

Triumph of the Heart

MERCY IN OUR MISSIONS

Family of Mary
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*“Mercy: the word reveals the
very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity.”*

*From Pope Francis’ Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy
“Misericordiae Vultus”*

My Merciful Heart

*Last year the Church celebrated the “Holy Year of Mercy”,
which proved to be a time of reflection and growth for all Christians.
Therefore, we would like to take you to some of our mission stations and show you
how God’s mercy reaches out and transforms people in the most unique ways.
The testimonies you will read are in no way a vain “self-portrayal” of our missionaries,
but they should show you, dear benefactors, how your prayers,
the difficulties of daily life which you offer to God and your material support
help us put into practice the words which Jesus spoke to St. Faustina,
“Look into My Merciful Heart and reflect its compassion
in your own heart and in your deeds.”*

Our Lady said to Ida Peerdeman, the visionary in Amsterdam, “*Let them come with all their needs, spiritual and bodily.*” This task given to Mother Ida, we are trying to continue as part of her spiritual inheritance. In 1996, Bishop Bomers entrusted us with the shrine of the Mother of All Nations. What a privilege it is for our three priests, together with seven sisters from a total of six different countries, to be the “guardians” of the very inconspicuous chapel which, in reality, is a grace-filled place where nations come together and find mercy, inner healing and peace! What the burdened souls take with them from the chapel here in Amsterdam, we have to leave completely in the Mother of All Nation’s hands. This was

the case for Sr. Maria Columba last summer. “The encounter with **Dorte, a young German woman**, happened seemingly by chance during my Sunday stroll through nearby Beatrix Park. She was standing there in her jogging outfit with an empty look in her eyes, staring at a tree stump. I approached her and asked if she needed help; she responded absently, ‘*I feel just like this chopped down tree, like this stump!*’ Then Dorte told me her story. Not baptized and far away from any Christian understanding, life without God and without support had taken its toll on her. She has an eight-year-old son and an infant from her Dutch partner who had now betrayed her and left her here in a foreign country with the children. To

console the young mother, I gave her the prayer card and told her about Our Lady. She listened attentively and responded with a single sentence, ‘Yes, Mary interests me.’ So, I invited her over, ‘We have a nice chapel close by, where Mary is venerated as the Mother for all races and peoples. Come by some time!’ Three days later, as a matter of fact, Dorte was standing at the door. Despaired with red, puffy eyes, she hurried over

to the miraculous image saying, ‘I want to draw strength for my motherhood.’ She sat there silently for a while. As she was leaving, she gave me a big hug and said with determination, ‘I’m going to tell my son about it!’

If Dorte comes to mind while I am praying, I quickly entrust her to Our Lady because I know she has her ways of being close to the young mother and her sons.”

Christoph, a young Frenchman from Metz, met the Lady of All Nations on the streets of Amsterdam because he received a prayer card from us and even asked for a second one for a friend of his. He briefly told us how caught up he had been in spiritism before an illness slowly helped him to come closer to God and Mary. The next day, Christoph was suddenly standing in our chapel and told us what had happened to him the

previous day, after he accepted the prayer card. Like hundreds of tourists, he was walking through Amsterdam’s lively downtown. Yet when he wanted to head into the red light district, a heaviness suddenly overcame him like never before. So, he changed his plans and decided not to dive into the nightlife. He just couldn’t! When we said to him, “*It was surely the protection of the Mother of All Nations,*” he silently nodded in agreement.

The twenty-nine-year-old Dutch woman **Ninya Den Haan** from Zeeland, Netherlands lives in Amsterdam. Although she is not baptized, since 2011, she has been coming regularly to the Chapel of the Lady of All Nations, even for Holy Mass. She often says, “*This is a very special place, where I experience so much peace and love and draw new strength. Mary has helped me time and time again!*” On the trip back to Holland following the Day of Prayer in Dusseldorf last year, she had a special experience with her friend. “During a break at a rest stop along the highway, we met three women with a little girl. They provoked us loudly, but I did not give in to the challenge. Rather, I told them very calmly that we were just returning from a Day of Prayer.

‘Wow! That’s nice!’ one of them responded perplexed. Since I did not have a prayer card, I spontaneously gave her a key-chain with the Lady of All Nations and the image of Divine Mercy on the back. Although surprised, she accepted it; and after I explained the pictures somewhat, she said, moved and with tears in her eyes, ‘*I thought I could no longer be saved, but it is still possible!*’ Then Philippe, our chauffeur, came and offered prayer cards to the other two women and the child. They were also sincerely touched. In the end, the one with the key-chain even gave me her e-mail address. I sent her information about the Lady of All Nations, and I hope she will come by the chapel sometime soon.”

Another long-time visitor to the *Lady* is **Shirley Fong-Tin-Joen** from Surinam, a vocational school teacher. Often groups of students decide to take a field-trip to the chapel of the Lady of All Nations. However, most of them are entering a Catholic church for the first time because more than half of them come from an Islamic background; others are Protestant or without re-

ligious denomination. With any luck, one or two of the students are Catholic.

We were astounded, therefore, when Shirley came into the chapel with fifteen students during our noontime prayer on November 16, 2015. The intriguing group wanted to light some votive candles for the victims of the terrorist attack in Paris; naturally, the Muslims with their veils stood

out. They spent fifteen minutes in prayerful silence before the image and while leaving one Muslim girl said, “*Oh, how nice it was to pray now in*

the chapel!” This experience reminded us once more how the Mother of All Nations unites all people of good will.

Eugenie Apaloo from Togo is a kind and joy-filled person. Far away from her family, she lives alone and nearly penniless, employed as a maid in the Netherlands. Her life is anything but easy, and perhaps that is why, in her loneliness, she seeks the closeness of Our Lady, whom she visits several times a week in our chapel. In May 2016, the Mother of All Nations “came to visit her” in the form of a pilgrim image. This child-like soul told us about it afterwards, “Since that day, I no longer feel alone in my apartment. I prayed the Rosary every morning and it was as if I was talk-

ing to Mary. Before leaving for work, I would tell her, ‘*See you later, Mama! Please accompany me throughout the day!*’

As soon as I came home in the evening, I greeted her again saying, ‘*Thanks for being with me today! And as I now go to bed, please remain close to me.*’ This beautiful daily experience during that week of grace gave me a peace in my heart like never before. I could give her all my problems, and I was confident that she hears my prayer.”

A Holy Couple

*One of our newest mission stations is in the little town Alençon, France,
fifty miles south of Lisieux, where St. Thérèse was born.*

*A shrine for families has been built around the house where the Little Flower lived.
Her parents, Louis and Zélie Martin, are the first married couple
in the Church's history to be canonized together.*

*Now we can venerate them as holy parents who, like you dear readers,
had to master the daily life of a family with all the joys, worries and struggles
of raising children, running a household and holding down a job.
May their example encourage you to accept the challenges in your family life
with a spirit of merciful love and make it fruitful.*

*L*n Triumph of the Heart #72, we already described how Louis (1823-1894) and Zélie (1831-1877) found one another and decided for a life together in marriage. They were both sensitive by nature and were deeply united with God who had placed a desire for monastic life in their hearts. Yet, it was also led by God that their attempts to join religious communities were in vain.

The dainty and yet spirited Zélie learned the elaborate art of crocheting famous Alençon Lace, and she was self-employed already at the age of twenty-two. Louis was a clockmaker and lived a joyful, nearly monastic, life for eight years in his workshop. At age thirty-five, he met and fell in love with Zélie, who was eight years his junior. It was not long before they married; and, in the summer of 1858, they discovered, with the help of their spiritual director, the greatness and beauty of Christian parenthood. They wanted to have many children and to "raise them for heaven." Four of their nine children died at an early age. Also tragically, only four-and-a-half years after little Thérèse was born, the family had to give their forty-five-year-old mother back to God after a painful battle with cancer. The Martins, who always remained true to the faith, were in no way spared from suffering. Nevertheless, they battled every storm with a sincere effort and an unshakable trust in God's goodness, which they drew from prayer and the Holy Eucharist.

Louis and Zélie lived an admirably selfless, tender love toward one another as well as toward their children. You cannot help but be amazed when you read the touching love letters they wrote when Louis was away on business even after being married for fifteen years.

Louis seemed to be good-will personified; he never judged people. Zélie, on the other hand, had to admit that her gift of sharp observation caused some ironic comments to slip out, which she later regretted. Indeed, not even the saints are born holy; but they all have one thing in common—the determination with which they fight against their weaknesses. Once, Zélie wrote to her brother with such touching sincerity, "*It was so unfair of me to make fun of Ms. Y. I regret it so much. I do not know why, but I just have a hard time liking her although she has always been good to me. ... Therefore, I really want to change; and I have already begun. Now, I have started using every opportunity to say something good about this woman.*"

*F*our of their five girls grew-up to everyone's satisfaction, through the extremely clever measure of strictness and tenderness. The Martins did not tolerate anything that would harm their children's souls. Léonie, however, caused them many worries. She had a difficult character, and neither goodness nor correction seemed to bring

her to reason. “*A spirit of contradiction*”, required a maximum of leniency and trust in God from parents and siblings alike. It culminated in the highest expression of merciful love—the sacrifice of her mother’s life, which Zélie offered to God, so that her daughter too would become a saint. And she became one; her beatification process was opened in July 2015.

Leven though their family was very close-knit, they were also concerned for the needs of the others. As the parents lived very simply in their suburban environment and held strict fasts, they put aside a set amount of money from their family budget for good works. Every year, Louis donated a considerable amount for the missions. They helped the needy with sincere attention and a loving sense of obligation. Their daughter Céline testified to her mother’s readiness to help, “*No effort was too great and her generosity knew no limits.*” Without any one knowing it, she often sent the maid to the poor with a pot of stew, a bottle of wine and money. “*In order to get to heaven, you have to give alms,*” she liked to say.

The parents instilled this love for the poor in the hearts of their daughters as well. During family outings on Sunday afternoon, little Thérèse was allowed to politely and discreetly give alms to the needy whom they met on the way. One elderly man was so grateful that Zélie wrote, “*I realized how unhappy he was.*” As a result, she invited him to their house, offered him something to eat, gave him with a pair of shoes and was satisfied only when Louis, after a few failed attempts, had him admitted into a home. The beggar actually cried for joy. A penniless man suffering from

epilepsy also cried tears of joy when Mr. Martin handed him a considerable sum of money at the train station. When Louis heard about his misery, he quickly removed his hat, placed generous alms inside and then went from one traveler to another begging for further donations for the sick man. In the case of a drunken laborer lying on the edge of a busy street, Louis lifted him up like the Good Samaritan, asked for his address and led him home. The next day, he went to visit the man, who in the meantime had sobered up, and encouraged him to change his life.

As business people, the Martins frequently had to be lenient with delinquent clients and more than once helped buyers in need with an inexpensive loan. Louis Martin did not hesitate to risk his own life when it came to saving someone who was drowning, rescuing a man from a fire or breaking up a fight. He was not afraid of anybody when God’s glory or the salvation of a soul were on the line.

Zélie also found polite but clear words wherever she witnessed injustice. Once, a well-dressed lady on the train turned up her nose at a poor woman who boarded with two infants in her arms. When the Martins disembarked with her, they accompanied the mother and her children with their bags to her apartment, and so they did not make it home until midnight.

Another time, when Zélie’s courageous efforts to help a badly treated girl ended with the police, the captain dismissed the case by turning to Mrs. Martin, “*I entrust this girl to your care, and since you want to accept her, I will also do so. It is nice to do something good!*”

Louis and Zélie helped

Just as Louis and Zélie had a heart for the needy during their lifetime, so now—as their saintly daughter Thérèse later expressed—they may, “*spend their time in heaven doing good on earth*”. The miraculous healing which the Church accepted for their canonization process

testifies to the special intercessory power which God has given them. Little Carmen was born in Valencia, Spain in October 2008, just six months into an extremely difficult pregnancy. With extensive bleeding in the brain and a bacterial infection, the child’s condition deteriorated to such an extent

that the doctors simply gave up. Since the baby was born on the feast of St. Teresa of Avila, the father asked the sisters in the Carmelite convent close by to pray for the mortally ill infant. The sisters realized that the beatification of Louis and Zélie Martin was just four days after Carmen's birth, and so they gave the parents a prayer. "*We started praying to them that very night,*" the father, Santos, recalled. Already the next day, a series of unexpected changes began. Carmen was transferred to a different hospital where her condition noticeably improved, until she was finally released on January 2, 2009, the birthday of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Two weeks later, the relics of Blessed Louis and Zélie came to Lleida, and the family took advantage of the opportunity to pray for their daughter there. A short time later, an ultrasound showed that the bleeding in the brain had disappeared and that, unexplainably, the girl had no permanent damage. Six years later, in March 2015, the family received news that Carmen's healing had been approved as the miracle for Louis and Zélie's canonization.

Since then, an increasing number of married couples and families seek consolation and help from these holy parents, especially in the struggles which marked the Martins' lives—problems raising children, serious illness or even the pain of a child's early death. Time and again they experience notable help. That, in turn, encourages others to come to the Martins in their needs.

Last November, a young Italian mother, for example, had a priest place a touching letter on the Martin's bed in which she turned to the saints asking them for healing.

In May 2015, the breast cancer which had been successfully treated suddenly broke out again, this time more aggressively. "*My dear Zélie, you know well what it means to receive this 'death sentence'. ... You were right when you said that the children will grow up one way or another, but who will look after their souls?*" The spiritual friendship with Louis and Zélie impressively consoled the deathly ill mother who now trusts in their intercession and help in prayer.

The Shrine for Families in Alençon

On October 24-25, 2016, the weekend following the canonization, a great "Celebration in honor of All Families" took place in Alençon, and around 550 families with children and youth participated. They came not only from France but also from Spain, Italy, Belgium and Switzerland, even from the USA and Brazil.

Our Fr. Jean-Marie, the shrine's rector, helped make the grace-filled meeting a success. Two other priests, two brothers and eleven sisters from our spiritual family came to help with the extensive program which included Holy Mass and prayer, presentations, meetings, workshops and daycare.

The mostly young families seemed to be especially touched by the beautiful, loving atmosphere which some described as "*between heaven and earth*". An unusually large number

took advantage of the possibility to go to Confession. At the end of the children's program, our African priest Fr. Van Marie gave each of the 270 children a personal blessing with the Blessed Sacrament in the monstrance, even the sleeping babies. When he explained to the children that Jesus "hides" in the Eucharistic form of bread and asked, "*Why do you think he does that?*", one of them spontaneously replied, "*So that we look for him!*"

The many couples struggling in one way or another who make a pilgrimage to the relics of the Martin couple and ask their intercession for themselves or for their children, feel understood by this married couple which also endured many trials. The following words which Zélie wrote with a little humor one-and-a-half years before she

died demonstrates this, “*If I were alone and had to start all over again to accept all that I have been through in the last twenty-four years, I would rather starve to death, because just thinking about it makes me shudder.*”

She never doubted in God’s merciful guidance, but rather clung to her boundless trust and total abandonment to his will. “*If I only make it to heaven with my dear Louis and see all our children there even happier than I am, my joy will be complete, and there is nothing*

I want more.”

She wrote to her brother Isidore, “*Let us not complain, my dear friend, the good God is Lord; he can allow more suffering for our betterment, but we will never lack his help and grace.*”

All the sacrifices and trials which Louis and Zélie accepted and carried out of love for God brought forth rich fruit in their five daughters, who all found their way into convents, especially in St. Thérèse who is so loved throughout the world.

Underway with a Beggar's Sack

*I*n the Moscow metropolis, there is an extreme contrast between rich and poor, and yet much good is done for the needy too. Over the last twenty-three years, we missionaries have modestly contributed as well by giving spiritual consolation and material help as means permitted. Although we often feel like just two tiny white dots, we are, nevertheless, thankful and receive so much ourselves when we are underway to inconspicuous “individual missions”—to those who are sad, let down by life, elderly or penniless. It always helps us think of St. Faustina who prayed, “*Help me, O Lord, that my heart may be merciful so that I myself may feel all the sufferings of my neighbor. I will refuse my heart to no one.*”

The Orthodox St. Elisaveta Feodorovna (see Triumph of the Heart #27) is an inspiring example for the two of us sisters here in Moscow. The German princess was married for nineteen years to Grand Duke Sergej Aleksandrovic Romanov, the uncle of the last Czar. Her marital happiness came to an end in 1905, with his gruesome murder. The Grand Duchess Elisaveta later founded the Orthodox Martha-Maria-Convent. As its superior, she was well-known for her goodness and her sheer unlimited generosity. Every time we pray before her relics there, we ask her for her courage and her merciful love.

The most difficult cases were sent to her convent’s hospital, and in the streets of the worst part of town, the Grand Duchess could be seen every day with her beggar’s sack. Everybody knew her and called her Matushka, little Mother. One time, during her regular begging rounds, Elisaveta went into a cafe where a pair of rough vagabonds were sitting at a table, drinking vodka and playing cards. Inspired by God’s mercy, she addressed one of them, “*Good man*”. His bellowing drinking buddy immediately interrupted her, “*Why ‘good’? He’s the lowest, a thief!*” However, she continued unwavering, “*My sack with money and the things I begged for the poor is heavy. Be so good and carry it to the convent for me.*” The man whom she had spoken to stood up immediately to fulfill her wish. The others who were present protested loudly, “*He will sell the stuff and drink away the money.*” Elisaveta remained firm however, handed the man the sack and calmly returned to her convent via another route. She had no sooner arrived than she was told, “*A stranger has already brought your beggar’s sack.*” Mother Elisaveta told them to bring the man something to eat. He wanted the superior to check the contents of the sack first, however. Since she found everything in the best condition, he gathered his courage and asked her for a job at the convent. In her goodness, Elisaveta

immediately made him the gardener's assistant. That same day, the vagabond stopped drinking

Now we would like to give you an insight into our every-day mission. There is not really anything amazing to tell because there are also many others who, in their own way, do similar things. We always have our little beggar's sack with us when we are out on foot and in the subway. Yet it does not serve the same purpose as Elisaveta's for collecting items, but rather for bringing them: sandwiches, cookies, socks, gloves or other useful things for our homeless and beggar friends on the streets who are always waiting at their usual spots.

After Holy Mass at the Cathedral on Sunday, we also look after the needy parishioners by giving them medicine, a subway ticket or a little booklet with the Mass texts for the bed-ridden babushka back home. Everybody wants to be personally acknowledged, even if it is only a handshake, a head nod or a smile. Others have practical, organizational needs—looking for an apartment or a job, a recommendation for a lawyer regarding a legal battle or suggesting a doctor... Yes, a thousand unpredictable things might be asked of us, and not exactly our area of expertise either. An hour flies by. Some believers even wait patiently to speak openly about their many concerns, intentions or questions. Particularly those from out of

We may also help many who are just passing through town. Several thank you cards from various religious sisters and priests testify that they felt at home with us when they came from faraway places in Russia like Vladivostok, Magadan, Khabarovsk or Astrakhan. In the huge city of Moscow, they can feel completely lost. In their parishes, they often feel alone since the next church is frequently five hundred miles away.

One of our favorite tasks is bringing Holy Communion twice a week to ninety-five-year-old Irina. The city is enormous; therefore, a visit such as this can often take a half a day. Yet, Irina is not the only one. We always have a whole list of families and friends in mind who are waiting for

and stealing, did his work diligently and started participating in the Orthodox liturgy.

town, some of whom drive two hours to come to church on Sunday, are often lonely and the only Catholics in their family. Once in a while, we invite individuals who want to speak with us about their great worries and problems to adoration and the Hour of Mercy in our chapel. If there does not seem to be a solution and we think, "*This needs more prayer support!*", then we call one of our other mission stations or the Shrine of the Mother of All Nations in Amsterdam and ask the priests and sisters for their spiritual help in prayer. Several times we have witnessed how shortly afterwards, little "miracles" have taken place.

Our apartment also offers a spiritual home to a little group of university students. The colorful troop of Catholics, Orthodox and soul seekers, all thirsting for spirituality, come to visit us every week. We rotate through a program of adoration, catechism and praying the Rosary. Naturally, the familiar Russian "Tschaepitie", a typical tea with a warm dinner, has to be part of the occasion. The pleasant fellowship at the meetings is a substitute for the family which many never experienced, and they all feel accepted and understood as they are. The young people may ask questions about things that are bothering them, and they always make new friends.

us to visit. Such a home visit is often then the best possibility to show them how their own home can also become a church, when they make a habit of praying together there.

Since our drive to the cathedral takes, depending on the traffic, between forty minutes and, when it is really bad, two hours, the two of us have also accustomed ourselves to making a chapel out of our car. We pray especially for the priest who will celebrate the Holy Mass for us. We also pray for priests who will not celebrate the Holy Mass on that day because they underestimate the preciousness of the Holy Eucharist which is what makes us capable of anything good in life in the first place.

Often a missionary could be tempted to think, “*I never get around to doing what I should be doing!*” But that’s just it—here in this fast-paced city, giving people some of your time is the greatest act of mercy! Like when someone speaks for a long time on the telephone. Showing understanding, consoling, encouraging, advising, transmitting knowledge of the faith or praying together can change a lot in a soul. Just recently, out in the hallway in front of the elevator, we held a brief “catechism class” for Meri, an Armenian lady from our apartment block. She is a teacher, who was baptized Orthodox, does not go to church and knows nothing about the faith. She has so many questions, starting with the creation of the world right up to the death of our Lord on the Cross. Meri’s smile when we say good-bye always shows us how thankful she is for the “neighborly help”.

Another “old friend” of ours is Malvina. This lonely babushka, who used to be a professor, has

no visitors other than only rarely from her nephew, from her cat and a few cockroaches, who do not seem to bother her. One time on our way to the car from the church she entrusted to us that, as a young wife, she did not want her first child at the time and aborted it. Later, however, she was unable to have children. Even in her old age, she had never been able to forgive herself and she believed, with the great guilt she carried, “*I deserve to be alone and lonely.*” What redemption, what consolation for this soul when she heard for the first time that God, in his merciful love, can make everything good in an instant for a sinner who sincerely repents and that this suffering can also bear fruit. When we call Malvina and ask how she is doing, she is very happy.

“*Thank you, thank you that you tell me these spiritual things and do not forget me!*” she says every time. Yet, we are filled with thankfulness too!

Our “Mission” in the Eternal City

More than twenty years have passed since a small white statue of Mary cried tears of blood for the first time on February 2, 1995, in Civitavecchia, a city close to Rome, Italy. Bishop Girolamo Grillo, the local bishop, was an eyewitness to one of the fourteen times the statue wept. Even Pope St. John Paul II, convinced of the authenticity, crowned the statue and said, *“If the Mother of God cries, then we have to console her.”*

Greatly moved by our Mother’s tears of blood, we also responded with love and offered her our own sincere conversion and willingness for expiation. We did this very concretely by starting a monthly “Mission of Mercy”, first in Civitavec-

chia and later in Rome. That year on December 8, the Holy Father called all priests and believers of the Eternal City to a great “city mission”. That was a confirmation and encouragement for us to continue.

So, for the last twenty years we have been inviting believers of all ages and social classes to the “Mission” on the third Saturday of the month. It does not draw attention, yet God silently and continually touches souls through his mercy so that beggars and professors alike, nuns and seminarians, young fathers and mothers, those who are single, elderly, ill and healthy all go home consoled and strengthened. We asked some of them what the Mission of Mercy means to them.

Ida Scifoni (87), a former elementary school teacher from Rome, has been there from the beginning:

“I remember the first Missions like they were yesterday. I helped organize buses to the weeping statue in Civitavecchia, where the Mission of Mercy lasted the whole day and included a procession of reparation.

“Although my legs and eyes have grown weak over the last twenty years and, especially in the wintertime, when it is a challenge for me to reach the church, I will not let any obstacle hinder me from participating once a month in this afternoon of prayer. I find spiritual nourishment for my heart, am consoled and strengthened and, last but not least, I go home completely refreshed through Holy Confession, so that I can continue on my path with new energy. I have always tried to bring along friends who are far away from the

faith. Although not everybody accepts the invitation, some did and have remained faithful. One of my dear friends, for example, went to confession at the Mission for the first time in sixteen years and found her way back to the faith. A missionary who accompanied me on one occasion also received an extraordinary grace. He had given up on his priesthood; but, after being reconciled with God, he concelebrated Holy Mass at the Mission of Mercy for the first time in eighteen years.

Twelve years ago, a tumor caused my retina to detach and my eyesight rapidly deteriorated. I was despondent at the beginning of this great trial. Through the prayerful support of my “brothers and sisters” at the Mission, I was able to take the difficult step and say yes, *‘You, O Lord, permit it to happen to me, and so it is good for me. I want what you want! I thank you, because what you do is always the best for me!’*

*M*arinella Paladin was a kindergarten teacher for forty-five years. Her husband Gilberto does not believe in God, and her two daughters Carlotta (39) and Virginia (31), both half-deaf from birth, will also eventually go completely blind.

“Over twenty-five years have since passed since Jesus took me gently by the hand in January 1990. Back then, I had already been with Gilberto fourteen years when the doctors gave us the devastating diagnosis that our fourteen-year-old Carlotta would slowly but surely go blind. It would turn out exactly the same for her younger

sister, Virginia. Gilberto said, ‘I’d rather die.’ I thought to myself, ‘You are at a crossroads. Either you will go crazy or you have to return to the faith that was planted in your heart as a child.’ When I met the Family of Mary and the Mission of Mercy in 1995, it was one of the many signs given to me by the Lord.

“I have never missed the monthly Mission. It is uplifting to experience the freshness of the Church, the living faith and true zeal in prayer at these meetings. I draw the strength to carry my situation at home from the Hour of Mercy, adoration and the Holy Eucharist.”

*S*imon di Serafino, a young family father from Teramo in the Abruzzo Mountains, makes a four hour drive every month when he comes to Rome for the Mission.

“The long drive is one hundred percent worth the effort! The first time, I came just by chance and a little bit out of curiosity. My jaw dropped at what I witnessed. Long after returning home that first day, my thoughts remained at the Mission in Rome in the Marian church, “Our Lady of Perpetual Help”, where I experienced a unique Holy Confession. The awareness that, ‘Jesus forgives all your sins and mistakes just like that, for free!’ floored me.

“Why drive over two hundred miles? Why sit in the car for hours?” Although I ask

myself these questions each time, no sooner am I in Rome than I experience this beautiful intimacy with Jesus. It is like making myself comfortable on the couch, closing my eyes and letting him work. I understand much more about our faith now through adoration and meditating on the messages of Divine Mercy and St. Faustina. Without wanting to be conceited, I believe that although I am a proud person, I am changing into somebody who desires to deny himself for the sake of his wife and children. The greatest fruit of the Mission which I always take home with me is peaceful love. My wife and our two daughters are always waiting with great anticipation to hear how beautiful it was, what was said this time and what particularly impressed me.”

*C*hristine Uhl, from Austria, worked as a stewardess and has been living with her husband in Rome for the last forty-four years.

“I came to the Mission for the first time on September 29, 1996. Even though I often feel miserable physically or the weather is bad, I do not let the circumstance stop me. When I often

count as many as twelve priests around the main celebrant at the altar at Holy Mass, it always encourages me and reminds me of my wonderful task to pray earnestly every day and offer my life spiritually for the priests. Yes, I have learned about the meaning of spiritual motherhood for priests at the Mission of Mercy, and I treasure it.”

*F*or Sr. Dominika, an Elizabeth Sister from South Tirol, the Mission is just around the corner from her convent. She too has come faithfully with some of her sisters for many years now

and told us last year, “*The Mission of Mercy is really a ‘Mission of Prayer’ for me because in this time of terrorism, where all other means fail, we all simply have to pray much, much more.*”

Teresa and Claudio Lupelli have been married for thirty-seven years. In Albano, fifteen miles south of Rome, they have an optic shop which they always close Saturday afternoon during the Mission of Mercy. **Teresa:** “The first time, I drove to the meeting alone and immediately felt at home.” **Claudio:** “Then I came too, but I said, ‘*We can't close the shop.*’ In the meantime, we do, and simply open later. The strength we receive each month on this afternoon is worth it. The terrorist attacks around the world have made it clear how serious the situation is, and now we close the shop completely so that we can be at the Mission from the beginning until the end.” **Teresa:** “The Mission is really an ‘encounter’ for me. Within five minutes, I feel that I am completely with Jesus, with him alone.” **Claudio:** “I can only agree with Teresa on this point. I’m touched each time I pass through the little church door. I can immerse myself and receive new strength because each month the first thing I do is look for ‘my’ confessor. Making my confession has become one of the nicest parts of the Mission for me, a grace, a true need, even though I used to go to confession warily only once a year.” **Teresa:** “Thanks to

the Mission, faith is no longer an obligation for me. It has become part of me. Through the many conferences, sometimes with music and beautiful projected images, I have learned more closely, among other things, the life and spirituality of the saints, some of whom I had never heard of before. For the first time, I experienced the saints as real people who have a lot of important things to say to us for every-day life. As a mother, for example, I know similar day-to-day problems like those of St. Monica. The grace of conversion which she obtained for her son Augustine through her prayers and tears were a reflection for my role as a mother. I often prayed at the meetings, ‘*Jesus, you have to take care of my two sons!*’ Stefano and Paolo were good kids, but they’re completely caught up in the world. Luckily, I had learned, ‘*God's time is different than ours.*’ And so, I placed them both completely in God’s mercy, trusting, for example, that Stefano would find a nice girl.” **Claudio:** “And that was not the only time that God heard our prayer. Stefano changed completely. He, who neither prayed nor went to Holy Mass, does both today together with his wife.”

 **Monia Liberatore** (42), a florist from Nemi close to Castelgandolfo, just recently started participating. Our sisters have known her for a long time from buying flowers every week for our chapels; and in the last months, they have witnessed how much grace has worked in her and changed her, even her facial expressions.

“My first time at the Mission in March 2015, was ‘catastrophic’ in the sense that, what I heard there and what I experienced in myself as mistaken and false, were two worlds that collided

head-on with one another. When I received the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the first time after many years and, above all, when I went to Holy Communion, it was annihilating and overwhelmingly beautiful at the same time. On one side, there were my sins and mistakes, yet on the other my tears were flowing because there was nobody there who condemned me. Jesus of Divine Mercy took me just as I am. I did not need to be ashamed to be Monia in front of him, and he forgave me everything.”

Hidden Fates

Our Sr. Madeleine and Sr. Notburga have been working in the young capital of Kazakhstan, in the Archdiocese of Mary Most Holy in Astana, since it was erected in 2003. In these fourteen years, they have been confronted daily with two clashing worlds—on the one side, the ostentatious and luxurious life of the capital as it is in other countries of the world and, simultaneously, a poverty requiring material and spiritual help as well. Sr. Madeleine reports a little bit from the sisters' mission there.

*W*hen, during our daily work at the archbishop's curia and in the Kazakh Bishops' Conference, Sr. Notburga and I encounter beggars here and there, it is important to us to share a small token of love, as well as to take a little time and exchange a few words with them. It is simply a part of our daily missionary life and nothing special because many people of good will do the same thing.

Therefore, we never thought we would write once about our friendship with Babushka Alexandra from Alexandrovka. Before we do, however, we would like to share an incident we recently experienced involving our Archbishop Tomash Peta who, as a good shepherd, truly goes after the sheep, even those "from another stall".

As one of us was leaving the cathedral after an hour of adoration, a Kazakh woman, probably a Muslim, was standing shyly and teary-eyed at the exit. When asked, "*What's bothering you?*" she answered hesitantly, "*My daughter has a serious lung disease and requires immediate treatment outside the country. I have already*

written many places looking for help. Nobody has answered me. But it is my child! I cannot just sit by and watch my daughter die!" With these words, she quickly handed over a letter which our archbishop read as soon as he returned from a trip.

The Bishop called the woman only to discover that her daughter had died in the meantime. Bishop Peta, together with Fr. Lucjan, went as soon as possible to the surprised Kazakh some 40 miles outside the capital and spoke with her for a long time. They consoled the mourning mother, who was so touched that the Catholic priests made an effort to personally respond to her letter and visit her, a non-Christian. She never expected such compassion.

It is not always easy for a missionary, since listening, consoling and showing love takes time. When I see someone crying in the pew, for example, do I decide to pray for them silently and pass by, or do I patiently sit down, let the person next to me pour out his heart and try to help somehow? It depends on the situation.

It is God who is giving you these gifts

*O*ne spring day six years ago, while I was grocery shopping, the latter was the case. A neatly dressed babushka, who looked nothing like a beggar, held out her hand to me in front of the store. Since I had some time, I not only gave the

kind woman a donation, but I sat down next to her and asked what trouble had brought her here. Alexandra immediately started to tell me how her stove exploded last winter causing the roof of her house to burn. The old woman was forced to live

for months with her pregnant granddaughter, her granddaughter's husband and their two boys in the primitive stall next to the house. I was overcome with such compassion that I promised to come back in the morning.

The next day, I packed the most important groceries, some things from our charity collection and finally the poor babushka into the car. "Now I can take you home," I said to her joyfully. I had no idea, however, that the drive would end twenty miles outside of town in the remote steppe village of Alexandrovka.

Along the way, the beggar told me her story, how she was once a well-to-do woman who, through her husband's sudden death and the devastating fire, fell into poverty through no fault of her own. She told her granddaughter, "Natasha, now I'll ask people for help. I'm gonna beg!" "Anything but that! What a humiliation! People know you!" she cried out indignantly. Yet the old woman calmly replied, "My child, we don't have to be ashamed to beg. We would have to be ashamed to steal."

When we arrived in Alexandrovka, I saw with my own eyes the family's misery now living in two little rooms of the desolate house in the poorest conditions. "This is worse than our barn back home," I thought to myself. The great-grandchild did not really have anything to wear and his parents did not have jobs. Yet they were friendly and invited me in for a cup of tea. And although the Russians are known for their hospitality, there was really nothing other than tea inside. They did not have even a little sugar. From that point forward, I paid a visit to Alexandra

and her family once in a while by myself or with someone else. We brought groceries, clothing and medicine.



This good-hearted grandma, who continued to beg for the roof repairs and for her family, was so thankful each and every time that I told her, "*It is God who is giving you these gifts. As sisters, we just pass on what God's providence has provided us through benefactors.*"

I had been taking care of my dear friend Alexandra for six years when her daughter Larisa notified us, "*Mama is not doing well. She wants to see you!*" Late the next afternoon, I found the deathly ill Alexandra sitting bent over at the kitchen table. Motionlessly, she had held out like that since six o'clock in the morning, washed and cleanly dressed. I lovingly passed my hand over her crooked head, and we silently looked at one another for a long time. It was obvious to me, "*This is our last good-bye!*" There was an indescribable thankfulness in the old woman's eyes. She passed away that same night.

We collected money from friends in order to organize a funeral—an undertaker, a cross for the grave, flowers, etc. There was neither a church nor a priest in the village. Accordingly, the meager burial was attended by only Alexandra's daughter, granddaughter, the two oldest great grandsons and us missionaries. Perhaps that is why the Chaplet of Divine Mercy which we prayed at the grave touched us all so much.

These simple people understood without explanation that this prayer was the deceased's greatest help on the other side

It was something special to bring God into Alexandra's family. They openly received the spiritual nourishment, religious reading and some catechetical instruction; and consequently, the granddaughter, Natascha, soon wanted to be baptized with her children. When we brought Alexandra a large tapestry of Our Lady and Child from our charity collection, she proudly hung it on the wall over her bed and spoke frequently with Jesus and Mary. She entrusted to us sisters, "Now I pray every day!"

Our Beloved Roma Children

Our missionaries have been working in the southern Slovakian, eight-hundred-person village Uzofská Panica for twenty-four years. Almost three-quarters of the population are Hungarian-speaking Roma. Much of their “Gypsy” way of life does not seem to make sense to us in the West. Therefore, it is all the more important to pray to God for a supernatural, compassionate gaze, full of sincere esteem, for this despised people.

*S*ince departing from northern India around the year 1000, Europe has been home to the Roma for over seven hundred years. This mysterious ethnic group has a fiery temperament and a mentality that sometimes seems to defy our sense of order, challenging us to love. Although Roma ideas on how to run a household and the virtues of honesty and diligence differ from ours, these circumstances require good-natured understanding. Fr. Lorenz, an Austrian who in 1993 moved to Uzofská Panica which is thirty miles east of our Motherhouse, also strives to learn continually and grow in love when dealing with the Roma. Together with Fr. Jozafat, Fr. Ignazio and seven sisters, he takes care of three parishes made up of thirty-five villages. He recounts:

“When I first arrived, I had a natural inclination toward this people, yet that was not sufficient to be a true missionary of mercy for them. An attraction has to become a supernatural love, which is not something we have of our own accord. Just like in marriage, where, over the course of the years, one has to continually accept the other with all their rough edges, so must it be for the priest and his people as well. One has to receive the love of the Good Shepherd from God, who gave his life for all mankind. We may learn this from holy missionaries, like St. Joseph Freinademetz. He was a radiant Divine Word Missionary from Austria who bitterly suffered for four years in China under the deceitfulness and mockery of the Chinese, in whom he found nothing appealing. However, God’s love changed his heart so much that, before long, he could not tolerate anyone

speaking uncharitably about them. He fully identified himself with them, and in the end, despite an attempt on his life, he declared, *‘In heaven, I want to be Chinese too.’*

“*T*hat is why we also try always to defend the Roma. If, for example, visitors from the West seem to be shocked by the misery in our villages, then I tell them to consider, *‘If we were born in this situation, we would be the same way and would not know how to get out of it either.’*

“Of course, we see what is wrong, but we must never feel better than the others. We often have to teach the Slovaks and Hungarians who also live in our parish, to consider the Roma with more mercy and respect. If someone starts to talk about the ‘Zigani’, the ‘Gypsies’—and it often has a condescending tone—I consciously use the term ‘Romovia’, ‘Roma’.

“Even among the Roma themselves, it is necessary to overcome differences and unjust prejudices. Sometimes we are called to help the more well-integrated Roma, usually the music-making families, to look with more compassion on those who live in less fortunate circumstances. Often when they are in the car with us and we pass by a slum-like Roma settlement, they say in a haughty way, *‘Look, that’s where the Gypsies live!’*

“*I*n their crowded dwellings where they lack everything, you do encounter, to be honest, dire poverty. You cannot always give something material—but you can always be friendly and

loving. Our experience is that love is the only power which can pick up the Roma and heal their wounds. It can be an enormous challenge for us when our Roma demand our attention by pounding and begging unbelievably long at our door day after day or occasionally there is a big fight because one is jealous of the other. It is not surprising because, with the Roma, almost everybody needs everything.

“When we give them groceries, clothing or material goods, offer them first aid or drive them somewhere, they immediately feel whether you love them, consider them your equal or look down on them. This humble respect as a fundamental attitude is so important to us.

*T*hrough a small, but unforgettable event at the beginning of our mission here, I learned something that stayed with me for the rest of my life. A man named Fero, a diminutive for Francis, had returned to the village from prison and wanted us to give him a bicycle. ‘But we don’t have a bicycle,’ I told him.

“With that, Fero pretty much lost control. The situation had already escalated when Fr. Paul Maria, returning from a trip, stepped out of the car, went directly over to Fero and started speaking very kindly to him. From one moment to the

next, Fero calmed down and became as meek as a lamb. That event has impressed me to this day—in difficult situations simply react with meekness and goodness.

“More than other ethnic groups, the Roma, unfortunately, speak curses over one another. In our neighborhood too, there is a woman whom we have helped a lot, and yet she was always so evil when our paths crossed that, honestly, I preferred not to run into her, even though Christians have nothing to fear. Nevertheless, I always said hello and have often blessed her. In spite of everything, we helped finance the woman’s correspondence study. It touched her so much that she changed completely. Now she comes to Holy Mass, not only on Sunday, but also during the week.

*N*aturally, it takes a long time for love to break through to such hearts. Above all it requires a lot of prayer and sacrifice in order for people to be freed from a sort of spiritual imprisonment. You have to say, it is something that lies like a great spiritual weight over the whole Roma people, a group who are still caught up in fortunetelling, superstition and the like. We missionaries feel this, yet mercy also means the readiness to take the load of another upon oneself and carry it with them.”

On May 4, 1997, Pope St. John Paul II beatified the first Gypsy, Ceferino Giménez Malla from Spain. This holy man demonstrates to what nobility and power of Faith the Roma soul is also called in their passion and capacity for love. His life was one of a true Gypsy and a true Christian, who always acknowledged his Roma identity and the history of his people. He suffered martyrdom for his Faith in August 1936, during the Spanish Civil War. For our mission in Uzovská Panica, he is, understandably, a special patron.

From Communist to Christian

In the Russian missions, we are always surprised by the mysterious ways in which God can touch a soul. Just recently in Alexejevka, Fr. Nicklas told how he once again witnessed God's saving grace which untiringly pursues the lost sheep—Anatoly Medvedko, in this case—to finally bring him home.

Anatoly, married and the father of three children, had been a Communist his whole life. In Davlekonova, seventy-five miles away from Alexejevka, he had worked his way up to being in charge of a large construction company.

Dima, his youngest son, who was baptized in the Orthodox church but was non-practicing, met Nastja, a young woman who had become Catholic through the blessed work of our late Fr. Johannes Nepomuk. Then, as is unfortunately often the case in Russia, Nastja and Dima married only civilly.

Only after years of suffering from being childless did they both finally open up to asking God's blessing for their marriage. Their wedding in 2014 in our parish church was an important occasion for which the whole family showed up—even Dima's father Anatoly! It was his first celebration in a church, and so he did not have the slightest idea what to say or do.

Then the first little miracle took place. Although the doctors had given Nastja no hope of ever conceiving a child, she called me just two months after the wedding and, in tears, shared with me that she was pregnant.

Eight months later, a healthy, cute little Mila was born. And so it came to pass that Anatoly found himself in a church for the second time in his life, for Mila's baptism.

Now we come to the decisive moment: Natsja called me at the beginning of November 2015 and asked if it would be possible to baptize Anatoly. She said he was very sick and in the hospital, but that he had expressed the wish to be baptized. When she asked him whether she

should call the Orthodox or the Catholic priest, he immediately answered, "*The Catholic priest should come.*" I instantly understood that grace was at work.

The next day I drove the seventy-five miles to Davlekonova to meet Nastja, Dima and his sister in Anatoly's hospital room. When I saw how sick he was, I knew he did not have much longer to live. I immediately administered the Sacrament of a new spiritual birth. Those present were deeply moved because, as believers, they understood what a great grace it was for their dear father, who now had the baptismal name Anatoly Nikolai.

I called the family the next day to see how he was doing and I heard to my great amazement, "*Our father is doing much better. When we told him what a great grace it was for him to be baptized yesterday, he started to cry for joy.*"

*S*ince I had to go to this town anyways two days later, I made arrangements with the family to visit the newly baptized at the hospital. As I entered the hospital room, there seemed to be a completely different person before me than the one I baptized three days earlier.

Anatoly was awake, sitting up in bed, speaking and laughing. The former Communist kissed my hands over and over again and thanked me for coming. It touched me so much that I gathered all my courage and said, "*Anatoly Nikolai, in Holy Baptism, God forgave you all the sins of your whole life. Now you too must forgive all those who were unfair to you during your lifetime, and, where necessary, ask also for forgiveness.*"

As a result, he started sobbing. I embraced him, gave him the blessing and said good-bye. His last words were, “*Spasiba, thank you!*”

Two days later, Anatoly died very peacefully and completely reconciled with God and his family. At his funeral, which I was permitted to lead, you can imagine the surprise in the face of his

former comrades—a Catholic priest was burying their old buddy! I said to those in attendance, “*I met Anatoly only four times in my life: at a wedding, at a baptism, at his own baptism and three days after his baptism when I encouraged him to show the same mercy to others that God had shown to him.*”

The Look of Mercy“

“Help me, O Lord, that my eyes may be merciful, so that I may never suspect or judge from appearances, but look for what is beautiful in my neighbors’ souls and come to their rescue.”
In Neuss, Germany, our Sr. Maria Gabriella has certainly made this prayer of St. Faustina her own since, for the last three-and-a-half years, she has been taking care of those who knock on the door of our monastery every day looking for help. She shares with us what this is like for her.

*A*s in all our mission stations, the tasks of the priests and sisters here in the Monastery of St. Sebastian are very diverse, and yet adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, which is exposed throughout the day in the church, always remains the most important and central “activity”.

Among the various duties, I am entrusted with a very nice but also challenging responsibility. I would call it “our little mission of mercy”—taking care of the needy. From Monday through Friday, those looking for help may ring our doorbell during set times. Nowadays, there are about eighty-five people who come, eighty percent of whom are German and only about ten percent of whom are women. On average, there are more than fifty per day; the others visit us occasionally. They are all unemployed, receiving help from social services or disability benefits, and can economically barely make ends meet. Two-thirds of them are homeless.

Each has his own tragic story of how he arrived at this point. Most of them come from broken homes, knowing only one or neither of

their parents. They were sent to institutions or were treated so terribly by their parents that they preferred to live on the streets. Many started using drugs and alcohol to forget the past.

For us missionaries, it is mercy itself who sends these people to us; and, in their name, we want to offer to God their suffering, whether it is their own fault or not, for the salvation of their souls. They receive one euro each day from us, a small subsidy of five euro a week. Much more important than the money, however, is the time and compassion they receive. They have to feel that there is somebody who cares about their situation and respects them. They are so thankful for this. I often hear, “*Sister, we do not come first and foremost for the money, but because we just like to see you.*” Others are thankful when they can talk about what is bothering them.

I feel great love and compassion for these people, but I know that God places that into my heart. When I took over the duties at the door, our Mother Agnes advised me to pray one Hail Mary for each person who knocks. Since there

are so many in the meantime, I pray a Rosary for them each morning before I go to the door, and I ask Our Lady to open the door with me. I light a candle next to St. Joseph's statue at the front door and entrust each case to him. When somebody new comes, I ask a little about his situation and then give him a prayer card of the Lady of All Nations to entrust him completely to Mary's motherly protection. It always makes me think how important it is that we have this prayer in many different languages.

Recently, a man from Turkey was touched to read the prayer in his mother language. Of course, I encourage everybody to pray to the Holy Spirit every day for peace and for their personal intentions and concerns. Most of them grew up in a non-believing, godless environment and have no relationship to God or the Church. Therefore, many really look at me in disbelief or laugh when I encourage them to pray. Sometimes I find out later though, that one or the other accepted my advice.

A short time ago, I asked one of the needy how he is doing, and he answered, "*When I pray and look ahead, then it is okay.*" "*Oh, you pray?*" I asked, happy and surprised at the same time, since he had always described himself as a non-believer. "*Yes, of course... the prayer which you gave me.*"

It really consoles me because it shows that, where we are unable to help, Our Lady takes her children under her mantle—through a simple prayer card.

Just the other day, one of my “friends”, Matthias, had a beautiful experience. He was homeless and had just told me again about his disheartening situation. I pushed him to try praying the prayer more and promised him I would do the same for him. Two days later he came overjoyed to the door, "*Sister, Sister, yesterday an acquaintance asked me if I needed a room! I have a home, just like that!*" He was very excited. I rejoiced with him and encouraged him to keep praying since he had now seen how powerful the prayer is. "*Yes, it was her!*" he said pointing to heaven.

Another time, a man came to the door who

seemed pretty absent-minded. Since he did not smell of alcohol, I asked him if he takes drugs. He said no and explained to me that he has to take strong medication for depression. Then, suddenly, everything came out, and he told me about his difficult childhood. "*There was a lot of violence in our home. My father beat my mother and us children. He repeatedly abused my two younger sisters and forced me to watch. He threatened me every time not to betray anything to my mom. To frighten me, he put out his burning cigarettes on my bare chest.*"

The homeless man, understandably, did not know how deal with his terrible past and therefore required psychological treatment. When I gave him the prayer card and explained in my own words who this is and why we should pray this prayer, he suddenly interrupted me, "*What... stop... wait... once again, please repeat very slowly. Our Lady appeared and revealed this prayer?... Could we pray it together now?*" We did, of course, and he left quite consoled. May Our Lady protect and accompany him!

Robert, another young man, was often beaten and abused by his parents, who belonged to a Satanic sect. As soon as he was able, he ran away from home and married very young. The marriage was okay for the first few years, but then his wife fell into a total dependency with the Jehovah's Witnesses. He separated from her and learned kick-boxing. Once, he had to compete against his best friend, and there was a terrible accident. Through an unfortunate strike, he unwillingly killed his friend. Tears ran down his cheeks as he told me this, "*I am so tired of life and I simply cannot forgive myself.*" Had I not the belief and trust that Our Lady is truly mother for all those entrusted to us and that she takes care of them, it would be very sad.



Now I know my people very well, and they are not offended if I offer them a little advice with regards to their hygiene or clothing since it is also merciful love to help wounded hearts rebuild their self-esteem and to give them a sense of dignity. I keep abreast of where I can send them for a free or inexpensive lunch, where they can buy a basket of groceries for two euros or where they

can shower and do their laundry, etc.

Many of the homeless no longer have friends or relatives, and so nobody thinks about their feast days. Therefore, we decided that for their birthdays we should at least give them a large, nicely-wrapped bar of chocolate. It is not first of all the gift that makes them happy, but rather that somebody thought personally of them. Even if someone has not come for a while, he is always at the door on his birthday to pick up his blessings and present. Once, a young man was deeply touched and said, *"It has been at least six years since somebody congratulated me on my birthday."*

Another man came several days after his birthday. When I congratulated him and handed him his belated gift, the normally boisterous man was moved to tears and mumbled to himself, *"That you still remembered me! It's so nice when we think about the others."*

This is our way of trying to show the needy God's merciful love. And since we can show

mercy through deeds, words and prayer, as we know, there is always a possibility for a missionary to be active.



I had a very nice encounter not long ago. A well-dressed man came to the door. Instead of asking for a euro, he said to me, *"I see that you always give people something. Now I want to give you something too!"* He gave me a fifty-euro banknote and disappeared before I could even react. He came a second time with a fifty-euro donation, and when I asked him who he is and why he was helping, he evasively answered, *"I live in the neighborhood and have been watching."* I understood that he preferred to remain a discreet benefactor who was doing a work of mercy in his own way.

I am very grateful to God that I can serve people like this since what I give them I give to Jesus, as he teaches us, *"Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."*

Once, I saw one of my guys on the other side street insulting others as they walked by. The next day, I admonished him saying he cannot insult the others like that. He looked at me surprised and asked, "But if I don't do it, who will?"

Valentine from Malinovka

Valentine always loved animals. He cared for the ones in the barn so well, especially his own little sheep which, on the day of the accident, also unexpectedly and unexplainably died. When the coffin was carried out of the house on the morning of November 10, for the funeral, everyone was amazed that the cows in the barn started mooing loudly as if to say good-bye.

*I*n the Kazakh town Sherbakty, one of our nice daily tasks is to pass on a little of God's love to great and small alike through exterior works of mercy. What a privilege it is to see the happy faces of all the children in the soup kitchen. To be honest though, there is a deeper and more valuable way for the heart of a missionary to help people to experience God's merciful closeness.

Although the so-called 'spiritual works of mercy' may not catch our attention, they nevertheless contain an incomparable inner joy. They invite us to give souls counsel, support and consolation and to soothe the soul's wounds, suffering and spiritual poverty which is much worse than any material need!

*I*t was this inner suffering which finally pushed fourteen-year-old Valentine from the neighboring village Malinovka ten miles away to put an end to his life here on earth. One of our parishioners, twenty-nine-year-old Natasha Wenz, told us about the tragic death of her cousin, whom we never met.

As is often the case in the villages out in the steppe, Valentine's father was unemployed and a heavy drinker who beat his children. The family often went hungry when he had drunk the last cent. Valentine's brothers had already moved out at the ages of twenty-four and eighteen, hoping to find a better future in the city.

Valentine remained at home with his mother Tanya, a meek, good-hearted woman, and his two little sisters ages six and three. All in all, without Faith, it was a very sad situation in this family; they suffered materially and spiritually.

Apparently, Valentine, a good, helpful and sensitive boy, was no longer able to handle this

terrible situation. On the evening of November 5, 2015, when his father was drunk again, the fourteen-year-old called the police, and then, without saying a word, went and hung himself. Late in the evening, when Valentine still was not home, his worried mother went looking for him and found him dead.

We missionaries were overcome with deep compassion when we heard about Valentine's death. Yet since we know all too well the frequent tragic conditions in the families, we could imagine what all the poor boy had been through in order to reach such a decision.

"*Would you like the Catholic missionaries to come and pray?*" our parishioner Natasha proposed to the family-in-mourning. Her aunt, Valentine's mother, immediately answered with thankfulness, "Yes, please."

We sisters, with our priest Fr. Ulrich, who was substituting for Fr. Bonaventura, drove to Malinovka. Valentine's brothers were crying so hard, but as we started praying the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, a calm, unbelievably beautiful atmosphere filled the whole house. Jesus had promised St. Faustina, "*I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the fount of My mercy.*"

*O*ur priest also blessed the place where Valentine was found. How consoling it was for us to know that we now had given Valentine spiritually all the riches which the treasures of the Church offer us as baptized Christians. The boy was not baptized. He did not know the Hour of Mercy, but the words which Jesus once spoke to St. Faustina, now applied to us as well, "*In this hour you can obtain everything for yourself*

and for others for the asking." Valentine did not know about the greatest gift, the Holy Eucharist; however, we wanted to consciously offer up Holy Communion for him at the next Holy Mass and give it to him spiritually as his "First Holy Communion". Certainly, nobody had ever told Valentine that he has a loving Father, the best Father in heaven. Now he knows it for sure!

If we missionaries wanted to give and sur-

round this poor child, whom we did not even know, with all the mercy we could possibly imagine, then how much more so does our Heavenly Father, who is Mercy itself?

Therefore, Valentine has become, in a spiritual way, one of our children from the "Bethlehem of Kazakhstan" and surely an intercessor for our children and our whole parish, for his family and especially for his father.

I Trust in You!

*In the middle of Uruguay's fertile pampa,
lies our mission station Belén, which is Spanish for Bethlehem.
Since Bishop Raúl Scarrone invited us to his Diocese of Florida in 2003,
a particular trait of our work has been to bring God's mercy to this materially
and spiritually impoverished country.*

*A*lready that first year, we started spreading the message of Divine Mercy, something new to everyone there, and we celebrated the Sunday of Divine Mercy. Hundreds of pilgrims came for this celebration, and Bishop Scarrone solemnly consecrated the cathedral's right-side chapel with a six-foot image of "Jesus of Divine Mercy". Although fourteen years have since passed, this feast day always brings great graces. We three priests, four sisters and a native novice experience these great graces again and again.

We were very happy that our dear friend Agustina Tellechea, for example, accepted our invitation to the Sunday of Divine Mercy. She carried a very special gift to the altar during the offertory—her little daughter Maria who had been born just one month earlier with Down Syndrome, to everyone's surprise.

Agustina was very moved as she carried forward her child to Bishop Martín Scremini. Obviously, at this moment, grace worked something very decisive in the heart of the young mother because after Holy Communion, tears were streaming over her cheeks. She was once again able to trust Jesus and Mary and believe that there is also a plan of mercy for their situation.

Agustina and her husband Juan Manuel, a believing, well-to-do couple who live with their four children in the capital of Uruguay, Montevideo, later wrote a touching testimony about this, and we would like to share it now with you, dear readers.

Juan Manuel: Agustina and I have been happily married for twelve years. When my wife started preparing for her consecration to Our Lady according to Louis de Montfort in the middle of 2014, I finally decided to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation, something that I had been putting off forever.

It was at this time that we received the exciting news that our fourth child, little Maria, was on the way. Agustina had a very joyful pregnancy, and the whole family was thrilled. But when Maria was born on February 19, 2015 with Down Syndrome, we were shocked.

We cried in our deep pain. All our plans and dreams seemed to have been destroyed, and it was something we could neither understand nor accept. It looked more like we were celebrating a funeral than a birth. However, while we were still in the hospital, we tried, with tears in our eyes,

to trust and put ourselves in Our Lady's hands. Each time I was overcome with anxiety and fear, I repeated, "*Mother Mary, I trust in You!*"

Yet only a few days after Agustina and the baby had come home from the hospital did I begin to understand that my little daughter is a new life and not the bitter end of a dream. God's plans are not always as we would like them to be.

Agustina: God transformed our suffering, step by step, into joy, according to the measure of our trust and prayer in which we simply said to Jesus, "*I trust in you!*" I also frequently asked Our Lady, "*Just let me see little Maria as a blessing and not as a cross!*"

Juan Manuel went often to the Blessed Sacrament in adoration; this calmed him. I also went to adoration, but not as often as my husband did. Then the Sunday of Divine Mercy came, and our Maria was to be an offertory gift. She was "my gift of trust" to Jesus. I am certain that during this feast I received many graces which gave me a completely new trust in Jesus and also in Our Lady as my personal mother. I understood deep down something that I could not understand when Maria was born; namely, that this was all part of God's plan of goodness and mercy.

Juan Manuel: God also taught us an important lesson through our other children. We explained to them the situation with their little sister Maria and Down Syndrome, that she belonged to those people in whom simplicity and goodness are expressed in a particular way. Manuel, our oldest, said so beautifully and true, "*Then we have nothing to worry about. If God takes something, then he gives something else in return. Maria received the gift of goodness.*" And as soon as he had the little one in his arms, he lovingly looked at her and kissed her with the words, "*Oh Maria, I love you so much!*" His

five-year-old brother Cruz added, "*You're the cutest little girl!*"

Truly, in their purity, the children were often teachers of life and of the faith.

Agustina: Three months after Maria was born, I was meditating on the part of the Our Father "*thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,*" and I understood that it is God's will that Maria came to our family as a special gift of his goodness so that we can learn many things. We learned to appreciate, for example, the simplicity and purity of heart of our youngest. And so now a great pain has been transformed into a great joy because we experience how Maria teaches us true love.

Juan Manuel: Today, I understand much better those who suffer and also those who are surprised when "life" has other plans than what they had imagined. I now know that, in the end, God does everything at the right time and in the right place. Sometimes it is really hard when things develop other than planned, but precisely in these circumstances, the person, the couple and the family grow.

Agustina: In the beginning, even my faith-filled mother China was deeply dismayed by Maria's handicap and asked in tears, "*How could Our Lady let something like this happen to us?*"

Now she sees it in a different way. She is always saying, "*This treasure is so loving and the sunshine of the whole family. She unites us all, and she has become the joy of my life.*"

As a matter of fact, Maria has conquered all our hearts, and we have fallen in love with this little angel. A smile from her is enough to make all of us happy. She teaches us how to be patient, however, and to cherish each little bit of progress

The last lifeline

 Bishop Scarrone told us another impressive story while we were walking through our

fields in Belen: "The doctors had given a woman with terminal cancer only three months to live.

Since she had been far from the faith for many years and had sought the meaning of her life in New Age, she adamantly refused the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. So, I at least gave her the CD with the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, Jesus' consoling words and the beautiful music. To everyone's surprise, she listened to the CD every day. A short time later, she asked of her own initiative, '*Can I go to confession?*'

Just recently, Agustina radiantly told us missionaries again, "We love Maria more each day. It is such a blessing to have her! Our family never would have been what it is today without her."

This miracle in her soul could only be worked by Jesus, who promised St. Faustina with regards to the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, '*Whoever will recite it will receive great mercy at the hour of death. Priests will recommend it to sinners as their last hope of salvation. Even if there were a sinner most hardened, if he were to recite this chaplet only once, he would receive grace from My infinite mercy.*'"