

we transported the 200 lb panels. Uncle Paul, Aunt Donna, Wes, Dr. Towsley and Grandpa Tom (Lynn's father) were the Crucifix carriers. I had a tall and sizable studio to myself. For the first time, after the pieces were gessoed, Uncle Paul put them together, with the help of Johnny Ferrell, the theater stage and lighting professor, who let me borrow two tall ladders, which I turned into a huge scaffolding. Paul and Johnny helped stand up the Crucifix in the middle of the room. They then hung it on a heavy-duty chain attached to the ceiling. The natural lighting was ever better. I own many thanks to Ms. Cathy Reizholt, the longtime art department secretary who also was like a mother to many professors, students, and especially me. She helped me a lot and was a very good friend to me. She had great patience as all good secretaries have. She was kind and hard working. She tried to please everyone. Thank you Cathy! May God bless you and your loved ones abundantly! Then there was my former art professor, Tom McPherson. Every few days, he would stop by the studio for about two minutes to check on the Crucifix and me. He would smile and say, "Minh, you are crazy!", then would walk out. Despite what he said, I faithfully painted from 9am until 4pm daily. I even packed a lunch. Each day, before I picked up the brush, I said the prayer that St. Francis prayed in front of the St. Damiano Crucifix.

All highest, glorious God,
Cast Your light into the darkness of my heart.
Give me right faith, firm hope, perfect charity and profound humility,
with wisdom and perception, O Lord,
so that I may do what is truly Your holy will. Amen.

As many of us often do to You, dear Lord, I made a conditional prayer saying, "If You, God, help me paint this crucifix well, I will convert to be a Catholic". So there I was working diligently every day. Cathy had to go down to the studio to remind me it was time for lunch. Then she came to get me when it was time to go home. I was really submerged in Your grace while painting the Crucifix. One day, I was up high painting the cimasa, the very top part of the crucifix. I was tired and hungry, so I was a little unsteady. Sitting on the top of the ladder (I was not supposed to because I had nothing to hang on to), while my left hand held the pigment tray which Uncle Paul made especially to fit the hand, my right hand held on to the brush, I lost my balance. I believe Your holy angels caught me. Otherwise, it would have been a disaster. I was about ten and a half feet above the ground.



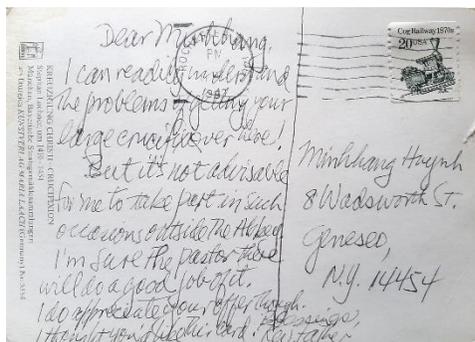
Every day, after I closed up to go home, I made sure to cover the Crucifix. There was just something about it that I did not feel right leaving it exposed while I was not there. Your image was so personal and sacred to my soul at the time – beyond my capacity to explain, but that is why I put a veil over it. Finally, the two weeks ended. I finished what I needed to do. Once the panels were brought back to Wes' and Lynn's confined and small room, I improvised what needed to be done. I continued to paint. Then came Easter vacation. The college had a week off. I needed the Crucifix to be one piece again to finish it. Monday, March 24th, the Crucifix was back hanging in the studio. After three days of hard work, the painting process ended.

On Good Friday March 28, 1997, I proudly said to myself that all faithful Christians went to Good Friday service. I, myself, had my very own crucifix here. As I had planned, at noon in silence, I reverently painted the blood onto the painted wounds of Your lifeless body. Thank You for loving me too, even though I was not yet a Christian. After I finished painting the Crucifix, since I still had the scaffolding, I tried to take as many close up pictures of different parts of the cross as possible before we disassembled it and moved it back home. Later I found out that nothing came out from the whole roll of film, except for one single picture of the whole Crucifix, which captured the solemn memory of that day. The crucifix was back in the humble and small room. I worked on gold leafing the halos. That took several days. Finally, the Crucifix was totally finished and all covered. No one knew what it looked like but You and me, Lord! Thank You for helping me. Someone asked whether I experienced You while painting the Crucifix. I had a dream once. You stepped down from the Cross like a triumphant One. I asked whether You were Jesus. You smiled and answered me in a language I could not understand. Abba later explained to me saying that my not being able to understand Your response meant that I was still on a journey seeking You. But You were calling me and teaching me how to find You. I agreed with Rev. Father's interpretation.

**CHAPTER V
CRUCIFIX MINISTRY
MEETING ABBOT JOHN EUDES BAMBERGER
CONVERSION TO CATHOLICISM**

Rejection Slip from Abbot John Eudes

Along the way of the Crucifix project, as I referred to it, I took pictures, or had someone take pictures of the Crucifix and me. I would use these images for the presentation which Dr. Cook had signed up for, the 32nd International Medieval Conference in Kalamazoo, Michigan. It was scheduled for May 8-11, 1997. Back in February of that year, Ms. Weider had asked me to let her borrow a couple of pictures so she could send them to Abbot John Eudes, the head of the Trappist Cistercian Abbey of the Genesee, in Piffard, the neighboring town, about four miles from Geneseo. I gave her the pictures. Later, she showed me a response from the Abbot saying he was glad to know I was painting the cross. He also mentioned that he had seen me at Mass with the Kennisons. I did not think much of his response until the Crucifix was about to be finished. I wrote him and asked whether I could have the Crucifix on display at the Abbey. Sorry, Lord, I



do not know what I was thinking! He wrote back and said it would be distracting at the Liturgy. He was very right. I, on the other hand, felt a bit resentful that he said 'No' to me. So, I approached Fr. Gordiner (May You bless his soul, dear Lord), the pastor of St. Mary's Church up the street from where I lived, and he welcomed it. So we had a date scheduled for Saturday April 26th to unveil the Crucifix. I wrote the Abbot again asking whether he would not mind coming to town to bless the Crucifix. You knew Lord, I was so naïve and knew nothing about their

contemplative way of life. You must have laughed at me but You wanted me to learn things the humble way. Again, I got a rejecting answer in a postcard with a beautiful crucifix on it, from the Abbot. It was postmarked on April 11, 1997, "Dear Minhhang, I can readily understand the problems of getting your large crucifix over here! But is not advisable for me to take part in such occasions outside The Abbey. I'm sure the Pastor there will do a good job of it. I do appreciate your offer though. I thought you'd like this card. Blessings, Rev. Father". I thought to myself, "Yes, dearest Abbot. I will carry the 200lb and 8. 5'x11' Crucifix on my shoulder and cross over the Genesee River to bring it to you". Evidently, I politely stated the fact that it took 3 strong men and about 45 minutes to assemble the Crucifix. So there was no way I could just bring it over for him to bless. I began to feel he did not like me because I was denied three times. 1. I could not borrow a habit because it was sacred. 2. The cross could not be on display in the Abbey Church because it would distract attention at the liturgy, and 3. He could not come out because he was a monk. No offense, but I had my dignity and pride, dear Lord. (Abba and I laughed as we were editing this part. He said, "You asked for it!" I am sure You, Lord are laughing with us, too!)

Unveiling and blessing of the Geneseo Crucifix, Presenting the Crucifix at Kalamazoo

On Saturday April 26th, the Crucifix was taken to St. Mary's in two pieces. It was put together and placed on the stand nicely for the first time. I touched it up again that night. It was done. I too, was finished. I was quite ready for the unveiling the next day. Accompanied by the Dedication Mass, *the Geneseo Crucifix* (as I named it) was unveiled and blessed by Fr. Jim Hewes who was the Newman priest at the time. David Desmon, the campus minister, offered the prayer intercessions. I made sure we prayed especially for all innocent children who died in the Oklahoma bombing, and those who went missing at the time. Wes and Lynn, between the two of them, read the Gospel and served as Eucharistic minister. I asked my friend Amita, and Argus's wife, whose name was also Amita, to present the Gifts! The whole event was beautiful and personal, especially to all who had been a part of this. Everyone loved the Crucifix. There was an announcement about the unveiling of the Crucifix in the local newspaper prior to the event, so many people came. I gave my first speech - a short one. Ellen Herzman helped me practice. She taught theater and acting at the college so she was a big help to me. Thank you, Ellen! (She helped me at the dawn of my art career when she was the director of the Livingston Council on the Arts. She also assisted me in filling out the SOS grant applications. With her encouragement, I had my first public art show at different banks in town.) When everything was over, Dr. Cook was very proud to see the Crucifix. He loved it. In a joking way, he said, "I don't trust you, but I trust God" So it was all successful. All the models were there. Jacob, being childlike, was moving about at the base of the Crucifix as people gathered to see it in details after my talk. Some college students jumped when they saw Jacob after they had just seen his portrait (St. John) in the painting!



The next day, the news spread. The other local newspaper in town and the city newspaper came and did more stories on it. The Crucifix was on the front page. One of the veteran newspaper owners, Mr. Sanders was quoted as saying, "This is News!" When he was dying, I went to visit and prayed with him. He appreciated that. I thanked him for being a good Catholic who had

helped spread the word of faith through the Crucifix. May he rest in peace with You, Lord. Amen. Many came to pray in front of the Crucifix and took pictures with it. (A stranger in Florida even had its picture printed on T-Shirt. He offered to do more for me. I thanked him and told him I preferred not to have it used that way.) Strangers cried and hugged me. I myself, was attached to it. I would go up to the church every night to sit with it as if it were my first-born. Before taking it to Kalamazoo, I had a photographer friend come and take several pictures of it. Again, only one came out perfectly. However, the picture was rather yellow. It was a real disappointment. Because I was desperate to have postcards made, I took the negative to have it developed anyway. Several hundred postcards will be printed from the one picture I would send in. To my surprise, the color of the picture came out perfect this time! Thank You, Lord! By May 5th, the Crucifix was taken down and packed for Michigan. As You had arranged, Lord, Professors Cook, Herzman, Kennison and Argus all went to the same Conference. I later found out that Cistercians were very involved with it. Many thanks for Grandpa Tom for letting us use his truck! He and Grandma Marge (Lynn's parents), and Grandma Beverly (Wes' mother) were very supportive of me. May You bless their souls, dear Lord. With my friend Trang's assistance, Grandma Beverly stitched the padding to support and wrap the Crucifix.

When the time came, Wes drove and pulled a trailer with the Crucifix in it. We went to Kalamazoo by way of Canada, and of course, we were stopped at the border. We had to present the Conference program to the border officer. It had my name and the Crucifix presentation listed in it. So he let us go.

Argus, Wes and I put the Crucifix together the next day before everyone arrived for the Conference. It was covered and stood in one of the lounges in the conference building, next to the room where I presented my talk. No one knew what it was. After I gave the talk to about 60 people, we all stepped outside to unveil the Crucifix. Since all the sessions for that slot had ended and people had gathered in the lounge for the next one, it was filled with people. The Crucifix was unveiled. Everyone clapped their hands. Ingrid Peterson, a well-known scholar on Franciscan and Claretian studies, made a comment to Dr. Cook that I was special, and she wondered what God had in store for me. Dr. Cook was never more proud to present me as one of his students. He then looked at me and said, "What are you going to do with the Cross? One has to carry his cross and follow Christ." I could just smile, for I had not yet comprehended or wondered what would be next for the Crucifix and me. My talk at the conference was a big success. We packed the Crucifix and headed home. However, on the way, the truck had an oil leak. Wes checked it carefully and told me to pray! We took the risk and tried to drive it home. Wes made sure to stop and check the oil regularly. Finally, at one check point, the leak was not there anymore. Wes looked at me and said, "There goes the Crucifix's first miracle!" Thank You, Lord. We drove straight home. All was safe and sound!

While the Crucifix was still in the trailer, people began to ask whether it could come to their church for a visit. I would go along to give a talk. For the next two years, it had a life of its own and I would accompany it. One of the places we visited was Mt. Savior monastery. The brothers displayed the Crucifix in their new Chapel. Fr. Martin was a big fan. I gave the talk to a big group of the monastery oblates. It was rather solemn as they were very receptive and touched by my sharing the journey of the Crucifix. After the talk, as at other places I had been to, many came to hug me and cried. I was not very comfortable because I was talking about You, Lord,

and I myself was still an informal Buddhist who was playing hard to get with You (Abba pointed this out to me later). On the way home, I became almost mute. I did not talk, and for the next couple days I was almost depressed. I needed to talk to someone who could tell me the truth about my problem and what I needed to hear. Everyone in town thought I was great because of all the publicity of the Crucifix. Suddenly, I remembered the Abbot who had “denied” three times what I had partitioned. I was told he was very stern and tough. He would not be afraid to tell me what I needed to hear. Yet, when he responded to my letter, he did not sound like that. I was not afraid of him. I had nothing to fear. I needed help, and I felt he could help me, Lord! So I immediately picked up the phone and called the Abbey. The porter answered. I said that I would like to speak to the Abbot. It was our dear Br. George whom I came to know well years later. Br. George said, “You can’t just talk to the Abbot. You have to write to him. If he thinks it fits then he will contact you!” Well, my dear Lord, You really try to teach me humility. “Yes, brother. I will. Thank you!” I had no choice but took the time to write a very respectful and tactful letter to the Abbot and sent it via postal mail. About three days later I got a response from him. Yes Lord, he agreed to meet me! I thank You!

First formal meeting with Abbot John Eudes

It was one of those summer mornings. As I walked to the Abbey main gate which was quite heavy, I saw a monk in his dignified habit coming out from the side of the Chapel. I was not sure if that was the abbot. I recall seeing him jumping over the wooden fence, and I thought to myself, “He is manly man, strong and robust. He is my type.” The Abbot greeted me first since he knew what I looked like. Then I recognized him as the monk whom I once felt sorry for, as he sat on the wheelchair with an injured leg. We shook hands and introduced ourselves as we walked to the front of the Abbey, towards the paths that led to the benches under the trees. The first comment he made was that I should get married to a rich man because being an artist, I would not make a lot of money to survive. I thought to myself, “He doesn’t even know me. How can he make such a statement? I came to seek You, Lord, and not a man!” I went straight to the point, telling him I was not interested in a husband. Then I asked him two questions to challenge him. For these questions I knew he would not have a clear answer. 1. “Do you know the Holy Trinity?” With confidence he calmly said, “If anyone tells you that he knows the Holy Trinity, he is a liar, unless he has a very special grace!” I liked that answer. 2. “How do you feel after you consume the Eucharist?” He humbly said, “Sometimes you feel very holy, and other times you do not feel anything. It is by faith that we believe in God’s presence in the Eucharist”. Again, I was very satisfied with the second answer. Then as we talked, I felt as if I had known him forever. I felt that I could connect with him easily and understood well what he shared that day. I was happy after I left the monastery.

As I continued to travel with the Crucifix and give talks, I began to pay attention to what the Abbot and I had talked about because I sensed that You were using him to help me. He had to go to the daughter house in Nigeria for a couple of weeks after our first meeting. I remember I could not wait for him to come back because I had so much to tell him. I was so happy that You brought him back safely. During that time, my parents, especially my father, was very upset at me because I declined graduate school and did not have a definite plan for the future ahead. It was a shock and a real disappointment for the family. It was very difficult for me during that time for many reasons: a) I did not have a job. b) I was not in school. c) I practically owned nothing. d) I did not have money to pay my student loan so I had to defer it. That meant there

would be more interest adding to it. I managed to have basic health insurance even though I hardly claimed it for any doctor visit or illness. I did not even have a doctor at the time. Somehow, You kept me healthy dear Lord, therefore, I was not worry too much about earning money to take care of myself. Since I received some painting commissions, I could afford to pay for health insurance. I practically did not spend any money on anything else. I lived like a monk already.

This was how my sister, Nomi and I ended living with Wes and Lynn. One afternoon, one side of my face was swollen. Wes volunteered to take me to the emergency room. My sisters were with me. As it turned out, I had a tooth infection! Thank You, Lord. We were there for several hours and did not get home until 2 or 3 am. After that trip, we had a lot of respect for Wes as a Catholic Chaplain. Like priests, he took his job seriously. Knowing Lynn had a terminal illness, I made an effort to come to their house often to keep her company during Spring breaks when Wes took students to projects helping the poor. In time, they came to love my sister and me as their own daughters.

I continued to live with Wes and Lynn as their adopted daughter. I helped out around the house and took care of things like doing yard work, mowing the lawn, shoveling snow, etc. I did not have to pay rent, and I ate very simply so it did not cost that much extra to feed me. They fed students and strangers all the time so it was not a big deal. Wes was the former Chaplain for the Geneseo Catholic Newman Center. He and Lynn were the perfect couple who helped so many students and town people even though Lynn was diagnosed with Lupus many years ago. My sisters and I first got to know them about a year or so after I helped doing translating for the Vietnamese family sponsored by the Abbey. They even took us to Italy and France. So we now had a bigger family in Geneseo. Almost every summer they traveled to Italy because Lynn worked for a Seminar there with Dr. Herzman. They were happy that I kept an eye on the house, as well as the grandparents and the cats. Whenever we had to have a house/cat sitter, we had to write complicated instructions because we treated the cats like spoiled children!

You, Lord were my only confidence and my for the future. I have heard stories from some people who are in the situation I was in. They feel desperate because they have to depend on their parents for health insurance, housing and food. They are still searching for You so they are uncertain about their path. They cannot make any commitment to find a job and a place to live so they can be independent until once they have a sense where You call them, either to join a community, live alone for You in the world or to get married. I pray for them, Lord.

The spiritual director

The Abbot had to listen to all my problems and complaints. One day, he said explicitly, “Tell your father your spiritual director is a doctor - a psychiatrist.” I thought to myself, “He is my spiritual director? Wow, I have a spiritual director. That sounds really wonderful!” O my dearest Lord, I never even knew the title to use it in asking for one. And if I had, I would not have dared to ask him, lest he put me in my place again by saying “No”. Then it dawned on me that my soul had yearned for such a person three years ago. It was You who prompted me to desire a holy master who could teach me the faith while I was walking on Second Street in Geneseo. Or should I say, the Holy Spirit knew it was time, so he impelled my soul to ask for someone to teach me about You. So here he was: Abbot John Eudes Bamberger! That explained why I

thought I knew him forever when I first talked to him, and how I could understand him well even though he was very superior to me in everything from wisdom, intelligence, dignity, holiness and age (forty-two years apart, though he still looked young !) He was known to be one of the best and the toughest, and I was just a little poor, naïve lost soul who tried to search for You from scratch. You gave me the grace not to be afraid of anyone. I love and respect certain people because of their virtues, holiness and humility and not because of their title, fame, richness or intelligence. Like the psalmist said, “Common folk are only a breath, great men an illusion.” (Psalm 62:10). Because I lived in one place for so long (30 years in Geneseo) I saw people at their strongest and then their weakest. None can escape death; only those who belong to the spirit remain alive. So I was not afraid of the Abbot. Sometimes I had the audacity to stand up to him when I felt he put me in a pigeon hole (another idiom he taught me). You, Lord, were my confidence and my strength. Therefore, deep down within me, I knew I was much loved even though, in the eyes of the world, I just knew You only a couple of years. Anyhow, the Abbot told me to tell my father he was a doctor so my father would stop trying to humiliate and degrade me. Father suspected that I followed a cult like the one that was mentioned in the news at that time when many families committed suicide with the leader who claimed to be Jesus. Due to all that my family and I had gone through, according to my father, I was heading into an embarrassment to the family and the end for my own future. I could see why he was so upset. You allowed it to help strengthen my faith in my vocation. I did not care that others could not perceive what I was called to do. You gave me this first cross and also the peace that went with it. Thank You, Lord!

In July 1997, I met with Rev. Father again. This time, he felt I was ready to say “yes” to You, but I was still wavering. He did not hesitate to tell me so, though he was tactful for he knew I was like a fragile flower with many tears to shed (and thorns, too). He told me this story. There was once a young man, Mike, who came to see the psychiatrist Dr. Bamberger. Mike did not have a lot of confidence, and therefore, was indecisive. As the psychiatrist worked with him, Mike shared his admiration for a certain girl named Margie. They often talked about her. One day Dr. Bamberger advised Mike to ask Margie out if he liked her so much. Mike said he was afraid she would say “No”. She was a popular, beautiful and wonderful girl. Dr. Bamberger insisted that Mike should try. The next time they met, Mike talked about everything else but Margie. Dr. Bamberger asked Mike, “What happened to Margie?” Mike said, “I don’t want to talk about it.” “Come on, what happened to her?”, the doctor persisted. Mike looked upset and said, “I asked her out, and she said “Yes” Rev. Father explained it to me that Mike was disappointed because he misjudged her. If she were as good as he thought she was, she would have said “No” to him. Then Rev. Father looked at me and said, “You are doing that to God. You prayed to Him that if He helped you with the Crucifix, you would convert to be a Catholic. Now that the Crucifix was a success, you ignored God thinking He was not good enough for you!” I am so sorry Lord. I did not know I did that to You. At least, I was not conscious of it. Being a sinner and the imperfect creature that I was, I felt so embarrassed, but Your love for a pitiful soul was so abundant that You waited patiently for my response. As if that were not enough to condemn me, the Abbot continued to say that I was playing hard to get with You. I am sorry, Lord. I was not mature enough either to see or to recognize my hidden fault. Since that day on, You gave me a special grace to learn humility. Rev. Father then told me I was very ready to be a Catholic, and that I should check with the local church to join the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) program and start the intense process to become a Catholic.

STUDY R. C. I. A

I was made to fly

As always, Your timing was perfect, Lord! The new RCIA program started in September at St. Mary's where the Crucifix was blessed and on display. Anita and Cindy were the two teachers. They were beautiful and fervent Catholics who were full of zeal and love for You. It was like dating. I was elevated and cheerful as a happy soul could be. What I learned in RCIA, I experienced in real life, so I talked non-stop in class. Dear Anita told me one day, "Minh, you need to get down. You are flying too high!" I felt bad and shared the concern with the spiritual director. He told me to tell Anita that I was made to fly! Of course I would not dare to tell her, but I never forgot Rev. Father's response that day. As if You wanted him to reassure me of the truth of my many dreams about flying, dear Lord. I often dreamed that I could fly. Not flying weightlessly like a bird or an angel. Instead, in the dreams I would make an effort and could lift my weighty body off the ground and could move freely in the air sometimes a foot high and sometimes as high as 10 feet where I dashed through the roof top. These dreams happened on and off starting when I came to America. Since I had more responsibilities and life got more hectic, I stopped having them. Back in the RCIA class, I asked Kathy Hartnet to be my sponsor. Thank you Kathy for walking the journey with me faithfully! We would meet with the group every Wednesday for about seven months until Easter. There were five or six of us in the program. Some of us were college students.

Meeting a stranger on Halloween

At the end of one of our first RCIA meetings, I found out that Kathy often went to the Abbey for Compline. I asked to join her. It was so powerful. I used to complain to You, Lord about the long Mass at the Abbey, and how I did not care to go there. But at Compline, my soul felt so at peace as if the brothers were singing to me a bedtime lullaby. I continued to join Kathy weekly unless she could not go. I did not have a car then, but if I wanted to go, Wes and Lynn would let me take their car. They were very good and generous to me that way. One time, it was Halloween. I got there early by myself to pray before Compline. There were not many people present. I noticed a man sitting in front of me. Usually, I stayed silent but that day, I silently expressed my many pleadings to You, so many that I do not remember what they were. When Compline was over, as we walked out to the hallway, the man who sat in front of me in church made his way to me and said (as if no one paid attention to us or could hear us), "I heard your prayer. I will pray for you. You will not see me again". It was the strangest thing. I told Kathy and described to her that the man wore a green jacket. She even made the remark that it could have been St. Patrick, and we laughed. Later I told Rev. Father. He did not say much, but he did not laugh at me. I sensed both Rev. Father and Kathy did not think much of it, but I never forgot what happened that Halloween.

Confirmation name

About mid-way through, we were told to pray and pick a confirmation name. I talked to the spiritual father about the name I had picked. He said that Francis would not be a suitable name for a lady like me unless I changed it to Frances! I did not like it! So he suggested the name Clare after St. Clare of Assisi. Without hesitation, I said, "How perfect! Why didn't I think of it? My Vietnamese name means 'bright/light' also, and I know St. Francis would be so glad to have known me as his little Mary Clare in Our Blessed Mother's and St. Clare's honor". My full

Vietnamese name is bright moon. It is fitting that I should feel that I am always under the Blessed Mother's care. Gladly, I embraced Rev. Father's suggestion.

Once I was given the exceptional grace to accept following Christ, I began to learn more and more about myself, my many failures and weaknesses in the light of faith. I too discovered I have such strong temperament and determination like St. Clare. I became more aware of my Christian name, of its beauty and its significant role in reminding me of what I am to be for You, Lord. And what seemed so sweet was Dot Spicka's reminder of the bond between us and the saints whose names we took. "When one is confirmed, she will take the name of a saint, of her own choosing, who best fits her personality, gifts and aspirations. "

Dream of St. Clare, dream as a bride of Christ

Soon after I picked the name, I had a dream in which I saw St. Clare who woke up from her deathbed. She was in her 40's and had fair skin. She told me four years ago I had touched the Cornerstone. I pondered on her answer. I understood what she meant. I allowed Christ to come into my life when I stayed in Italy for six months in 1994. Then I asked whether she got to see St. Francis in heaven. She did not respond to that question. Then, she had to go so said good-bye to me. I asked whether I could give her a kiss. She nodded and said, 'Yes'. After the privilege of a loving kiss, she went back to where she came from and eventually disappeared. A couple of weeks later, I had another significant dream. I saw myself standing in the apron area of a painted crucifix. I dressed in traditional bridal Vietnamese dress. When I woke up, I became worried thinking I was overzealous or somehow unbalanced to have these dreams. I cried as I described the dream to Abba who told me not to worry. He said becoming a Catholic is like getting married to Christ. Since I was preparing to be a bride of Christ, it was normal for me to dream what I did. But for me, it was more significant than that. There was something much deeper, which I could not explain. Whenever I watch a movie about a saint, I cry and cry. The tears are not sad tears but compassionate ones. At these moments I experienced their love for You and trust that the saints are praying for me, so that I can become a saint like them. What is a saint? Br. Christian once read a definition to me on All Saints' Day, which I never forgot, "A sinner who keeps on trying". That is one definition. I myself think that a saint is a faithful sinner who loves You with the greatest humility and trust. There are so many. They all depend on how one lives one's life in response to Your overflowing graces, Lord (this is the definition of human existence which Abba often tried to share with us. When I asked Abba Bernardo for his definition, he humbly directed me to St. William of St-Thierry's saying that a saint to God is like a faithful dog to its master!) Readers, what is your definition?

Confirmation

Then it was time to see Bishop Clark for Confirmation. I surely was ever ready! It was so wonderful to see so many of us from different churches in the Diocese who deliberately would be saying their "Yes" to You, Lord. I thought of the whole of New York State, of the U. S. and the whole wide world. There would be so many new Christians to follow Your footsteps. But then I felt sad wondering how many of us would actually want to be saints, like Mother Teresa, the saint-to-be whom we knew during our life time. I prayed that there would be many, including me who desired to live for You and love You like the saints did. As St. Therese of Lisieux said if You had put that desire in me to be a saint, You would give me the grace to live and fulfill it.

May Your will be done to me and to all Christians who want to live and die for You, Lord.
Amen.

PAINTING THE ABBEY CRUCIFIX, DISCOVERING GOD'S GIFT AS ICONOGRAPHER

Called her Blessed Mother Mary

During one of our sessions of spiritual direction, I told Rev. Father I did not want to take the Geneseo Crucifix to display in churches anymore. I asked whether I could give it to the Abbey. He said that perhaps the monks could build a shrine for it outside. I knew that the harsh weather would ruin it quickly, so I could never agree to that. However, he said he would ask the council. A few days later, he told me they did not have a proper place for it. Instead, he asked whether I could paint a smaller crucifix for their Sacred Heart chapel. I told him I was not good enough to paint one for such a sacred place, and that I needed to study more with a master iconographer. He said that was not necessary. I should just be myself and not try to be someone else. So, I met the Abbot a few times to discuss the design for the sketch and have Spencer Furbush, a lay carpenter hermit, build the crucifix panel. Spencer is a gentle soul. He used to be a monk, but felt called to be a lay hermit who worked and lived on the Abbey land. He was like a Christian brother to me. He too, along with Uncle Paul helped build icon panels for me. Since he retired at the age of seventy-five, he moved out of the hermitage on the Abbey land. He now resides in a town nearby. Please take good care of him dear Lord! Rev. Father and I met to talk about the images of the Blessed Mother and St. John. As I showed him the small sketch, he told me I should fix the Blessed Mother's hand because it looked like she had a toothache (he told me he had just gotten back from the dentist) At the time, I referred to them as Mary and John because that was how everyone in town and at the college called them. After our conversation about them, I kept on hearing how Rev. Father addressed them, so I felt I had been being disrespectful. Growing up in Vietnam, we never called older people by their first name. You knew, Lord, that my heart understood their titles. Since then, I began to address Mary as the Blessed Mother. As for the beloved disciple, I started to address him as St. John. The mind acknowledged what the heart had already experienced.

Blessing of Abbey Crucifix

Finally, we agreed on the design for the Abbey Crucifix. I was inspired to place St. Bernard at Your feet, Lord. I felt it should be personal to the brothers who would see themselves constantly desiring to love You and trying to live deeply the mystery of the Cross. Imitating the Saint, they would ceaselessly praise You and pray to You for the whole human race. I suggested it to the Abbot, and he welcomed the idea. Br. Anthony took pictures of Br. Paul posing as the Saint. After Spencer finished building the panel, I took it home and gessoed it in Wes and Lynn's kitchen. Then I carried it to my bedroom. Since the wood was heavy and the shape was unusual, I could not hang it anywhere where I would have enough light to paint. So laying it on a piano bench, near the Southwest window, I painted it for the next three weeks on my knees. I did not have a studio space. The plan was to have it ready on March 21, 1998, Saint Benedict's feast day (his feast has been moved to July 11 since). That day also marked the 900th anniversary of the founding of Citeaux. It was celebrated as a big solemnity. The weather for the week before the due date was beautiful. I would have liked to carry it to the Abbey from Geneseo. Unlike the Geneseo Crucifix, this one was just perfect. It was just about three feet. I really wanted to fulfill my dream of walking the cross to the Abbey. Many people discouraged me because it would be