

Mutual encouragement in attending early morning Mass

Now and then, Br. Christian would come to where I sat in church to thank me for various things, especially for being faithful in attending morning Mass after I became converted. Many thanks to you, brother. I remember Lord, after the first few weeks of being very fervent in getting up to go to morning Masses, especially in winter months, I began to get lax. In the winter, I had to get up a half an hour earlier to shovel snow. Morning Masses used to be at 5am, so I got up at 4:15am. One morning I was so tired, cold and felt too lazy to get out of bed. You reminded me of Br. Christian's and Br. Gerard's comments (Br. Gerard also told me about his admiring my attending the early Masses in the winter.) Thinking to myself that they needed my presence to be an encouragement to them, I jumped right out of bed in time to clear the snow and to get to Mass on time. Since then, I did not stop to ask whether I should or should not go. Rev. Father taught me that if there was only one choice, I would do it without any hesitation. But if there were more choices, I would hesitate and get distracted by asking should I or should I not? Through this experience, I realized that the more we love and think of others, the better and happier we become, because charity helps make our life more meaningful and fulfilling.

Being Banned from early morning Mass

Then it was time for some real lessons about virtues which You knew, I could learn with Your help. You allowed someone to say something to the Abbot who, on the eve of my 30th birthday, told me not to come to the 5 a. m. daily Masses because I was a woman. Oh, how mad I was! My tears could not express it enough. I was innocent, and I knew it. I was not there to look for a man, but You drew me there. I frankly asked the Abbot whether he thought I wanted to live with a whole bunch of men! I quickly answered my own question, "Of course not!". Except for the Abbot and Br. Anthony, I associated with no one. Everything I did, I let the Abbot know about it. So I had nothing to hide or to fear for I was in the light. He told me women were supposed to care for their husbands in the early morning. O! It was the wrong thing for him to say to an angry lion. I told him, "Excuse me, but I do not have a husband, and I do not plan on having one!" So on my birthday, I cried and cried so hard that I could not sleep. I got out of bed and went to the Abbey for Vigils to make a statement that I was praying to You more ardently than ever so the Abbot would change his mind. That was how I began to follow the hours of Divine Office by myself, "The monks can do this, so can I!" After Vigils I went home and waited until 8am to go to St. Mary's in town for Mass. My godparents teased me saying, "Rev. Father gave you a special present on your birthday!" They knew he was my spiritual director.

Since that day, I either cried or complained to You every time I walked up the hill to go to St. Mary's Church for morning Mass. You knew how upset I was, and I let the Abbot know it too. He asked me to pray and to focus on reading books, but my feeling resentful was very strong. As grumpy as I was, I listened and obeyed even though without a smile. You let me learn my lesson of obedience and dying to self so You did not interfere with the Abbot's decision. Interestingly, at St. Mary's, I picked a spot to sit, and every day, I would sit there. One day, a kind and loving parishioner approached me, and she made an effort to do so every time I was at Mass. She sure helped cheer me up a little. To her, it was obvious that when a young woman, like me, goes to Mass often, she must have a special story to tell. That was why the woman was curious about me. After she got to know me better, she made a joking comment saying, "You took my seat!", and introduced herself as Mary! "Oops, I did!" I apologized to her. It was not a coincidence that out of the one hundred and something empty seats in church, I picked her regular place to sit.

She did not mind, especially when I told her I would move. She was one of those regular and faithful parishioners we see at each church. May You bless them for their faith dear Lord. It seems to me that they often are the friends of the priest. They are there daily to worship You and be a great support for the priest.

Struggles and temptation

As I continued to be miserable, I asked to talk to Br. Anthony who was an experienced novice master and a brother whom I trusted and respected. Yes, of course I could not hold back my tears and was very upset. He pleaded my case to the Abbot, but to no purpose. The brother told me that You, Lord, write straight with crooked lines. In the meantime, I experienced strong feeling of exclusion and rejection every time I went into the chapel. Many temptations followed. The devil threatened and told me how bad everything was so I could leave. He laughed at me for not being strong enough to rebel. He asked me why I had to submit myself to an abbot. He told me to forget the Abbey so I did not have to suffer as much and there was much more in the world where I could do whatever I wanted and whenever I wanted. I was very afraid of the Abbot as if he had betrayed my trust. I also felt as if the brothers were laughing at me. I am sure many novices had gone through that same experience one way or another. Where shall we go Lord? Only through Your cross should we find our way home.

Once I received a chain email with pictures of people carrying their crosses on their journey to seek You. One person found his cross on part of the journey quite heavy to carry. As he went on, he tried to shorten it a little at a time. Toward the end of the journey, like others, he had to use his cross to build a bridge to cross over to get to the destination. Since he had shortened his cross, it was not long enough for him to advance any further. So, when I felt my cross was too heavy, I would make an act of faith and seek for advice as how I might deal with it and not try to avoid it, or make it lighter or shorter. Therefore, confiding one's temptation to a spiritual father is a must, as St. Benedict wrote in his Rule. You gave me that special grace dear Lord. Even though I did not feel like I could trust my spiritual father when I was mad at him, I made an act of faith to tell him the truth about how I felt about what he did to me. Thanks to St. Gertrude who emphasized this well. She said to me that my bad thoughts, moods and feelings were not mine unless I wanted them to be. So why not expose them to the light, to the spiritual father who could help me get rid of them? It felt very good to empty my garbage daily so why not keep my soul clean from unwanted trash by dumping it before it defiled and suffocated my soul? If I made that act of faith to trust him, and if he were not a good spiritual father, You, Lord, who are in charge, would see to it that I would be saved and justice would be served at the proper time. But since he is a good spiritual father, I grew strong and was ever closer in Your love. Rev. Father surely suffered with me for he could see Your grace in all of this. It was a great effort for me to try to convert along with causing me much grief.

Being willful

So like a willful child, I continued to fight and struggle. Thanks be to Frances Verna (one of the cooks who passed away. May you bless her soul, dear Lord), the only one who listened to my distress and laughed about it to make me laugh. She helped make my cross easier to bear. One day, I was helping her cook at Bethlehem retreat house. We then went out for a walk. As I spotted the Abbot driving up the dirt road from the river bank with his pickup truck, I jumped right in front of him. He was not driving very fast, and I knew that. I did not want him to hit me.

I just wanted to let him know that I was mad, and I was on strike! From his truck, he spoke aloud and wanted me to get out of the way. I made sure I stood far enough so I could not hear him. That way, I did not disobey. Frances, in the meantime, was laughing discreetly as she tried to pull me out of the Abbot's way. Well, I was too strong for her to move me. We struggled back and forth for about ten minutes. Frances thought it was the funniest scene she had never witnessed. A retreatant approached so I gave in. Well, I was reprovved for that, but nothing changed. I hardened my heart so I continued to suffer.

Intercession of St. Bernard, St. Francis, St. Benedict and St. Joseph

The next time we met, Rev. Father told me to read St. Bernard's *Steps of Humility and Pride*. I obeyed even though I was still mad at him. After many days, I got nothing out of it because I refused to read it with my heart which was too busy crying and being angry. Finally on St. Francis' feast, I began to understand St. Bernard's words as I read. I came to Rev. Father and apologized. He told me he prayed fervently and asked St. Francis to intercede for me, a willful sister of the Saint. From that day on, for the love of You, I made a great effort and tried neither to pay attention to my anger nor to entertain my bad thoughts. However, I still felt very sad and continued to cry. You helped me endure it, Lord. That was my first painful experience of dying to self. Finally, when completely let go of my will and my control, You spoke to the Abbot. On the feast of Your dear foster father, St. Joseph, I was allowed back to the early morning Masses. O how I thank You, Lord! Thank You! I was wearied after fighting so hard for almost seven months. You allowed it Lord because I needed to become more mature in faith. For the first time in my life, You allowed the Abbot to break down my stubborn and willful spirit. I persevered and surely learned by experience what humility and the cross meant for me. The whole ordeal also helped make my skin thicker as Rev. Father tried to help me so that I would not cry about everything. St. Benedict advised the monks to test the spirit of those who wanted to join the monastery. Even though I was not there to enter, I was tested. If it were not for Your spirit that brought me here, I would not have lasted. Reading how the saints were tested, I could not comprehend the bitter sweet flavor of the mysterious cross until I experienced it myself. The Blessed Mother had to endure suffering in dealing with You and the mystery of the cross. You let her suffer in the dark. But it was her faith that allowed her to endure the cross for our redemption, dear Lord. Thank you Blessed Mother!

Asking to live for God and receiving another cross

One day during our spiritual discussion, impulsively, I kneeled down and with tears in my eyes, I told Abba, "I want to live for God. I want to consecrate my life to Him." It must have been Your spirit which prompted my request. Rev. Father told me I just had become a Catholic; Therefore, no religious order would consider me. I needed to be more mature in faith, at least for another two years! I was not happy to hear that. In the meantime, Rev. Father made sure that I continued to work on purity of heart and growing in faith. It was certain I did not belong in the world for I had no desire to do the things people normally do. Wes, Lynn and many people in town began to think I was just using them because I did not want to associate with them as I used to. There were nights I cried myself to sleep because, except for Rev. Father, no one understood me. But You, Lord gave me the strength to endure all the negative comments and misunderstanding from people. It hurt more when the criticism came from those I love. The saints had gone through that, and You purified them. I used their examples to learn perseverance. On one occasion Rev. Father shared with me that when he was young, he expressed his concern to his spiritual director that

there was only one person in the world who could understand him. The priest replied, “You are blessed to have one!” Rev. Father told me he thought the priest would say, “You poor thing!” but when the priest said that to him, he knew the priest was right. That was a very deep experience for Abba that he had never forgotten. So I consider myself blessed, Lord, to have an Abba who understands the things of God even better than I think he does. I thank You!

“I am not a good Catholic because I do not know Blessed Mother Mary”

I met with Rev. Father, and was upset. I confessed, “I am not a good Catholic for I do not know the Blessed Mother Mary!” He always seemed to have all the answers for me from You, Lord. He responded, “Unless you were ready to know her, the Spirit would not be inspiring you to ask. Now that you are aware of what your soul desires, you will recognize the grace more readily when it is given to you. In order to get to know her, you have to be like her. So try to imitate her virtues.” That was the most insightful answer. His words helped console me greatly. I thought I was a sinner for not knowing her, but Rev. Father just reversed that. I felt so blessed to prepare myself to get to know the Mother of God. I thought that active preparation was the way good Catholics took to get to know you, Blessed Mother. Rev. Father told me we would both pray for my intention. To follow up on his promise, he gave me a stack of homilies he had preached about you. In college, I studied about Saint Bernard of Clairvaux’s close relationship with you. In one of the art history classes, in Dante’s *Paradiso*, the Saint is depicted sitting on a celestial rose petal near yours. One of the favorite paintings I studied in class was the one of him writing while you paid him a visit with angels surrounding you and him. So on the Saint’s feast day, August 20th, I asked for his special intercession. Time went by slowly. I continued to learn how to deal and live with little crosses, which You gave me, Lord.

A few weeks later, Sister Edith from Wrentham visited Genesee. I had a chance to talk to her. Then sometime after, I had a dream about her. Rev. Father told me perhaps I should write to her and visit her convent so when I was ready, I could join the sisters there. I obeyed and wrote her. I waited and waited but there was no response. It was during Advent. Rev. Father was not happy to hear they did not respond to me. He hastened to send them a fax asking about it. As it turned out, the sisters do not open personal mails until after Christmas. My mail indeed was in Sister Edith’s personal pile. So we finally made the connection, and I would come to visit them in February of the coming year.

Making a retreat at the Abbey, Asked me to help cook

On January 22, 1999, Vy and I made a five-day retreat at the Abbey. I loved it, but Vy was not sure. Our retreat ended on the feast of the Cistercian Founders, January 26th. The retreat master



at the time was Carl Boyer who had to attend a dear friend’s unexpected funeral in Washington, DC. Carl asked whether I could help cook for him that weekend starting Friday when my retreat ended. “I have never cooked here before so I do not know what to do”, I told him. “Not to worry”, he said. He had prepared everything, and there would only be three retreatants. I just had to warm up the food and serve. I agreed. (May you rest in peace, Carl! Amen.) Retreatants usually come on Friday afternoon for the weekend retreat. The only retreatant

who showed up that day was a Franciscan friar from Canada. There was no problem for me in taking care of him. After supper, we spent some time talking about St. Francis, and how we both loved the Saint. After Compline, I was alone in Bethlehem chapel praying. Talking to the Franciscan brother earlier made me realize how much I loved and missed St. Francis. More than ever, I did not feel I wanted to go to Wrentham to check out the Cistercian nuns as I had scheduled to. I had learned so much from the Rev. Father and had gotten used to the brothers here. I did not want to leave the Abbey. As I prayed, I cried hysterically in front of Your Blessed Sacrament and the statue of the Blessed Mother carrying You as a baby. After, I went to retire in the little room off the kitchen which was reserved for the cook. Carl paid close attention to the Rev. Father's direction so he kept Bethlehem a monastic-like retreat house with strict silence and simplicity. I liked my little cell. It was austere and simple. The only thing I could remember seeing before going to bed was a small statue of the Blessed Mother holding You. "Good night, Blessed Mother. Good night Lord!"

First encounter with the Blessed Mother in a dream

The time came. I had a deep dream. Lovingly with You in her arms, the statue of Our Lady became alive. Courteously and solemnly, she turned toward me and said that despite my many shortcomings and weaknesses such as not doing my reading and writing on time for the GLC monthly reflection, she wanted me to go out and tell people about her and about You. She continued, "We can work through you!" Still dreaming, I had a dream. I saw a miracle happen to an overweight English professor (she passed away. I pray for her soul, dear Lord) who was miraculously cured. She became thin from having been quite heavy. I woke up and felt so tense because the dream was very powerful. Deep down, I was assured that it was more than just a dream! So fearlessly, I hastened to pick up the phone to leave the Abbot an important message in the middle of the night. I could not wait. It was about 3:20 a. m. I



I knew he would still be at Vigils. I wanted to catch him before he left for a trip early in the morning. In fact, I got the date wrong. Reverend Father did not have to go for another month. He obviously got my phone message and showed up at the retreat house to see me before heading to the recycling center. In his work clothes and big heavy unfitted boots, (I used to refer him as the "garbage man" to Frances Verna), he sat down and calmly asked me what was so important that I could not wait. Being skeptical about my worth, I humbly detailed the dream as best as I could remember, not to an authoritative abbot but to an ordinary and humble spiritual director and a brother in Christ. To my surprise, Rev. Father reprimanded me for my lack of faith instead of agreeing with me about my not going to Wrentham. As usual, he asked me what I thought of the dream. I responded that perhaps God did not want me to go to Wrentham because Our Lady told me to go out to tell others about them. "That is all you think about, not going to Wrentham?" He was disappointed in my attitude and response. I was not sure what he meant so I said, "Maybe the dream was about me projecting myself on the Blessed Mother since you said we usually project ourselves onto images in our dream?" He told me that this one was different. "If I had your dream, I would have a party right now", he continued saying that the dream was significant because of the facts that the statue became alive, and that the Blessed Mother took an effort to turn toward me, and spoke directly to me the words I could hear, understand and remember well.

“This is more than just a dream”, the spiritual father reemphasized. Then he said I should still go to Wrentham because, like him, I could still follow the Blessed Mother’s request of making her and You known by being a cloistered nun. That did not help me Lord, but I humbly obeyed.

The spiritual father’s assurance and more consolations

I was not worried about Wrentham anymore. Rather I began to think about the Blessed Mother’s personal message to me. Then I felt unworthy and did not believe in the attention the Holy Mother of God had for me. I started to get scrupulous. Using you, dear Blessed Mother as the example, Rev. Father told me that no one was more humble than you, and yet, you magnified God for his doing great things for you. You accepted the cross and your role in our redemption. Abba went on to say, “True humility is simple. It does not make false excuses or pretenses of unworthiness. It is able to recognize when to accept a charge and a trust and to carry it through without demur. True humility does not deny one’s gifts. It refers all things good to their source - God.” I trusted, believed and accepted Rev. Father’s interpretation of the dream and the grace I had received. Not long after another dream followed where I was in a parish setting with the Vietnamese community. We chanted repeatedly in Vietnamese, “One Mother, One Lord, and one Spring”. I was still hearing it as I woke up. I still had doubts about my relationship with her until one important dream occurred. Rev. Father said Mass for a few of us lay people in Bethlehem chapel. Spencer was there, too. At the end of Mass, Our Lady appeared. She was very casual as a young petite girl in our midst. Everyone was so excited about meeting her and wanted her attention. As in real life, in the dream I detached myself and humbly watched everyone from a distance. I was not sure whether she knew me as I thought she did. When everyone had their share of her, as if one saves the best for last, she approached me, and we went outside for a private walk. Once we talked, I perceived that she knew me as I thought she would. I do not recall the content of our conversation, but it was peaceful and pleasant in a solitary setting garden with just green plants and trees surrounding us. There was nothing to distract me. When I woke up, I was so edified and peaceful as I was convinced of her love for me. Once the spiritual father reaffirmed our relationship, I was so ready to do whatever she asked of me.

Then little by little, day by day, I began to experience what we call everyday miracles, which made me feel happier than ever. Like a little baby who was nourished with milk and soft food, I enjoyed those special graces, but at the same time, Rev. Father reminded me that eventually, I would get closer to her by faith and not just by sight! Yes, Rev. Father, I do understand and will not get attached to our bodily senses but the spiritual ones. The spiritual father also shared with me that the closer we get to the Blessed Mother, the more we experience the cross, “On her feast days, I often suffer with some difficulties” he told me. “Thank you Rev. Father for sharing”. I replied and thought to myself that I do not think I can handle suffering. “I am not sure if I want this close relationship with her, Rev. Father.” Half kidding, Abba reproved me, “What a coward!” He said that Jesus died for us. We as Christians need to help carry the cross by suffering. I received Your grace that day to obey and eventually, I did not feel afraid anymore.

Visiting Wrentham and vocation at Genesee

Thus under obedience, I went to Wrentham, but not without spiritual struggles. I liked the sisters but had a very strong feeling that You, Lord, definitely did not want me there. I even felt afraid of the Crucifix in their church. Ms. Weider went with me. She thought the sisters were very happy, and there I was, being like “the Little Flower who got very spoiled”, complaining about



not wanting to join them. We met some nice people, including Br. Andrew's wife (may they rest in peace Lord) and spent time with other retreatants. I was ready to go home. The night before leaving the convent, I remember crying and talking to You, Lord, alone in my retreat room which was rather extravagant (the mansion was donated to the sisters and was used as the main guesthouse). "Lord, if You appear in front of me right now and tell me to join the nuns, I will say: 'I am sorry, but No'" Now, come to think about it, I

am embarrassed for being so spoiled! Again, unconsciously, I must have known how much I was loved by You! Then I exhausted my soul and felt asleep. Like the dear St. Joseph, I had yet another dream. I was back at Genesee praying with the brothers in the Abbey Church. There was a small leak on the roof. I immediately reached out my hand hoping to catch the water and save the Psalters from getting wet. Then all of a sudden, the leak turned into a powerful flow of water and came down upon me. The first thing I thought about the dream when I woke up was that water indicated the Holy Spirit. "Could that mean Genesee will be the place where I will be taught about You?" I felt reassured and could not wait to go back to the rather distinctively simple, dark but solemnly sheltered chapel where I often hid myself to be alone with You. I had to say sorry and say good-bye to the sisters who liked me and told me I had Cistercian blood. One sister told me that it was not normal for me to be with the Genesee brothers. But I did not see it that way. Interestingly, when I was in high school, I happened to watch the movie Joan of Arc. I admired her very much and could relate myself to her. I did ask Abba once why I could be among the Genesee brothers without feeling awkward. As we discussed it, we both agreed that it is a special grace and that You, Lord, had given me the opportunities to learn about my special vocation through my dealing with the five men I have written about during my growing up. You allowed me to see so clearly that You alone are the one true love for all souls. More importantly, You gave me the grace to really see that the monks are my brothers in You. Abba told me once that I would know where I belonged by recognizing where I could learn to love You and serve You best by way of the cross. Honestly and respectfully I responded to the sisters, "Yes I have Cistercian blood, but I am sorry, I have Franciscan blood, too." They told me to be at peace, go home and pray about it. May You bless them in their love and their search for You, Lord. Amen.

CHAPTER VII

NEW HELFTA, SERIOUS STUDY, MARIAN CHILDREN MINISTRY REV. FATHER'S RETIREMENT, THE HOLY EUCHARIST

I belong to everyone and not just an order

I was glad to be back to Geneseo "the Beautiful Valley" where I have made my home ever since college. However, I felt sad because I knew everyone wanted me to find my own place. I felt Rev. Father would be disappointed that I did not like Wrentham. O well, I could not help being truthful about how I felt. At least, in the meantime I could stay focused on Our Lady's message more peacefully. Joining Wrentham was off the list. I did visit and spent some time with some Franciscan sisters and did not feel that You wanted me to join them either. Rev. Father never