



Pray for our effort, dear Abba John Eudes!!!

(on your feast day August 18&19, and then St. Bernard's August 20, I prayed for help with the Book so it can be published. On August 21, Fr. Gerard brought Fr. Bernardo to the store and left him there with me. We spent time helping Father looking for books and religious articles. Getting to know him a little, I made an act of faith and asked him to help editing the Book. He accepted gladly! Praise the Lord!
He started on the feast of Queenship of the Blessed Mother)

**We work on this in your memory, dear Rev. Father.
May God bless and keep Fr. Bernardo well in all! Amen.**

Sunday, March 4th, 2018, Abba John finally came on board for he was Abba John Eudes' health care proxy. To everyone's surprise, Abba John told Dr. Hammed to put Abba John Eudes back on the ventilator if he could not breathe on his own. I did not know what to think. Abba John Eudes' family and I talked, and we all agreed with Fr. Gerard the day before to let the patient go peacefully and not to prolong his life on the ventilator if ICU doctors were sure he would not live. Dr. Stalica came in and saw how disappointed I was, and that my swollen eyes clearly showed great distress and anguish. She consoled me that they would try something different and less aggressive and hoped that they would not have to put Abba back on the respirator again. "You pray!", she told me.

Fr. Gerard, Fr. Stephen and Br. Christian came that afternoon as Charlie Gardner was about to leave. Many thanks to this loving friend and caretaker of Rev. Father. He helped fill-in a few times when I had to leave for work. He was a great support for Abba and for me also when I needed it. Abba's two monk brothers took turns to pray as they supported his unconscious hands with theirs, which deeply and tenderly revealed the spiritual affection of the sons toward the Emeritus Abbot. Fr. Gerard in the meantime, tried to talk to the doctor. Outside the room, I humbly asked, and Fr. Gerard explained the reason for putting Abba back on the ventilator if he needed it. Not being able to breathe and gasping for air would be the long and worst way to suffer. The hope was that while being on the ventilator, his heart would go first. It would be less painful. Later that day, it was consoling to have Fr. Isaac stop by on his way home from Virginia. He too prayed over Abba with care and affection. Fr. Isaac told me once that when it comes to life and death, it brings out the worst and the best in people. You allowed me, dear Lord, to witness the greater side in these brothers whom I once thought were like robots.

The bright sun soon yielded its way to yet another dreadful night and sundown syndrome. Abba started to hallucinate. This time it was worse. The nurse came in and sedated him again. Staring at the monitor, I saw his heart rate and blood pressure were very high. They were like that continually for more than an hour. One doctor had said earlier that the recent EKG showed signs of heart failure. He told me I should only worry when the speedy heart rate was at a steady range for more than an hour. Dear Lord, that was what we prayed and hoped for - his heart to stop first. I do not recall I ever wrestled with You or begged You to heal Abba. I just prayed that Your compassion and mercy would allow me to be by his side to be a help and support as the Blessed Mother and the Holy Women were to You, Lord.

So there I was, speechless and totally surrendered. Abba had asked me to pray that You would come to take him home earlier when the suffering was unbearable. Watching him suffer, I too could see that Your taking him home would be an act of mercy. Therefore, I prayed for that very

intention. As I continued to witness the steady rapid heart rate, with uncontrollable tears streaming down my cheeks, I gently wrapped the rosary around his fingers thinking the Blessed



Mother would like that when she comes to receive his soul. Spontaneously, Your Spirit prompted me to make an audacious prayer, and I did. The prayer was about writing my book, with an effort to give You all the honor and glory; an effort to bring all creation to know and to love You; an effort to help fulfill my brothers' prayer for vocations. "Please, if it is Your will, give him more time.", for he would be the best one to help encourage and motivate my attempt. I quickly sent a text with the picture of Abba's rosary to my dear spiritual sister, Catherine Spada in Canada. She too sought spiritual direction from him. She had been praying for Abba and consoling me during the long ordeal. Then

desperately, I placed my hands on his chest and heart. With head bowed down and eyes closed, I stayed silent. A couple of minutes passed. I opened my eyes and checked the monitor as I constantly did. The heart rate dropped below 100. I did not think much of it because of his atrial fibrillation. I assumed it would soon jump to way above 100 again (it was 165 and sometimes 170). However, it did not! I waited and waited for it to go up, but it remained low. A couple of times, it went down as low as 36. I looked around to see where the on-call doctor and the nurse were, thinking they had something to do with it. I saw them sitting in front of the computer screen so it could not have been them. Only then, I began to think about my prayer, and of course, You, Lord. Then the heart rate went up and stayed at the range where the one nurse had told me earlier that it would be ideal to have (from 60 to 80). As much as I was happy and hopeful, I somehow did not have enough faith and kept on expecting it to jump high again soon. After a while, it did. I quickly placed my hand on his chest, and the heart rate immediately slowed down. I only had to do it twice. Then throughout the night, whenever I looked at the monitor, the heart rate stayed consistently perfect. It surrendered to Your love for all of us who love Abba, and so did his precious heart which was so connected to and united with Yours.

The next morning, Abba made 'a remarkable come back from death'. . Hospital staff greeted him with amazement and friendly smiles. I told Dr. Hammed what happened. Somehow, I trusted that he would believe me. With a glowing and happy smile, leaning toward Abba and then me, he whispered, "You keep on praying!". Abba finally was discharged. The nurse from the Abbey was sent to take Abba home, but You, Lord arranged it and gave me the great honor and joy to drive him back to the Abbey infirmary. It was a bad snowy afternoon, but I was not afraid of it. Nothing was going to stop me. Driving Abba home was my only goal. Abba was so happy and cheerful as we had light conversations in the car even though he was very weak and sick. As we approached the big cross in front of the Abbey, I smiled and shook his hand and said: "Home sweet home, Rev. Father!" He smiled and said: "Home sweet home!" from his heart with great happiness and appreciation.

Our dear friend and faithful servant of Yours, Dr. Bob Faillace, who had been a great advocate for Abba during his hospital treatment, wrote (and I forwarded to Abbot Gerard): "Routine human interaction would help him stay engaged emotionally which would help him heal physically. May You bless the good doctor, Lord! Not long after he received the message, Abbot Gerard called and asked me to be the person to help Abba. Thank You, Lord! I was speechless.

After Abba got back from the hospital, I did not know how I was going to convince the Abbot of the miracle and that Abba and I needed to work on the Book. I felt hesitant to share the miracle with him, but after You allowed him to ask me to work with Abba, I thought it was time, and so I did. Abbot Gerard did not say much, but I knew he pondered on it prayerfully in his heart.

Again, I was late in writing my annual Easter greeting letter to the community. I contemplated and prayed whether I should share the miracle story. Since I told Fr. Gerard about it, I decided to share and leave it up to his judgment. I gave him the letter on the eve of the feast of the Annunciation, which was moved to after Easter of that year because it fell in Holy Week. As You knew, the Abbot did not think it was a good idea so he kept it to himself and even so, on the feast of the Annunciation, the brothers had decided and began to do adoration daily after Vespers to pray for the Church and especially for vocations. Since the Abbot permitted me to work with Abba, and because of my work schedule, You arranged for Abba to help me with the Book right after adoration. Only You, my Lord and my God, could orchestrate such a plan! Abba got stronger and better every day. Thank You, Lord, for the infirmary staff who care for him around the clock, especially Br. James. As for me, instead of having a breakdown after the horrible hospital ordeal, eating poorly and lacking sleep, I was totally fine as if everything had been normal. You, Lord, began to inspire me to write. Many times, You woke me up in the middle of the night to do it. Words continued to pour forth. I had no choice but to write. Even when I worked full time at the college for about two weeks right after Abba came home from the hospital, I still had time and energy to meet with him to edit the Book. My body, spirit and mind were exceptionally alert which is so amazing. After about seven months, as I wrote and wrote with Abba's help editing the Book, I managed to catch up with Your composing the Book of my life up to the present. Your story keeps getting more and more interesting as You show me how You are connecting everything together. This Book will not be complete until I die.

My spiritual father John Eudes Bamberger is a man with many hats. In this Book, I will refer to him as the spiritual father, the psychiatrist (he was a MD at the age of twenty-two. Later, as a monk, he was asked to go back to school to study psychiatry to help the members of the Order for there was a real need), the Abba (means Father. This title is only used for an Abbot of a monastery which he was for almost thirty years), Reverend Father (the monks refer to the abbot as Rev. Father) and Abba Su'Phu. (Father Master in Vietnamese. Being a man gifted with many languages, Abba was delighted to hear me addressing him in Vietnamese and eagerly responded with a smile.)

A Soul's Journey with God

Author: God the Almighty

Writer: Minhhang K. Huynh

Chief Editor: Abba John Eudes Bamberger OCSO

Present Editor: Abba Bernard Bonowitz OCSO

Co-Editors: Jane Rahn and Pat Olioto

To praise and glorify God
in honor of Blessed Mother Mary, all the Saints and Holy Ones,
in appreciation and love for all whom God brought in to my life

especially my foster family, biological family, Geneseo family,
the Abbey of the Genesee brothers, and most of all,
in loving memory of the spiritual father and teacher, Abba John Eudes Bamberger

The Lord spoke to St. Gertrude the Great of Helfta, "I have poured out my grace in your heart because I require great profit from it. That is why I want those who have received gifts similar to yours and who are careless enough to underestimate their value and make light of them to read about you; then they can recognize their own gifts and grow in gratitude and so increase in grace themselves. As for those with hearts so evil that they should want to calumniate my gifts, may their sins be on their own heads, while you remain blameless;"

St. Gertrude the Great, "*The Herald of Divine Love*", Book III, Chapter 15

My dearest Lord,

I believe this is a fascinating book of life about You and Your intimate presence in a life of a soul, which You have been writing as You have written the lives of all Your creation. If it is indeed Your will that I share what my memory has recorded and remembers as You continue to compose it, then please, grant me the grace to persevere and fulfill Your holy will. The Blessed Mother told me to go out to tell people about her and about You. I trust this is Your will, my Lord, because my spiritual father, the Abbot of Genesee Abbey in Piffard, New York at the time, advised me that I should take Our Lady's words to heart. With great enthusiasm and joy, for the last twenty-one years, I have been doing just that. However, Your graces have been so abundant and overpowering that I could no longer restrict myself to speak about them in just one or two hours, the usual time limit for my talks. I prayed, prayed and prayed ardently. Finally, on January 26th, 2018, the eve of the 19th anniversary of my first encounter with Our Lady with the above message, You gave me emphatic signs that it is time to put down what You have been revealing to me, Your intimate presence in everyday miracles, in the form of a book entitled: *A Soul's Journey with God.*

O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me.
O Blessed Mother, please help me stay focused as I write. amen!

"Without doubt the beginning of our salvation is effected by God. But consent and act even if not from us, do not occur without us."

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio", xiv. 46 PL 182: 1026C,
trans. Rev. Father John Eudes Bamberger

CHAPTER I INFANCY TO 7 YEARS OLD

Your thought of me became flesh!

The year was 1968 when the world fixated on the dreadful war in South East Asia, the Vietnam War. While there was so much mayhem, suffering and bloodshed in many parts of this small S shape country, especially in the North and the Central, in a hospital in Saigon, South Vietnam, Your thought of me became flesh on September 3rd. Abba John Eudes once told me a story that

took place years before I was born. Then he asked me with a smile, “Where were you then?” Then he confidently replied, “You were in the thought of God.” His words grasped my attention right away, and I imprinted them in my heart. I loved the answer because it made me feel so loved. I thought to myself, “Like all, God actually thought about me before he created me. He did not just do it at random. So, all creation came to be out of love and because of love.”

Before I continue, there is one important thing, dear Lord. You know when I was a little girl, after watching the movie “Aladdin”, how You inspired me to ask for three wishes? If I remember them well, I wished that everyone would be fed, be happy and be safe. As I am so eager to tell the world about You and Your fatherly love, I am perplexed as I hear and see images of famine and wars which show many of my brothers and sisters are suffering greatly. Again, You seem to tell me as You did to St. Anthony of the Desert that I am to mind my own business; to do what I am supposed to and to trust You, Our Heavenly Father who knows best. Yes dearest Lord, I obey. You and the Blessed Mother are accompanying me as I go through my life from the beginning. I love and praise You as I commend all my suffering brothers and sisters to your loving care and protection. Amen.

Maternal ancestors: Great grandparents, grandmother and parents

I was born into a family in which the father himself grew up and was influenced by a largely pagan culture. Father never talked much about his childhood, his parents and family. He only made reference to them a couple of times when he corrected us (when my siblings and I began to live with our parents as a family when we first immigrated to America in 1985). He told us we would better appreciate living with our parents as a family even though he was a difficult father. He told us he had to live with his uncle, and it was not easy! As a young man, alone, father found ways to survive in a big and foreign city full of temptations because of which many at his age could, and did, go astray easily. My mother, on the other hand grew up in a well-respected, educated and well-to-do family. My great-grandfather married twice. He had many children. I could never keep track of them and still cannot. I now have many relatives who mostly live in France. There are over 100 of them! I did have the privilege to get to know my great-grandmother, his first wife, a devout Buddhist. She was a holy woman. As I am writing, in my memory, I can see a dignified and serene picture of her dressed in a Buddhist robe. It was hung in their family living room. I recall the story how she once died before death. As her body was laid in the house waiting to be embalmed, she woke up and recounted what she saw when a man led her through a tunnel, etc. Since she was told by that man not to tell about the experience and she did, she became mute for several days. Several years ago, her tomb was exhumed. While great grandpa’s body had decomposed, hers was intact. They were buried side by side.



My maternal Grandmother, Gung Thi Vo, was one of their daughters. She was the matriarch of my immediate family. She thought she had a call to be a Buddhist nun, but she ended up getting married. Sadly, she lost her husband in her late 30’s. Grandfather was one of the first teachers in the village during the French colonization of Vietnam. Grandmother recounted that, discreetly, he often went to meetings with other intellectuals. One night, he never returned home. I am sure both grandparents knew the risk that grandfather took. Devastated news like this was no surprise to those who love their country and wanted to make a difference. They knew they lived in a regime in

which if one had much knowledge, he would be a threat to the authorities. Grandmother was left with five children (including the second uncle who was adopted in place of the one who died at birth). Eventually, her three young sons were brought to France, still at a young age. Single-handedly as a competent and chaste widow, she raised the adopted son and two daughters, and eventually helped take care of the eighteen grandchildren.

My mother, a good and naive country girl, met my father, a handsome and charming city man with fair skin and curly hair, and she fell for him. His fine-looking and stylish picture was on permanent display in a celebrated saloon in Saigon city. She paid attention to a certain gentleman friend, but my father knew just how to steal her heart, and he did! He had wide experience of life, while for my mother, he was her only man and would be for life. I always wondered about grandmother's relationship with her children, especially her daughters whom she actually raised. I have a feeling that she did not have much of a say concerning my mother's choice of the man to whom she chose to entrust her life. After they were married, my parents settled down in the city where my mother was in pharmacology school. My father was in the army. After he got out, he worked as a tutor to help one of mother's relatives. That was how he met my mother. He had other jobs but did not seem to be proud enough about them to ever share with us what he actually did. He told us he wanted to be a doctor but chose to sacrifice his career to take care of mother! Only You know the truth, O Lord, the intention of the heart!

First foster home

One could have guessed it. Like many young couples in a similar situation, my parents' marriage was not the happiest. As they had children (about two years apart) one by one, they sent each of us to Grandmother who would then entrust each to a relative to be raised. I was the fourth of six children. Mother told me she had to stay behind and graduated one year later because she had to give birth to me! I was brought to one of Grandmother's half-sisters to join my older sister Omnie. For some reason, dear Lord, You allowed me to be a strong willed child with a difficult temperament. (Abba told me I have not changed as we read this) From very early on after birth, I was always crying. The atmosphere in the house was gloomy and dark, filled with burned incense. I could not stand it, and my continuous wailing made it clear to the people who were devout Buddhists, most humble and gentle as I knew them years later, that something needed to be done. It is quite amazing to notice how the memory of my childhood goes way back to when I



was a little baby perhaps just a few months old. I can see it now as I am writing. By the way, I was three months and seven days old when Fr. Louis, Thomas Merton, died in Thailand, the country adjacent to Vietnam. O my Creator, the temperament you gave me helped change the course of my destiny. So grandmother had to move me. Someone was brave enough to agree to put up with me. So as arranged, I was brought to live with a distant relative and his family who happened to be right next door to Grandmother's.

The real foster family, Grandfather's first cousin

As I grew, as all growing babies do, I realized I had a voice and a will so I put them to full use. The foster family seemed to love me very much. What do I mean by love? Well, they spoiled me. That is, they always held me and kept me from crying or being upset. Well, let's just call it love for now! Was it because I was lovable, or because they did not have a choice? I would think both. All babies are cute when they are born. In some cases, they are even cuter when they have

a strong temper! The adults would find it fascinating and some would encourage it. That was my case, unfortunately! Yes, I had a strong will and a loud voice, and I was not afraid to make my wishes known. My tears were also abundant! I was spoiled because I knew I would have my own way. That was how I understood love. However, Your mercy, Lord, kept an eye on me. Therefore, I was not truly spoiled in a negative way.

I was very close to the foster mother, and I also enjoyed spending time with the foster father who was old enough to be my grandfather. He was a meek, humble and quiet carpenter whose actions and demeanor spoke kindly of him rather than words. I wonder about St. Joseph. What was he like? We never hear him speak much. I would assume the foster father did have some of the Saint's holy characteristics. Like a tomboy, I often played with the tools in his shop and learned how to build things. I still recall how he helped make me a beautiful and adorable little hoe for a school project. I got a 10, the highest score, and I was very proud. The fact that the family was poor did not bother me at all. I had one older brother and six older sisters who helped care for me. I enjoyed being with every one of them. I was never alone and bored. At all times, I had all the attention I wanted. In response, I too was kind and loving to them. Life was great! The psychiatrist Abba told me that psychologically I am healthy even though I did not live with my biological parents. This family You gave me Lord, loved me much and contributed greatly to help form the healthy foundation for my future. A soul desires to love much because it has experienced much love. As St. Bernard pointed out, "The more surely you know yourself loved, the easier you will find it to love in return". Abba also pointed out to me that if one does not have much, one cannot give. And when one is needy, one cannot think about others but oneself. You were always there to teach and care for me even though consciously, I was not aware of Your presence as I am today. I thank You! (I asked Abba, "Do you think St. Bernard would like me, if he knew me?" He answered, "Oh yes, no doubt about it!" That makes me feel very happy!)

Universal family and poverty

You, Lord, let me experience what it meant to have a universal family. Since childhood, I played with the neighborhood children. They were like my little brothers and sisters. One thing I was proud of doing for them was cutting their hair. I learned from watching a hair dresser who rented a spare room in grandmother's house for her studio. I applied what I learned and practiced on their hair (the ones who allowed me). I was quite confident and did it well. You gave me a daring spirit to go with my temperament. Besides, I was well-coordinated and strong, so I played well in all the games kids played those days. That made me a favorite big sister to them to have on their team. You surely prepared me because as I continued to grow, it was not difficult for me to accept strangers as my brothers and sisters.

As I grew in body, I too grew in confidence and love. As I learned to love this poor family, I too learned to embrace poverty. Grandmother provided everything for my needs. I could not be happy watching them go hungry without sharing. So we always ended up eating the same food. What was mine became theirs and vice versa. You do give me a special grace I must say when it comes to food and eating. I was never picky. I remember a few times when I wanted soup, all I did was to add cold water into my rice no matter if it had any flavor or was just plain. At times, I felt sad knowing how much the foster mother got worried about food for the days ahead. Because You watched over us, O merciful One, it was never that bad. We had some tough days, but You always provided just enough to sustain us to make me smile. I was content to live like

them and enjoyed the poor life I had. This often helped me contemplate on Your grace, and how You said You gave everyone sufficient grace to live the life pleasing to You. Poor and suffering people, especially children in war torn and third world countries, must receive special graces from You to be strong, to endure and so to recover as long as they are not yet called home. We all are given a precious life to live. We are born, grow up, learn about life through joy, happiness as well as hardship and suffering, grow old and die. We experience and define happiness and sadness depending on how we understand the purpose of life. One could be led to think I somewhat suffered from “family dysfunction”, and that I was poor for I was raised by the poor. but I would say I was totally content, happy and rich in spirit compared to those who are rich in material things, wear extravagant clothes and eat fancy food but never experience love, whether loving someone or being loved by someone. Such persons keep on searching for love in material things and still never be satisfied. Often, they live a troubled life and face an unhappy death.

Early sins and confessions

I was born a sinner with a strong will and a bad temper. I had many faults, but the one that bothered me most was that of taking from one and giving to another what was not mine. Angelika Hood would have been proud of me! If I knew then what I know now, I would have done things differently. Someone may ask me how? You, Lord, would inspire me to do what is right, my Creator and Loving Father, by the compassionate heart You gave me. At times, I feel as if You allow us to commit a fault for charity’s sake. Forgive me if I am presumptuous. Once I saw an episode of “The Andy Griffith Show” in which Opie Taylor and his little friends tried to feed a homeless man who turned out to be a fraud. They took the pies from their mother’s/aunt’s kitchen and gave them to him. As I watched, I did not get mad at the boys but thought they had a caring and compassionate heart. They were reprovved when the adults found out, but silently their loved ones were proud of them for their kindness toward the less fortunate. As I watched the episode, I could see there was a better way the children should have acted rather than committing the fault they did (as I did). Dear Lord, I learned my lesson. I trust You see me the way their loved ones saw them so You are not too disappointed.

The neighborhood children and I grew up in the countryside where we were surrounded with fruit trees, insects and domestic animals. We did not play with toys, dolls or board games. Rather we were physically more active and mentally creative in what we played to entertain ourselves. We played ‘Hide and Seek’ or ‘Tag’. We drew designs on the dirt ground and chased each other within the restricted boundary lines. There were rules to determine who won and who lost. Relying on Your strength and speed, I was almost always the winner of these games. We also imitated home builders who created such beautiful and attractive brick houses. We built little ones out of sticks and leaves in which we walked in and out using our little fingers which we also used to make mud cakes. When we had more time, we played dress up as kings and queens wearing costumes made from jackfruit leaves pinned together using toothpicks. You know well, dear Lord, sooner or later we would imitate the bad things as well, and we did. Watching adults roll tobacco filing inside small sheets of calendar paper, we mimicked them but used cassava leaves for the filling instead. Well, it tasted so awful that I almost gagged. I thank You for the unpleasant experience which I was never tempted to repeat ever again. There goes my smoking experience!

As for my memory dealing with insects, I am guilty as charged. My conscience did not bother me until memory by association brought me to shame. Now I know why I always feel upset and sad when I see or hear children being cruel to animals. You allowed my bad involvement so I could perceive the reality that I am a sinner who desperately needed your bounteous grace. You also allowed me to do the evil act so that I always remember never to judge because what seems so obvious to one, is not necessarily so to others who are not exposed to what is right and just and good and holy. The children and I caught insects to feed to our domestic animals which grandmother raised such as cows, pigs, pigeons, rabbits, geese, ducks, chickens, etc. The housekeepers helped feed them, and once in a while, my sisters and I would help. With the rice milling factory, they were well fed. We, the children, however, gave ourselves responsibilities by adopting chicks as pets. We took them away from their mamma when they were old enough to feed themselves. I named mine Misa. She had the most beautiful black fur coat. My sisters, cousins and I would go catch worms and grasshoppers to feed our little babies. We needed to love them, and it was not they who wanted to be loved. We put them in our pockets and let them take naps with us. Poor little things, they must have been so scared and suffered very much because we treated them as if they were little kittens! Sadly, one day, came the bird flu, and they were all killed. We learned how to grieve and to go on with life. Dogs and cats somehow were never that close to us. Perhaps because they were not that clean. The dogs were to guard the house, and the cats were to eat rodents and mice.

Our selfish nature followed us through the stages of our life. Unless we were taught and made aware of good and evil, we continued to fall into sins and probably would die a miserable death, if it were not for Your divine mercy and constant guidance to help us recognize our fault. Some insects we caught to eat as a delicacy according to the adults who influenced our thought. One of which was a dish of fried brown crickets stuffed with peanuts. Yummy! (My spiritual father is laughing. He just said that he would not associate with me now that he knows I ate crickets!) I believe the thought of them being good made them tasty. In the morning when grandmother had not yet swept the front yard, we went to hunt for dirt mounds, which the crickets had spent tremendous amount of time and effort to make their dwelling place. With a hoe, we dug them up and found the little creatures of Yours at the end of the tunnels which they skillfully excavated using their powerful back legs. We also hunted them at night when they came up and made noise during the mating season. I am sorry Lord! Poor little things! I hope they did not have much feeling or could experience pain the way we do. Other insects we played with and even performed funerals for them when they died!

Weddings (three festive days) and funerals (usually three to five days long depending on the date picked by a fortuneteller expert) were the two big events in our lives. When there was a death in a family, all the ceremonies took place in the house and not at the funeral home. For us children, it was a frightful thing. We would mourn our lost and at the same time, be fearful of ghosts. Growing up, we were told scary stories, which associated death with evil spirits. If not prevented, they would take control over dead bodies and together, they could do harm to the living. So death was never a good thing. We were heavily influenced by some Buddhist myths and not Christian belief when a person's life is celebrated and welcomed to a journey home with God once he or she dies. During the days of mourning, when the body was not yet buried, family members were encouraged to express their grief and misery to the extreme to show how much they loved the departed one. Relatives, depending on how one was ranked, would wear robes

with particular head bands made out of white linen. Day and night, two kinds of drums were pounded powerfully when a neighbor or a friend came to pay respects to the dead. They would kneel and bow with burned incense. Last but not least, before the burial, spirit fighters would perform martial arts around the casket for about fifteen minutes or so, supposedly to ward off evil spirits from the house and from the dead once and for all. As a whole, funeral experience had a dramatic effect on one physically and psychologically, especially for a child. In a way, dear Lord, I am so thankful because I did not have to go through such experience since there was not a death in the family nor was there any funeral in the house where I grew up.

I was tempted to do the things kids do out of curiosity and for entertainment, and fell for it. St. Augustine warned us that whenever we are with a group of friends, we are most likely to be influenced and do the things they do. I remember once I was with my cousins and some kids in the neighborhood. We decided to trespass into a neighbor's field and pulled some peanut plants. It was just a game. We did it and ran away quickly without being caught (not realizing You saw everything) or getting yelled at. The little selfish sinners felt good because they thought as a team, they had accomplished something. Ultimately, the satisfaction came from the yearning to be a part of and being accepted. Abba told me once that we are not made to be alone! For those who are called to be with You, Lord, will eventually, find his or her way to arrive to that revelation. Until then, they are restless (until they rest in you). So naturally children are curious and try to do many things including mischievous deeds to see what they can do and how far they can go. Some parents see that as being tested by the children who need the attention and approval. These are opportunities for learning and teaching but for some impatient and busy parents, sadly, the lessons turn out to be not very favorable and can scared the little ones who would not and could not know the difference. For me I feel, stealing the neighbor's crop with friends was also an act of testing one's potential. We were not hurry for peanuts. Grandmother had plenty of them. During the peanut harvest season, there were piles of them scattered all over her front yard, and people were hired to come sit and extract the peanuts from the plants for long hours.

I am sorry, Lord. I did not know better then, for my heart had not yet grown to love and respect the living things and people you have created out of love. For all that I had been exposed to and lived through, Abba often reminded me of how much You made my guardian angel work overtime, especially when I was a little girl growing up without having at least one parent watching over me and teaching me attentively what to do and what to avoid. The housekeepers were older and worked around the house so my siblings and I tried to imitate them because we thought they had more experience. They were also more available to us than our parents. They meant well, but not all the things they influenced us to do were all good and holy. I remember watching them hunting lizards and shooting birds with sling shots. I imitated them but did not recall I actually was skillful enough to kill any. Thank You, Lord!

It is Your mercy that I was not bullied or hurt in any way. The reason was because I had such a temper. You turned it into something good. It was a weapon for me to protect myself. One time, a boy took a pushcart from me. I demanded him to give it back. He did not. What did I do? No, I did not hit him! Rather, I cried so hard that I fainted! I found out later how that scared him. He hastened to return the cart to me with much guilt, and he never dared to do it again. No, I did not know I would faint. No, I did not know I had that "power", or shall I say "weakness". I pray that

all my limitations will eventually give way to Your strength once I totally surrender to Your holy will and become a slave of love. Until then, I am not proud of and do not plan on exercising my temper if I can help it. A few times I recall giving my foster mother some special snacks. She refused and wanted me to enjoy them instead. I insisted, but she refused to eat. After going back and forth, I let her know I meant it, and if she did not take the snacks, I would throw them away. So I did. The poor and humble mother knew my heart and my temperament, so she picked up the broken snacks and consumed them to please me. If it were my dear Abba, he would say, “Don’t be such a brat” (Abba told me to add this in as he helped me edit the Book!).

I am sorry Lord! I was not very gentle and nice sometimes. It is in my blood that I have much pride, and it somehow rises above my affection even at the present time if I do not keep guard over it. The foster parents had a lot of patience with me. They would laugh at my roughness instead, for they knew my loving heart. When I got older and knew that I would eventually emigrate to America, I often thought I would never be able to detach from the foster family and my grandmother because I loved them all very much. But when the time came, You performed the miracle! None of us was broken-hearted. You took grandmother and the foster parents home years ago. I pray and trust they are resting in Your peace. I owe them so much. May You also bless all my foster siblings and their loved ones. Please give them the knowledge of You; give them the faith to trust in Your fatherly eternal love. These are greatest gifts I could ever ask for them here on earth. Until we meet again, please unite us in Your love. Amen.

CHAPTER II SEVEN TO SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD RETURN TO BIOLOGICAL FAMILY, SCHOOL, FRIENDSHIP AND PREPARATION TO GO TO THE U. S.

New living arrangements, going to school and learning virtues

When I turned seven years old, I went to live with grandmother next door to go to school. My three older siblings were already there. It was not a big separation for me to leave the foster family because I spent all my time at their house when I was not in school, except at night. It was not unusual for younger children to sleep with the mother or for sisters/brothers to sleep together in one big bed. My younger sister, Nomi and I slept with the foster mother. I am ashamed to admit that I was selfish enough to always want mother to turn toward me every time my little sister got her attention. When I fell asleep then she could turn toward my sister! Perhaps I always got my way because if I did not, I would cry so loud that no one would be able to sleep! It is just like the way You taught us in the parable about persistent prayer. Why did You allow me to be such a spoiled brat, dear Lord? The consolation I can humbly hear in my contrite heart is You allowed it so that when I am ready to convert, which I have been working hard on, I will give You even greater glory. You, Lord, told us that a greater sinner who is converted loves You even more because of Your greater mercy! I was glad that my sister Nomi was still there sleeping with mother when I was gone. Otherwise, she would miss me very much! I thank You, too for now the economy became better and so the foster family was not as desperate. Though, I still brought lunch over and shared with them daily before I went to school.

I knew I was ready for school because I was quite active and wanted to learn very much. You, Lord, allowed me to inherit the creative and smart genes from my parents. While my mother was intelligent, my father was very gifted in art. He did not have a formal education as far as I know, but he could do a lot of things by figuring them out, and he had the most beautiful handwriting. In fifth grade, the school had a competition in calligraphy. I was the best among all fifth graders that year. It seemed to me, Asian schools took great effort to instruct their students how to write properly and beautifully. I recall learning how to write in calligraphy in every grade up to fifth grade. On the whole, I was a good student. From first grade up to ninth grade, I almost always ranked among the top three. Because of grandmother's highly regarded reputation as a teacher's wife with holy demeanor (she also owned a lot of land and a rice milling factory which separated the husks from the rice kernels), my siblings and I had to behave all the time because people gossiped. So with both intelligence and integrity, I was popular and loved by my classmates and teachers. I believe I inherited integrity from grandmother. She was virtuous and had a loving heart, especially toward less fortunate people.

You, Lord, designed everything, but it seems to me at times You leave us to our initiatives as we search for You and Your holy will. Something was quite mysterious to me with which I knew You had everything to do. When I was in sixth grade, I learned many lessons about virtues at school. Somehow, I really took them to heart and embraced them. One day, I happened to encounter a thick book containing short stories aimed to teach the readers virtues. They were written about people from the mountains. The stories taught me how to be respectful, humble, kind, selfless and detached. Everything made so much sense to me, and for a long time, one could find me lying on a hammock hanging between the fruit trees beside the house when I was home from school, reading this book for hours. I can see myself doing that as I am writing. I was most contemplative as if You alone were teaching me Lord, one on one, in silence and without distractions. I was unconsciously united with You in spirit. I understood and found virtues fascinating as I longed to learn what was good and true.

My love life in high school, preparation for future vocation

When I was in the fifth grade, there arrived a new student who became a classmate of my Cousin Linh who was also in the same grade. Hung was his name. Since his father was a tailor, he was the best dressed student in school. He was also handsome (as I was told), manly, strong and brave. Yes, he was courageous enough to announce to the whole school that he was interested in me, not long after he came. How great was that! We became the most popular couple, but by name only. My life changed. Was it for the better or for the worse? Only You knew Lord. I was shy but flattered at first, however, not for long. Soon I was annoyed and embarrassed. Hung was loud in telling everyone how he liked me. One day, his teacher was sick so his class had some free time. He and a couple of his buddies decided that they would come to my class to watch me learn from the window. Well, that did it! I became so uncomfortable that I never cared to find out what he really looked like. All the time, if I could help it, I would avoid being near him. That meant I had to run and hide when I saw him coming near. A few times he came to grandmother's house to look for my cousin who lived right next door to me. I disappeared quickly. He was so protective of me that he prevented other boys from associating or making any eye contact with me, even my classmates! It was hard because I was the head of my class. One morning when I first showed up for class, my girlfriends rushed in to tell me that a classmate of ours, Luan had a black eye. I was horrified and angry at Hung who hit him. The day before, our class played the