the

world—even larger than Australia—and with a population today of over two hundred million. In 1894, the priests were entrusted with the mission and pastoral care of the Indian tribes in the Amazonian rain forests. What an adventure!

One of the outstanding missionaries among them was Fr. Giovanni Balzola (1861 – 1927), from the northern Italian province Piedmont. In 1893, just months after his ordination to the priesthood, the thirty-two-year-old went to South America where, for thirty-four consecutive years, he sought out many Indian tribes in the huge rain forests. Untiringly, he pulled all the registers of Christian love, leading the Salesian missions,

primarily for the conversion of the wild Bororos in the Brazilian state Mato Grosso. In December 1901, following hefty quarrels between the Indian tribes and the Whites, Fr. Balzola, together with Fr. Antonio Malan and some mission helpers, undertook a daring study of the formerly unexplored Amazon forests east of the capital city Cuiabá. The troop of missionaries traveled two months through thousands of perils on horseback, on foot and in canoes through uncharted waterways. In January 1902, after traveling nearly three hundred miles deep into the jungle and never seeing the face of a Bororo, the missionaries looked close to the Barreiro River for a temporary sight to establish their mission station “Sacred Heart of Jesus”.

In Fr. Balzola’s ethnological collection of Mato Grosso, which can be viewed today in the “Don Bosco Museum” in Turin, Italy, the following seven months are vividly described with all the struggles and fears endured by the missionaries.

Until that time, the Bororos had always been very hostile toward strangers, and nobody had ever dared to press that far into the immense rain forest. Yet now a handful of brave men, under the leadership of Fr. Balzola, set up wood huts for shelter preparing themselves to encounter the feared Bororos. Days and weeks passed.

Nothing happened. They did not see or hear anything other than the countless bird calls in the trees and various chirps and roars in the forest. The missionaries suspected, however, that just steps away, the Bororos were lying in wait and silently patrolling their camp, watching their every move. For the Bororos, one thing was certain—these white men had trespassed their sovereign territory and they deserved to be massacred. Their leader, the Kazike, held a council with his strongest tribal warriors, and they decided to attack the invaders and butcher them that very night. The Bororos had bows and arrows, long spears and clubs ready for the surprise attack.

Night fell on the camp, and while the missionaries unsuspectingly prayed the Rosary, the blood thirsty warriors closed in around them. The Bororos were poised and waiting for their leader to sound the battle cry.

Suddenly, the Kazike was blinded by a light that shone brighter than one hundred fires. Standing in the light was a beautiful woman in a stunning, shimmering dress, more beautiful than the iridescent feather dress of the birds. She smiled full of goodness and said to the Indian leader, “*Do not touch these men who have come into your country! They are my sons. I protect them, and I also protect you when you are good to them.*”

Believing he was the victim of a spell, he put down his bow and slapped his face and legs with both hands. Yes, he was fully awake. In the meantime, the beautiful woman had vanished and the jungle was wrapped again in a mysterious darkness. The braves were becoming impatient waiting for the agreed sign, when they suddenly heard a few bird calls—their signal to retreat. They left the area surrounding the camp and disappeared into the dark of night.

“*The next morning,*” reported Fr. Balzola about August 7, 1902, “*we saw the tribe of Bororos gathered around the Kazike coming toward our camp for the first time. They stopped a few steps from our wood huts, and their leader emerged from the pack. He approached us, stopped directly in front of me and laid both his hands on my head as a gesture and expression of his protection. After this solemn ritual, no Bororo would have ever dared to touch us.*”

In April 1903, one hundred and thirty Bororos entered the Sacred Heart Mission Station together. Fr. Balzola accepted them wholeheartedly and taught this rebellious people with kindness. Step by step, God’s grace through Mary, Help of Christians, worked a miracle in these Indians, the terror of all white men, to free them of their traditional vices and win them over to the Christian faith. On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception and Christmas 1903, the first Bororos were baptized.

Fr. Balzola gave everything for the salvation of his Indians’ souls. After a short period of recovery in his homeland, Italy, he asked to return to his mission. He knew all too well, “*They really need the help, even from a poor, ill priest like myself.*” In 1927, the sixty-six-year-old emissary between the Indians and the Whites died at the Barcelos Mission Station.

The largest rain forest in the world is found in the Amazons; it spreads over nine countries. The tropical rain forests are known as the “green lung” of our planet, and are rightfully considered the crown jewel of nature. The Amazon and its rain forests, as the most diversified region of the world, are home to an overwhelming variety of more than one-fourth of all known types of plants and animals.

If You Knew How Much I Love You

“I don’t think there are many people who are so caught up in esoteric practices as I was,” admits Fr. Rolf Maria Reichle, a tall, sixty-two-year-old priest from the picturesque town of Rheinau, Switzerland. He relates how he was freed from the entanglement with Yoga and New Age and, hand-in-hand with Our Lady, found his way back to Jesus and even to the priesthood.

I grew up in Constance, Germany and was embedded in a believing, Christian environment through my mother, a very devout soul. I always went to Holy Mass on Sunday, and to the Marian devotions in May as well. Yet, when I was about fifteen, Catholicism no longer seemed able to provide the answers to the existential questions I started asking.

When I was sixteen, in my intense search for God, I became involved in an occult esoteric movement and Yoga through Theosophy. Back then, in 1970, Yoga had not yet experienced the boom it has today; esoteric books were more or less sold behind the counter.

After a while, the systematic study and practice of Eastern religions alone no longer satisfied me. I went looking for a living master, a guru, who could introduce me to the mysteries of life and the “divine” world. I was told, *“You have to go to India. That’s where the gurus, the yogis, are; that is where salvation is, ‘ex oriente lux – the light comes from the East!’”*

As a result, I left for India in the winter of 1972 in an old Volkswagen bus with two friends, who were searching for the same thing as I was. At that time, it was a very adventurous road trip!

In India, I discovered an Ashram, a Hindu meditation center, as well as a yogi, and I im-

mersed myself in this fascinating world.

We started every morning at four o’clock with meditation, exercises and studies. It was an intense, full-time study, the classic way of Raja Yoga to “activate” the inner “divine” powers of the body, soul and spirit through meditative techniques in order to reach a superconscious state in which the soul is united to the “cosmic God”. One could say it is the way of the serpent who tells us, *“You will be like God!”*

So, for years, I practiced Yoga several hours every day. If I do something, then I want to do it right. I moved about India, even up in the Himalayas, to the cities where the yogis live, and I visited the most important Hindu pilgrimage sites. It was a very colorful, adventurous life.

Looking back today, however, I have to say that I was always protected, even though I did not realize it at the time. Naturally, I had fully distanced myself from the Catholic Faith, yet Jesus always remained present.

When, for example, the guru in the Ashram asked me, *“Which divinity do you venerate the most?”* I answered, *“Jesus.”* So, as a Mantra, I received a sort of ejaculatory prayer in which I repeated continuously, “Om Ishai Namah”. I did not meditate on the Hindu gods like Krishna or Rama but on Ishai, Jesus, although he was only

one of many gods in Hinduism. So, that is how I

I kept returning to Constance though, and then at the age of nineteen, I went to Switzerland to train as a psychiatrist's assistant. Five years later, I started working at the Herisau psychiatric clinic. There was a patient there named Josefa from Lichtenstein, who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. I was thoroughly occupied with her at work and I noticed that, although she did need temporary therapy because of a psychological crisis, she was not schizophrenic. She was a deep believing Catholic, yes, a mystically gifted soul, who had an intense relationship to Our Lady and prayed the Rosary the whole day. That fascinated me because continually repeated prayer was nothing new to me.

When the woman expressed the wish to participate in the monthly Fatima Day in a nearby town, the doctor permitted it under the condition that she be accompanied by one of the staff. Since she was my responsibility at the clinic, I volunteered

to accompany her. So on the thirteenth every month, we drove to the Fatima evening. This was, naturally, high voltage spirituality—they prayed all the Psalms, there was a Holy Mass with an incredibly long homily; it went on for hours! It was captivating because I was used to long rituals in India. I spoke quite a bit with Josefa during these trips; we prayed the Rosary, and so I even started praying it regularly.

I even went to Holy Confession and was moved by knowing that it is Jesus who forgives sins. I was impressed, because in Hinduism you have your Karma, your weighted presence, your personal guilt which you have to pay off over many lives of reincarnation. I had noticed, however, that it does not work. Even if there were many lives—which is ridiculous of course—I would never be freed and redeemed through any sort of exercise or technique. I needed a Redeemer who takes all my guilt away.

Taking Our Lady's hand

*T*he talks with our patient who told me about Our Lady made me think, *"You have to go to Fatima because Our Lady appeared there; you have to go to Lourdes and Medjugorje!"* So, I visited the most important Marian pilgrimage sites, and I felt the strong presence of Our Lady in these places of grace. Fatima particularly impressed me. In 1988, in Medjugorje, I had an intense encounter with the Holy Eucharist, and I understood Jesus' true presence. The words of Our Lady, *"If you knew how much I love you, you would cry for joy"* made a deep impression on me. I did the consecration to Mary according to St. Louis de Montfort and have prayed a Marian consecration every day since then. That became my spirituality.

*A*t first, even after I had started praying the Rosary and going to Holy Mass, I was still very caught up in esoteric, any magical practice and astrology, which I studied rigorously. For many

years, I tried to combine Yoga and other things with Christianity which, obviously, did not work.

Today, I know that it is a miracle that I escaped all of that, because it is easier to lead an atheist or an agnostic to Jesus than someone who is involved in esoteric or New Age. When I finally grasped how dangerous this world is, I denounced esoteric a thousand times and I threw away hundreds of books. Yes, I made a radical break.

*I*n 1981, at the age of twenty-seven, I began to hear a voice in my heart, *"You could become a priest."* This became even more clear to me at the Marian shrines. The path leading to it, however, was still full of many interior and exterior oppositions and obstacles. So, I started out as a pastoral assistant, where I worked passionately with the youth for eight years and soon started doing pastoral work in prisons.

Encouraged by several priests, I entered the seminary in Chur, Switzerland and was ordained

a priest in 1997 at the age of forty-three. One year later, I was sent to Rheinau, where at the time, a psychiatric clinic and a prison were located on the island. I have been in prison ministry for twenty-eight years now. Along with my pastoral work in the parish, I take care of psychological ill criminals at the clinic in Rheinau and inmates at Switzerland's largest prison in Zurich. It is a very, very dark world where you hear unbelievable stories. In order to deal with it, you truly need the protection of Our Lady and the protection of Jesus. Yet it is my world, a gift, a charisma which God has given me to go to the prisoners and lead them to Jesus, especially through the Rosary, through Our Lady.

 Of course, Holy Mass is the center of my life, but the Rosary prayed and meditated in love, as Our Lady teaches in Medjugorje, is the main prayer for all Christians; it is the greatest power! It is so simple, that it is the first thing I teach the children in the parish and the young people in Confirmation class as well. I even give the Rosa-

ry to the prisoners. I teach them to pray the Hail Mary, then a decade and then the whole Rosary. Through the Rosary, and even more through the consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, we take our Mother's hand. She protects us—that's how I've experienced it—she really spreads out her mantle over us. In this way, Mary lives in our soul and she enkindles us with her abundant love for Jesus and for all people so that we can lead them to him. Particularly with the prisoners, you need a lot of love, sensitivity, patience and endurance, and that is Mary's great gift to us,

"If you knew how much I love you, you would cry for joy."

God has a plan with me. All the wrong paths I have traveled and all the experiences I have had with Yoga, esoteric and the occult help me today. The awareness of the jeopardy to which I was exposed in these dangerous movements also helps me now to understand the people who have lost their way in these worlds. I meet them where they are, help them free themselves from their entanglements and start on a new path.

Benedictine monks lived for over a thousand years on the little island in the Lake of Constance separating Germany and Switzerland. The monastery was suppressed and turned into a psychiatric clinic from 1867 to 2000. Today, the monastery's impressive Abbey Church of St. Mary and Mark serves as the parish church and the monastery buildings are used for music seminars. For the last thirteen years, there has been a small, Catholic community of sisters, the "Spiritual Way Community" on the island which has brought about a spiritual revival.

Fr. Rolf Maria Reichle was born in 1954, the year in which Pope Pius XII proclaimed the first Marian Year on the occasion of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception's centenary. And so his "crooked" path stood, nevertheless, under a saving Star. Today, Fr. Rolf Maria is responsible in Switzerland for Fr. Stefano Gobbi's Marian Movement of Priests. Coincidentally, the order started in Fatima in 1972, just when the eighteen-year-old was preparing to head to India in search of his God.

The Mother of Ten Thousand Children

Perhaps a believer trembles just as much as a non-believer when threatened, and he might be on edge when he is scared, but the difference between a believer and a non-believer is that the former does not stop praying and trusting.

A Christian grabs his Rosary as though he would take hold of Our Lady's hand and never lets go. Then suddenly our Heavenly Mother can give us new courage which we do not have from our own strength, and she inspires us, letting us know the right way to react in the most difficult situations. In imitation of her, the most powerful weapon, together with the Sacraments and the Rosary, is prayerful and sacrificial love, which consciously offers itself for the attacking enemy. No one can resist this love, because in the moment you forgive, Satan is defeated. He must yield.

During a telephone conversation last year, Fr. Daniel-Ange de Maupeou (see Triumph of the Heart #74) shared an impressive example from Africa, which is dear to his heart after working there for twelve years. He told us about a sixty-year-old woman named Marguerite Barankitse from Burundi who has cared for nearly thirty thousand orphan and refugee children since the start of the civil war in her homeland in 1993. Today, the very devout Catholic is known around the world as "Mama Maggy", the "Mother of ten thousand children". She never tires of emphasizing, *"Every life is holy. If you love, nothing can scare or stop you because nobody can hold back love—no army, no hate, no persecution, no hunger, nothing!"*

"It was in the middle of the civil war between the Hutu and the Tutsi. One day, a fifteen-year-old soldier stepped in front of Maggy with his Kalashnikov and said coldly, *'I'm going to kill*

you, but I kill people only on their knees. So kneel down!'

"Unshaken, she responded, *'I kneel down only for the Lord.'* Then she noticed that the boy had a Rosary hanging around his neck and calmly asked him, *'Do you know what you are wearing?'*

"Yes, it's a good luck charm I found around the neck of somebody I killed.'

"Oh, then I will tell you now what it really is,' she replied evenly. Maggy started to explain to him the Rosary and what the different mysteries mean. When she was finished, she told him, *'So that you may really understand what the Rosary is, let us pray it together. And since we are praying, I will kneel down; and you kneel down too.'* It was unbelievable! The boy with the machine gun agreed; and the two of them prayed the whole Rosary on their knees.

"Our Lady must have touched his heart while they were praying because afterwards he admitted to Maggy, *'I cannot kill you anymore.'* Instead, he asked her for forgiveness. Maggy not only forgave him, but she made him her chauffeur three years later."

Marguerite Barankitse, who tragically lost her father to violence at the age of five, learned the beauty of Christian forgiveness and charity from her widowed mother's example at home. At the age of twenty-four, Maggy was a French teacher when she, a Catholic Tutsi, adopted her first child, her student Chloé, a Protestant Hutu who had just become an orphan.

The decisive turning point in Maggy's life came on October 24, 1993, in Ruyigi, when a group of Tutsi, among whom were several of Maggy's cousins, brutally killed seventy-two

Hutu before her eyes in an act of revenge. A few hours after the slaughter, twenty-five Hutu children who had survived gathered traumatized around Maggy.

The thirty-six-year-old immediately understood it was her vocation *“to enflame a light of forgiveness”*. Since a Tutsi had murdered the children’s parents, a Tutsi should become their new, loving mother.

A week later, there were eighty more children, and after one month, two hundred. It was the birth of “Maison Shalom”, the “Shalom House” where all children, Tutsi and Hutu alike, are valued without distinction in their dignity

and are especially raised to love God and their neighbor. “Mama Maggy”, who has witnessed unspeakable massacres over the years, testifies very openly in speeches around the world, *“If I was not a Christian, I would have committed suicide many times already. I draw strength every day from prayer and especially from the Holy Mass. My Faith, which nobody can take away from me, gives me peace and hope even in the darkest moments. Only the spirit of love makes it possible to forgive and to reconcile. I am convinced that evil does not have the last word. Faith and love can move mountains of hate.”*

Marguerite Barankitse has been recognized with numerous human rights and peace prizes for her extraordinary humanitarian efforts which have saved thousands of lives, including those of her enemies, and also for her care of orphans and refugees.

As if Somebody Took My Hand

The following true stories, one which took place during World War II and the other in our day, prove how true are the words we pray in the Memorare:

“Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession was left unaided...”

I am Jewish, was born in eastern Poland and am the seventh of eleven children. Although the majority of our neighborhood was Jewish, from my childhood on I preferred to be friends with the Christian girls. To my great joy, they often brought me to the Catholic church.

There I saw how they prayed before the altar of Mary, and my best friend secretly taught me how to pray the Hail Mary. Since then, I often went to the church all by myself, to the beautiful statue which my friends called the “Immaculate”. I prayed very earnestly to Mary, and I felt an ever-increasing love for her.

In first grade, there were a lot of Catholic girls in my class with whom I loved to go to Holy Mass. The pastor knew that I was Jewish, but he was very happy that I came. In that time, I also learned the “Our Father”, the “Glory Be”, the Rosary and the whole “Litany of Loreto”.

When the other girls in third grade started

preparing for First Holy Communion, they always asked me to test them on the Catechism. As a result, I soon knew not only the answers by heart but also the questions of the Catechism.

One day, however, my older siblings found out that I had been going to the Catholic church. My father started to cry and went to the Rabbi to ask for advice. My mother, on the other hand, wanted me to swear that I would never enter a Catholic church again. I broke into tears, but I did not swear or promise anything. When my father returned from the Rabbi, he whipped me fiercely with a belt and forbid me to leave the house alone. He strictly explained to me that it is a sin to go into a Catholic church.

*P*oland was occupied by the German army in September, 1939. Being Jewish, my father, a tailor, soon lost all his clients, and the family fell into great misery. I had to go out on the streets and

beg, but people often chased me away cursing.

In the spring of 1940, the Germans fenced in part of our village with barbed wire, and all the Jews were forced to live there while their homes were taken over by other people. Three of my brothers and my older sisters were able to flee, but my mother did not let me go.

One October morning, the Nazi soldiers suddenly surrounded our cramped Jewish ghetto with tanks and forced all of us to come to a little square in the ghetto. They started shooting, and I had to watch with my own eyes how my parents and my younger siblings were killed. I froze with horror. Strangely, nobody shot me. Then one soldier moved towards me with his gun pointed. Unexpectedly I shouted, *“I love the Immaculate! I love the Immaculate!”* The soldier quickly looked around, grabbed me by the hand, hid me under his long soldier mantle and led me out of the ghetto. Once outside, he said, *“And now run!”*

I hid the whole day in a field. When evening came, I arrived at a house, but they did not let me in because they were afraid. Finally, a poor lady took me into her home, gave me something to eat and a place to sleep. The next morning, she packed a lunch for me in a cloth and handed it to me saying, *“Go that way, my daughter, toward the mountains. There is a bunker where the Jews are hiding. Perhaps you will even find your brothers and sisters.”*

After a few days, as a matter of fact, I found my siblings. I was exhausted, but I told them everything that had happened to our parents and the rest of the family. We did not remain together long, however.

One night, Nazi soldiers surrounded us, opened fire on our hiding place and threw grenades. The bunker was hit, and my brothers and sisters were killed. I do not know why nothing happened to me. I was able to escape and hide in the woods. The keen German Shepherds passed very close to me several times; but, miraculously they did not pick up my scent. I prayed unceasingly to the “Immaculate”.

In the morning, the Nazi soldiers withdrew, and I left my hiding place. The ground was strewn with silenced corpses. I found my siblings’ bod-

ies and buried them; it took me all day. After sunset, I prayed at their grave and then departed. I wandered throughout the night, but the strange thing is, I was not afraid at all. I had the strong impression that somebody was leading me by the hand. In the morning, I arrived at a settlement. The first farmhouse appeared to be abandoned. I went onto the porch and opened the front door to peek inside. There was a girl lying motionless on a bed, pale as a sheet—dead! A woman was kneeling next to the bed crying bitterly. Her husband was standing next to her, petrified with pain. Suddenly he turned to me and asked,

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” I merely looked at him in deep distress. The woman understood. She came over to me and hugged me tenderly. After a while, she turned to her husband in tears and said, *“Look, our only daughter is dead. God has sent this girl in her place.”* She hugged me tighter and asked, *“Tell us who you are and where you come from.”*

Then I told them my story and concluded with, *“No, I do not want to die; I want to live because I love Our Lady, the Immaculate! But the soldiers will kill me.”*

“No,” the woman calmed me, *“we will protect you. Listen up, my little one. You are similar to our daughter. You will now be called Hedwig, like her.”*

The following night, the couple buried their daughter in the garden, sprinkled the grave with holy water and covered it with leaves. Nobody could tell that there was a grave there, and their Hedwig lived on now in me.

A few days later I fell very ill and was hanging between life and death. Nazis entered the house several times, but they no sooner heard *“Typhus!”* than they left just as abruptly as they had entered.

Finally recovered, I did not leave the house at first under the pretense that I was slowly recovering. My adoptive parents treated me like their own daughter from the very beginning. After a while, they secretly baptized me at my request, and so I could also go to Confession and receive Holy Communion. I liked to pray often to Our Lady, the Immaculate.

My new parents loved me, and I repaid their love with mine. They even enrolled me in the high school and I graduated with honors. After

the war, my path led me to the “Community of the Immaculate Conception”, where, as a religious sister, I happily teach at a school.

Source: Karl Maria Harrer, Die schönsten Mariengeschichten, Heft 20

Mary Shut the Eyes of the ISIS Fighters

*Mary has always been our greatest protection.
She proved this so vividly in a recent ISIS attack in Iraq on October 21, 2016.
She simply made her children, who were looking for help, “invisible”.*

The meager accommodations at the university dormitory in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk had become a new home for twenty-two-year-old Monaly Najeeb and her six roommates. In 2014, the Christian girls from Qaragosh, once the largest Christian city in Iraq, had to flee from ISIS with their families and thousands of others. In Kirkuk they were able to resume their studies, pray together and even laugh again—until one terrible Friday last October. The horror began early in the morning, around 4 a.m. Monaly, who had recently graduated from the university with an engineering degree, later testified on behalf of the other six girls as to what happened.

Five days earlier, the Iraqi army had launched their major offensive to retake Mosul from ISIS. And now, one hundred miles to the south, Kirkuk became the target of an ISIS retaliatory attack. They heard gunshots and loud explosions outside. Monaly and her friends could no longer escape from the house.

The girls wrapped themselves in blankets in a quick attempt to protect themselves from bullets and glass shards. Intruders were already skirmishing around inside the building. The seven girls had just enough time to hide under four

little wooden beds when they heard voices in the kitchen. Their hearts sank, they were ISIS fighters! They heard them open the refrigerator and rummage through the cupboards.

Then several men entered the students’ bedroom and sat down on the beds to eat. The girls were lying beneath them, pressed against the wall and frozen in fear. They did not dare to breathe and hoped that all their cell phones were in silent mode. One of them had severe allergies; it would have taken only a cough or a sneeze, and everything would have been over.

The men searched through the girls’ bags and one ISIS fighter said, “*Look, they were in such a hurry that one of them even forgot her cell phone.*” Monaly clung to her Rosary and prayed. The thought raced through her mind, “*I’d rather die than be raped!*”

Then she dared to carefully write a text to her good friend, Roni Salim Momika, who had been ordained a priest just two months earlier and had been a spiritual support since the time they had come to the refugee camp. “*Help us, Father! ISIS fighters! I’ll keep you up to date.*”

The newly ordained priest, himself a refugee, testified, “*I was in contact with the girls the whole time via their cell phone. I encouraged*

them, 'Don't forget your Faith! Pray to Our Lady! She will help you! She will also protect you!' And Mary truly was with them. Afterwards, one of the girls told me, 'When the ISIS fighters came into our room, we had the feeling that Our Lady shut their eyes because they didn't see us.'" Monaly attested, "There is no human explanation as to how we survived. It was a miracle that they didn't see us." Yet that was only the beginning.

The battle continued to rage outside, and Fr. Momika later reported, "Two wounded ISIS fighters were brought in and laid on the beds under which our Christians were hiding." One fighter reached for a blanket for

the wounded; how easily it could have been one of those same blankets covering the girls! Blood soaked through the mattress and started dripping on Monaly's friend. Two men were sitting over her; they were so close that one of their boots was touching her. The fighters even said their prayers next to them!

Almost eight hours passed before the men received new orders and left the room, leaving one of the wounded behind. Not until they heard him turn on the water in the bathroom did they run out through the back door, one at a time, toward an eight-foot wall where police were waiting to help them. "I feel like I have been reborn," Monaly said once she reached safety. Five minutes after the last student escaped, the ISIS fighter detonated his suicide belt in the bathroom.

Roni Salim Momika of the Syrian-Catholic Church was able to flee from the seminary in his hometown, Qaraqosh, just minutes before it was taken over by ISIS. He was ordained a priest in the refugee camp Erbil with two of his friends, Emad and Petros, on August 5, 2016.

Once in Amatrice ...

Since the strong earthquake on August 24, 2016, Amatrice, Italy has become a name familiar to everyone. Nearly three hundred people died in many of the surrounding towns and villages. Once recognized culturally and architecturally as one of the "most beautiful places in Italy", the century-old town with its medieval city center was reduced to rubble in the devastating earthquake.

Yet even in those very difficult days, the Blessed Virgin was so visible to many of the injured and those inconsolably left behind. Mary gave a very clear sign on August 30, just before the big funeral celebration in Amatrice for all the victims. Firefighters miraculously found, in perfect condition, both an antique reliquary and its precious contents buried in the ruins of the Sant'Agostino church.

The so-called "Madonna di Filetta" has been the beloved patroness and protectress of the

citizens of Amatrice and the whole surrounding area for generations. When the rescue workers handed over the tiny, finely etched sculpture which, being about one inch in size is no larger than a brooch, to Fr. Savino, he immediately held high the little white image of Our Lady and, with tears in his eyes, solemnly blessed everyone present, the ruins of Amatrice and the whole devastated region. Then he touchingly kissed the highly venerated emblem of Amatrice. When journalists asked him about the significance of finding the "Madonna di Filetta", Fr. Savino responded visibly moved and overcome with thankfulness, "The significance? To find the little Madonna in the ruins, what a grace! It signifies everything! How could it be otherwise when somebody loses their mother and then finds her again! We will bring our holy patroness to the requiem and burial of our relatives and parishioners today. To find her and have her back is a very

important sign for us, a grace, as if somebody had found his own mother again!”

*T*he sudden death of parents, spouses, innocent children and youth is, for those who love them, a shock, a tragedy and something which simply remains a mystery hidden in God and, from a human standpoint, something nobody

can fathom. Nevertheless, Our Lady is with her mourning children in their need, just as she said as the Mother of All Nations in Amsterdam, *“I will give consolation. Nations, your Mother knows life, your Mother knows sorrow, your Mother knows the Cross. Everything you go through in this life is a passage that your Mother ... went before you.”*

The history of the “Madonna di Filetta” dates back to 1472, when, on the Solemnity of the Ascension, a little shepherd girl, Chiarina Valente, pleaded with Our Lady to save her during a severe thunderstorm. In the same moment, Chiarina’s attention was drawn to a little sparkling piece of jewelry on the ground which she recognized as a bust of Our Lady. Since that time, the people in this area of the Abruzzo Mountains make a solemn procession with the “Madonna di Filetta” every year on the feast of the Ascension.

Torn from normality

*M*aria Guerrini, who lives in Rome with her family and works with our sisters in our office, “Monte Santo”, recounted to us in November 2016, how she indirectly experienced the terrifying earthquake:

My father was born in the little hamlet Cornillo Vecchio, just a mile or two from Amatrice. Time seems to have stood still there between the old houses, barns, hay lofts and free roaming animals who pasture in the nearby fields. When my father was very young, he moved to Rome; but he could not stand it there and hurried back to his beloved mountain village the same day. At my grandparents’ house, I also spent the joyful and carefree summer vacations of my childhood with my siblings; and, later on, my own children enjoyed the peace and beauty of the area surrounding Amatrice.

My story is like that of many others who, although they do not live there permanently, a piece of their heart belongs to these towns at the foot of the mountains, the Monti della Laga. My family owned two little houses in our village—one which we inherited from our grandparents and one which my father renovated with great effort.

I had just been there with my husband Raffaele and our son Matteo two days before the earthquake. My mother, my brother and his fiancé, however, were on the second floor of my grandparents’ house when the disaster struck the night

of August 24. In the dark, climbing over rubble, it was practically a miracle that they were able to escape the collapsing bedroom. Since that night, all my family’s possessions—pictures and precious personal items—are “buried” in the house which not even the firefighters are allowed to enter because of the imminent danger of collapse. For me, it is as if part of my life is locked up there without any hope of ever being salvaged from the wreckage.

It breaks my heart to see Amatrice and our little hamlet like this. Yet my pain is minimal in comparison to the infinitely greater suffering of those who have lost their loved ones. Others may have been able to save their lives, but they have lost their homes or work places. The most terrible sufferings are those which come so quickly and unexpectedly and for which you are not prepared.

From one moment to the next, you are torn from the normality of daily life into an abyss of suffering. In this deep darkness, there is only one light that shines, the light of Faith. Only when you believe that God sent his son Jesus to take every suffering upon himself and cry every tear with mankind to redeem him from the Evil One, do you see the sense of each cross. Then you know that you are not alone, that the Lord of time and life is with you, and you recognize the little signs of his presence.

I was very touched by a television interview

in which a man testified that in his little village there was a lot of hate and quarreling between the families, yet the antagonism collapsed with their homes, making room for peace and solidarity.

*A*s I passed with dismay through my village Cornillo Vecchio, where miraculously nobody was killed or even injured, what a beautiful sign it was to see an image of the Lady of All Nations peeking out of the bag of one of the

firemen! The sisters of the Family of Mary had visited Amatrice a few days after the first earthquake and handed out the prayer cards.

One of the natives told me in tears, “*Our Lady saved us; I am sure that Our Lady saved us!*” The statue of the Queen of the Rosary, which we had often carried through the streets in procession in the past, was, as a matter of fact, undamaged in the ruins of the church. What a consoling sign of hope! Mary was standing there upright, just like on Calvary at the Cross of Jesus.

Riccardo discovered her first

*O*n September 13, as we were on our “Lady of All Nations’ Mission” for the third time, Riccardo Alessandrini, a young civil engineer from Leofreni who is a volunteer with the catastrophe response unit from Rieti, told us about his unforgettable experience:

We were in the Cornillo Vecchio evacuation camp just outside Amatrice finishing setting up emergency tents. My friend Giacomo Esposito and I decided to walk through the streets of the heavily damaged town to see for ourselves the needs of the Cornillo Vecchio community.

In some back corner, we suddenly found ourselves face-to-face with a statue of the Blessed Virgin which was standing on a pile of rubble.

She was practically undamaged in the middle of the ruins of the church which had been almost completely leveled by the terrible earthquake. We looked at each other in amazement, deeply touched by what we saw—the statue of our Mother in the midst of destruction and misery. A heavenly sign!

It was all so surreal, almost mystical, that we instinctively took off our helmets, knelt down immediately and reverently made the sign of the cross. It was obvious that the spot on which the valuable statue was standing was extremely dangerous; the roof above her and the adjacent wall threatened to collapse at any moment. We had to hurry back to camp, however, because the poor citizens of Cornillo needed our help.

Give me strength

*A*s we continued setting up the tents, something happened inside of me: I could not think about anything other than the statue which I had seen. I was so taken by this statue, that I dropped my tools and ran the quarter-mile back to the spot where we had found her. I ran as fast as I could, as if being driven by a force, as if the little Madonna was asking me to remove her from this unsafe spot.

Out of breath, I reached the church ruins within two minutes. Now, I have to admit, I was

somewhat afraid because the roof could have fallen on me at any time. So I said, “*Blessed Virgin, if you are with me, I have nothing to fear.*” In the same moment, I felt such a courage that I hurried over to the statue, and as I was doing so, I prayed the Hail Mary and entrusted myself to her mercy. The statue, however, was extremely heavy and the rescue was made even more difficult by all the rubble. With tremendous effort, I pushed her about three feet; but the more I tried, the more I realized I would never be able

to move her alone, at least not quickly enough. I stopped for a moment to catch my breath so that I could try again to lift her up. Exhausted, I prayed, *“Blessed Virgin, help me, give me the strength to get you out of here...”*

I had no sooner finished this prayer than the door across the street from the church opened and a young man named Francesco Maschio stepped out. Without hesitating, he hurried over to help me. Thanks to him, I was able bring the statue of Mary far enough out that it was no longer in danger.

A short time later, the fire department arrived. Firefighters searched the sacristy, which was in just as grave a danger of collapsing, for the poles to carry the statue. They found them, stuck

them in the platform under the statue and carried out the Queen of the Rosary. They loaded the statue onto a vehicle and brought her to the camp.

The citizens of Cornillo Vecchio believe they witnessed a miracle; on the one hand because nobody in the village was killed or seriously injured and, on the other, because it is unexplainable how the statue of Mary who was situated in corner of the church, could suddenly be standing on a pile of rubble in the middle of the church without hardly any damage. The people said, *“It is as if the Blessed Virgin went there herself. It is inconceivable how she could remain unharmed although the church had collapsed.”*

“The more I called out to the Blessed Virgin, knowing that even the smallest tremor could cause everything to fall on me, the more an immense determination and strong awareness grew in me that she was protecting me, just like a mother would calm her own child. I will remember this for the rest of my life. My trust in the Blessed Virgin has grown tremendously.”

Riccardo

The Mother of All Nations

Mission

*O*ne week after the inhabitants of the numerous Abruzzo villages were surprisingly awakened early in the morning by the violent tremor, we sisters from the nearby village of Civitella del Tronto understood that there is nothing more important now than visiting and consoling the victims. We decided to bring them the Mother of All Nations and explain to the suffering people that through praying her prayer we can be preserved from much greater degeneration and disasters. It was the day after the big funeral in Amatrice, and in a short period of time we handed out all seven hundred prayer cards which we had brought along. Rescue workers from the fire department, police, Red Cross, military and catastrophe teams were especially thankful, as well as the other people we met while we were there.

Right after parking the car, we handed a prayer card to a couple standing in shock before their toppled house. The outside wall of the bedroom had broken away and you could look right inside. Just then a fireman handed them a plastic bag with a few of their important personal belongings which he had been able to salvage. One of the next people we offered a prayer card to was an older man who took it, but said in tears, *“I lost all of my prosperity: my son and his twins.”* Amazingly, we did not notice any bitterness among the people; but we could read the shock on their faces. Another gentleman spontaneously said as he was passing by, *“If that’s a picture of Our Lady, then I’ll take one. I will ask her to take my wife and son, who lost their lives, with her soon to heaven.”*

As we were handing the prayer cards to a

few police officers in front of their operations tent, a priest walked out. It was Fr. Savino, the pastor of Amatrice, who greeted us with the words, *"I just answered a text message from the Bishop of Amsterdam's secretary with his condolences."*

It was a good moment to present the prayer card and ask him if it is okay if we give it to the people. He thankfully took one for himself and then gave us a blessing *"for this mission,"* as he expressed it.

Since we were not allowed to enter the tents of those affected for reasons of privacy, the helpers from the Order of Malta promised to bring the prayer cards personally to the people inside.

 On the Feast of Mary's Nativity, September 8, we set out again, this time in the heavily damaged villages of Arquata del Tronto and Pescara del Tronto. When we offered to give a hand to Michael, the commander of the civil patrol, he immediately responded, *"No, thank you. Your spiritual support is much more important to us."*

Sr. Rafaela showed the prayer card to a few young people and explained that God gave this prayer great power to preserve us from degeneration and disaster. One of the boys replied bitterly, *"I have the nightclub to thank for my life. I was there all night, and so I was safe in my car that morning when the ground started to shake."* The sister was speechless. Hugo, a police officer, who was with the sisters, encouraged the teenagers, *"Accept this consolation. Today the Mother is coming to you; you cannot go on with your lives like this!"* Subdued, they all accepted the prayer card. Hugo asked for a whole pack to hand out himself. One image, however, he kissed reverently and stuck in his shirt pocket, *"This one is for Maria, my wife,"* he explained with a smile.

Then we had the opportunity to give the prayer card to children, adults and elderly in a rescue camp, and Sr. Rafaela tried again to give the image to the teenagers. As soon as she began to speak to them, one of them with a sad expression, took out a cigarette and said, *"You have to know something, sister..."* Sr. Rafaela thought,

"Oh no, what's coming now." He continued, *"...All this had to happen. We had to make it through this night so that a new morning, a new day could come. It could not go on like it was any longer. My family, my relatives lost their home, but we were allowed to live."* After this testimony, all of his friends accepted the prayer card, and one of them even kissed it impulsively.

Sr. Eugenia, herself an Italian, had a sorrowful experience on September 13, during our third visit to the area effected by the earthquake, and it made us all think. *"Only those who had Faith and prayed, in the good days before the earthquake, felt supported by their Faith following the catastrophe. And those who had no relationship to God before the earthquake did not expect any help from him afterwards either. 'I am unable to pray,' many said. We met people who had eaten and played cards together just ten steps away from the church their whole life long but had never stepped inside. They did not go in after the earthquake either; they continued playing cards and did not know what to do with the prayer card."* Need does not necessarily teach us how to pray.

 Giuseppina Sorrentino and her husband Saverio, who have been happily married for twenty-six years, agreed. They too were seriously affected by the earthquake, but they did not show it. *"We know the image from Amsterdam and pray the prayer by heart every day,"* they said enthusiastically. *"We are used to living simply, and start our day early with the Rosary and Holy Mass. We also meditate every day on the Lord's suffering in the Holy Hour and pray the Chaplet of Divine Mercy,"* the deeply pious couple related to us.

"When we were awoken by the trembling, my Saverio, who has heart disease, was short of breath and lay, as if paralyzed, in bed," Giuseppina reported. *"I took him by the hand and said, 'Let us give each other a big hug, and then we will see what God wants.'"*

"When we had finally made it outside, it was pitch black and cold. 'Now let's make a fire, warm up a little and pray the Rosary together,' I suggested. We started a fire, but the

others did not want to pray. They just cursed and complained. So, we prayed alone in expiation and in the name of the others. No, the earthquake

was not a punishment from God. There were just too many sins. But Mary is there where there is suffering, especially with those who suffer!”

Through the prayer card, we gave consolation and new courage to hundreds of people, and this made us very happy and thankful as well.

The fall of the West

On August 28, just four days after the terrifying earthquake, Fr. Cassian Folsom and Fr. Benedetto Nivakoff, prior and sub-prior of the venerable Benedictine monastery in Nursia which was built over the house where St. Benedict was born, gave an interesting interview:

“Instinctively, we all ran outside and gathered in the square in front of the monastery. While new tremors caused the ground beneath our feet to roll, we held on tight to one another because it was rather cold outside. Inhabitants and monks alike all gathered spontaneously at the statue of St. Benedict in the middle of the square. We monks started praying the Rosary, and many others joined us. We thanked God with our whole heart that our lives had been spared.

“On the other side of the mountains, in Amatrice and Accumoli, the earthquake leveled the towns and left behind death and destruction. We are deeply saddened by so many tragic deaths, and we are compassionate for their families and friends. Sudden, unexpected death is especially painful because it does not give us any time to prepare.

“That is why St. Benedict encouraged his brothers, *‘always have the possibility of death before your eyes,’* so that you are ready at any moment, even in the face of a violent and unanticipated death which comes in the middle of the

night. The Basilica of St. Benedict is severely damaged, and had one of us monks been celebrating Holy Mass at the altar, he would have been killed. The facade is now separated from the church. These are signs from which we can learn and should give serious consideration.

“The first sign is that St. Benedict’s Basilica and its altar are severely damaged. That makes it very clear that the Catholic culture in western civilization is crumbling! The second sign is the people gathering around the statue of St. Benedict in the square, united in prayer. That signifies that prayer is the only means with which we can rebuild our lives!”

The monks, who follow St. Benedict, the father of western monasticism, were certainly strengthened in their conviction with the basilica’s ultimate collapse during the second large earthquake on October 30. Of the former church to the Patron of Europe, only the facade symbolically remains, rising alone over the ruins.

Without a doubt, the basilica physically needs rebuilding. Yet incomparably more urgent, all of the West, which will be shaken invisibly by a spiritual quake and is in the process of abandoning its Christian heritage, is in need of a spiritual, interior renewal through prayer and by living Christian values!

At the end of October, another earthquake struck central Italy with the epicenter in Nursia. Something caught on video touched the hearts of people around the world: an elderly Poor Clare nun fleeing her convent with the help of firemen into the town square in front of the collapsing basilica of St. Benedict. As if an apocalyptic warning, only the western facade of the church remained standing, before which some people fell on their knees and started to pray.