

IMPRINT

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golden threads of grace

— that shaped one man's life...and countless others.



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The flowering of a Charism of Life

Where grace abounds

Our Novices:

Bottom Row: Sr. Sophia, Sr. Claudia Marie, Sr. Naomi Maria Magnificat

Middle Row: Sr. Gabriela Maria Mega, Sr. Cara Marie, Sr. Magnificat Rose, Sr. Jordan Rose

Top Row: Sr. Elizabeth Grace, Sr. Pia Jude, Sr. Maria Cristina, Sr. Anne Marie Elizabeth

The Weaver

*My life is but a weaving
Between my Lord and me,
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.*

*Oftimes He weaveth sorrow,
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I, the underside.*

*Not till the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Shall God unroll the canvas
And explain the reason why.*

*The dark threads are as needful
In the Weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.*

*He knows, He loves, He cares;
Nothing this truth can dim.
He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice to Him.*

- Author Unknown

Dear Friends,

Our God is truly a God of surprises.

There are moments in our lives that call us to stop and ponder, to look back over and reflect upon events, circumstances, relationships and encounters throughout our life. Given the distance of time, we may begin to see things from a different perspective and with a new light notice a Hand at work weaving the seemingly disparate threads of our lives - joys, sorrows, failures, challenges - into an unexpectedly beautiful tapestry.

In this issue we would like to look at the mysterious and wondrous workings of God's grace, particularly in light of the recent news about our founder, John Cardinal O'Connor's Jewish heritage. Cardinal O'Connor would often reflect upon how his visit to the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau forever changed his life. Upon leaving he vowed that he would do whatever he could, until his dying breath, to promote the sacredness of human life. It is deeply meaningful to us that God chose this priest, who did not know he was born of a Jewish mother, to bring to birth a new Charism of Life in the Church at this moment in history.

*It brings to mind a poem, *The Weaver*, that many have found consoling at confusing or dark moments in their lives. It was often recited by Corrie ten Boom, a woman from the Netherlands who was arrested for her participation in the resistance during World War II. She and her family helped many Jews escape the Holocaust. On December 28, 1944, the Feast of the Holy Innocents, Corrie was released from Ravensbrück concentration camp. Upon learning that her release had been due to a clerical error, she said, "God does not have problems — only plans."*

Truly, God writes straight with crooked lines. And we marvel at the beauty of the tapestry He creates.

In Christ, Our Life,

Mother Agnes, SV

Practical tips:

How can I live more aware that God is continually at work in my life - awake to the reality that God is calling to me through the deepest yearnings, hopes and desires of my heart?

- 1** Try to see with the eyes of faith. Take time each day to look back at where God was present today, look for the graces and blessings He sends.
- 2** Be docile to the Holy Spirit and attentive to what He is asking in the moment.
- 3** Notice the movements of your heart, what are you drawn to and what are you resisting? Why?
- 4** Express gratitude to the Lord for all that he has given you today and throughout your life. Notice the threads of grace.

One Man with a heart for the most vulnerable



Who was John Cardinal O'Connor?

Archbishop of New York (1984-2000), he was heralded as a patriarch of the pro-life movement. He united and championed the efforts being made on behalf of human life across the country. He was enormously supportive of pro-life medical professionals, politicians, teachers, lawyers, journalists, activists and anyone who did anything, however great or small, to defend the most vulnerable in society. After years working to promote the cause of human life, Cardinal O'Connor prayed to know why greater progress was not being made despite the manifold efforts. He was struck by the Scripture, "This kind of demon can only be cast out by prayer and fasting." (Mk 9:29)

Founder of the Sisters of Life

With these words Cardinal O'Connor recognized that the battle in our culture needed a supernatural response - a powerhouse of prayer. Cardinal O'Connor came to the conclusion that God was calling him to found the Sisters of Life, a spiritual response to a spiritual reality.

What is the Charism of Life?

Charism is a Greek word meaning gift or a gratuitous favor the Holy Spirit bestows upon someone for the upbuilding of others. The Charism of Life proclaims that every human being bears the imprint of God. In contemplating Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, the eyes of our hearts are opened so that we may recognize His presence in each human being. Every human being is a sacred, unique, unrepeatable expression of God's love in the world. God loved you into existence, continuously upholds you and calls you forth to become your best self and chooses you in each moment.

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golden threads of grace

**December 15, 1945
Ordination to the priesthood:** Fr. O'Connor loved parish work and imagined a simple, hidden life serving families and administering the Sacraments to the faithful. His gifts were quickly recognized, however, and it became apparent God had other plans for his life.

The Rose: The symbolic rose for life that he wore on his lapel wherever he went.

Early Years John O'Connor was born to loving and devout parents, Thomas and Dorothy O'Connor in a row house in Philadelphia - the place where the seeds of his priestly vocation began.

The Navy Days As Chief of Chaplains for the Navy, and later Auxiliary Bishop of the Military Vicariate, he loved the men who courageously gave their lives for our country. The suffering and death he saw during the Vietnam war radically tested his faith. However, it was the daily visits to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament that gave him strength to overcome the feelings of doubt and hopelessness. He would say after this experience of darkness, that never again did his faith falter.

May 6, 1983 On May 6, 1983 Pope John Paul II named him Bishop of Scranton and eight months later, after the death of Cardinal Cooke, Bishop O'Connor was named Archbishop of New York. He was ordained a Bishop by Pope John Paul II in Rome. The two great men soon became cherished friends - both leaders who courageously proclaimed the beauty and sacred dignity of every human person, born and unborn.

**June 1, 1991
The Birth:** Docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, John Cardinal O'Connor founded the Sisters of Life to protect and enhance the sacredness of human life—especially the most vulnerable, the unborn and their mothers. He was a beloved spiritual father to every Sister.

Radically changed forever. Scattered seeds: His trip to Dachau in 1975, before being made Chief of Chaplains for the Navy, changed him forever. It was only after his death, and the discovery of his Jewish roots that one can fully realize and appreciate what shaped, inspired, and motivated this man of faith.

His fondest memories: Some of Cardinal O'Connor's fondest memories were initiating religious education programs around the country for children with special needs. Later, as Archbishop of New York he began an annual Mass for them and their care-givers at St. Patrick's Cathedral. He would always say it was the highlight of his year.

The man in green: He received his great gift for storytelling from his Irish father and had a quick wit and wonderful sense of humour. He built up the Mass before the St. Patrick's Day parade in NYC to a standing room only event, encouraging all to pray for peace with justice.

His Jewish Roots: Cardinal O'Connor played an active role in fostering Catholic-Jewish relations. He had a deep affection, respect and love for the Jewish people.



"Shaped" by a sweet tooth for cinnamon rolls: Cardinal O'Connor loved cinnamon rolls and the Sisters never forgot that on the many special occasions they would be with him.

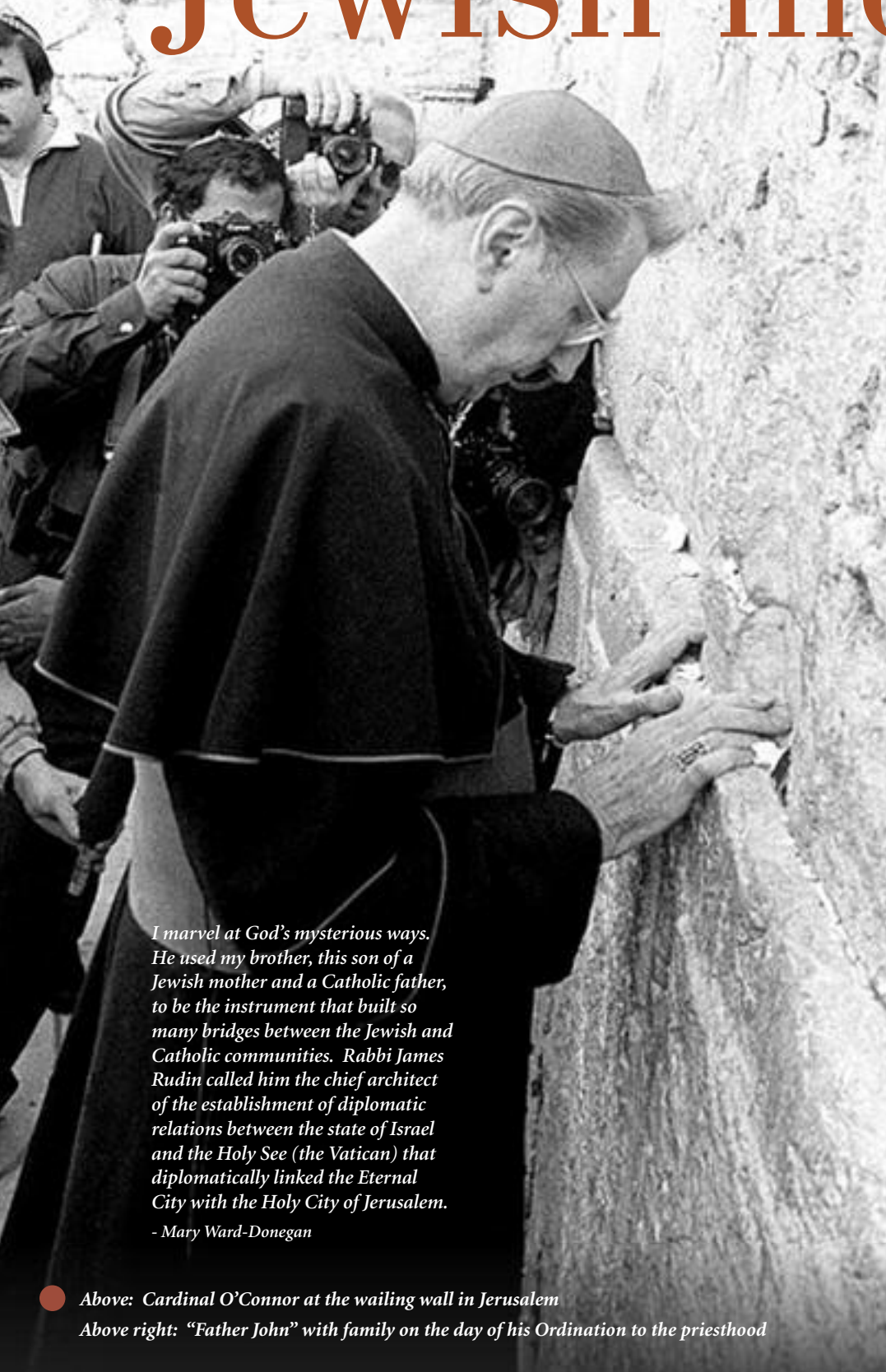


John Cardinal O'Connor

the son of a

Jewish mother

Photo courtesy of Chris Sheridan



I marvel at God's mysterious ways. He used my brother, this son of a Jewish mother and a Catholic father, to be the instrument that built so many bridges between the Jewish and Catholic communities. Rabbi James Rudin called him the chief architect of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the state of Israel and the Holy See (the Vatican) that diplomatically linked the Eternal City with the Holy City of Jerusalem.

- Mary Ward-Donagan

● Above: Cardinal O'Connor at the wailing wall in Jerusalem
Above right: "Father John" with family on the day of his Ordination to the priesthood



"It was a surprise I never expected: my mother, the mother of a former Cardinal Archbishop of New York, was born Jewish. My heart swelled as I read the words written over a hundred years ago by a simple parish priest on the pages of a worn church record book. The lines of script documenting my parents marriage union read, "Dorothy Gumble (my mother) was converted from Judaism and baptized in April 1908." I was stunned, breathless at the thought, and soon filled with joy as I came to know our family story in a completely new way. Our dear mother was Jewish."

MARY WARD-DONEGAN
Sister of Cardinal O'Connor, 2014



Photo credit: New York Times / Jessica Kaurkounis

He was shaped by a past he never knew

-Mary Ward-Donagan [the sister of the late John Cardinal O'Connor]

Mary lives outside of Philadelphia and recently celebrated her 87th birthday. She is a close friend and supporter of the Sisters of Life.

The journey that led to this astonishing discovery began months earlier when I decided to make a family tree. In my research, I stumbled across records that showed my maternal grandparents were buried in a Jewish cemetery. How could this be? How did I go through life not knowing this? I do not know why my mother never shared this with us, although it fits her character. She was a humble, discrete, and gracious woman who rarely spoke of herself. She was also one of the most devout Catholics I have ever known. I marvel at the work of grace in her soul that led her to the Catholic Church. She did not marry my father, Thomas O'Connor, for nearly two years after her baptism. Her path to the Catholic Church was a secret of her heart - held now in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Church where she was baptized.

Upon my discovery, my thoughts quickly turned to my brother, and his life as the Archbishop of New York came into focus. I am convinced that my brother did not know my mother was Jewish either. We knew she was a convert, and presumed that she had converted from another Christian religion. Her journey of faith was simply never mentioned or spoken of in our family. My eyes fill with tears and I smile as I think of how my brother would have cherished the thought. He did not know our mother was Jewish, yet there is knowledge deeper than the intellect.

Indeed, "the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." Our hearts tend to linger and gaze upon that which we most cherish and esteem. In his heart and in his soul, my brother had a deep and profound love for the Jewish people. He had a loyalty and a fidelity to them that went far beyond natural human respect. He cherished their friendships and thought of them as his dear older spiritual brothers. One Rabbi said, "He was not only your good shepherd, he was our good shepherd too." The late Mayor Ed Koch said, "I loved John Cardinal O'Connor as I did my own flesh and blood brother."

My brother revered the Jewish people for their sublime dignity as God's chosen race. It was the Jewish people who taught mankind what it means to know and trust God, and to be His beloved. He would have considered it the greatest honor to be united with ties of blood to the race that bore our Savior Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother. I see now that my brother's entire life was shaped by the faith of Jewish people.

"It was the Jewish people who taught mankind what it means to be God's beloved."



Dachau:

“A trip that radically changed me.”

[and the future of countless others]

Cardinal O'Connor would often reflect on a singular experience he had in 1975 before becoming the Chief of Navy Chaplains making him responsible for the needs of almost 2 million souls, 800 chaplains, and the religious programs on ships, submarines and bases around the world. He knew he needed to make a retreat and thought of the many monasteries and convents around the world where he could pray and prepare for the tremendous task that lay ahead. Somehow none of these places seemed right. So he did something that might seem very strange. He flew off to Germany and made his way to the Nazi concentration camp, Dachau.

When Cardinal O'Connor described his experience as he walked through the concentration camp, he said he was pierced to the core of his being. He vowed that he would do whatever he could, until his dying breath, to promote the sacredness of every human life.

What drew him to this place of the most infamous crimes against humanity? Whatever the motivation was, this decision and this retreat changed him in a dramatic way and in turn the lives of countless others. He described his experience as he walked through the concentration camp and came to the red brick crematoria where the bodies were burned, "I placed my hand in the oven and felt the intermingled ashes of Jew and Christian, rabbi, priest and minister." Struck to the heart, he thought, "Good God, how could human beings do this to other human beings?" He was pierced to the core of his being and vowed that he would do whatever he could, until his dying breath, to promote the sacredness of every human life.

Cardinal O'Connor would often speak of the effect this experience, "My life was changed radically, not modestly, not fractionally but radically when I put my hand into the oven at Dachau for the first time...I knew that with all my studies and all my degrees up until that moment, I knew no real theology. I learned it at Dachau. And it radically changed my life."

For Cardinal O'Connor, it was always about the individual person - what he called the dazzling value, the infinite worth of a single soul made in the image and likeness of almighty God. To him, it was not that 6 million Jews and 5 million Christians were killed in the holocaust - but that 1 person of infinite worth was killed, 11 million times and that God experienced each death as His own.

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THE SEED

In a place of the most profound darkness, amidst the ashes of evil and death, Christ cast His salvific light into the heart of our Founder, planting the seeds that would bring forth a new Charism of Life.





THE BIRTH OF THE SISTERS OF LIFE

We want to shout from the rooftops –
God loved you into existence with a
unique plan that only you can fulfill! Rejoice! Have Courage!

How do we reach out to the world?

- Serving vulnerable pregnant women
- Mission to those suffering after abortion
- Retreat Mission at Villa Maria Guadalupe
- Mission of Evangelization on God's plan for life and love
- Service to the Church in the New York Family Life/ Respect Life Office

Weaving a tapestry *[mission to serve pregnant women]*

It was another full day at the Visitation Mission. All of our appointments arrived for the afternoon, and the phones were ringing at a steady interval. I just finished a call when the doorbell rang. I walked to the front entrance and opened the door to find three young women standing timidly on the front step. "Is this the Sisters of Life?" One asked. I smiled, nodded, and prepared my heart for what I sensed was a Divine appointment. She continued, "We just came from Planned Parenthood. I found your brochure there and wanted to learn more about your program." Though in wonder at how our brochure got there, I quickly invited them in, grabbed some cookies and tea, and sat down ready to listen.

Amy was three months pregnant. The father of the baby told her to get an abortion. He wanted nothing to do with her or the baby. Her family and friends told her it was "her choice," a response that only made her feel increasingly overwhelmed, unsupported, and alone. Though she said it wasn't what her heart wanted, she felt abortion was the only option and scheduled an appointment. The day arrived, and as she got ready that morning she said a little prayer, "God, if you don't want me to do this, you have to give me a sign." A few hours later she found herself sitting restlessly in the waiting room of Planned Parenthood and tried to distract herself by looking at the brochures. Drawn to one in particular, she read it and began to cry. Her heart was filled with certainty it was God's answer to her prayer. She quickly stuffed it in her purse, grabbed her two friends waiting outside, and hopped on a bus determined to get to the address listed on the back of the brochure. Through a miracle of God's grace a Sisters of Life pregnancy brochure found its way into the rack at Planned Parenthood ready to present Amy with a way out.

The afternoon passed quickly as Amy spoke about her fears, the pressures she felt to have an abortion, the challenges of continuing the pregnancy, and her dreams. At one point she looked at me and sighed, content and grateful to have the weight of the past three months out on the table. Then I asked her, "What is your heart telling you to do?" She looked at me and thought for a moment. "Keep the baby," she said with quiet sincerity. Light filled her eyes and a beautiful smile stretched across her face. Full of conviction she looked me in the eyes and said, "My life is not over. I just have to let go and let God. I am keeping this baby."

Since that time, golden threads of grace have continued to weave a beautiful tapestry in this woman's heart.



When asked what the Sisters of Life will do, Cardinal O'Connor responded, "they will love, they will love, they will love. Love is the most powerful force in this world, not nations, politics, cultures or military forces, but love."

The ocean waves are pounding for *you*.

God's love story for every person



Often times when the Sisters are on speaking engagements we like to share our vocation stories. And in sharing moments of grace, most people are surprised to discover each is a love story. The following is a part of one Sister's journey and the way the Lord spoke to her heart. We pray that you will hear in it an echo of how God loves YOU – personally, intimately, with special plans for your life. He simply waits for your Yes.

I was at my friends beach house over the summer and it was early in the morning.

I'll never forget the way the Lord spoke to my heart. It was not a voice I heard in my head, but in my heart and it told me to go to the beach and I would find my answer there. I left the house and began walking quickly and then running. When I arrived I could feel my heart filling up with love. It was so powerful and overwhelming, unlike anything I had ever experienced before. Jesus was posing a question to my heart, and my answer was, "Yes, yes, Lord, whatever you want, whatever it is, the answer is YES!"

Now, I had no idea what He was asking, but I knew it was good to say yes! Suddenly, as I looked out into the ocean I experienced the love of God the Father and I knew in a way that I could never doubt that I was His beloved daughter. I saw the sun rising, and somehow I knew the sun was rising *for me*. And all of the ocean waves pounding on the shore, were pounding *for me*. And every little piece of sand that was on the beach, was placed there specifically *for me*. God loved me that much. And if I was the only person in the world, Jesus would have died on the Cross just *for me*. He knew me better than I knew myself. He was always there deep in my soul, drawing me. I also felt that the Lord was telling me that I could trust Him, that He would never, ever hurt me because He simply did not know how. And all of the desires that I had in my heart – to be a mother, and a wife, and a daughter? All of those things would not be taken from me, but, would in fact, be fulfilled totally and completely in Him by becoming a bride of Christ and a spiritual mother to many, many children that He would send me to help.

I also knew that this experience was not just for me, but that He felt this love for each of His children and He wanted me to share this story. Eventually, some time after that experience, I met the Sisters of Life. I knew God was calling me to lay down my life so that others would know their own dignity – because each life is sacred and each life matters to the Lord – more than we can imagine.

-Sr. Therese Marie, SV

photo credit: istock / stephiii



Our Mission of Evangelization includes running weekend retreats throughout the year at Villa Maria Guadalupe and traveling around the country sharing the beauty of God's plan for life and love. This year the Sisters spoke at over 198 events, reaching tens of thousands of people.

Evangelization trips included: Alaska, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington DC, Wisconsin, and Ontario and Vancouver, Canada



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“The limit imposed upon evil is ultimately Divine Mercy... In sacrificing himself for us all, Christ gave a new meaning to suffering, opening up a new dimension, a new order: the order of love...it is this suffering which burns and consumes evil with the flame of love and draws forth even from sin a great flowering of good.”

-Saint John Paul II

[mission to those suffering after abortion]

When His mercy touches our wounds

I’ll never forget one woman who attended a Day of Prayer and Healing. At the end of these days, those attending have the opportunity to place a rose in front of an image of Jesus, the Divine Mercy. It is often a very powerful moment of grace, where they have a tangible way to entrust their child, and their own lives to the One who is Love and Mercy. This particular young woman came to us suffering greatly after her abortion. She was trapped in self-condemnation, and struggled with deep sadness, regret, and a sense of helplessness. I will never forget as she approached with her rose. She knelt before the image of Jesus and began to weep...what she would tell us later is that she was finally able to give the tears permission to fall, and with them came the release of all the sorrow, pain and grief she felt in the wake of her abortion. As I watched, my heart was deeply moved with this bitter-sweetness. The bitterness was a rending compassion I felt at the great grief and loss she experienced and expressed. The sweetness told of the powerful action of mercy unfolding before me. My heart understood that what I was witnessing was a fulfillment of God’s promise to us—His Divine Mercy. Through this act of faith, she gave God the Father an opportunity He eagerly waits for—that of embracing His beloved daughter or son with all their sins, pain, and wounds, making them new through the gift of His real transforming love.


Afterward I had the chance to speak with her and she was hardly the same person who had walked in. Her face and eyes were filled with light. She possessed a new sense of dignity and innocence. She was truly made new. And while she knew there was still a long road ahead in healing, she had the peace, hope, and support to move forward in the journey.

- Sr. Mariae Agnus Dei, S.V.



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Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives. Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see...faith becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time...Dante describes that light as a "spark, which then becomes a burning flame and like a heavenly star within me glimmers."

- Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*

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