

St. Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897)

On a pilgrimage to Rome, when she was only 14 years old, Therese came to understand her vocation to be a spiritual mother for priests. In her autobiography she describes that after meeting many holy priests on her trip to Italy, she understood their weaknesses and frailty in spite of their sublime dignity.

“If holy priests...show in their conduct their extreme need for prayers, what is to be said of those who are tepid?” (A 157) In one of her letters she encouraged her sister Céline, “Let us live for souls, let us be apostles, let us save especially the souls of priests. ... Let us pray, let us suffer for them, and, on the last day, Jesus will be grateful.” (LT 94)

In the life of Therese, Doctor of the Church, there is a moving episode which highlights her zeal for souls, especially missionaries. While she was very ill and had great difficulty walking, the nurse advised her to take a little walk in the garden for a quarter of an hour each day. She obeyed faithfully, although she did not find it effective. On one occasion, the sister accompanying her noticed how painful it was for her to walk and remarked “You would do better to rest; this walking can do you no good

under such conditions. You’re exhausting yourself.” The saint responded, “Well, I am walking for a missionary. I think that over there, far away, one of them is perhaps exhausted in his apostolic endeavours, and, to lessen his fatigue, I offer mine to God.”

God gave a clear sign of accepting Therese’s desire to offer her life for priests when the mother superior gave her the name of two seminarians who had asked for spiritual support from a Carmelite nun. The future Abbot Maurice Bellière was one of them. Just a few days after the death of Therese, he received the habit of the “White Fathers” as a priest and missionary. Adolphe Roulland was the other seminarian whom she accompanied through her prayers and sacrifices until his ordination.

“Our task is not based on ‘making’ a new humanity as much as ‘being’ a new humanity. Keeping all of this in mind, we can very well say that we have a life full of meaning and not by any means wasted or ruined. We have not closed off or run away from the world, but rather, we gladly give our lives to the God of Love and to all our brothers and sisters without exception. Here in ‘Mater Ecclesiae’ we give it especially for the pope and his co-workers.”

Sr. Clare-Christine, Mother Superior of the first Poor Clare community in the Vatican explains, “Arriving here, I found the vocation of my vocation: to give my life for the Holy Father as a Poor Clare. The rest of the sisters experienced the same thing.”

Mother M. Sofia confirms, “As Benedictines, we are very

close to the Church and thus we have a great love for the Pope no matter where we are. Of course, being called to live here physically in this ‘unique’ convent has deepened our love even more toward him. We try to transmit this love back in the convents which we left behind to come here.

“We know that we have been called to become spiritual mothers in our silent and hidden life. Priests and seminarians have a privileged place as our spiritual sons, as do all of those who turn to us asking for support in their priestly life and ministry, in the trials and anxieties they encounter. Our life shall be ‘a witness to the apostolic efficacy of contemplative life, imitating the Blessed Virgin Mary, who stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother.’” (LG 63)

“Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers”

“Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers”. This means that the harvest is ready, but God wishes to enlist helpers to bring it into the storehouse. God needs them. He needs people to say: yes, I am ready to become your harvest labourer; I am ready to offer help so that this harvest which is ripening in people’s hearts may truly be brought into the storehouses of eternity and become an enduring, divine communion of joy and love. “Pray the Lord of the harvest” also means that we cannot simply “produce” vocations; they must come from God. This is not like other professions, we cannot simply recruit people by using the right kind of publicity or the correct type of strategy. The call which comes from the heart of God must always find its way into the heart of man. And yet, precisely so that it may reach into hearts, our cooperation is needed. To pray the Lord of the harvest means above all to ask him for this, to stir his heart and say: “Please do this! Rouse labourers! Enkindle in them enthusiasm and joy for the Gospel! Make them understand that this is a treasure greater than any other, and that whoever has discovered it, must hand it on!”

Meeting with Priests and Deacons - Freising 14 September 2006

Blessed Cardinal Clemens August von Galen (1878-1946)

On 13 September 1933, a 55-year-old German priest, Clemens Count von Galen, was appointed Bishop of Munster, Germany by Pope Pius XI.

In accordance with his motto, he allowed himself to be swayed “neither by praise nor by fear,” but openly protested the terrorist activities of the Gestapo and condemned the government for violating the rights of the Church and the faithful.

In 1946, Pope Pius XII made him a Cardinal because of

his merits and the exceptionally courageous conviction which he had exhibited as Bishop of Munster. Upon taking the office as shepherd of Munster, Bishop Count von Galen had prayer cards printed with the following words:

“I am the thirteenth child in our family, and I will be forever thankful to my mother, who had the courage to once again say ‘Yes’ and thus accept the thirteenth child which God was offering her. If it had not been for my mother’s ‘Yes,’ I would not be a priest and bishop now.”

“Lord, Give Us Priests Again!”

Anna Stang endured great suffering during the Communist persecution, and like many other women in her situation, she offered it up for priests. In her old age, she has become a woman with a priestly spirit.

“We were left without pastors!”

Anna Stang was born in 1909 to a large faithful family living in the German area of the Volga in Russia. She began suffering for the faith as a nine-year-old schoolgirl. She writes, “...In 1918, in second grade, we still prayed the Our Father before class. One year later, everything was forbidden and the priest was no longer allowed in the school. People began to laugh at those of us who believed, showing no respect for the priests anymore, and the seminary was destroyed.”

When she was 11 years old, Anna lost her father and several siblings to a Cholera epidemic. When her mother died six years later, Anna was left to raise her younger brothers and sisters. Not only did they lose their parents, but, “Our priest also died at this time, and many religious were arrested. So we were left without a pastor! That was so difficult. ... In the neighboring parish, the church was still open, but there was no longer a priest there either. The faithful gathered for prayer, but without a priest, the church was very cold. I just used to cry, no longer being able to hold myself together. Earlier, this church had been filled with so much song and prayer! Everything seemed dead to me.”

Deeply afflicted by this spiritual suffering, Anna prayed from that moment on—especially for priests and missionaries. “Lord, give us another priest, give us Holy Communion! I gladly suffer everything for you, O most Sacred Heart of Jesus!” All the suffering which she endured in the following years, she consciously offered for priests—even when the Communists raided their house in 1938 and arrested her brother and the husband to whom she had been happily married for seven years. Neither of them ever returned.

A priestly service

In 1942, the young widow, was deported with her three children to Kazakhstan. “It was hard, arriving in the bitter cold of winter, but we lived through it to see spring. In

those days I cried a lot but I also prayed a lot. It was always as if somebody was leading me by the hand. Some time later, I found some Catholic women in the city of Siry-anovsk. We secretly congregated on Sundays and solemnities to sing hymns and pray the Rosary. I prayed so often, ‘Mary, our beloved mother, see how poor we are; send us priests, teachers and pastors again!’”

The persecution subsided somewhat after 1965. “A church was even built in Bishkek (the capital of Kirgizstan), and once a year my friend Veronica and I went there for Holy Mass. It was a long way, more than 1000 kilometers, but we were so happy to go. We had not seen a priest or a confessional for more than 20 years! The priest there was old and had spent 10 years in prison for his faith. While I was there, somebody lent me a key to the church allowing me to spend a long time in adoration. I never thought that I would be so close to the tabernacle again, and in my joy, I knelt down and kissed it.”

Before returning home, Anna always received permission to bring Holy Communion back to the Catholics in her city who could not make such a trip. “With the mandate of the priest, I baptized the children and adults in my city for 30 years; I led couples to the sacrament of marriage and buried the dead until my health no longer permitted it.”

Hidden prayers...

that a priest might come!

You cannot imagine how thankful Anna was when a missionary priest visited her home for the first time in 1995. She cried for joy and said so movingly, “Jesus the High Priest has come!” At 86 years of age, having prayed for decades for priests and missionaries, she no longer believed she would see them again.

Holy Mass was celebrated for the first time in the apartment of this exceptional woman who possessed a true priestly spirit. Out of reverence and joy for the reception of Holy Communion, she ate nothing for the entire day.

A Life Offered for the Pope and the Church

In the shadow of the dome of the Basilica of St. Peter, at the heart of the Vatican, lies a convent consecrated to “Mater Ecclesiae”—the Mother of the Church. Previously used for other purposes, this simple building was remodeled several years ago to serve the needs of a contemplative order of nuns. The Holy Father, John Paul II intentionally fixed the date of dedication of the convent as 13 May 1994, the anniversary of the first apparition of Our Lady of Fatima. The sisters living here consecrate their lives to the needs of the Holy Father and the Church.

Every five years this responsibility is assumed by a different contemplative order. The first international community was composed of Poor Clares from all over the world (Italy, Canada, Russia, Bosnia, Nicaragua, and the Philippines). The Carmelites then took their place, and continued to offer their prayers and their lives for the intentions of the Pope. Since 7 October 2004, the Feast of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Benedictine nuns from four different countries have come to live in the convent. One sister is from the Philippines, one from the United States, two from France and three from Italy.

Through this initiative, John Paul II made an impeccably clear statement about the need of this modern and hectic world for the indispensable importance of silent prayer and sacrifice. By maintaining a cloistered convent of sisters praying for his intentions and his pontificate in the immediate vicinity, the Holy Father revealed his profound belief that the fruitfulness of his ministry as universal shepherd and the spiritual success of his charge are primarily due to the prayers and sacrifices of others.

Pope Benedict XVI holds the same deep conviction. Many times he has gone to celebrate Mass for “his Sisters,” thanking them for offering their lives for him. The words he addressed to the Poor Clares in Castelgondolfo on 15 September 2007 also apply to the convent of nuns in the Vatican: “So, dear Sisters, this is what the Pope expects of you: that you be bright torches of love, ‘joined hands,’ watching in ceaseless prayer, totally detached from the world, in order to sustain the ministry of the one whom Jesus has called to guide his Church.” Providence has so beautifully provided that a Pope under the patronage of St. Benedict is especially close to a group of Benedictine Sisters.

A daily, Marian life

It was not by chance that the Holy Father chose a feminine order for this task. Throughout the history of the Church, women, taking Our Lady as their model, have always been the ones to accompany and support, through prayer and sacrifice, the apostles and priests in their missionary activities. For that very reason, contemplative orders consider “the imitation and contemplation of Mary” as part of their charisma. The present prioress of the convent, Madre M. Sofia Cicchetti, defines the life of her community as a daily, Marian life:

“There is nothing out of the ordinary here. You can only understand our contemplative and cloistered life in the light of faith and the love of God. In the largely consumerist, pagan society that we live, almost every sense of beauty and awe before God’s great works in the world and humanity seems to have disappeared, as well as the adoration of his loving presence here in our midst. A life separated from the world, but not indifferent to it may seem absurd and useless. Nevertheless, we can joyfully say that giving our time entirely to God is not a waste. Let everyone remember a prophetic, fundamental truth: to be fully and truly human means to be anchored in God and live from the breath of God’s love. Like many, we strive to be like ‘Moses’ with his arms lifted high and his heart wide open to the universal love, and at the same time, very concretely interceding for the good and the salvation of the world, thus becoming ‘collaborators in the mystery of redemption.’ (cfr. Verbi Sponsa, 3)