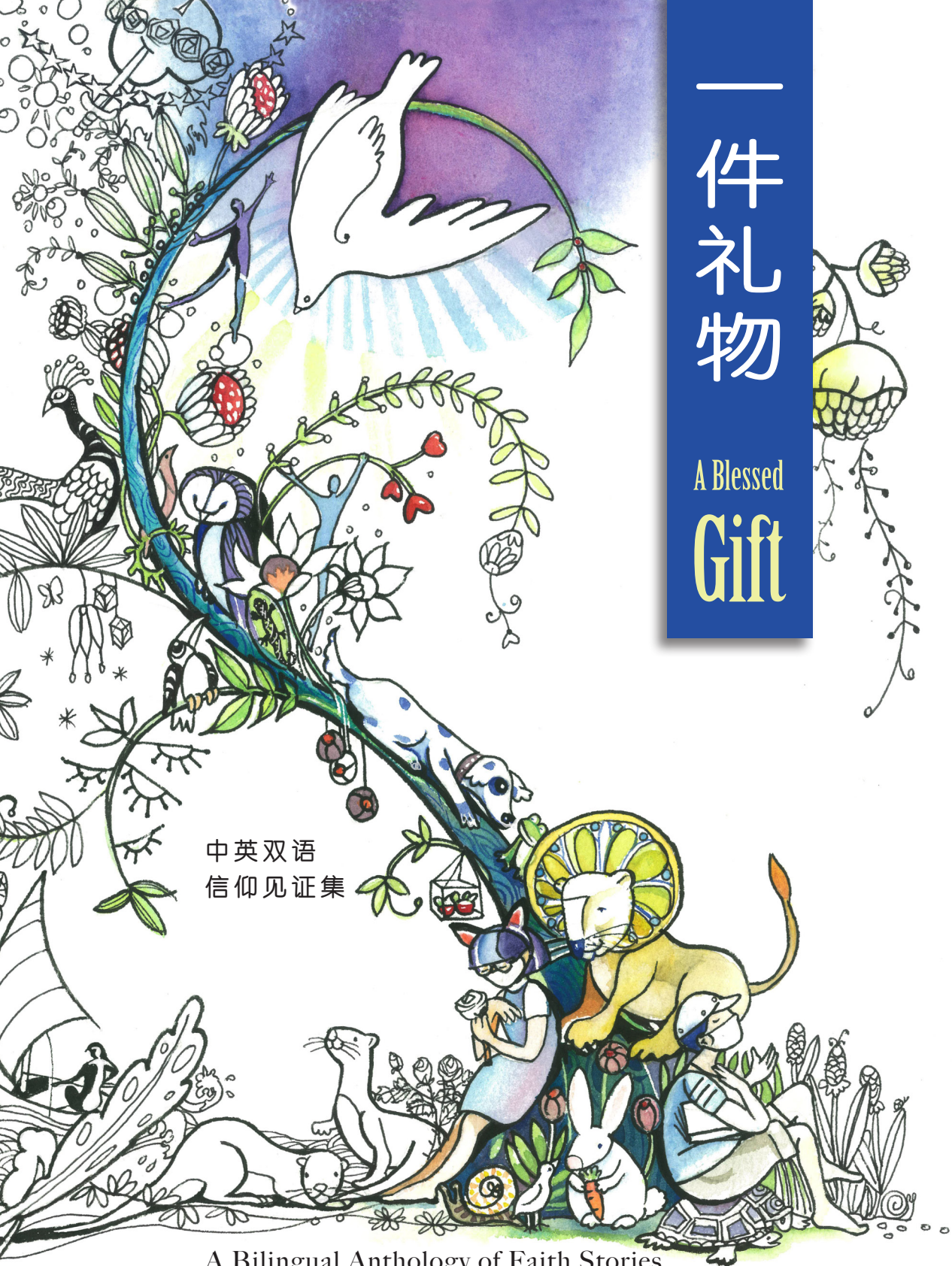


一件礼物

A Blessed
Gift

中英双语
信仰见证集

A Bilingual Anthology of Faith Stories



一件礼物：中英双语信仰见证集
A Blessed Gift — A Bilingual Anthology of Faith Stories

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Preface

By Julia Wong Soo Mei

Before Jesus' ascension to heaven, he had said to his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Many of us have heard these words from the Bible, spoken by our Lord Jesus two thousand years ago, and we desire to obey his command. As long as we know and trust the Lord Jesus, even when our lives are filled with challenges and many unknowns, our hearts are still filled with joy. I believe that many sisters and brothers in Christ also long for others to have this same joy. In recent years, whenever I heard Pope Francis and Archbishop Goh urging us to spread the Good News, I mulled over what they said, but could not think of what to do, and so, I pondered their words in my heart.

In January this year (2020), I attended a Bible course, "Acts of the Apostles", and this rekindled the spark of evangelisation within me, strengthening my resolve to be courageous like the apostles in not being afraid of any difficulty. At the same time, a

friend happened to give me a compilation of faith stories about Catholics and their encounters with God, and in the process of reading these testimonies, I was stirred. If one faith testimony was printed into 5000 books and 5000 people read it, that one story would have testified 5000 times, not to mention that each book may have more than one reader. If I could collect the faith stories of a number of Catholics and compile them into a book, those who had the passion to evangelise could use this book as a gift for their non-Catholic friends, to give them the opportunity to know about the Lord Jesus. It would also be an example of the collective power of evangelising, using social media for publicity.

I believed that if we were willing to offer our “five loaves and two fishes”, the Lord Jesus would surely bless our offering and use it to feed and satisfy the masses. But where were we to find the “five loaves and two fishes”? The first potential group of writers I could think of was the Catholic alumnae of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School. In the past few years, through my participation in Church activities, I had come to know many alumnae who had been baptised after leaving the school. I immediately contacted them to share my idea, and at the same time, invite them to write their stories. Thanks be to God! Everybody’s response was most enthusiastic and positive, and they committed to submitting their faith stories within one month. Moreover, in order to achieve our objective of evangelising, all were in favour of having these stories published in both Chinese and English. Thanks to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, through the recommendation of one of the juniors, we found a group of alumnae willing to undertake the translation work. It was in this valuable spirit of enthusiasm to spread the Good News and with the abundant graces of God that *A Blessed Gift — A Bilingual Anthology of Faith Stories* was born.

The number 40 appears numerous times in the Bible and has multiple layers of meaning. Hence, our aim was to have 40 stories — 80 after translation. Taking into

account the production cost and the thickness of the proposed book, 40 stories seemed a reasonable limit. However, in the process of gathering the testimonies, many other alumnae contacted me, one after another, expressing their willingness to share about the blessings that God had granted them in their lives. But, regretfully, I had to turn them away. This confirms what Saint John said, “There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them was written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). These words from the Gospel of John illustrate the endless abundance of the works of Jesus. Truly, God’s grace is boundless and can never be fully recorded.

As the stories came in one by one, the editors felt as though we were piecing together a ‘faith puzzle’ from God for the non-Catholics. As we read each new submission with the awareness that what the contents touched upon would be extremely important for readers interested in the Catholic faith, we could feel the Lord personally putting the puzzle pieces into place. The themes covered in the anthology include: Is Jesus just a good man who lived 2000 years ago, or is he the true God? Who am I? Does God hear the prayers of the terminally ill? Where do we go when we die? Can I believe in Jesus without getting baptised? If my parents are non-believers, how do I fulfil my filial duties to them when I become a Catholic? We were amazed to read how Jesus had granted faith to a primary school child, and through her, had led her whole family to be baptised. All of these 40 authentic and touching insightful stories, each one unique and captivating, carry the same Gospel message, the same Good News of God’s salvation plan.

Our hope is that after reading this anthology, other brothers and sisters in Christ will also be willing to put into writing how God’s goodness has been made manifest in their lives, making for many future anthologies, with each testimony becoming a beacon of light illuminating the Catholic evangelistic landscape in Singapore.



Message

From Reverend Monsignor Ambrose Vaz
Vicar General (Pastoral),
Archdiocesan Commission for Catholic Schools

When I was a child, one of the things that excited me very much was receiving a gift. The level of excitement was often determined by the degree of interest that gift would evoke in me – in terms of its taste (if food), or colour, or beauty, but above all, the utility of the gift. However, as time went by, I realised that I did not always know what provided me with the greatest utility! This was partly due to the fact that I did not quite recognise what fully satisfied me. One moment's fascination with something was the next moment's frustration with it! I needed to know and accept what would give me lasting satisfaction.

When I was asked to pen a message for this book, I was intrigued by its title and contents – *A Blessed Gift* – highlighting the faith experiences of alumnae of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School. It struck a chord in me, as I recalled how I had recognised, quite past my childhood days, that the gift which provides lasting satisfaction was actually the experience of a relationship with God, who is the source of all satisfaction, and that the means to that relationship was my faith in him. From experience, I find it so true that my intimacy with the Giver always encompasses more than the gifts I receive, which all have a run out date! However, the greatest and most

enduring satisfaction in life comes (logically) from a gift that — or rather, WHO — is eternal, the gift of a relationship with God.

Faith, therefore, enables us to taste and see the goodness of God in all situations of life, transcending even the things that, based on human definition, may be considered as unlikely or even incapable of providing joy, such as pain, suffering, deprivation, or abandonment. Yet, because God — in Jesus — has shown us that he transcends pain and death and can lead us through and beyond these, my faith in him becomes the gift that I treasure most today!

In the Bible, the number 40 reflects a number of things. As the product of 5 and 8, it can signify grace (5) ending in revival, or a new beginning (8). This gift of faith experienced and testified to by the 40 contributors to this book, serves as a catalyst for the seed of faith God plants in each one of us, the readers, inviting us to grow and bring about a new beginning in our lives, through our outlook on life, our relationships with others, and our sense of mission and dedication in all we are called to do.

The number 40 in the Bible often also delivers the message pointing to testing or trial, as a process of, or an invitation to one's readiness for a greater mission and challenge in life. May this book with these 40 testimonies serve to remind us to see our many trials — those we have faced and those we will face — as but invitations to better growth and to a scaling of greater heights. A faith that is not tested cannot really be trusted, and so, if we are presently experiencing a trial or a test, let us not give up because God may not necessarily be disciplining us, but may be inviting us to see how strong our faith and trust in him really is. I pray we will accept all those invitations he extends to us, by remaining steadfastly obedient to God, even as our faith in him remains unshaken. God bless!

Message

From Mrs Fiona Tan
Principal,
CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School

“Whatever happens, be always at peace and trust in God.”

Blessed Nicolas Barré

Founder, Sisters of the Infant Jesus and CHIJ Schools

The distinctive blue-white uniform of the IJ schools was a common sight in my family. My mother and aunts are all alumnae of IJ schools and it was only natural that my mother wished for me to be an IJ girl. I attended CHIJ Opera Estate in my primary school days, and then enrolled at CHIJ Katong Convent to complete my secondary education.

Being in a Catholic school helped me to appreciate and embrace God in all aspects of my life. During Bible Knowledge lessons, the teachers vividly brought the Bible stories to life as they shared about Christ and his apostles. The daily prayers, whether in praise or supplication, were a constant reminder of God's loving presence. I remember praying together with my schoolmates before going for competitions and exams and feeling this inexplicable sense of calmness, buoyed by the faith that God

was with us. These experiences have left an indelible mark on me and have given me the faith and tenacity to face challenges in life.

When I was posted to CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School as her 9th principal, I was delighted to return to the IJ family. There was a comforting sense of familiarity to see the girls in the distinctive IJ uniform and to feel the presence of God permeating the school.

St Nicholas Girls' School celebrated her 85th anniversary not too long ago. If anyone were to ask me to share the school's journey, I would describe it as a chronicle of faith. More than 165 years ago, when Reverend Mother Mathilde Raclot (the foundress of CHIJ in Victoria Street) and four other Sisters made the perilous journey from France to Penang to set up the first IJ school, it was their unwavering faith in God that enabled them to prevail over almost insurmountable adversities. In my reading of Mother Mathilde's correspondence to her Superior General, her complete surrender to God's will and her profound joy shine through like a beacon of light.

In the course of a history spanning more than eight decades, St Nicholas has weathered many storms. However, the legacy of love, simplicity, steadfastness, and faith left behind by the pioneering Sisters kept the school sure and steady on her course. Today, the selfless dedication of the IJ Sisters and the way they live their faith through simple everyday actions continue to move and inspire us.

Faith and gratitude are irrevocably intertwined. With faith, we are able to place our complete trust in God. But faith fortified with a grateful heart enables us to recognise and appreciate the daily miracles that the Lord works in our lives.

In St Nicholas, the school's beautiful culture of gratitude is a constant reminder of

God's compassionate presence and the abundance of gifts that he has blessed us with. It has helped to encourage a spirit of generous giving, rather than just receiving. As we give of ourselves to others and see God's work through the actions of others, the seed of faith continues to grow, flourish, and bear fruit.

This spirit of giving is exemplified by this anthology of personal stories by our alumnae. The writers have opened their hearts and revealed their vulnerabilities to show how God's amazing grace has given them the courage to overcome life's challenges.

As you turn the pages of this book, may these stories be a source of comfort and inspiration – a gentle reminder to have faith and be grateful for God's everlasting and loving presence.



“O Mary, woman and mother, you wove the divine Word in your womb,
you recounted by your life the magnificent works of God.

Listen to our stories, hold them in your heart,
and make your own the stories that no one wants to hear.
Teach us to recognise the good thread that runs through history.
Look at the tangled knots in our life that paralyse our memory.

By your gentle hands, every knot can be untied.
Woman of the Spirit, mother of trust, inspire us too.
Help us build stories of peace, stories that point to the future.
And show us the way to live them together.”

*An excerpt of the message from His Holiness Pope Francis
for the 54th World Communications Day on 24 May 2020*



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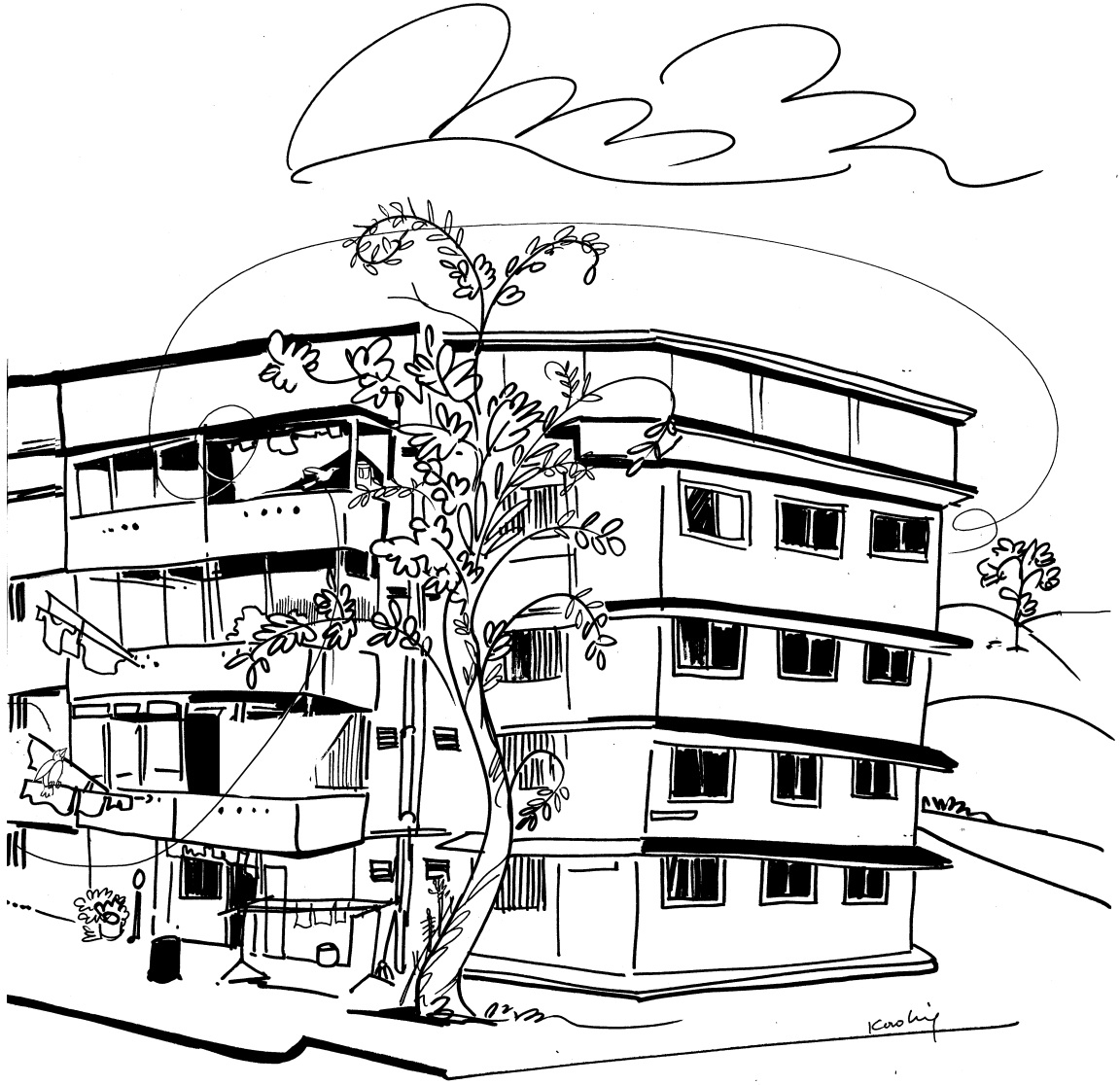
A Blessed
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A Bilingual Anthology of Faith Stories





The Oriole That Listened

By Adeline Tong

Decades ago, on a bright and sunny day at noon, in the Victoria Street school compound of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School adorned with wind-tousled blooms of morning glories, my nine-year-old self wandered alone along the corridor outside the classrooms. It was not unusual for me to be there by myself as the driver of my private school bus always sent me to school early for the afternoon session, way before my classmates reached the school gates. I looked down at the red-tiled ground, and an idea came to mind — to play hopscotch by myself. In no time at all, I had become a little fairy dancing along the corridor. Suddenly —

“Adeline! Stop playing outside the classroom! Come in and listen to our catechism class!” boomed the resounding voice of my principal, Sister Françoise. She had been teaching catechism to a class of primary students and perhaps my actions outside the classroom had been distracting them, and so, she had called me in. Many students were frightened of Sister Françoise, but from the time I was in Primary One, I would run up to her and hug her whenever I saw her. That was why she knew my name. Sitting quietly in the classroom, I was filled with curiosity, listening intently as Sister Françoise's narrative took me on a journey into the kingdom of God. I had no idea

at the time that Sister Françoise was teaching us about the Word of God.

“Children, you have a guardian angel by your side watching over you all the time. So, no matter what kind of trouble you may be facing, don’t be afraid. Just pray earnestly to God and he will come to help you solve your problems. You just need to have faith and believe. Don’t forget to say your prayers regularly — one Our Father, one Hail Mary, and three Glory Be’s!” Throughout the entire lesson, I listened in puzzlement, only remembering the last part, but this advice from Sister Françoise has stuck with me for more than forty years.

I am not a cradle Catholic, but that noon, I began to learn about God, and that lesson laid the foundation for my relationship with him. Because of Sister Françoise’s words, the young me learnt to pray often.

One evening after school, I remember coming back to my home in Kampong Bahru to find, to my surprise, a beautiful yellow bird shut in a cage in the living room. It was an oriole. The bird was full of life, chirping as it hopped about in its cage. Out of curiosity, I went up to it, wondering if I could ‘communicate’ or play with it, but suddenly, my brother yelled, “Don’t touch it! And don’t stick your hand in to take it out of the cage either! It’s my classmate’s pet bird. He loaned it to me for a few days and I have to return it. If you let it fly away accidentally, I will thrash you!”

I thought, *Hmph! Who wants to touch it? What a domineering grouch!*

The next morning, when I woke up, no one was home as Mother had gone to the market and everyone else was out. Just as I was dying of boredom, I heard a bird chirping. I thought, *Eh? Where’s that chirping coming from? Ah! I remember, it’s the oriole that my brother brought home yesterday. He even warned me not to touch it.*

But he's not at home now. This is great! I do have something to play with.

In that instant, overcome with excitement, I completely forgot my brother's stern and grim warning. I opened the door of the bird cage and carefully cupped the little oriole in my hands. Just as I was about to stroke it gently, it struggled and broke free of my little hands and flew out through the front balcony. "Oh no! The bird has flown away!" I yelled in shock. I looked out and saw it land on a small hillside in front of my home, its bright yellow feathers conspicuous among the green thicket.

The oriole had escaped. *What should I do?* I immediately thought of God and I remembered Sister Françoise's advice that if I prayed to God, he would help me solve my problems. Immediately, I knelt down, looked heavenward, and prayed to God, asking for his forgiveness and help. With a little child's pure and simple heart, using plain and childish words, I confessed that it had been my playful act that had brought this trouble upon me. Then, I proceeded to sincerely recite one Our Father, one Hail Mary, and three Glory Be's.

Right after that, the little oriole flew off the hillside and over the rooftop of my four-storey government flat, heading towards the back of the flat. I rushed to the kitchen balcony, looked out, and saw — how strange — there was the oriole perched on my neighbour's laundry pole!

I immediately knelt down again, clasped my hands in prayer, raised my head, and shouted, "Praise the Lord!" I knew that this merciful God had actually heard and granted the prayer of a nine-year-old child! Looking with pity upon my anxiety and fear, he had wielded his mighty power and sent the little bird flying back to me from the hillside. I continued praying, asking God to bring the bird to my balcony. Then I began to coax it, saying repeatedly, "Hurry, hurry, fly back, fly over here..."

Then, as if God had made the bird understand what I had said, it looked at me and flew off my neighbour's laundry pole on the second floor to the ground floor. I was a little disappointed that it had not flown directly to my home, but I had to acknowledge that it had already been most cooperative by coming gradually closer to me. Excitedly, I said to it, "Please stay there. Don't fly away. I am going down now to bring you home!"

I dashed out of my second-floor flat and rushed down the stairs straight onto the grassy patch behind my flat. I was amazed to see that the cute little oriole actually seemed to be waiting docilely for me! I approached it cautiously, speaking in a gentle tone, "Don't be afraid. Come to me." To my surprise, it listened and allowed me to cradle it in my hands. I hurried home and it did not struggle as I put it back into the cage.

This thrilling episode in my life had a profound effect on me. It made me certain that somewhere out there, there really was a true, compassionate, and almighty God.

That same day, the moment I arrived in school at noon, I went straight to the convent chapel and offered a sincere prayer of thanksgiving to God. From that day onwards, my little heart had learnt, in its own way, to love and trust God with all my heart, with all my mind, and with all my soul.

While going through life's ups and downs in the past forty years, whenever I was sad or lonely, I would walk into any Catholic church, sit quietly to one side, and fix my gaze upon the image of the crucified Jesus on the cross. I would confide to the Lord all my doubts and confusion, asking him for the strength and wisdom to overcome all the challenges I had to face. Regardless of whatever pain I have had to bear and all those times when I have been wronged, I have not borne any resentment against

anyone as I believe that God is always with me, guiding me, helping me, and training me through my trials, so that I can grow from these challenges in my life.

In 2012, my mother passed away and I no longer needed to spend my Saturdays with her. One evening, as I was walking past the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I saw a banner hanging on the fence with the words “Come and see!” There and then, I knew that God was once again calling me. I contacted the person in charge of the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) ministry and one year later, I received the Sacrament of Baptism, officially becoming a daughter of God. That year, the parish priest, Father Henry Siew, said that although it had been costly to make that banner, and even though I was the only non-Catholic who had signed up for RCIA in response to it, it had been most worth it! It was only after becoming a Catholic that I discovered the Catholic Church had so many treasures. I came to know about Mother Mary and the saints, learnt various methods of prayer, and I met many brothers and sisters in Christ, thus enriching my life immensely.

At the present time, I am active in the Mandarin-speaking community in the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Through my regular participation in the retreats and other activities organised by the Singapore Archdiocese, I often meet many classmates and other alumnae from St Nicholas Girls’ School, some of whom are also converts like me, baptised into the faith many years after graduating from the school. I am grateful to God for my education in a mission school, where he planted the seeds of faith in me.

In actual fact, it was not the little yellow oriole that had listened to me; it was God who had heard and answered my prayer.

The Sower

By Grace Cheong

A long time ago when I was studying in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, there was a particular teacher, Miss Fong, who gathered a group of Catholics to form a small faith-sharing group called The Sowers. I was in Secondary Two then. Miss Fong had a way of asking us questions that got us thinking about what our faith was all about. I suppose it was through our activities in The Sowers that God set me on the path to enquire more deeply about my faith.

When I was an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore (NUS), this hunger to know more about God spurred me to join the doctrine classes and retreats organised by Opus Dei. Opus Dei (Latin for Work of God) is a personal prelature founded by Saint Josemaría Escrivá in Spain, in 1928. The women's centre belonging to Opus Dei in Singapore was located near the NUS campus, and as I was living on campus then, despite my busy schedule, it was still convenient for me to attend their activities.

In 1990, together with four other university students from Singapore, I had the great opportunity to attend the UNIV conference organised by Opus Dei in Rome.

Thousands of university students came from all over the world to attend this grand gathering. On one of the days, we were sightseeing in the Vatican City when we stumbled upon a public audience that Pope John Paul II was giving in the Sistine Chapel. Little was I to know that Pope John Paul II would be canonised together with Pope John XXIII on 27 April 2014 by Pope Francis. How blessed I was on that day in Rome, in 1990, to have been personally blessed by a saint!

Not long after, I got married and started work, and all too soon, the lure of the secular life, climbing the corporate ladder, and having my four children took its toll on me. Going to church on Sundays became just an obligation for me as a Catholic, just another commandment to be kept. This robotic existence went on for more than ten years. Then, one day, my dad was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive cancer, and within the space of six months, he was gone.

Dad's death felt so final. So absolute.

However, the passing of my dad also marked the beginning of my journey, step by step, back to God. A year or two after his death, when I was at the Lenten penitential service confessing the usual sins, I mentioned in passing that I felt that my dad's death had been so final. To my horror, the priest asked me, "Do you know that it is a mortal sin to think this way?" He explained that in the Creed that we profess every Sunday, we always say that we believe in "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting". Then he said, "You should try praying to your dad." I was flabbergasted, but it got me thinking and questioning again, the way I used to do in school. *What does that mean? Is the soul of my dad still alive? The priest said I should pray to him, but isn't that ancestral worship?* I decided to try. I tried talking to my deceased dad, but I did not get any response. Nonetheless, I kept the words of the priest in my heart and continued to ponder their meaning.

In the meantime, God continued leading me back by gentle paths. Quite by chance, my older brother, Felix, asked for help with attendance-taking for his primary level catechism class in church. I immediately agreed because I thought, *How difficult can taking attendance be?* However, the reality was a nightmare! During the class, the students ran all over the place, disturbing one another and generally not paying attention. My brother could not get a word in edgewise. I found that I could not just remain as an observer; I had to help him teach as well. And thus began my weekly routine of taking time out to prepare the materials for these weekend catechism lessons. And before I knew it, my original agreement to teach for one year became five years, then ten, then fifteen. All through this time, unknown to me, the seed of faith that God had planted in me during my secondary school years continued to grow.

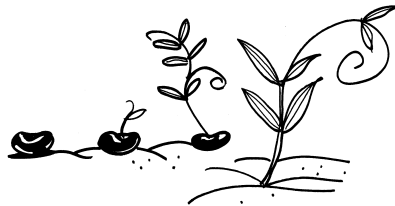
One day, about ten years after I had first started teaching catechism, Felix enthusiastically invited me to attend a retreat he had been to, called the Conversion Experience Retreat (CER). He said a niece of ours had recommended it to him, and it was personally conducted by Archbishop William Goh. I could tell by the way he spoke that the retreat had touched him deeply, but I declined, telling myself that it was meant for 'holy-holy' people, and I was not one of them! After being prodded by him for more than a year, I do not know what made me finally nod my assent one day. And that was how I found myself at a 5-day-4-night retreat with about 120 strangers. Those five days were truly blessed! I was deeply touched from the first to the very last minute of the retreat. During one of the sessions, I was brought back in time to a long-forgotten childhood nightmare — that year, I had been rescued by my dad from a near-drowning incident at Changi Beach. Experiencing this vision of my dad also made me recognise how his love for me had driven the many important decisions he had made for me when he had been alive. By the end of the retreat, I was so euphoric that I felt like I was floating.

One week after the retreat, everything started to make sense. It suddenly dawned on me that Jesus was alive! This must have been how the disciples had felt when they saw the transfigured Jesus after his resurrection. I had been living my faith as if Jesus had been just a good guy, a role model who had died some 2000 years ago. But instead, Jesus really was resurrected, and he is living, breathing, and at work in the Catholic Church. How did I know this? Because I could see Jesus in our Archbishop as he taught and preached to us for hours on end, cracking jokes that had us howling with laughter; that was like Jesus teaching his disciples through parables. As Archbishop Goh quoted Scripture to us, words that had previously just been mere ink on paper made “our hearts burn within us” (Luke 24:32). Through witnessing the many miracles and healings that took place during those five days, I saw Jesus healing the sick and casting out demons. I also saw Jesus’ love through the selfless giving of the service team members, who not only ministered to us during those five days, but also spent many months in prayer as they prepared for the retreat. Jesus’ love was also manifested through the delicious home-cooked meals prepared with much love. And the reverence shown by everyone for the Blessed Sacrament during adoration helped us to feel and experience Jesus’ presence. I saw in my fellow retreatants, in the service team members, and through the vision of my late dad, what it meant to be in the communion of Saints, as well as what it means when we profess we believe in One God, as we eat from the One Body and drink from the One Cup.

Ever since that CER retreat five years ago, my life has greatly changed. My friendship with Jesus has grown more intimate, and my understanding of not just what I believe in, but also why I believe in the Catholic faith has deepened and continues to grow. “The Word of God is alive and active” (Hebrews 4:12) and provides a daily guide for me. My faith community in the Church of Saint Francis Xavier — SaLT (Servants at the Lord’s Table), a group of about 30 people — meets weekly to break the Word and share where Jesus is in our lives. The richness of the Catholic faith is a source

of endless amazement that compels me to continue catechising. Since my encounter with the Lord, being part of his kingdom-building team has been so much more rewarding and fulfilling. Just as we cannot see God's face but only his back as he passes (Exodus 33:23), I look back now and recognise that God has been active and present in every aspect of my life. Through all the good times as well as the bad, he has been in control, taking care of everything, for "we know all things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

I am also aware that Dad must have been praying very hard for his family as I have seen the conversion and deepening of faith in his children. The seed of faith that God, the Sower, planted in my heart when I was still in St Nicholas sprouted and grew, giving me an enquiring mind to pursue the truth and seek the Lord, and opening the door for me to receive fullness of life in him. As God has spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "For, as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11).



Identity Crisis

By Winnie Foo

Who am I?

Shorty. E.T. Witch. Yong Tau Foo. What do these have in common? They were my identities (a.k.a. nicknames) in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, where I spent six memorable years, from Primary Five to Secondary Four. I was Shorty because I only began puberty at 15, which meant being stuck in the front row for many years; I was E.T. (the extra-terrestrial who phoned home) because I had a long neck and loved to draw E.T. cartoon heads in my classmates' books; I was Winnie the Witch because that was my cackling character one of the times my class presented the assembly; and I was Winnie Yong Tau Foo, because of my surname! Fortunately, I grew taller, and even more fortunately, grew out of those nicknames. In fact, I became a teacher (and for sure my students had many nicknames for me!). But nicknames are the mark of one's youth and (usually) do not lead to any confusion of identity.

However, after getting married, I became a mother, and got stuck with the label "the mum with many kids" (only four, please!), and I began to notice that people in church generally did not recognise me when I was out without the children!

Anyway, ten years ago, when I was a harassed and not-so-young-anymore full-time mother of four children under twelve, I skimmed through *The Catholic News* after Mass one day, and that one look opened up a whole new chapter in my life.

That weekend, *The Catholic News* ran an article about Eucharistic Adoration sessions to be led by Father Antoine Thomas from the Congregation of Saint John, founder-priest of Children of Hope, with separate sessions for children (accompanied by parents) and youth. Though I was a regular churchgoer, I was not one who regularly attended Eucharistic Adoration sessions (where people spend time in prayer before Jesus Christ truly present in the Blessed Sacrament, displayed in a special holder called a monstrance, either in a church or in an adoration room), nor was I into any particular prayer devotions. But somehow, the word “children” seemed to jump out at me, and as I could make myself free for the Saturday morning session for parents and children...

And so, on that Saturday, I made my way to the Church of the Holy Spirit on Thomson Road, without my children! I told the Lord that I was just going to have a look. I sat right at the back and observed everything, and saw that it was very good! It was a lovely session with prayers and prostration, Gospel reading and reflection, Rosary recitation, and lots of singing led by Father Antoine on his guitar. It was very peaceful and inspiring indeed. When the session ended, the organisers (Serra Club, Singapore) invited interested parties to leave their names and contact numbers, and so I did.

A few weeks later, Father Erbin Fernandez hosted a meeting, at the start of which he invited us to a short time of silent prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Kneeling there before the Lord with a bunch of brothers and sisters in Christ whom I did not know, I found myself tearing uncontrollably, but found it strangely comforting.

Did the Lord know how much my heart was yearning to find something that my family could do together to grow in our faith? As we gathered to talk after the short adoration session, I discovered, to my slight embarrassment, that I was the only non-catechist among catechists, being ‘only a parent’! By then, I had sensed that God was inviting me to do something new and different. Father Erbin told us to return to our parishes and in his words, “start small”.

Remembering an unexpected encounter with Mother Teresa in 1990

With Father Erbin’s words in mind, I decided to start by approaching the others from my parish church, the Church of Saint Bernadette, whom I had spotted at that Saturday adoration session with Father Antoine. One of them was a young dad named John, who had two young children. John expressed interest, and so, I suggested that we both spend time in the adoration room to discern God’s will.

While praying, I recalled a special day way back in 1990, when I had unexpectedly found myself in an adoration chapel with Mother Teresa of Calcutta in the Missionaries of Charity’s novitiate house in Rome! I remember being struck by Mother’s countenance and posture during adoration. Her whole being was focused and still before the Lord’s presence. I remember thinking, *Wow! What does she know that I don’t?* As this memory drifted into my prayer reflection, right there and then, I knew that even if Jesus was not saying anything to us audibly, Mother Teresa was saying a resounding “Yes!” to our question of starting up Eucharistic Adoration sessions for our children.

With the support of our then parish priest, Father Eugene Chong, John and I rounded up a few other families with young children, and together with a young seminarian, Brother Gabriel Wong (now Father Gabriel Wong), we conducted our very first session of CEA – Children’s Eucharistic Adoration – in the adoration room

at the Church of Saint Bernadette on 23 June 2010. The mission of CEA is to bring children to spend time with Jesus, truly present in the Blessed Sacrament, so that they may know and experience his love for them.

Becoming like little children again

Why does Jesus want children to come for Eucharistic Adoration? While pondering this, I realised that Children's Eucharistic Adoration was not just for the children, but for us parents too, as children of God. Jesus wants us to be like little children again, to come back to him with childlike innocence, trusting and believing in him completely and without inhibitions.

In the Gospel of Saint Mark, when Jesus saw his disciples scolding the children (for being noisy? playful? hyper?), he said to the disciples, "Let the little children come to me and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:13-14). And later, "Then he embraced them, laid his hands on them, and gave them his blessing" (Mark 10:16). How much he wants to embrace us, his most beloved children, and tell us how much he loves us. All we need to do is spend time with him, and he will do the rest.

And so it was through Eucharistic Adoration with the children of my parish that I found my own faith renewed. Through our regular adoration sessions with our small community of families, God strengthened our faith and invited our members to be active in other ministries.

A most generous gift

For Eucharistic Adoration sessions with the children, Father Antoine had made available to us his CDs of hymns composed by him and his community. Before our first session, I had dusted off and restrung my old guitar from my childhood days,

and retrained my old and rusty fingers to play the songs that Father Antoine had shared with us. So really, I was also learning that God was using me just as I was. He had not expected more than that.

God continued to bless my little efforts to please him. During a retreat in 2011, he gave me the gift of song-writing – simple heartfelt songs that I brought back to share with the group. I am amazed by his generosity. I had not asked for this, but he freely gave it to me.

I am never bored because there is always a new song of praise and thanksgiving to write and to sing for the Lord! But the greatest gift of all is the knowledge in my heart that Jesus is real and dearly desires to spend time with us because we are God's beloved daughters and sons. If I have ever doubted him, and I am sure I did at times, I never will again. This is why.

An unforgettable evening

In 2010, I joined a group of retreatants for a silent retreat in Malaysia. On our last evening, several of us were praying in the adoration chapel at the retreat house when I heard a sigh and saw one of the retreatants slip gracefully into a full-body prostration, lying face down on the floor. I folded myself into a normal prostration position, and suddenly, I felt an overwhelming spiritual presence cover me as I heard a voice saying, "By yourself, you can do nothing, but my grace is what gives you everything in your life." Wow! In that split second, I understood why the apostle Saint Peter had wanted to stay on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured (Matthew 17:1-8). I just wanted that moment to last for ever because it was an experience like no other. But just as suddenly as it had come, it disappeared, leaving me shedding tears of gratitude and joy. It was the most wonderful encounter with Jesus that I had ever had.

The next morning, a few of us shared a taxi to return to the city where we would catch the coach back to Singapore. One of my fellow retreatants shared that Jesus had come to her that same evening (when we had been in the adoration chapel) and told her to look up to see whom he was calling. Initially, she had not looked up, wanting to mind her own business. So, Jesus kept ‘cajoling’ her until she finally looked up and saw a few of us at prayer. But she did not know whom Jesus had called. Some years later, when one of those retreatants became a nun, all was made clear. Thanks be to God! Praise the Lord!

I share this story today because it brings me great joy to recall that when we had all been at our own silent prayer before the Blessed Sacrament that night, Jesus had been busy encountering us – he came to me to encourage and affirm me, he went to invite a young single lady to respond to his Call, and he delighted in telling my married friend that he was calling someone. I can just imagine the glee on his face as he danced around the adoration chapel in our midst that night!

Identity crisis no more

This is why I believe that Jesus is truly alive and working hard to keep us all close to him. Because he loves us so much, he really does want the best for us. Whenever I am discouraged, I remind myself of this encounter with the Lord, and I am filled with strength and hope again. Praise the Lord whose love for us overflows in abundance! And now I know, I am not just “the mum with many kids”. I am, first and foremost, God’s precious and beloved daughter.



Breath of the Spirit

By Rachel Pang

Whenever people ask me what the happiest period in my life was, without a moment's hesitation, I would always joyfully reply, "My schooldays in St Nick's!"

I was born into a happy family; an only girl sandwiched between two brothers. I had only had one regret — since my earliest memory, I had always longed for a sister; someone I could discuss 'girly stuff' with, someone I could share clothes with, someone who could really understand me. I believed that a sister's understanding of me would far surpass that of a brother's.

When I reached school age, my parents' favourite choice of school for me was CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, the 'in school' then, and so, they fought hard to secure a place for me. Thinking back now, it was really God's providence that granted me a place there. Imagine my joy and excitement on knowing that I was going to be surrounded by lots of girls and that I would suddenly have so many 'sisters', all day, every day, in school!

There was never a dull moment growing up in St Nick's; I felt right at home in my

new environment. At that young age, I had already decided that I wanted to continue my secondary school education there too.

I can recall that when I was in Primary One, apart from my great delight in having so many girls to study and play with, I also looked forward to Monday mornings when I would follow a few of my Catholic classmates to attend Mass celebrated by Father Simon Pereira in the school chapel. At that time, I had no idea what Mass was all about, let alone what its true significance was. All my six-year-old mind could comprehend was that it was a time of prayer as well as an activity that my friends and I participated in every week, and if I wanted to be a part of it, I had to turn up punctually.

Actually, I was not Catholic. I grew up in a family that did not subscribe to any particular religion. My dad would occasionally take us to a Buddhist temple but he was not a staunch Buddhist. It seemed to me that he was just continuing with the customary rituals because his parents were Buddhists. For me, going to Mass was a new and exciting experience and it always gave me an intense joy and peace. Little did I know then that God was already planting the most precious seed in my young heart.

There was one time when none of my friends wanted to go for Mass. I could choose either to stay with them to play or go to the chapel myself to attend Mass. I was a little girl who hated being alone and loved being in the company of others. That was truly an unforgettable test for me – to go or not to go? I was really in a dilemma. However, I finally did the most unexpected thing – I went for Mass by myself.

I vaguely remember that some time in Primary Two or Three, when my friends started lining up to receive Holy Communion during Mass, not knowing any better, I would also line up with them. From afar, I had observed others and knew the exact way

to place my hands with palms facing upwards, and how to say “Amen” after the minister said “The Body of Christ”. I so innocently believed that since I was a part of this community, I could ‘boldly’ go up to receive Holy Communion and invite the Lord Jesus into my heart. I do not know when I began to understand that only Catholics who had received the Sacrament of First Holy Communion could receive the Eucharistic Host. A part of me felt guilty and embarrassed, but a deeper part of me felt gratitude that God had used my heart, pure and full of faith, to receive him without any of the teachers in attendance ever ‘exposing’ me as a non-Catholic. Truly, Jesus loves the little children! Was I not living proof that Jesus loves all the children in the world?

One day, I told my parents that I wanted to learn more about the Catholic faith. My parents were very receptive and soon arranged for my brothers and me to attend catechism classes in the Church of the Holy Spirit on Thomson Road. The three of us were baptised on 9 November 2003. A year later, my parents were baptised as well. So, not only did Jesus love me, a little child, he also loved this little child’s family. Jesus not only loves all the children in this world, but he also loves the children’s parents, and this means Jesus loves everyone in the world!

My mum often comments on how funny it was that my encounter with Jesus in the chapel of St Nick’s led to our whole family’s conversion. In fact, both my parents had been from Catholic schools themselves. Mummy was from Saint Anthony’s Convent and Daddy was from Catholic High School. All of us had been brought up in a Catholic school environment and all we needed was that little push to help us take that next step to accept the gift of faith.

Many years later, my faith was sorely tested. In 2012, at the age of 21, I went overseas to pursue my studies at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. My

close friends were all Protestant Christians and I would join them in their regular Bible study sessions. Often, I was the only Catholic among them. Whenever they raised any questions about the Catholic faith, I would be at a loss for answers, mainly because they were more well-versed in the Bible than I was. They would bombard me with questions regarding Papal authority and the authenticity of the Eucharist, but I did not know how to counter their arguments. I had never had to deal with such questions when I was growing up as everyone around me had always been on the same page as me. That was when I realised how helpless and ill-equipped I was at defending the Catholic faith against others' attacks, unable even to protect my own faith. My pure, unshakeable, childlike faith began to waver.

In order to find answers, I would text Father Ambrose Vaz back in Singapore, or dig into the Scriptures. Sometimes I would find the answers, but at other times, I was left even more confused. I started doubting the True Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, thinking that maybe my Protestant friends were right, that what we received was just a symbol of the body of Christ but not Christ himself; after all, it was just a piece of bread.

In December 2015, my younger brother, a few friends, and I participated in the Australian Catholic Youth Festival. Before the start of the festival, I had been praying relentlessly for a sign from God that would help clear my doubts and convince me once again that Jesus was truly present in the Eucharist. I was desperate for some revelation, an answer, even just a tiny little message.

Day 1 of the festival passed without any breakthrough for me. On Day 2, I attended a workshop by Catholic songwriter, Steve Angrisano. In his workshop, he shared with us his journey in song composition and how he found the inspiration to write his songs. That day, time seemed to pass very slowly, and the only thing I remember was

him repeating these lyrics from his song “Leading Us Home” – “When we wander far, as close as our breath you are...”. Steve told us to put our palms in front of our mouths and breathe into them. Then he asked us, “Can you feel your breath? Well, remember that even when we wander far away, God is still as close to you as your breath is.” That night, these words lingered around my ears and nothing could quieten my heart. Till today, these words still send shivers down my spine.

The last day of the youth festival ended with Mass in a massive hall that seated thousands of people. Just before Mass started, an elderly nun went up on stage and said in a gentle voice, “When you receive the Eucharistic Host in your hands, I would like to encourage all of you to look at it for a while, and say, ‘I love you, Jesus.’”

I was so preoccupied with remembering her words that I could not pay attention to the readings or the priest’s homily. When it came time to receive Holy Communion, I gathered my wits and consciously reminded myself to say “I love you, Jesus”. I received the Eucharistic Host tenderly in my hands, took some time to appreciate the beauty and sweetness of God’s love for me, then quietly said, “I love you, Jesus” before placing the host reverently in my mouth. Then I returned to my seat and knelt down in prayer. In my prayer, I said, “Jesus, I don’t know how to pray, but I offer this silence to you. Please help me overcome my unbelief.” That was it. I remained silent in the Lord’s presence.

Suddenly, I felt a strong breath being blown into my left ear; it made my hair stand. I thought it was my friend teasing me and telling me to get up as I had been kneeling in prayer for some time.

I made the sign of the cross and turned to my friend, saying, “What are you doing? Why did you blow into my ear?”

Totally baffled, she replied, “Huh? I didn’t do anything.”

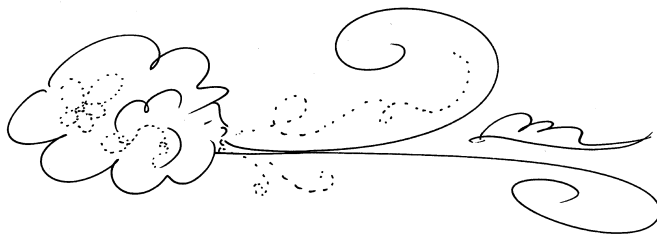
I nudged her and said, “What’s up? Stop fooling around.”

She denied it again with a solemn expression and assured me that she really had not blown into my ear. I looked at her, and right there and then, I burst into tears! I broke down completely, sobbing uncontrollably. From deep in my heart came the realisation that it had been a divine moment; it had been God’s breath, his answer to all my questions. Steve Angrisano’s reflection on how God is as close to us as our own breath flashed through my mind again as I continued sobbing. My friend speedily passed me a tissue to wipe my tears away, and till today, I still have that tissue in my little treasure box, a reminder of the tears of joy that I shed that day in 2015, a constant reminder to me that God is real and he exists for ever. He loves us so much that even when our faith wavers, or even when we forsake him, he will still remain by our side, watching over us, staying close to us, and staying close to our hearts for ever, just like our own breath.

In the Gospel of Saint John, Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, but the apostle Thomas was not there. “The other disciples told Thomas, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.’ Eight days later, his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’ Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ ” (John 20:24-28).

So I was like the apostle Saint Thomas, the doubter. But like Thomas, I have also

changed and no longer doubt. I am already convinced. I am certain that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharistic Host. He is my Lord and my God. I will always be a work in progress, but my faith and hope tell me that I am God's creation and God will surely not leave his 'masterpiece' half-completed. He is always with me, watching over me. In this life, each of us has her own cross to bear, as well as many hills and valleys to traverse, but God's loving hand is always supporting the other end of the heavy cross. May the Lord help me to always remember to take time out to say that simple prayer "I love you, Jesus". I believe, and I will always believe that even if I wander far, far away from him, he still remains as close to me as my own breath!



“The mind of man plans his way,
but the Lord directs his steps.”

Proverbs 16:9



Step by Step

By Sheryl Wong

1974 — One Monday morning, on a school bus heading towards school.

A dialogue between two Primary Two students.

“Hey, Wong Leng, I received Holy Communion in church yesterday!”

“What is Holy Communion?”

“It’s the Body of Jesus.”

“Huh?” I did not know what my friend was talking about.

“Let me tell you, I put the Body of Jesus in my mouth. We can’t bite it, otherwise blood will come out!”

“Blood?!” I almost fainted on the spot.

1972 — Primary One registration

I remember when my mom brought me for registration at CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, located on Victoria Street, I saw the statue of Mother Mary for the first time. My mom told me that it was the Blessed Lady, Mother Mary. I had no idea who she was, but I kept staring at the statue because her face looked so kind and serene.

When I was in Primary Two or Three, I learnt to recite The Lord's Prayer and began to understand its meaning. That was when I first learnt of the existence of God, and it was then that the seeds of faith began to sprout.

Whenever my school bus passed a church, I noticed that the Catholic students would make the sign of the cross and I would imitate them. When we alighted from the bus at school, I would also follow them into the chapel, dip my fingers into the holy water, and make the sign of the cross again. At the time, I did not know the true significance of the words: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit", thinking only that the words were uttered as a means of asking for God's protection.

After graduating from secondary school, I continued my studies in a junior college, where my connection with the Catholic faith took a hiatus. Nevertheless, whenever I was troubled, I would still pray The Lord's Prayer, hoping that God would come to rescue me, this 'half-believer' who only called upon him in times of distress.

I always thought that because I was not baptised, I did not really belong to God; I was not officially a Catholic, so I was not a true daughter of God.

1990 – In my boyfriend’s car while he was driving one day.

A dialogue with this boyfriend.

“Hey, I want to go for RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults), to prepare to officially become a Catholic.”

“I will go with you.”

“No need.” *Who needs a boyfriend to tag along for catechism class?*

“I want to go.”

“It’s OK, I really don’t need you to accompany me.” *Why is this guy so persistent?*

“Who says I want to accompany you? I am interested in becoming a Catholic too!”

Actually, he had been inspired by his Catholic aunt to become a Catholic.

This guy and I were baptised together in the Church of Saint Francis Xavier, and three days later, we received the Sacrament of Matrimony in the same church.

Someone asked me if I had decided to get baptised because I had wanted a romantic church wedding. Of course, I had heard about people who had done that, but no, not me. The catalyst that had led me to join RCIA was the inner darkness that had been smothering me due to major setbacks at work. With the encouragement of my aunt and uncle, I resolved to break out of my ‘cage’ and take the first step that would lead me closer to God.

At the time, my thinking had been that since I wanted to marry that guy, of course I wanted to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony with him before the altar of God, making our marriage vows in the presence of God. I believed that a marriage thus blessed by God would be a holy and stable one. However, as only official Catholics could receive this sacrament, of course our wedding had to be scheduled for after our baptism.

During my baptism ceremony, I also received the Sacrament of First Holy Communion. At the time, I was overwhelmed and moved to tears. Right after receiving Jesus into my heart, I felt an indescribable feeling of peaceful joy that surged like a warm current through my body. It was nothing like that frightening description offered by my Primary Two classmate of fresh blood oozing out of the body of Jesus!

In the next ten or so years...

I was busy with my daily life and career. My kids grew up and progressed smoothly in school. At the beginning of each year, we would prepare for the start of school, and at the end of each year, we would go for a holiday. The days and years passed in this predictable fashion.

I led a mediocre life; I was a regular Sunday Catholic. I was living just for myself, caught up in my own pursuit of material aspirations; and for my sons, from whom I was anxiously demanding better results. I had always thought that the daughters of St Nick's were outstanding and self-confident, especially those of us who were in the first batch of 'special stream' students. When our school became a Special Assistance Plan (SAP) school, we naturally became the pride and joy of our teachers. Growing up with accolades and praises, I unknowingly became arrogant and self-centred, having no consideration for others. I thought that the many successes in my life were due to my own intelligence, talent, and sheer hard work.

At that point in time, I even thought I had a fulfilling and happy life.

2017 – A new beginning for my faith journey

That year, I joined the church choir, where I met friends who helped to enrich my faith. Apart from our weekly choir practices, we also shared the Word of God together.

Inspired and encouraged by these friends, I joined the Church of Saint Francis Xavier Conversion Experience Retreat in 2019, organised by the Archdiocese for our parish. In those five days of retreat, I can confidently say that I experienced the abundant grace of Jesus and truly felt the presence of the Holy Spirit.

That retreat liberated me completely. I was able to make my ‘deathbed’ confession, the most thorough confession that I had ever made, as I invited the Lord Jesus into the innermost depths of my being. During the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I could see Jesus’ love and mercy reflected through the words and actions of the priest. I was awakened! I realised that only Jesus could give me true joy and peace.

As I reflect on my life, I realise that I was introduced to God when I was 8 years old and baptised at 25, but it is only now, a few decades later, when I am already over 50, that I realise that I had not known God as a Father who loves me so deeply that he forgives me completely and accepts me as I am. Life is short; I do not know how many more decades I have left, but I do know that in the coming days, I want to walk, step by step, on the path of grace towards Jesus, to get closer to him, and to know and love him more. Along the way, I want to learn to serve others with humility, in his name. I want to bring more people to know God and accept Jesus’ love for them. I want to sow the seeds of God’s joy and peace in everyone’s heart!

Pass It On

By Linyi Zhou and Jenny Kua

Linyi Zhou:

I was from the class of 2000 in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School. In November 1998, I arrived in Singapore from China, together with fifteen other girls. We were the first recipients from China of the Singapore Ministry of Education Scholarship. That year, we had taken an examination in China before being allocated to local schools by the Singapore Ministry of Education. As I was not Catholic, I was apprehensive when I first learnt that I had been posted to a Catholic school, worrying about how I would adjust to a totally new environment. However, these anxieties were quickly assuaged by the warm welcome given to us by my principal, vice-principal, teachers, and classmates.

I remember Christmas Eve in 1998. The group of us from China had barely been in Singapore for two months, and as we were nearing the end of the English language course arranged by the Ministry of Education and the school, and would soon be starting a new academic year in different classes, we could not hide our growing anxiety. We were well aware that with the exception of our Chinese Language and Chinese Literature classes, all the other classes would be taught in English.

To assuage our feelings of homesickness and anxiety from our studies, our principal, Mrs Hwang-Lee Poh See, vice-principal, Mrs Cheong-Chan Wan Mui, and teachers, Madam Lim Tze Min and Madam Lee Beng Hwee, meticulously planned and prepared some exciting activities for us. That year, we spent Christmas Eve at the NTUC Seaview holiday resort near Pasir Ris with our principal, vice-principal, and the many teachers who brought with them a variety of delicious Christmas goodies. It was the first time I enjoyed a Christmas feast, with everyone singing, playing games, and feasting together!

On that 'Night of Peace', we, the wanderers far from home, really enjoyed a peaceful Christmas. In the following days, the principal and vice-principal even welcomed us into their homes. They never put on any airs, and in fact, I could feel the warmth of maternal love even though I was far away from my family.

When school started, I gradually became used to hearing Mrs Hwang's voice over the public address system, reminding her "big and little precious darlings" to drink water. Every now and then, she would also let us enjoy foods rich in vitamin L (L for Love!), like chicken wings, Milo, and red bean ice cream. I also became accustomed to using the polite term 'older sister' or 'younger sister' to address my schoolmates as well as alumnae who came back to visit. In class, the students were loving and caring, and whenever we had meals together, it became a habit for me to greet our principal, teachers, and 'sisters' before starting my meal. These little vignettes became an important part of my life.

In addition to all this, to ensure that all of us who had left our families could still experience familial warmth, Mrs Hwang had taken painstaking effort to match all 16 of us to our own 'godmothers'. I was incredibly fortunate to have been paired with Auntie Jenny, whose family regarded me as one of their own. Auntie Jenny showed

great concern for me. I still remember celebrating my first birthday in Singapore with her and her family. At that time, I had only been in Singapore for a month and was feeling very homesick, even more so on my birthday. Auntie Jenny thoughtfully planned a celebration for me; she and her family brought me out for a whole day of fun and a sumptuous seafood feast. She had even prepared a huge blackforest cake! I was extremely happy that day. I brought the rest of the cake back to the hostel for my fellow sisters from China. As they partook of the sweet cake, my heart felt full of the tender, sweet love showered upon me by this Catholic family.

Although I did not become Catholic, this did not hinder Aunty Jenny and her family from showering love and care upon me, her non-Catholic goddaughter. From the very first day I stepped into her home, more than twenty years ago, she has never once forgotten me, always inviting me to her home on various special occasions to join her family in their activities. After my A-Levels, Auntie Jenny and Uncle Paul even took me and their daughter, Felicia, to Beijing for a holiday to ease the tension from the examinations. They truly regarded me as a part of their family.

I feel incredibly blessed. I had come to an unfamiliar land at the age of fifteen, alone, yet bearing the expectations and hopes of my family as well as my own dreams. While filled with eager anticipation, I had also felt lost and confused, but the enthusiastic reception from the St Nicholas family, together with the selfless care of Auntie Jenny and her family, brought me great comfort and warmth, and gave me a sense of belonging. After eight years of studies in Singapore, upon graduating from university, I had very quickly found a job I liked, and met someone I loved. I have followed the path of an ordinary life — buying an apartment, getting married, and starting a family.

From the first day I arrived in Singapore, I have received such an immense amount of care and help that since entering the workforce, I have been actively participating

in company and community events, doing my best to help those in need. Just like the lyrics in that hymn “Pass It On” that I had learnt to sing in school — “It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around will warm up in its glowing...”, I want to be that spark, passing on to others the love that I have received.

Jenny Kua:

My husband, Paul Chio, hailed from a Catholic family. The boys in his family attended Catholic High School, while the girls went to CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School. When we were dating, Paul told me that if I was unwilling to become a Catholic before marriage, we would have to stop seeing each other, as his mother was extremely insistent on him and his siblings having Catholic spouses. Because of this, I attended religious instruction classes before my marriage and was baptised as a Catholic. After our marriage, Paul and I were active in Church ministries, including serving in the Mandarin Marriage Encounter and offering pre-marital counselling. I also visited prisons to counsel the inmates, and participated in the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) sessions and faith formation courses organised by the parish.

Although I am not an alumna of St Nicholas Girls’ School, my daughter was a student there. At that time, as I was hoping to invite the principal, Mrs Hwang-Lee Poh See, to participate in the Mandarin pre-marital counselling work, I frequently sought her out in school to talk to her about it. However, it was obvious that she was far too busy with her leadership and management responsibilities, and so, she always declined.

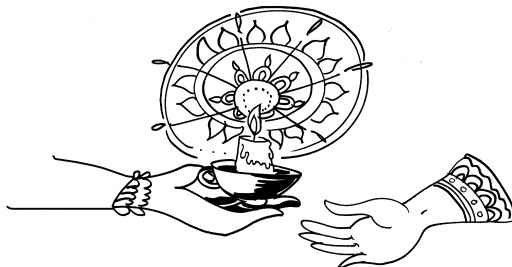
In the year when my daughter was in Secondary One, the Ministry of Education sent school leaders to China to select outstanding students to be part of a scholarship programme funded by the Singapore government, to enable them to pursue their

studies in Singapore schools, one of which was St Nicholas.

One day, when my daughter came home from school, she told me that the school was encouraging parents to come forward as guardians for the scholarship recipients, and she asked if I would be keen to be one. At the time, my life was mainly focused on my family and home, and my daughter's friends frequently came over to study and spend time together. As Paul's work involved numerous trips between Singapore and China, and as I frequently accompanied him to Shanghai and Beijing, I felt a natural kinship with the Chinese students. Moreover, I felt that it was our duty as Catholics to offer our help to those in need, so I readily agreed.

In 1998, Linyi Zhou, who came from Zhangzhou in Fujian Province, became my first ward. After her, I also became the guardian for several other students from China. However, as Linyi eventually chose to settle in Singapore, marrying and having children, we have stayed in touch all this while, and she and her family remain a part of our family's regular festive celebrations.

In the blink of an eye, we have already known each other for 22 years. With all my heart, I wish her all the best.



Editor's note:

This book is a collection of the personal faith experiences of our Catholic alumnae. This piece, “Pass It On”, was jointly written by Jenny Kua and Linyi Zhou by special invitation, who have each shared a part of their life story with us.

The First Letter of Saint John says, “God is love” (I John 4:8). We have been chosen by God to become his sons and daughters. God’s love for people overflows into our hearts, fills our minds, and compels us to manifest his love through our actions. “We love, not just with words or speech, but with actions and in truth” (I John 3:18). It is clear that Jenny and her family embodied the spirit of Catholic disciples, expressing that same universal love to nourish the lonely heart of Linyi Zhou, who was studying in a foreign land far away from her family.

That year, Linyi Zhou was sent to our alma mater – St Nicholas Girls’ School, a Catholic school. At the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the Declaration on Christian Education stated that the proper function of a Catholic school “is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity” (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 8). From Linyi’s account, we know that Principal Mrs Hwang-Lee Poh See, Vice-principal Mrs Cheong-Chan Wan Mui, and the teachers who cared for the girls surpassed their call of duty as educators. As it is said in the Bible, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27). Through their actions, they demonstrated this universal love, and manifested the spirit of love for their neighbour. This is the most powerful testimony of faith.



Youth's Indelible Mark

By Winnie Foo

At journey's end, the brown dirt beneath my feet and the cloudless sky that stretched to infinity above me were the boundaries of my home for a day and a night. My dusty backpack across my shoulders attested to the many days I had spent travelling – in a plane, by train, in buses, and on foot (especially on foot!), indeed being a worthy mark of my long journey.

Despite the muck all over our faces, the sight that beheld us when we arrived on the Monte do Gozo (Hill of Joy) on the morning of 19 August 1989 drove our tiredness away. For we knew we had the fellowship of thousands and thousands of young and not-so-young people from every continent who had come, like us, for the Fourth World Youth Day in Santiago de Compostela in Spain, the burial ground of Saint James the apostle, with the theme for that year's encounter being "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life".

I was there with a small contingent from England, where I was at university, and we had gathered in Covadonga to join other friends and members of the Teresian Association from Italy, Spain, Portugal, and France, on our own mini-pilgrimage,

before setting forth on the journey to our final destination for the World Youth Day. How we bridged the language barrier I shall never understand, but in a couple of days, the ice was broken and new friends were made. We were once again just a bunch of youth, sharing meals and the Eucharist together, as well as our dreams and hopes for the future, and our desire to know God better. Each Eucharistic celebration was truly a universal expression of our faith. We sang hymns to praise God in many languages, and of course, we exchanged smiles and hugs to celebrate our newfound friendships.

We moved on to Leon where the group got bigger, and finally, to where we would begin our own walking pilgrimage. With sleeping bags strapped to our well-laden backpacks containing spare clothes, food, and water, we started on the Camino de Santiago, the road to Santiago, in the spirit of Saint James the Great.

Along the way, during our group discussions and times of reflection, we were invited to write our own version of The Lord's Prayer, presenting the needs of the world and asking forgiveness for what we perceived as our reality of sin and anti-values. Then we had to write our Creed, putting in what we believed in and wanted to reaffirm as our goals for the future. And finally, we had to write our own Beatitudes, relevant to our lives then.

It was tiring. It was sweaty. It was hot in the day and cold at night. By the end of our dusty walk each day, we had become several shades darker. We had become wanderers with 'no fixed abode'. One of the nights was spent in a cleaned-out cattle shed, and another in army style barracks with interesting communal showering facilities (gender-separated, of course!), but even the cold showers at the end of each day were warmly welcomed. Above all, it was a journey of discovery for each one of us.

There were about half a million people gathered on the Monte do Gozo by the afternoon of 19 August. At first sight of the popemobile, we shouted as one, "Papa! Papa!", hands wildly waving, arms reaching out. We laughed, we cried, we could hardly believe it was really happening. It was worth every effort I had made to be there. It was an incredible time of grace. It was an incredible event, for ever stored in my memory. When Pope John Paul II turned his kindly, smiling face in my direction, I raised my camera for a quick shot, and successfully captured an image of that cherished, saintly face!

On that last night of the World Youth Day, our 'home' was a bare patch of soil, but even the seemingly desolate surroundings could not lessen our excitement. People danced and sang around little campfires, and the air buzzed with anticipation for the morning, when the Papal Mass would be celebrated. Late into the night, we wearily laid out our sleeping bags on the bare ground, for they were all we had to sleep in. In the midst of these humble conditions, God still used the opportunity to teach us a valuable lesson that night...

The next morning, when we peeled open our sleepy eyes, we discovered that in the silent, still night, the dew had moistened the ground and we had all unknowingly slid about two metres down the damp hill in our sleeping bags during the night! We learnt from this that even the patch of ground beneath us as we had soundly slept the night before was not ours to own! In that case, what else in the world was worthy of our attachment?

But we were not discouraged at all. We were energised because what followed was the spiritual feast that we had all been waiting for — the outdoor Mass with the Holy Father that would be attended by half a million people. How we wanted it to go on for ever, a beautiful moment to be frozen in time. How could we fail to be changed?

How could we fail to live out our dreams for the future? How could we fail to believe in a God who loves us so dearly?

Pope John Paul II reminded us once again to seek the truth and ask the Lord to help us grow in true freedom. He said, “Do not be afraid of this freedom with which Christ has liberated us. It will guide your moral behaviour towards truth and charity. It will help you discover true love, unspoilt by an alienating and harmful permissiveness.”

He exhorted us to be witnesses of Christ to those around us, in school and at university, in the factory and at other workplaces, at work and even during our free time. He said, “Let the youth of today be the true protagonists of more human ways of life. [...] Dear young men and women, give yourselves up to Jesus, for Christ alone is the Way, Christ alone is the Truth, and Christ alone is the Life.”

As I write this, I am already over fifty. How grateful I am to the Lord that in the days of my youth, I was so blessed to have been able to participate in World Youth Day, an experience that left such a beautiful mark on my life. I truly believe that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life!



Faith, Friendship, and Fifty

By Nancy Teo, Josephine Ng, and
Irene Chan

We were from the graduating class of 1985 in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, brought together by our Catholic faith. Looking back, it is really amazing how we even got together! First of all, we were from three different primary schools; secondly, in all our four years of secondary school life, we never once shared the same class or extra-curricular activity; and lastly, even our personalities and interests were entirely different. Yet, the fact that our loving friendship, the starting point of which was a retreat during our Secondary Four year, still remains as it was, even after so many years and changes in our lives, proves how timeless and strong it is. Without a shadow of a doubt, this can only be a divine intervention from God.

Although we were very different in so many aspects of our lives, we nevertheless faced similar challenges as solitary teenagers searching for our own identities while struggling to cope with the demands of growing up with complex backgrounds. It had never occurred to us then that our reward for the trials and tribulations that we went through as teenagers would be this special and precious friendship that would bind us together, even continuing into our adult lives, and hopefully, for the rest of our lives.

Thinking back to those days, as with most teenagers today, growing up for us at I6 meant being confronted with many issues like personal relationships, external appearances, our future, and our interests. Apart from our own personal struggles, there were also the expectations from family, school, and society that brought on additional stresses. During that retreat, quite coincidentally, we discovered we did share something in common — each of us was the youngest child in her family — and from this similar vantage point, we were struggling to find our own voices within families that mostly disregarded what we thought or how we felt. Moreover, apart from having to mug up for our O-Levels, we were also standing at the crossroads of our lives, wondering what was in store for us after St Nick's. And so, the growing-up process for us involved, on the one hand, enduring the raging hormones intent on transforming us from girls to women, while on the other hand, striving to find the meaning of life through the chaos.

Just at this juncture of our internal turmoil, two Redemptorist priests, Father Simon Pereira and the late Father William Heng, came to St Nick's to give a school mission retreat for the Catholic students in Secondary Three and Four. Their wonderful work helped to sow the seeds of faith in our hearts and enabled us to encounter the Lord, bringing those seeds to new life.

Because we received this Catholic faith formation, the school became for us a place of comfort, and our friendship gave us a sense of acceptance. The Catholic mission in school was central to our growth in faith, providing an anchor to 'moor' us to the Lord's side, giving us stability in our growing up years. We really offer our gratitude to those two priests.

Because of our Catholic faith, the Church provided a platform for our learning and communication, giving us the opportunity to make and interact with new, authentic

friends, and also find solace for our souls. In those few days of the school mission retreat, we learnt to release our negative emotions, and began to recognise that we were God's beloved children, chosen to be his instruments to carry out his work. After the retreat, we initiated activities in our own small Catholic community in school and were also active in the youth group at Novena Church. For the first time in our lives, we experienced how the Catholic faith was practised within a community. In the process, our faith grew as we learnt to place Jesus at the centre of our lives.

As part of the school-based mission in those days of our youth, we reached out to our peers to provide them with much needed support, and this experience kindled in us a passion to serve others in the future. Later on, however, due to so many factors, we lost touch with one another... for 30 years.

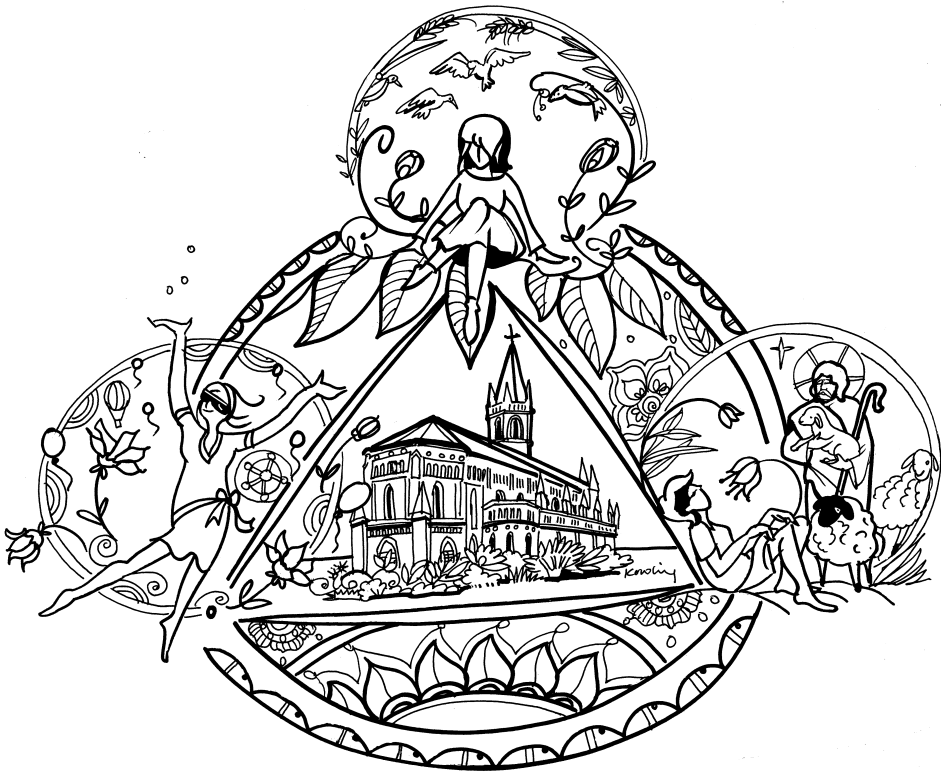
Some 30 years later, when we were finally reunited, we discovered that we were all doing our part to uplift lives in different segments of society. Our hearts were still aglow with the embers of God's everlasting light, as he eventually led us into our chosen professions. 35 years after graduating from Secondary Four, Nancy is now an educator teaching in a primary school; Josephine is a social entrepreneur enthusiastically helping the less fortunate on the margins of society; and Irene is a hospital administrator serving those who are suffering in body and spirit. We still abide by the promise we made to God so many years ago; we are still his instruments.

God's gift of faith has accompanied us into middle age, enabling us to give testimony to how good God is, all the time. He is with us always, as a caring Father and an intimate friend, accompanying us through the dark valleys and the victorious peaks of our lives. Even though our faith journeys have followed different trajectories, God is always waiting with outstretched arms to welcome us home, no matter where we have wandered. God's mercy is most real especially when it is we who are the

recipients of his unconditional love.

While writing this testimony and reflecting on our friendship, we can see that this friendship that has withstood the test of time is truly the most precious blessing from the Lord to the three of us, and is also a testimony to our faith in God.

The Book of Proverbs says, “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). As for the three of us, we know we have one another, and Jesus, too!



Our favourite Bible verses

Now that we have passed the half-century mark and have been through the ups and downs of life, these are our current favourite verses from the Bible.

Nancy

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing” (Psalm 23:1).

Life has always been a struggle for me in all the different stages of my life. In the many times I have been lost in dark tunnels, God has led me out each time, and I have almost always emerged stronger than before. Even when I came out beaten and bruised, I have always been able to find comfort in his love and protection. In those times when I wandered far away from him, he was always waiting there, watching me from a distance just like a shepherd, trusting that I would turn back because of his great love for me.

Over the years, I have also learnt to place my trust in him, following him as he leads the way, especially when the path ahead is unclear. Just like the sheep, I will follow my shepherd, trusting that he will take care of me by leading me out of any danger and granting me rest.

Whenever my friends express their admiration for my courage and strength in facing life's adversities, I always tell them it is because my shepherd never leaves me.

Josephine

“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (Matthew 6:26).

Whenever I go through uncertainties in life, this verse gives me strength. God always takes care of us so we should not be afraid. On my social enterprise journey, when financial issues or other work-related obstacles become too challenging, and they have many times, I will reflect on this verse, draw strength from it, and surrender my fears to the Lord. Very often, the issues would be resolved by themselves. The important thing is to trust the Lord in all things, and he will take care of everything.

Irene

“But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy” (Isaiah 65:18).

When I turned 50, the first reading for that day’s Mass readings was from the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 65:17-21). This was God’s birthday gift to me, assuring me that the fruit of my abidance in the Lord will be the newly created heavens and earth that are filled with gladness, joy, and abundance. Life is meant to be lived with confidence and purpose. The greatest purpose is to build God’s kingdom on earth, through our everyday acts of love, and choosing to follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd.



A Very Special Sister

By Grace Tan Huai En

In March 1999, my sister, Mary, was born two months premature. I was only three years old then, and although I cannot remember much of what happened, I am sure I must have been very excited! I wanted so much to carry baby Mary, but I was not allowed to because she was so fragile and small, with the tiniest hands and feet. I cannot remember when I first became aware of my sister's condition, but I know that my mum was always telling me she was special, she was different.

Little me did not understand what that really meant. I only knew about our many trips to KK Women's and Children's Hospital for check-ups and therapy sessions, and that I had to help my little sister do her 'exercises' at home. My fondest memories were of attending her physiotherapy 'classes' in the sensory-motor gym — I loved the different swings and slides, the large gym balls, and the colourful ball pit. My happiest times were when the physiotherapist allowed me to play with all the equipment hoping that my sister would follow my lead. These exercises were meant to help stimulate her learning ability. The most boring days were when the adults made me sit outside the clinic and wait quietly while the therapist assessed Mary's development and progress.

Mary required special help and care in her daily tasks, such as feeding, dressing, and showering. My mum would guide me to be a part of these routines, and as a result, looking after my sister became part of my daily life too. In all those times of helping her, I never felt that it was a 'responsibility' because I enjoyed those moments, and in fact, I felt proud of what I could do as her older sister. At that time, I did not even know what occupational therapy was and little did I know it would gradually become a part of my life.

My mum frequently praised me for being a good big sister, a responsible daughter, and an independent child. Through all this 'training', I was filled with self-confidence and became my sister's guardian angel. If I remember correctly, the year I started Primary One in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School was also the year Mary started nursery school. My mum had always advocated letting my sister attend a mainstream school as she felt that a more conventional education system would help Mary to progress further. However, in the mainstream nursery school, Mary actually attended classes with children who were two years younger. At the time, I did not know how to explain to my classmates why Mary would not be in St Nicholas with me when she turned seven, or how to explain to my friends that my sister was 'special'. If your peers had never encountered issues like this, how would they be able to understand the meaning of 'developmental delay'? I have to admit that there was a period of time when I longed so much for my sister to be able to attend the same school as me that I even envied other classmates who had siblings in the same school, who could go to school together and go home together.

In the year Mary turned nine, my mum decided to enrol her in a mainstream primary school. When school started, I could see how my sister struggled so hard to fit in, make friends, and even understand what was going on in class. At times she would become so frustrated and overwhelmed that she would tear up her homework because

it was really beyond her. Watching Mary struggling with her studies, I felt so helpless and wished so much to be there with her to help and protect her; I even thought of transferring over to her school just to be with her! In order to enable Mary to adapt better to the school environment, my mum decided to transfer her to a Special Education (SPED) school in the year she turned ten. Although attending a SPED school was still a great challenge for Mary, lessons were conducted at a slower pace with a lower student to teacher ratio. Moreover, the teachers had more time and energy to care for the students, so all these were definitely advantageous to her.

When I went up to secondary school, my classmates and I were constantly reminded by our teachers to think about our future career options as we needed to choose our subjects to be streamed accordingly. I knew that I wanted to pursue a career in healthcare, especially since I had been regularly observing and caring for my sister, as well as observing how my family took care of my elderly maternal grandfather who lived with us. This made me determined to go all out for occupational therapy to be my chosen field of study. This way, I could learn to care for people with disabilities, helping them to maximise their independence and enhance their engagement with their daily lives.

After my O-Levels, I was determined not to go to junior college but to enrol myself for the Diploma in Occupational Therapy at Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP). What I had not expected was that this course had an A-Level entry requirement. (The diploma programme is no longer available, having been replaced by a degree programme at the Singapore Institute of Technology.) I had no choice but to enrol in junior college first, where I focused on completing my A-Levels, and in 2015, I was finally accepted into NYP for the Diploma in Occupational Therapy.

During my diploma studies, I learnt about the different models and theories of

occupational therapy, including the processes of assessment, intervention, and evaluation. I also learnt that the different types of disability bring up divergent challenges and impact each individual differently. During my fieldwork placements, although I faced many challenges, I managed to step out of my comfort zone to overcome the difficulties. Through all these, I learnt to speak up and speak out, interact with new people, and build good relationships with colleagues, my clients, and their stakeholders. The collaborative nature of my profession has pushed me beyond what I thought I was capable of, thus increasing my self-confidence. I am grateful as I “have the strength for everything through him who empowers me” (Philippians 4:13).

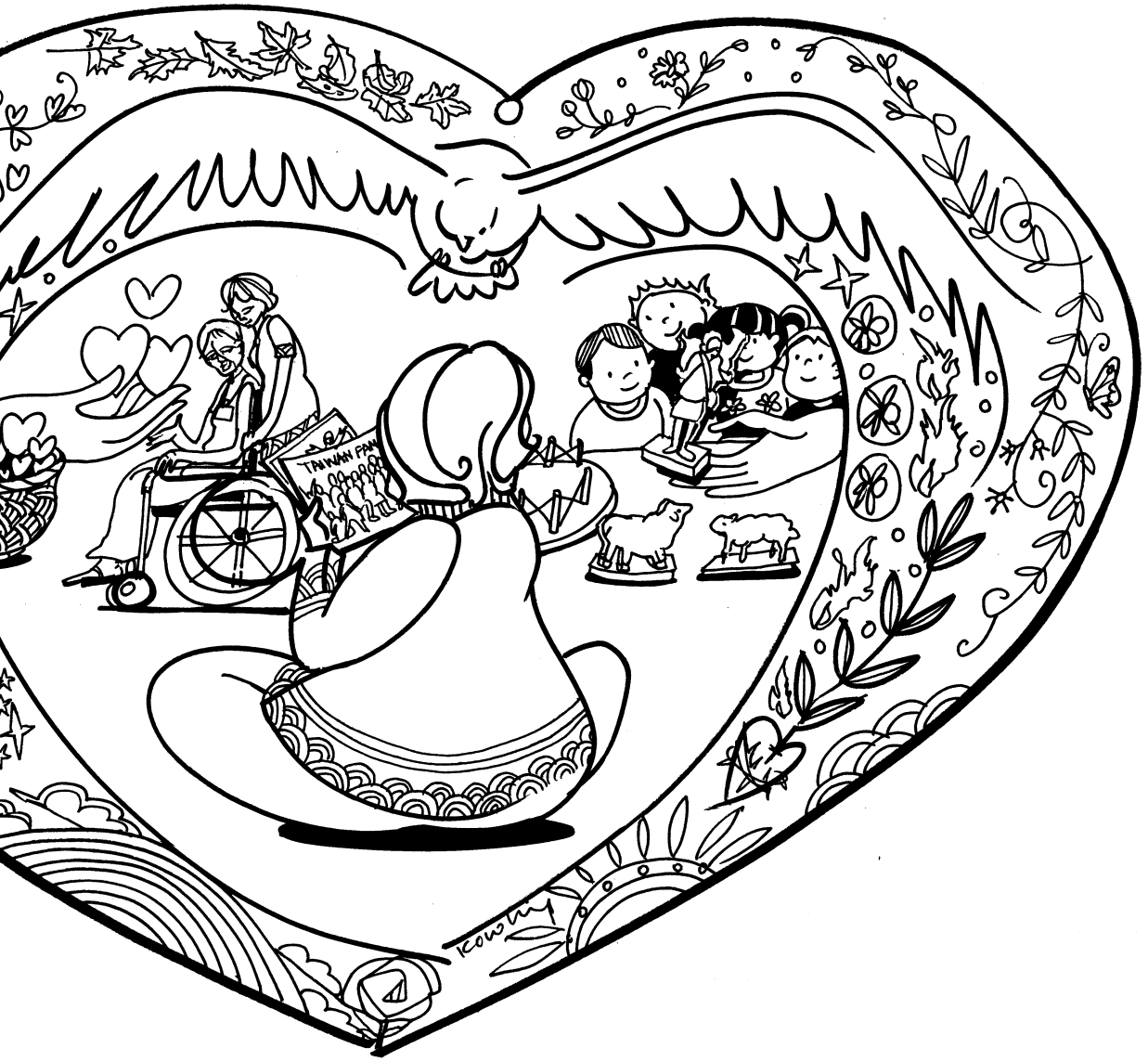
“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15). In 2018, I decided to further my studies at Curtin University in Perth, Australia. My time at university not only improved my professional skills and knowledge, but also boosted me in other areas as I learnt how to live independently within a different cultural environment, and how to interact and work together with individuals who had dissimilar values and beliefs. At times, these many challenges seemed insurmountable, but as I faced each one with faith in the Lord, I learnt that God is all-powerful and loving. “But for human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God” (Mark 10:27).

Under God’s kind and loving care, in the blink of an eye, my beloved sister grew up and entered the workforce, holding a job suitable to her skill set in the food and beverage industry. I, too, have started my job as an occupational therapist in a SPED school. I have to admit it has been tough making the transition from occupational therapy student to qualified occupational therapist. I am beginning to understand what ‘lifelong learning’ means, and I know that this is only the first step towards a new and fulfilling life for me. In order to become a competent and skilful occupational

therapist, there is still so much for me to learn. However, I am not fearful because “the Lord is my strength and my shield, in whom my heart trusted and found help” (Psalm 28:7). I hope that I will never forget why I am doing what I am doing, and that my heart will remain open to exploring new possibilities for myself and the students whom I work with.

As I reflect back on my journey, becoming who I am today has been no easy feat. I am so grateful to have a mum who, being so filled with such a special love, was my role model showing me how to accept my special sister with love. And in fact, Mary’s special-ness was what inspired and motivated me to become an occupational therapist. Apart from taking care of Mary, I am also happy to be part of the disability sector. Having a sister with special needs is definitely challenging and filled with uncertainties, but I have never seen my life as being short-changed because of it. On the contrary, I am grateful to have found my life’s direction through growing up with my sister. I want to share God’s love with my ‘brothers and sisters’ who suffer from disability, using my love and patience to lead them closer to God, to know God and Jesus Christ. I know that every Catholic has a mission to spread God’s Word. The Lord Jesus said, “In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). I must do my work to the best of my ability, because I want to carry out the mission of evangelisation in a special way through my work.





“For my thoughts are not your thoughts
and your ways are not my ways.”

Isaiah 55:8

Offbeat

By Ruth Wong

After my A-Levels, I chose to pursue a university degree in an area that was considered rather offbeat at the time for undergraduate studies – Early Childhood Education. After I graduated from university in Canada, I returned to Singapore to work as a pre-school teacher. A few years later, I was promoted to be a teacher trainer, with the responsibility of training pre-school teachers in the subject of teaching music to young children. Harmonious music is known to bring joy to life, but unfortunately, my career became rather ‘dissonant’. After twenty years of working in early childhood education, I left what I really loved, and went overseas for further studies in Gerontology (the study of older people). So, I made the leap from interacting with the little ones just ‘sprouting’ in life, to caring for the elderly who have been through much in life...

Meeting God

I spent ten wonderful years in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School. When I was in Secondary Three, my friend, Xin Hui, invited me to join the Young Christian Students (YCS), with Father Paul Tong as its spiritual director. Through its activities, I came to know God and experience his great love! Some of the activities included combined

holiday camps with YCS members from other secondary schools, where we learnt about God's teachings. Thanks be to our kind and loving God that in those two years I made a lot of friends, including two, who by God's grace, responded to his Call to become "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19) – Father Henry Siew and Father Emmanuel Lim, S.J. Father Siew was a student at Maris Stella High School and Father Lim was from Catholic High School. After our graduation from Secondary Four, we formed a new group to continue our faith formation. Till this day, these brothers and sisters in Christ remain close mentors and friends on my faith journey. When I entered the working world, I resolved to give myself two birthday treats every year; firstly, a medical health check, and secondly, a personal retreat, because no matter how busy I was at work, I would put aside time to spend with God, to renew my faith.

Spring and autumn

After graduating from university, I was immersed in my work in early childhood education. I loved my time working with pre-school children and early childhood educators. The children, simple and innocent, were like the spring, so full of life and energy, while their bright smiles were like blooming spring flowers that gave me boundless joy.

At the time, I was living with my then 90-year-old maternal grandmother. The way this venerable lady lived her life with such a positive attitude and independent spirit aroused in me a keen interest to study older people and the process of ageing. So, in 2010, I was back on Canadian soil, this time to study Gerontology. During that period, I went regularly to one of the residential facilities specialising in dementia for my practicum. There were many opportunities for me to interact with the residents there, and gradually, my interest in the work of looking after and caring for persons living with dementia began to grow, as did my knowledge of what was required.

When I came back to Singapore from Canada, I worked in a day-care centre for the elderly for three years. Shifting from working with young children to looking after the elderly seems like a huge leap, but in actual fact, there are many similarities. Regardless of whether you are caring for the young or the old, what is required is respect for them, not to doubt them nor deprive them of their ability to make their own decisions. In fact, we should be quietly accompanying them, only intervening when they ask for help. In so doing, we let them live a life that is rich and meaningful in their own eyes, rather than what we think is best for them. On hindsight, I realised that God was using the training I had gained in the field of early childhood to equip me to recognise that the principles of looking after the old and the young were essentially the same.

Making this career change proved to be very challenging for me; the problems were not so much in the area of looking after older persons but more in personnel management. Fortunately, God gave me a team of wonderful colleagues. With everyone's mutual help and support, we worked together to overcome many difficulties. My colleagues taught me compassion, humility, and love. Within this harmonious work environment, I managed to complete my three-year contract.

In 2013, upon the completion of my contract, I decided to take a break and give myself a long holiday. As the eldest child in my family, I organised a family trip to Taiwan for my parents. It turned out to be an intergenerational trip for fifteen – my parents, me and my siblings, and the grandchildren. We toured Taiwan for ten marvellous days. However, not long after we returned home, my dad had a stroke and passed on! I was guilt-ridden for a period of time, thinking that my elderly dad had succumbed to a stroke because he had been too tired from the hectic trip, not being accustomed to the increased level of activity. But, one day, a relative said to me, “Your father was so blessed to have gone on that family holiday, enjoying himself so

much before going home to heaven.” Those words helped to ease my guilt. I thank God for sending me consolation through that relative when I was wracked with the pain of losing my dad.

I also realised that by the time we reach middle age, our parents are quietly slipping into their autumnal years. They could be blessed with longevity or leave us suddenly.

God’s guidance

A few months after my dad’s passing, I received the news that the Alzheimer’s Disease Association had accepted me for a part-time position. This really met my needs as I did not want a full-time job then. Working part-time meant that I could spend more time with my mum, and I could also join Bible Study Fellowship in the daytime, meet old friends, attend retreats, and most importantly, I would have enough time for daily prayer. A few years later, in line with the demographic trend of an ageing population in Singapore, the number of those afflicted with dementia increased, and I once again returned to full-time work, hoping to give of my best in this area of service.

Although I had left early childhood education, which I had loved, for many years, it was because of my experience in that field that gave me the opportunity to run the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) programme for the Singapore Archdiocese, to lead children aged three to six to know Jesus and experience his love for them. This programme was established by two Italian Catholics in 1955 for young children, with the aim of teaching catechism in language that was simple enough for children to understand. As I led these sessions for children to encounter the Lord, I felt deeply how much God loved them. The Lord is the Good Shepherd who truly loves his little sheep – the little children. Again, because of my previous experience in early childhood education, I was also given the opportunity to go overseas to share my catechetical experiences with Catholics there.

Thanks be to God that he granted me, even while I was working part-time at the Alzheimer's Disease Association, the time to interact with children; not just to teach them music, but to teach them how to encounter Jesus, and learn about God, the Holy Spirit, Mother Mary, and the sacraments.

God's way

My journey to baptism was also rather offbeat. From the time I joined YCS in secondary school, I learnt about the Lord Jesus and believed that he was the true God. In the year I was 21, I attended the religious instruction class conducted by Father Paul Tong. One day, I plucked up the courage to ask my parents' permission for me to become a Catholic. They listened but did not give an answer right away. Not long after that, they gave me the go-ahead; this happened during the Lenten season. On the one hand, I was elated, but on the other, I was worried that they would suddenly change their minds, and so, I immediately requested Father Tong to give me a private baptism. In actual fact, the Catholic Church does not encourage catechumens to be baptised on certain days of the Church calendar, including the whole of the Lenten season. So, Father Tong encouraged me to wait for a few more weeks and be baptised at Easter. However, I was really afraid that my parents would change their minds, and so, Father Tong reluctantly agreed to baptise me. I immediately asked a colleague of mine to be my godmother. This explains why my baptism day was so offbeat – I was not baptised at the Easter Vigil Mass, but in Lent. That happened in 1982, the year I turned 22.

What a coincidence that I am writing this faith-sharing testimony during the Lenten season, but the year is 2020, almost forty years since my baptism. Looking back on this relatively long period of time, my ten years in St Nicholas Girls' School gave me an orthodox education, and during those years, the school was also a 'seedbed' for my faith. Since that time, I have felt God's presence with me, more and more, as

he sends people to guide me and friends to support me, and also equips me for my work, helping me to know that what I need in caring for the young and the old is respect for them.

There is still much to be done, and who knows where God will lead me to next? Will it be to another area considered 'offbeat'? As it says in the Book of Isaiah, God's way of thinking far surpasses ours. The Lord says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). But wherever I go, as long as it is the Lord who sends me, I am willing to fulfil the mission that he gives me.

Dear Jesus, thank you for your great love for me! Amen!



Count Your Blessings

By Agnes Lee Ling Ling

When I was a little girl, I never knew how to count my blessings or even what they were! As I was the eldest child in the family, my parents had sent me, from a very young age, for both piano and ballet classes, activities that many children of that era could only have dreamed about. I, with my two sisters and brother, had lacked nothing materially. If we wanted anything in particular, all we had to do was tell Father and he would give it to us. Whenever we craved any particular food, all we had to do was mention it to Mother and that delicious food would appear on the dining table. From when we were young, we three sisters always had tailor-made clothes, each set of which would have been, without a doubt, quite costly. However, not being appreciative, and never showing gratitude nor understanding how blessed we were, we would always find some fault whenever we tried on a newly tailored dress.

This was how I grew up in a carefree and happy family. I never knew how hard my father worked to provide for our family of six, nor did I know how much my mother always worried about our family. It was only when I entered adulthood that I began to understand how challenging it was to raise a family. And only then did I discover how my parents, by constantly putting their trust in the Lord and praying for God's

strength, were able to persevere and keep working hard to provide for our family.

Indeed, during my childhood, God had already given my family bountiful graces. Father was a devout Catholic; no matter how busy he was at work, he never forgot his duty as a Catholic. He enthusiastically supported Church activities, being an active member in both the Family Life Ministry and the Legion of Mary. In the early days after the establishment of the Blessed Sacrament Church, Father energetically participated in joining the home visits, bringing fellow Catholics to participate in the Masses, and setting up individual Chinese ministries. At the time, our entire family of six was in the church choir. My father was just like the “labourer” in the Gospel of Saint Matthew who was busy gathering God’s “harvest” (Matthew 9:37).

As I grew up, I was no longer that little girl who did not know how to count her blessings. I came to profoundly understand that whatever I had in my life could be attributed to God’s abundant graces, and my heart overflowed with the joy of knowing gratitude. However, in December 2012, my family suffered a grievous blow when my mother suddenly passed away, leaving us for ever. Shortly after that, barely a year after her passing, while we were still trying to cope with our grief, Father was diagnosed with dementia. My siblings and I found ourselves at a loss, as we scrambled to try and understand this illness as quickly as possible in order to give Father the proper treatment that he required.

Caring for a father suffering from dementia was a new challenge for us. But we understood that in this time of helplessness, all we could do was entrust the needs of our family into the hands of our almighty and loving God. Because my God has made the heavens and the earth by his great power and outstretched arm, nothing is too difficult for him (Jeremiah 32:17). And we believe that “nothing is impossible to God” (Luke 1:37).

God is truly great! He heard our prayers and arranged the doctor for us. When I brought Father for his first consultation with the specialist, she turned out to be a former student of mine. Thanks be to God, she was also a Catholic, and a very meticulous doctor. Father has a rather stubborn personality, but after talking to her, he grew comfortable in her presence and willingly listened to what she had to say. She was indeed an angel sent by God. She also gave me many suggestions and taught me how to help my father carry out certain activities.

As soon as we had learnt about our father's new health status, my siblings and I divided the tasks among ourselves, managing his daily routines and activities, medical treatment, and social activities, to ensure that he stayed healthy in body and mind. Father's condition has greatly tested my patience. As I was the eldest child, Father had doted on me most, but I was also always the rudest to him because I had taken the privilege of his love for granted. But now, the situation has changed. Whenever Father refuses to take part in an activity, I have to muster up as much patience as I can to gently persuade him.

Under God's protection and blessing, after more than three years, Father has gradually regained his confidence and begun to make new friends. Even though these new friends also suffer from dementia, they still live their lives full of hope, striving each day to live out their new lives. Two years ago, I started accompanying Father to the activities organised by the Alzheimer's Disease Association in Singapore, where he shares his journey of living with dementia while I share my experiences as his caregiver. Through this, my father and I have found a new way of sharing God's love and living out our mission as his disciples.

My father's illness has strengthened my faith in God. It was when we were feeling so helpless and lost, seemingly with nowhere to turn to, that I experienced the answer

from Jesus: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). For, in our helplessness, as long as our prayer request is good, when we knock on God’s door, he will surely open it and come to us. God has been right by my father’s side, and at the same time, has also been guiding, leading, and giving me strength to face reality, empowering me to lead my siblings in the combined caring of our father. Relying on the power of God, I have been able to overcome all kinds of difficulties. Thanks be to God! Praise the Lord!

Caring for people with dementia is not easy. Looking after and caring for them requires a lot of help and support; the resultant stress can destroy or strengthen the relationships within families. I am so grateful that through this process of caring for my father, our family bonds have been strengthened. I am so thankful to my parents for having sown so many seeds of love in our home from when we were very young, that our family is now able to lovingly work together through practising mutual support and forbearance. I also want to thank my parents for leading by example, be it through their daily lives or in their faith lives, allowing us to deeply appreciate that God is in our midst. They instilled in us, from an early age, the importance of obeying the commandments of God, and showed us that the way to a happy and contented family is through everyone helping and loving one another.

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances” (I Thessalonians 5:16-18). These are the guidelines given to me by the Lord. Whenever I face difficulties, all I have to do is turn to the Lord with a grateful heart, and by God’s grace, I will be able to face those challenges with a joyful heart. For I know that God’s grace is like a living spring nourishing my soul and giving me strength.

Today, I can say that I am no longer that little girl from the past; I now know how to appreciate and count my blessings, and spread God’s Word joyfully!

A Blessing in Disguise

By Tessa Ho

One Saturday afternoon, I was at the well-known Church of Saint Alphonsus (popularly known as Novena Church) attending a Novena devotion when my attention was drawn to an excited young girl seated near me with her mother. This brought back wonderful childhood memories for me. When I was young, my mother and I used to attend the Novena devotion together and follow it with brunch in the church canteen. I was moved by this memory as I had not been attending this devotion with my mother for some time. While reminiscing, I recalled the significance of the Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in my mother's faith journey as well as mine.

How did God come into my life when I was born to parents who were unable even to agree on practising any religion as a family? My father was a cradle Catholic, but he was not an active one and did not see the importance of being raised within a religion. My mother was born into a family of freethinkers who did not practise any religion out of respect for my grandfather, whose duty as the eldest son was to maintain the ancestral altar. However, she was blessed to have had a Catholic aunt who had brought her to Novena devotions every Saturday. She was also blessed to have been a student at CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, where the daily prayers and

regular Masses had left her with a desire to know more about Jesus. This curiosity about Jesus had first begun when she had been a young pupil at Newton Life Church Kindergarten. She had wanted to be baptised at the age of nine but her parents had felt that she was far too young to know what she wanted. Hence, they told her she could explore the Catholic faith but would only be allowed to be baptised at 21.

Unfazed, my mother continued to go for Novena devotions with her aunt and was even an active member of the Young Christian Students (YCS) in Singapore! She finally got baptised at 21. After her marriage and the birth of her children, she was fully intent on raising my brother and me in the Catholic faith. However, due to the reluctance of my father, she relented and agreed to support his desire for us to explore the different religions before deciding for ourselves.

This decision worked well for my brother who, being a relatively healthy child, was unplagued by childhood ailments. However, things were different with me. Not only was I born with atopic eczema and thus required an intensive moisturising regime from the day I was born, but I had also been diagnosed with childhood epilepsy, and so, I also required more attention and care. These 'small' details made all the difference to our lives. My brother, with perfectly unblemished skin, was an outstanding athlete, whereas I was not even allowed to participate in any outdoor sports due to my problems with heat rash and dry skin. This also contributed in no small way to my self-consciousness as a child.

Still, all seemed fine enough until one evening in the year I was five years old. That evening, my grandmother and our helper were busy with the dinner preparations while my brother and I were getting our daily dose of *Mr Bean* on the Disney Channel. At a particularly intense moment, I collapsed onto my brother who was sitting beside me. Initially, he had thought nothing of it, thinking that I had just

fallen asleep. He did not know that something serious had happened to me. Till this day, I am unable to recall any of this, not least the panic that ensued!

What I do remember is waking up in a hospital bed, with me hooked to a multitude of tubes and wires and the anxious faces of my family members staring at me. I was then informed that I had been unconscious due to an epileptic episode. Little did I know that this event would be the catalyst for my faith journey.

Amazingly, that medical episode made my father relent, and he decided not only to allow my brother and me to be baptised, but also that we would go to church every Sunday as a family. My brother, already eight, was finally able to attend catechism classes despite being a year behind his peers. Following my hospitalisation, I was put under a more comprehensive medical plan that involved regular check-ups until my condition stabilised and I was deemed to be no longer at risk of an epileptic episode. I was finally able to achieve my dreams of being a 'normal child'. Thanks be to God for his graces upon me, enabling me to participate in physical activities and take up dance lessons, which were previously forbidden. I was even allowed to take up horse riding and other activities that had previously been deemed too high-risk for me.

“My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). This verse holds tremendous meaning for me as I had first been given a life in which all sorts of precautions had to be taken daily, and little, if anything, was left to chance. However, since my baptism, I have been able to fully embrace life because God’s power was made perfect in my weakness, as the Holy Spirit guided my family through my epileptic episode and opened the way for my brother and me to be baptised into the big Catholic family. Who would have thought that an illness such as mine, normally regarded as a burdensome suffering, would have ended up being my greatest blessing? Praise the Lord! Thanks be to God!

My Model of Faith

By Teresa Lee SK

May faith guard you through the vicissitudes of life.

Jesus is always with you in the boat of your life; all you have to do is rouse him.

I remember when I was young, my family had a very old, framed portrait of the Holy Family in my home. In the quiet of the night, before my father returned home, my mother would gather my siblings and me to kneel in front of this picture of the Holy Family to recite our night prayers, praying especially for my father's safety and well-being.

My mother had a strong faith; she always trusted our Lord Jesus with all her heart.

Mother loved to recount her experiences of World War II. She never failed to remind us that our family would not be around today if not for God's protection. What had happened was that not long after the Japanese occupation of Malaya, my father decided to take Mother with my older brother and sister, as well as our elderly grandmother, to Tanjung Balai in Indonesia, by boat, to escape from the war and seek help from our fellow villagers there.

On the night they set off, as they were halfway through the sea crossing, a strong wind whipped up the waters, and the small boat struggled to keep afloat amidst the turbulent waves. My five-year-old brother was so terrified that he cried out loudly, "I told you not to do this, but you wouldn't listen!" This threw his already panicking mother into fits of tears. However, amidst the chaos, she kept praying to the Lord Jesus, believing that he would take pity on this small boat and the family in it, and would raise his hands to calm the storm. The Lord Jesus did hear her prayers. As the day dawned, their little boat arrived safely on the shores of Tanjung Balai, a small island in Indonesia. And it was on this little island that I, their third child, was born. Our family lived on this island until the Japanese surrendered.

When peace returned, Father brought all of us back to Singapore, and Mother brought me, just eight months old, to the Church of the Sacred Heart to be baptised, and thus, I became a cradle Catholic. My father had a teaching stint in Singapore before taking on a job as principal of the local Chinese-medium school, SJK(C) Pei Cheng, in Pengerang, little knowing that our life there would entail some nerve-racking encounters with 'mountain rats'.

Pengerang was a small town in the south-eastern tip of Johor, Malaysia. As my father was the principal, my whole family lived in lodgings within the school compound. As the principal, he often had to entertain the board of directors of the school in the evenings, and thus, would only return home late in the night.

It was just after World War II, and this small town would occasionally see the appearance of 'mountain rats' – a small number of members of the Malayan Communist Party who were still hiding in the forests. At nightfall, these 'mountain rats', armed with their guns, would grope their way in the dark to the school and stealthily knock at the door, hoping that my father would spare them some cans of

food. These extraordinary times were always filled with great anxiety for us, because if the local policemen, out on their night patrols looking for them, discovered that these ‘mountain rats’ were coming to the school to look for my father, the consequences would have been unimaginable. So, whenever we were in such moments of danger, we would cease our verbal prayers and just kneel quietly in front of the portrait of the Holy Family. Although my siblings and I were young at the time, somehow we knew enough to keep kneeling obediently, not daring to make a single sound. The Lord Jesus was always with my mother and my whole family, protecting us and ensuring our safety time and time again.

My family only made the move back to Singapore when my siblings needed to begin their secondary education. I completed the last two years of my primary education in the CHIJ Town Convent before moving on to the secondary section of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School, where I became classmates with Ho Yok Kum, who has been teaching in the school now for more than half a century. Apart from having my mother as my model of faith at home, being in a Catholic school also meant having my faith nourished by the nuns in the school. Thanks be to God!

Because of my mother’s steadfast faith, she was able to overcome many of the obstacles in her life by the power of that faith. Whenever my beloved mother had to face any adversity, she would always put her trust in God, rousing, calling upon the Lord in the ‘little boat of her life’. For every milestone that she passed, the Lord was always with her. She truly believed that God would never ever forsake us. “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they are?” (Matthew 6:26).

Because my mother had faith, her frequent, pious prayers to the Holy Family to grant our family holiness, harmony, and peace allowed my siblings and me to be brought

up in an atmosphere filled with love.

Tonight, as I pen this testimony of faith, it suddenly dawned on me that as my mother's daughter, I have inherited my mother's solid faith. My mother has set an outstanding example of faith for me, and it is also by God's grace that I have faith. This same faith has enabled me to guide my own daughter through the hardships of her life, relying on the power of God to watch over her and her family.

I am well aware that our lives cannot always be smooth sailing. In my own life, whether it was going through the setbacks I experienced in my university days, or the difficulties I faced after my marriage, I have always upheld my faith, letting Jesus hold my hand to lead me over every obstacle in my life.

Whenever I face any storms in my life, I will always remember this: The Lord Jesus is in the little boat of my life, fast asleep. When a storm breaks out and my boat is being swamped by the waves, I only need to rouse him, and he will get up to calm the storm! (Matthew 8:23-26).



“How precious is your love, O God!
We take refuge in the shadow of your wings.”
Psalm 36:8



In the Shadow of His Wings

By Joan Lim

My dad grew up in a non-Catholic family, but as he was educated in Saint Joseph's Institution, a mission school, he was immersed in a Catholic atmosphere for so many years that after graduating, he decided to be baptised as a Catholic. My mum was also baptised before her marriage to my dad, and together, they built a Catholic family. My grandfather, who highly valued Chinese tradition, had insisted that my older brother and I be sent to Chinese-medium schools when we reached school age. As a result, we ended up in Catholic High School and CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School respectively. My younger brother, on the other hand, went to an English-medium Catholic school.

Dad is a staunch Catholic – our family's role model of faith. When I was young, my family was living in the Thomson Road area, so every Sunday morning, we would go for Mass at the Church of Saint Alphonsus (otherwise known as Novena Church). As Mum was frail and sickly, Dad would often kneel before the altar with the three of us and lead us in prayer for my mum's health. So, from young, I was already cultivating the habit of praying to God and seeking his guidance whenever I ran into any difficulties.

My greatest setback in school was my inability to achieve good academic results. Every day before the start of my classes, I would go to the school chapel to pray, asking God for help with my school work. However, despite my diligence, my results remained unsatisfactory. My parents even sent me for tuition hoping that would help, but I still managed to be retained in Primary Four. I thank God for blessing me with enlightened and loving parents who did not pressurise me over my school work, but instead, always comforted me by their constant encouragement, telling me just to do my best. My older brother had outstanding results, but my parents never compared our results. They respected all their children, firmly accepting that the Lord had granted each of us different abilities and talents.

In secondary school, our principal, Mrs Hwang-Lee Poh See, encouraged the Catholic students to choose ECAs (extra-curricular activities) connected to the Catholic faith, so I joined the Saint Vincent de Paul Society (SVDP, now known as SSVP — the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul) and began to reach out to the less privileged. We collected food donations and visited nursing homes regularly. Later, I was elected chairman and had the opportunity to participate in regular meetings involving SVDP groups from the different Catholic schools, during which we would share with one another about the progress made in and insights gained from our voluntary work in this organisation. After graduating from Secondary Four, some of us like-minded friends came together to form a youth group and we continued to serve the needy, including the residents in the home for the lepers. Five years later, as all of us were becoming increasingly preoccupied with the various challenges in our individual lives, the group was disbanded.

After my marriage, I had a daughter, then a son, and held a stable job, but my husband often needed to travel for work, and so, I had to manage the care of my family as well as my career. In 2008, my employer decided to fold up his business in

Singapore to reduce his operational costs and I was out of a job.

At that time, my daughter had just started primary school and was still adjusting to the changes from her kindergarten life, being as yet unable to handle her school work independently. Due to these circumstances, I became a full-time housewife and stay-at-home mother to look after my two young children. This gave me not only the chance to provide my children with a happy childhood, but also the energy to look after my ageing mother-in-law. She was living with us and I wanted her to enjoy her remaining years in the company of her son and grandchildren. I knew that this was all part of God's perfect plan to enable me to build a cosy and harmonious home for my family. Thanks be to God for planning everything beautifully for me.

A few years later on a particular day, my husband, on a whim, suggested that we should go for a health screening together, and I agreed without hesitation. An X-ray done with my family doctor showed a shadow in my lung. The doctor prescribed me a course of antibiotics, but the shadow did not go away even after I had taken the medicine. Instead, a malignant tumour was discovered in my right lung. The doctor immediately ordered a full-body CT scan and a lymph node biopsy for me. Thanks be to God! The cancer cells had not spread to the other parts of my body, and so, I immediately underwent surgery to remove a third of my right lung.

From the health screening to the removal of the tumour, everything happened within two months. During this period, my family and friends were praying for me and Mum even visited the Carmelite Monastery to ask for the intercession of the nuns. In the midst of all these loving prayers, I felt the grace of God like showers of blessings poured over me. I was able to commit everything to my almighty and loving God, and during the period of time I was undergoing treatment, I was not afraid at all.

When I regained consciousness after the operation, I lay on my hospital bed reading the medical report from the doctors. When I saw the photographs, I was completely shocked! I shuddered at the sight of that frightful black tumour, and only then did I realise the severity of my situation and how I had almost missed the ‘golden period’ for treatment of my cancer. Before my retrenchment, I had gone for regular health check-ups under the company’s medical benefits scheme. But ever since I left the workforce in 2008, I had not gone for any health screening. As a result, the cancer cells had been lurking silently in my lung, gradually and insidiously growing into that ugly black tumour.

As I look back on the path of my life, my heart overflows with deep gratitude! I thank God for blessing my dad with the grace of faith, so that under his guidance, I could know God and trust him from a tender age. I thank God for letting me grow up in a home filled with love, with loving parents who accepted and respected me. Dad is now 83 and Mum is 78 and they are still my role models of faith. May the Lord bless them with good health and a long life. I thank God, too, for sending my husband to accompany me for the health screening in 2012. He is not Catholic, but God used him as my guardian angel to protect my life.

My whole life is in the shadow of God’s wings (Psalm 36:8); he guards and protects me with his almighty wings! I thank the Lord with all my heart, with all my mind, and with all my soul! Praise the Lord!



My Journey With Cancer

By Rosa Wong Mei Kwui

There I was, in the clutches of breast cancer! That was in 2007.

I have always been fearful of death, and so, I tended to steer clear of regular breast screenings. When I was over 40, I finally mustered up the courage to go for a check-up, but experienced a false alarm. What happened was that the hospital had requested a re-examination. Upon hearing this, I immediately thought I was a ‘goner’. It was only later that I was informed that the X-ray image taken had been unclear and had to be redone – this had not been clearly explained to me over the telephone. After that scare, I became even more reluctant to go for any form of health screening. That lasted until the year I turned 52, when I noticed that my left nipple appeared to be turned slightly inward and the areola felt hard. I knew I could no longer behave like an ostrich. I had to go to the hospital for a check-up.

When I was 31, I had returned to the Church. God spoke to me through a priest, “Have patience, for faith is like a seed sown by a farmer; it takes time to grow.” At that time, I prayed that God would help me to put my trust in him and overcome my fear of death. Even if I were to get cancer, I hoped I could still praise and thank him.

The day on which my faith would be tested had finally arrived. When the doctor confirmed that I had breast cancer, I said in my heart, “Thanks be to God! Praise the Lord!” as I calmly accepted this reality. I knew that the peace I felt had been given by Jesus and was not a result of my courage, as my nature was to be timid and fearful of death.

I thanked the Lord that my breast cancer was only in its second stage. If the cancer cells had been lodged deeper within the breast tissue, I might only have discovered the cancer in its fourth stage. Western medicine follows this treatment formula — surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and hormone therapy involving the taking of an oestrogen-inhibiting drug called tamoxifen for the next five years. Surgery would involve either a lumpectomy, which is a partial excision, or a mastectomy, which is a complete excision. My husband felt that it would be safer to do a mastectomy in order to reduce the chances of a relapse. He comforted me by saying that we would not be having any more children at our age, and so, I would not need my breast for breastfeeding. He also assured me that if I lost one breast, he would love me even more as my health was his priority. He even specially cooked me a meal — the first time in our marriage!

From the time my cancer was diagnosed, I could see the Hand of God constantly leading me. Before my operation, one day while I was driving, a white van in front of me was going so exceptionally slowly that I could read the words of the slogan pasted on its rear door: “A joyful heart is good medicine” (Proverbs 17:22). This was the ‘reassuring pill’ God was giving me, teaching me how to gain victory over my current battle with a joyful heart. I felt so thrilled that I wanted to read the verse again, but I had already overtaken that van. I intentionally slowed down to let other vehicles pass, so as to get behind the van again, but even though I searched in every direction, that van had completely disappeared!

Before my surgery, I was hoping to get a second opinion. I also had to go to the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) to undergo various tests such as blood and liver function tests. While I was waiting in SGH, a senior nurse who had previously visited my orchid farm recognised me. I told her about my objective, and she helped me arrange an appointment with Dr Yang, whom she said was a specialist in the field, and he was only available for consultation once a week on that particular day at SGH. While waiting to see Dr Yang, I received a call from my younger sister's neighbour, who was also a senior doctor at SGH. When she heard me mention the name of Dr Yang, she told me I had found the right person. I said to God, "O Lord, how could all of these just be coincidences?" I now felt totally reassured!

The day of my surgery finally arrived. As I lay on the operation table while the surgeon read through my medical report, he realised that I had a history of high blood pressure, yet I had not done any cardio tests, so he asked me if there were any issues with my heart. I did not know, thinking there should not be any. The team of doctors hesitated for a moment, and then asked me if I wanted to have my heart checked before the operation. At that point in time, I was brimming with confidence and did not wish to delay the operation because I trusted that God had already 'prescribed' all that I needed. I believed that the operation would definitely be safe, so, if I was not meant to wake up after the operation and left the world just like that, why would God have given me that prescription? Finally, the head surgeon allowed me to sign my consent, after which the operation began.

The operation was most successful. Once the effects of the anaesthesia had subsided, I had no side-effects from it at all and was discharged from the hospital the very next day, to recuperate at home for a month before starting chemotherapy. During that month, many relatives and friends expressed their concern and recommended various treatments. I also read many books on cancer treatments, but the one that attracted

me most was the concept of natural therapy, of which there were also many different types. At that point, I began to develop a phobia about chemotherapy. I prayed for God's guidance, as I only believed in his method of treatment for me!

During this period of time, a relative of mine passed away from cancer; chemotherapy had not saved her. As I could not go to Johor, Malaysia, to attend her funeral, at the scheduled time of the funeral, I went to the adoration room at the Church of the Holy Family. While I was praying, a friend of mine happened to walk in. She was on her way to have breakfast nearby and had stopped by to pray. She told me that a nun from the Carmelite Convent had cancer, and after chemotherapy, her white blood cell count had dropped, and as a result, she was often in and out of hospital.

Thereafter, I went to Chung Hwa Medical Hospital, intending to try Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). There, I met a nun who also had cancer but had found chemotherapy ineffective, and she was now hoping to be treated with TCM. (She subsequently passed away.) I thought of my former neighbour and my second aunt, both of whom had died from cancer, after chemotherapy had failed... "Lord, were you telling me through them not to take the path of chemotherapy?"

From the time of my diagnosis until my successful surgery, my heart had been overflowing with joy and peace. But one day, I found my image in the mirror unable to smile and bereft of joy due to the disagreement between my husband and me concerning our views on chemotherapy. A joyful heart is good medicine, but when joy is absent, the body will collapse. Overwhelmed with anxiety, I retreated alone to Pasir Ris Park for my morning exercise and some quiet time with God through meditation, Bible reading, and soul-searching. That day's Bible reflection raised this question: Are you seeking Jesus' guidance and leading, or are you looking for someone's affirmation?

If I resolutely refused chemotherapy, my husband, a non-believer, would spend his days wracked with worry awaiting the relapse of my cancer, and perhaps even collapse before that could happen. As the Lord Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). I was willing to learn from Jesus, and for my husband’s sake, accept the risks of chemotherapy at any cost, even if it meant sacrificing my health or even my life.

God’s teaching did not stop there. It so happened that the reflection guide I had in hand contained an article pertaining to conflict resolution between spouses, with this particular line impacting me deeply: “If your heart is not at peace, then likewise, you and your spouse will not be at peace.”

I decided not to continue rejecting chemotherapy, a decision that softened my husband’s heart. That afternoon, we attended an introductory seminar on the Gerson Therapy, a therapy that had been around for more than 60 years in the USA, offering a dietary-based alternative treatment for cancer. During the talk, the Holy Spirit opened my husband’s eyes to see that there were multiple paths to the treatment of cancer, and he began to recognise that chemotherapy had its own pros and cons. From that time on, he actively researched and explored various alternative therapies, and after comparing them rationally, concluded that the Gerson Therapy was the most scientifically reliable one.

Actually, what I was thinking was that if God’s will was for me to live to a ripe old age, then any treatment would work, although I still felt a strong aversion to chemotherapy because of the potential after-effects. Since my husband believed so much in the efficacy of the Gerson Therapy, I would go with his decision! Moreover, we knew a nutritionist who had just returned from his studies at the Gerson Institute; he needed clinical practice, and so, I became a patient for his case study.

Unexpectedly, just a mere two days into the new therapy and I already found it unbearable as I could not accept the dietary changes that it would entail. Just the very thought of all my food for the next two years being devoid of salt and condiments that contained chemicals, how could I live like that? I immediately halted the treatment and went for a three-day retreat to ascertain if this was indeed the path that God had planned for me.

During my retreat, I reread the book on the Gerson Therapy, trying to find its flaws, but to no avail, and so, I surrendered, saying to God, "Lord, let your will be done." Once home, I told my husband my decision and he embraced me, crying emotionally, because he had been so worried that I might wilfully give up this therapy.

Undergoing the Gerson Therapy was a tremendously difficult path for me to take, but trusting the Lord with an obedient heart, I survived the long two and a half years. I viewed my submission to my husband and my compliance with the requirements of the therapy as an expression of my obedience to God. The road to recovery was arduous and demanding; it was my personal experience of this verse: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

I am not advocating any particular therapy for I believe that God has a different plan for each person. I simply believe this: "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord" (Psalm 128:4).

May God be praised for ever!



"For I know well the plans I have in mind for you,
says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future."

Jeremiah 29:11

On Terminal Illness and Prayer

By Sandra Lai

“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24).

The Lord Jesus instructs us to pray always. He tells us to ask in prayer and it shall be given. He tells us to pray unceasingly. He shows us that he prays. He even teaches us how to pray. He makes it clear he wants our active participation. He tells us he does not sleep; he hears and he answers every prayer.

Jennifer Yeo (the wife of George Yeo, Singapore’s former Minister for Foreign Affairs) contracted cancer at the age of 59. When she shared the Word of God through the story of her miraculous recovery from cancer, I was awed by how Scripture came alive for me. Jennifer had suffered from sinonasal undifferentiated carcinoma (SNUC), a rare one-in-five-million, very deadly, and very aggressive form of cancer with a very low cure rate. After undergoing two cycles of chemotherapy in seven weeks, the tumour disappeared and she recovered fully. Hers is a beautiful testimony of steadfast faith, earnest prayer, and her intimate relationship with God, as well as a powerful testimony to God’s kindness and omnipotence, and of prayers answered.

On a more personal front, my eldest sister, Joyce, was 29 when she was diagnosed with multiple myeloma – cancer of the bone marrow. Joyce was at the peak of her life; it was a devastating blow. Due to her young age, the cancer was extremely aggressive. I witnessed my parents' heart-wrenching prayers for their firstborn's healing and recovery. Our whole family prayed persistently and fasted together. In the years that followed, my sister lost her job, her fiancé left her, and she went through a multitude of debilitating treatments, including a bone marrow transplant and kidney dialysis. It was a torturous and painful ten-year journey for her. Joyce passed on in 2001.

We have often heard that God does answer every prayer, but in a different way for each person. Sometimes his answer is “yes”, sometimes “no”, and at other times, “wait”. But the question I find hard to let go of is this: Why was it that Jennifer was healed but Joyce was not?

In my prayer community, we often receive many requests for prayers, especially for the sick and the terminally ill. Without a correct understanding of prayer, we may begin praying with a strong and fervent belief in the healing power of Jesus, but when we see no improvement, we may end up becoming disheartened and disillusioned, or even worse, feeling betrayed and abandoned, and find ourselves moving away from Christ.

What do we need to be mindful of to avoid such pitfalls? Do we really know what is best for us?

God has a plan for our welfare, to give us only the best (Jeremiah 29:11), but our idea of what is best for us may not really be so. With our myopic vision of life, how many of us are 100% confident that what we pray for is in our best interests and not to our detriment? We have heard that oft-repeated story of a young boy asking his father for a motorbike. He wanted it so badly and persevered in asking, but his father

knew his son was not ready to handle a motorbike yet, so he repeatedly turned down his child's request. When God does not unreservedly dispense what we ask for, we need to trust that he is using our struggles to nurture and refine us. He is preparing us to receive something that is deeper, bigger, and better — the gift that our loving Heavenly Father wants us to have.

God is more concerned about the healing of our souls

Jesus has urgent plans for our spiritual health. He is far more concerned about the health and healing of our souls than our physical needs and wants. He wants to guide our souls and eventually lead us safely home to be with him for eternity. He can choose to simply give us what we ask for — after all, it saddens him to see us unhappy and troubled — but instead, he patiently persists in helping us grow, maturing our souls, and readying us for the eternal. It is this that is of paramount importance.

Saint Augustine famously said that sometimes we pray “aut mali, aut male, aut mala” (literally translated from Latin as “or evil, or badly, or bad things”). This means praying with a personal disposition that is not good; or asking badly — praying without faith, without humility, without persevering; or asking for things that can harm us. Because the Lord is so concerned for our souls, in withholding what we ask for (which is oftentimes “aut mali, aut male, aut mala”), he is patiently helping us to grow, and guiding us towards the healing of our souls.

God's will versus our will (Matthew 6:10)

Often, when we petition God with our needs and wants, we remember to add “if it is your will”, but do we pray that with conviction, or do we add that feebly? Do we push for God's will to be aligned with our will, or do we sincerely seek to align our will with his? Are we really ready to trust him and accept whatever comes?

One time, I was at Mass in Manila and the words in the homily given by Father Bob McConaghy that day remain etched in my mind. Father McConaghy said that when things do not seem to go our way, try not to be tempted to ask “Why?” Instead, ask “Where? — Where do you want me to go from here, Lord?” In this way, we let the Holy Spirit prompt us towards the direction of growth that the Lord wants, through the struggles we encounter.

When our prayers do not seem to be answered

When we remain financially strapped or our loved ones remain ill and die despite our fervent prayers, how do we make sense of things? We may feel that our prayers have fallen on deaf ears or that God is not interested in relieving us of our suffering.

I had the blessing of attending a three-day talk by the late Father Ignatius Huan on redemptive suffering. The gems that Father Huan shared were life-changing for me. He helped me to understand that while suffering is never positively willed by God, there can be a meaning to Christian suffering. We can choose to embrace suffering and transform it into a redemptive grace. As followers of Christ, we have a choice — we can choose to accept the graces from God through suffering (Colossians 1:24), or we can choose to reject the suffering and reject God.

Father Huan shared that life is more than just a linear journey through each day. In fact, it is a radical journey deep into our own heart. He urged us to go deep within ourselves, to ask not only “Where, Lord?”, but to also ask “How?” and ultimately, to confront the question: “Who am I?” In so doing, we can begin to truly comprehend our identity and enter into suffering as a child of God, to be in communion with him and to be participating in Christ’s suffering, presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1). Through believing in the goodness of others and finding meaning in suffering, we will find ourselves the victor, as our eyes

will be opened to see that God does answer our prayers, time and time again.

Both Jennifer and Joyce were healed

Yes, indeed, our prayers are always answered. Jesus does not lie; each and every prayer is precious to him, and he hears and he answers each one (Mark 11:24 and Matthew 7:7-8).

Although Jennifer and Joyce met with different outcomes in their experience of cancer, both lived out their suffering and allowed something beautiful and worthwhile to emerge. In this sense, our Lord answered both their prayers for healing, granting them physical as well as spiritual healing. Both availed themselves of their vulnerability and their suffering to be channels of grace to others. In their acceptance and trust, they understood not only the ultimate purpose of life, but also grew into a deeper relationship with their Maker. Isn't the purpose of our lives to be in a deep and intimate relationship with God? Isn't this the meaning of life?

Jennifer showed us how, by listening attentively to the Word of God, by relying on the Eucharist and on God's grace, by turning her focus away from her own suffering and towards others through doing good works, by praying and fasting, and with the intercession of Mother Mary, she was able to rise above her infirmity to become a new person pleasing to the Lord. She showed us that it is in weakness that power is harnessed. Through sharing her journey, her faith, and her love, with so many people, Jennifer allowed the Lord to use her suffering to carry out his will.

My sister, Joyce, met with an end to her earthly life, but the process was no less beautiful and meaningful. We still miss her dearly — grief does not end — but we take heart that her earthly life was well lived, and that she is safe with the Lord. She had moments when she was really down, but the enduring peace and feisty joy she

expressed, despite all that she was going through, must have been so pleasing to the Lord. In her darkest hour, my sister bravely told us, "Do not fear, Jesus is near!" She never stopped giving praise and thanks to the Lord for his blessings that "are as numerous as the stars in the sky". My sister's journey taught me that illness and suffering are not problems to be solved; but instead, if we allow it, God will use every morsel of pain for his glory. Our Lord did indeed mightily use Joyce's suffering. The doctor's prognosis for her was six months, but Joyce went on to live for ten more years, during which time God's plan for the salvation of the family unfolded. As we journeyed with her, we encountered Jesus and witnessed the baptism of the entire family, including Joyce herself (I had been baptised earlier). Twenty years have already passed since she left us, but Joyce's faith journey continues to touch lives as both family and friends carry on sharing her legacy of love and trust in the Lord. My parents, now in their 80s, continue to inspire many whom they encounter, as they lean on the Lord to rise above their pain and grief. To this day, they are still joyfully serving God, sharing his love, bringing many to know Christ, and above all else, fervently praying for the salvation of souls.

Expectant and submissive faith

Jennifer and Joyce's journeys to healing give us hope and teach us that we need to approach the Lord not only with an expectant faith, but also with a submissive faith. In humility, we submit ourselves to the Lord and let him give us what he knows is best for us. When we make this "movement into the heart" that Father Ignatius had taught us to do, we submit to the Lord and let him guide us to where he knows best. We have to focus on training ourselves to have a disposition of empathy, to be in communion with the Cross of Jesus, to believe that he has plans for us, plans to prosper us and not harm us, plans to give us a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11), and that in the final analysis, all will be well with our souls. As Jennifer stoically shared, while she may be physically healed now, one day she will still die. Indeed, it

is a certainty that we will leave our physical bodies, and ultimately, all that matters is our spiritual well-being and the healing of our souls before we leave this world.

So let us continue to "make our requests in everything known to God, by prayer and supplication, and with thanksgiving" (Philippians 4:6). At the same time, let us submit to our almighty God knowing that there is a deeper, bigger, and better gift that he wants us to have, one that is beyond our comprehension. And so, we rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us (I Thessalonians 5:16-18).



A Blessed Life

By Julia Wong Soo Mei

In June last year (2019), a few volunteers from the Alzheimer's Disease Association and I brought a group of elderly people and their family members for a visit to the National Museum of Singapore to see the exhibition *Packaging Matters: Singapore's Food Packaging Story from the Early 20th Century*. I saw, among the exhibits, the brand of milk that I used to drink in my childhood, called KLIM ('KLIM' is coined by spelling 'MILK' backwards). It was not a cheap brand of milk, and in the early days of Independence in Singapore, not many could afford it. I was the youngest in my family, and my three brothers and two sisters had all grown up on my mother's breast milk. Mother said I had refused to drink her milk and would only drink KLIM. Fortunately for me, Father had been promoted that year and our family circumstances had improved, and so, Mother said I had a "blessed life".

Milk was not the only uncommon thing between my siblings and me. Another uncommon thing was that I was born with a hole in the heart.

When I was young, we lived on the fourth floor, and getting home required climbing the stairs each time. My family always did this with ease, but I would be panting and

out of breath. By the time I made it through the doorway, I would be ashen-faced and gasping for air. Later, when my parents brought me to see a doctor, they found out that I had a congenital heart disease – a hole in the heart. But it was a small hole that did not require reparative surgery. Thus, my parents decided to let me lead a normal school life, with me taking part in the usual physical activities alongside my classmates. At the time, I was even a sprinter, specialising in the 100-metre event!

In 1981, after the completion of my Secondary Four examinations, I followed my school's Saint John Ambulance Brigade (SJAB) members for a combined camping trip with two other schools, on Saint John's Island, south of the mainland. We went by boat. On the last evening of the camp, while a group of us were strolling along the beach, I suddenly broke out into a cold sweat. Subconsciously, I put my hand on my chest and discovered that instead of a regular heartbeat, there was a whooshing sensation. However, it was already dark, too late for a boat ride back to the mainland. The camp doctor examined me and arranged for a buddy to accompany me as I rested back in camp.

The next day, when we had returned to the mainland, my father rushed me to the doctor. (My mother had died of an illness.) This doctor discovered that one of my heart valves had ruptured and immediately arranged for me to be treated at the Singapore General Hospital. My main doctor was the distinguished Dr Tan Ngoh Chuan. He explained to my father and me that a heart valve could only be 'made' with cardiac tissue, not tissue from any other part of the body. He was hoping that my cardiac tissue would be strong enough and suitable for making a heart valve; otherwise, he would need to use either an artificial valve made of synthetic material, or a heart valve from a pig, to replace my damaged valve. However, the latter two options were less than ideal as there would be risks after the operation — I would have to be put on lifelong medication, or endure a heart valve replacement operation

every five years. Would he be able to use my cardiac tissue to make a valve? He would only be able to make a decision during the operation itself. He would saw open my sternum and connect my blood vessels to a cardiopulmonary bypass machine that would ensure continuous blood circulation to my body. Only when my heart had stopped and the blood had been drawn away would he then be able to examine my cardiac tissue. Dr Tan also said that all things being well, he would repair my heart valve by slicing a piece of my cardiac tissue to 'make' a valve, and then 'sew' it to the heart chamber, and at the same time, patch up the hole in my heart.

I was pre-admitted a week before the surgery to begin my hospital stay, having first to undergo a battery of tests and checks before the scheduled operation. At that time in the Department of Cardiology, there was a young specialist named Dr Tong Ming Chuan, who had been my father's student at Catholic High School. Having such a connection brought much comfort and assurance to me. During my time in hospital, apart from receiving visits from family and friends during the visiting hours, I was alone the rest of the time. Left to my own thoughts, I reflected upon my life and wondered if I would make it to my seventeenth birthday in just a few weeks.

Alone in my hospital room, I pondered two issues repeatedly. Firstly, if my operation failed, would I get to heaven? What made one good enough to enter heaven? I did not have an answer. What I did know was that it did not involve having a university degree or a successful career. In fact, I had a profound realisation that nothing I acquired here in this life could be taken to the next.

Secondly, if the operation was successful, how would I go about spending my days after my recovery? For me at 17, in the golden years of my youth, the most imminent issue concerned my studies. However, if entering heaven did not require paper qualifications, a successful career, or status, why should I even pursue further

education? In fact, what was the purpose of education? Was there something else of greater meaning that was waiting for me?

Faced with the real, imminent prospect of meeting death, the most pressing issue for me was: Is Jesus the true God? Is my faith in the Catholic Church merely a self-deceptive spiritual 'crutch'?

Thanks be to God! Two nights before my surgery, I woke from a deep sleep, and through my half-opened eyes, I saw Mother Mary standing by the window of my room. I thought that as I had been praying the Rosary so frequently and asking for Mother Mary's intercession, because of our spiritual closeness, I must be seeing a vision. Yet, to say that I would be able to see the Blessed Lady simply by praying the Rosary, would that not be the greatest motivation for everyone to start praying it? But at that moment, I knew that Mother Mary had come to visit me. The tranquillity in my hospital room and the peace that I felt in my heart were indescribable. The Lord Jesus is the true God and Mary is his mother. If the operation was unsuccessful and I left this world, I knew where I would be headed.

After the surgery, I was wheeled to the Intensive Care Unit, where I slept and rested for what felt like ages. When I awoke, I did not feel anything amiss, but all of a sudden, the medical device monitoring me started beeping an urgent alert. Dr Tong Ming Chuan, who was on duty, rushed in with a team of nurses bringing with them yet another medical device. I lay on my bed conscious but calm as I watched them pulling me back from the brink of death. Apart from that one medical crisis, the rest of my recovery went smoothly. I had only applied for a month of medical leave from school, so after that month, I returned to my classes in my junior college. More importantly, my new heart valve had been made out of my own cardiac tissue, and so, I neither needed lifelong medication, nor would I need to bear the risks of

undergoing heart valve replacement surgery every five years.

I know that even if I had the means to pay for the services of the best surgeon in the world, whether or not my cardiac tissue would be deemed good enough was in the hands of my Creator God, and only God could make it possible for me not to need the services of the best surgeon ever again. I know that my life is under the Lord's care and protection. To this day, my heart has not had any other incident and I have even survived three pregnancies that gave me my three healthy and lively children. Thanks be to God!

Looking back on the time before my hospitalisation for the surgery, I had looked fine on the outside and yet, suffered a problematic heart within. When I was discharged from the hospital after surgery, I bore a deep scar on the outside as the doctors had sawn open my sternum, but within me, my heart had been repaired. However, what surprised me was that I felt that my whole attitude towards life had changed. I felt detached from the secular world and its promise of fame, fortune, and pleasure. I wanted to opt out of the rat race not because I wanted to be lazy, but because I really felt no motivation to compete in work and career just to amass wealth and status.

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). This verse touches me deeply.

Having had to stare death in the face, I am well aware that my life is not within my control. My first life may have been a “blessed life”, but this second life, given to me by Jesus Christ, rightly belongs to him. I must emulate the apostle Saint Paul in striving to live out my life as a disciple of Christ.

Farewell for Now

By Teresa Wong Soo Hwa

Close to midnight on Friday, 18 January 2013, my eldest child, Jonathan, returned home from his weekly youth group meeting in church. After a shower, he complained of an acute headache. My husband and I hastened to help him to bed, but shortly after that, right before our eyes, Jonathan lost consciousness. We rushed to call for an ambulance. When it arrived, my husband accompanied our son as it sped to the hospital. In the ambulance, the paramedics discovered that Jonathan's heart had stopped. They tried to resuscitate him, but to no avail. And so it was that in the early hours of 19 January 2013, just like that, God called my son home.

He was only nineteen that year, but he died of cerebral bleeding from the rupture of a carotid aneurysm. This fatal condition often presents with no symptoms, but once the aneurysm ruptures, it can result in a quick death.

For my husband, our two younger daughters, Jonathan's grandparents, as well as our relatives and friends, Jonathan's sudden passing threw all of us into an abyss of pain. As for me, his mother, I was even more deeply and hopelessly lost in anguish.

I come from a Catholic family, and from young, had followed my family for Sunday Masses. In the ten years of my school life in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, I had always been an obedient and law-abiding student. In secondary school, I had participated enthusiastically in the activities of the school's Legion of Mary. After graduating from university, I married my university sweetheart and became part of his Catholic family. My first pregnancy ended in a miscarriage and I had Jonathan after that, but from young, he had severe eczema. My youngest child is a child with special needs resulting from a premature birth. Despite facing these multiple challenges, I never complained to God, but had relied on my faith in him and the power of prayer, endeavouring to live out my life as a child of God.

However, Jonathan's sudden death was an extremely painful blow to me.

"Lord, you gave me this child and now you have taken him from me. I am not against your decision, but please tell me if he is by your side today." From the moment that Jonathan left me, this was my constant and tearful plea to the Lord.

In the afternoon of 19 January, Jonathan's casket arrived at the funeral parlour beside the Church of the Nativity in Hougang. Many parishioners, relatives, and friends came to pay their respects and offer prayers. After the prayers, a fellow parishioner told me that while praying, she had seen a very happy Jonathan; indeed, she had never seen him with such a joyful expression before. "Lord! Is this your answer to me? But I am not satisfied. It does not really mean Jonathan is with you." At the time, I was like a petulant and demanding child, constantly pestering my Heavenly Father with my pleas.

At noon on the second day of the wake, Jonathan's friends from the youth group came to pray. After the prayers, a young girl, the chairperson of the group, approached me.

“Auntie, as we were praying just now, Jonathan came to me. He wants me to tell you not to cry. He is very happy. He has been fully healed of his eczema.” As I listened to her sharing, I said to God, “Lord, I believe Jonathan is already at your side, but could you give me more messages from him?”

During the next few days, different brothers and sisters in Christ shared with me that during their prayers they had seen Jonathan with God, or Jonathan with Mother Mary. All these messages gave me immense consolation and spiritual support. Although I was heartbroken, I knew that he was reunited with God and this gave me the strength to continue living.

Although I truly believe that the death of the physical body does not mean life has ended, but has only changed, did it mean my relationship with my son had ended? I did not believe it to be so, but how could I contact him? I believed he was in heaven, enjoying eternal joy, but I was still on earth, unable to connect with my son. It was as if my heart had been pierced with a thorn. I felt an indescribable pain.

The shock, the pain of loss, and the fact that I deeply missed Jonathan brought on an anxiety disorder as well as a hormone imbalance. I had to seek psychiatric help in order to get medication to regain my emotional stability. At the same time, I also accepted psychotherapy to help me attain a healthy understanding of my relationship with Jonathan, and deal with the guilt that I harboured. Having the anxiety disorder made me realise that apart from prayer, psychiatrists and psychotherapists are the professional helpers that God sends us to get us through the low points in our lives. There was nothing shameful about having a psychological illness; it was not an indication that my faith was weak. God knows what we need. He is a loving Father who desires our happiness and wants us to be healed. And so, we should, with open and humble hearts, accept help when we need it.

In the first year after Jonathan's death, apart from my receiving treatment under the psychiatrist and the psychotherapist, my husband, Gerald, and I also made a trip to Hong Kong to attend a twelve-day silent retreat at a retreat centre on Cheung Chau Island. We invited Father Paul Goh Lian Kok, S.J. to be our personal retreat director. He intended to focus on the sudden passing of our son and help us work towards spiritual healing. Not only is Father Paul Goh a priest, but he is also a certified professional therapist. During that retreat, he taught me to use contemplative prayer and other forms of prayer. In those twelve days of silent retreat, I had a profound experience of the power of God's healing.

On our return to Singapore, I continued to see the psychiatrist regularly and he gradually decreased the dosage of my medication. Not long after, I no longer needed the appointments. Thanks be to God!

I will never forget the first time Jonathan appeared to me in a dream.

At that time, I had been facing huge challenges at work. In my dream, I told Jonathan about my problems at work and even asked him if he was in favour of my continuing with the job. He nodded at me. After that, I asked him to intercede for me and he nodded again in reply. After that dream, although my workload continued to be heavy with new challenges coming my way, the problems were always resolved. As I gradually regained my emotional stability and life became calm again, whenever I had any problems, I would ask my son to intercede for me and God would always grant me his favour. I truly believed that Jonathan was at the Lord's side and the Lord always willingly answered the requests that Jonathan brought to him.

In these recent years, whenever I particularly missed my son, I would invite him into my dreams, and he would indeed come. I would ask him if he was well. He would

reply that he was happier now than he had ever been while on earth, and I would be much consoled. However, one must always wake from one's dreams. The bitter pang of parting from him was unbearable. It would take me three days to regain my emotional stability. After experiencing this pain of parting twice, I decided not to invite him into my dreams anymore.

When Jonathan was alive, although we did not have a perfect relationship, we did frequently spend time communicating and sharing our thoughts. Of course, there were also times when we hurt each other, but we would always reconcile after that. Today, although I cannot see him, we still have a relationship; in fact, one even closer than before. It must be because we have no more disagreements and differences of opinion, only the joy of working together – he, in heaven, and I, on earth. I have told him that I will continue to serve the Lord, but on the day that God calls me to heaven, he must come and receive me!

Looking back on my life, God has truly given me uncountable graces. As the psalmist said, “How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?” (Psalm 116:12).

Ah! The Lord gave me Jonathan (Jonathan's Chinese name, Hong En, means 'goodness'); how can I repay the Lord?

My son, Jonathan, was a gift from God, and now God has taken him back. Although it is so painful when our loved ones leave us, I thank the Lord for letting me understand, in such a profound way, that this parting is only for now, not for ever.

And so, let me repeat. The Lord gave me Jonathan; how can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?

Seeing Jesus

By Alice Cheong-Chan Wan Mui

I became a Catholic when I was baptised in 1987. After my baptism, I had often wondered, *How can we see Jesus in others?*

During the period of time when my husband, Robert, was hospitalised with an illness for six months, I saw Jesus.

In late December 2017, Robert was diagnosed with cancer of the small intestine, and the doctor scheduled him for a surgical operation on 22 February 2018, a few days after the Chinese New Year. His surgeon assured us that the operation was a common one and had a success rate of 95%. As my younger brother had gone through a similar procedure the year before, and had successfully recovered, we were full of confidence for Robert's operation. Before the operation, priests, the nuns from the IJ Convent, as well as many Catholic friends and friends from other Christian denominations and religions all promised to pray that God would bless and protect Robert, and grant him a successful operation and a speedy recovery. We were all united in offering our fervent prayers. The operation was deemed successful, and Robert was scheduled to be discharged a few days later, to recuperate at home. Alas, he never made it home;

instead, he ended up staying in the hospital for six months, and when he finally left, it was to return to heaven to be with our Heavenly Father.

I can recall that at 3 a.m. on the fifth day after the operation, I was at home when a call came from the hospital informing me that due to Robert suddenly experiencing severe difficulties in his breathing, he had been sent to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and put on life support. Stunned and terribly upset by this sudden bad news, I began to pray fervently for Robert, knowing that at that very moment, the only one I could depend on was my almighty God.

After being in a coma for four weeks in the ICU, Robert finally regained consciousness. Despite the agonising pain in his body, he continued to smile at us — his family, the medical staff, and friends who came to see him. Robert had a high threshold for pain, and when his pain became unbearable, he would only, with tightly-closed eyes, faintly utter, “Painful!” Whenever we prayed with him by his bedside, he would reverently clutch his rosary while listening quietly to our prayers. His face still glowed in spite of the immense suffering he was going through. He was unable to talk, but with an unsteady hand, he would write notes telling me to go home and rest. At Easter, he wrote many notes of thanks to his friends.

As I witnessed the great trust he had in the Lord, trusting him with his whole heart and soul, my prayer became simply to ask for God’s mercy and that all would go “according to the will of God”. We often praised the Lord together for the times of intimacy we had enjoyed with each other and even more for the times of closeness the Lord had shared with us. Our hearts were filled with peace, awaiting the plan that the Lord would reveal, step by step, to Robert, waiting in God’s time for whatever might happen.

The next few months passed in a blur as Robert's condition seesawed and he was transferred to and fro between the ICU, the common wards, and the community hospital. I was with him every day from 9 a.m. until 7 p.m.

In August 2018, Robert was transferred to the Ang Mio Kio Community Hospital in a bid for him to strengthen his immune system so that he would have a better chance at fighting against the infections that seemed to be constantly attacking him. I spent my nights in the hospital with him. A few of his close friends, who regularly visited him, also went to see him. On National Day, we watched the live telecast of the National Day celebration together.

When the celebration ended, his friends left one after the other, and I helped Robert to clear his phlegm. However, that night, his phlegm would not stop spewing out and I had to help him clear it every few minutes. By 4 a.m., I was so exhausted that my eyes could not stay open and I fell into a dazed sleep. At 5:30 a.m., the nurses woke me up, saying that Robert had pulled out his feeding tube and they had to rush him back to the National University Hospital (NUH). At the time, I thought he had accidentally pulled out the tube, but over the next few days, he kept pulling it out. When asked why, he told the nurses that a man had asked him to do so. We thought he was saying that in jest. Three weeks later, he left us peacefully to return to the Lord's embrace.

Actually, in mid-August, the doctors had already told us that the infections in Robert's body could no longer be resolved and any further treatment would be futile. Moreover, the cancer cells had already spread to his liver. They could only offer him palliative care – measures that would help relieve his pain as much as possible. When we had received this news, our children and I had spent as much time with him as possible, playing card games and tic-tac-toe, and listening to one hymn after another.

When his younger brother, Tony, came to visit him, Robert stretched out his hands and took our hands in his, gazing at us peacefully and calmly. When we asked him if there was anything he wanted us to do for him, or anything that he wanted to tell us, he calmly shook his head. Our hearts also felt at peace, and that was the last time Robert and his brother saw each other. Robert returned to the Lord's embrace on 31 August. Because he had trusted the Lord with all his heart, he was totally immersed in God's love and was able to leave serenely and peacefully.

It was in those six months that I saw Jesus in Robert. His faith in Jesus made his face like a mirror that reflected the face of Jesus, and the boundless love he showed to friends and family was like the love that Jesus has for all people. Robert helped me to understand that whoever puts his trust in Jesus and loves others out of his love for Jesus, then surely, it is in that person that others will see Jesus.



Saying Farewell With a Rose

By Teresa Lee SK

Funerals always make people feel very heavy-hearted, sad, and sorrowful.

When we as followers of Christ attend funeral wakes to offer prayers for the recently departed, we can bring much consolation and incomparable strength to the bereaved family. It can also be a good opportunity to witness to our faith and share the Good News with non-Christian family members and friends present at the wake. I once attended a special and unique remembrance and farewell ceremony — for my goddaughter, Celine — that touched me deeply. Let me tell you about it.

On that particular night, after the wake prayers had been offered, the prayer group had prepared pink roses to be distributed to all present. Everyone was invited to walk up slowly to the front, holding the beautiful roses, while soothing music played in the background. When we approached the casket, we were to quietly express our feelings to Celine, already ‘resting in the Lord’, and then offer her the rose. I could see that almost everyone was moved to tears, especially her family members and relatives, who said their farewells very emotionally and could not bear to move away after bidding farewell.

This simple yet unique remembrance ceremony using flowers was very meaningful and touching indeed. It gave all the mourners present the opportunity and the time to say a proper goodbye, and to express their love for their loved one or dear friend.

After that, the leader of the prayer group invited the family members and friends to share their thoughts and memories of Celine. This was my sharing.

Dear Celine,

You have left us. You have left your beloved family to return to the arms of your Heavenly Father! Tonight, our brothers and sisters in Christ are leading your family, including your older sister, Helen, and your nephew and nieces, in prayer for you. Our hearts feel so heavy because your departure has brought your family such immeasurable pain. Your nephew said to me, "Auntie Teresa, my heart feels empty and my mind is blank. I was in a daze during the prayers." When the prayers ended, I heard the music playing "Amazing Grace" and "Auld Lang Syne". I nudged him gently, saying, "Hey! Get up, here's your rose. Go and offer it to your aunt."

He was suddenly alert. He took the rose, holding it tightly in his hand. Yes, it is right that he uses this rose, a symbol of love, to thank you, his dearest younger aunt, and bid you farewell.

Dear Celine, I know that your nephew and both his younger sisters were your 'followers' from young. Ever since their mother left them more than ten years ago, it was you who brought them up. Not only did you take care of their daily needs, but you also tended to their spiritual growth, bringing them to church for Sunday Masses and catechism classes. During the school holidays, you would treat them to a movie or buy them dinner at the hawker centre. The joy they experienced during

their childhood and the achievements they have attained today are because of your selfless giving.

Why did you love them so much that you sacrificed your youth and personal pleasure for them? It must undoubtedly be because your heart was so full of God's love that you were able to live out the Gospel message of "Love God and love your neighbour", testifying to your faith through your deeds.

My dear goddaughter, from now on, you do not have to endure the pain and suffering from lung cancer anymore! This is the biggest consolation for me and for your family. I take this rose to pay my last respects to you, and to express my love for you. Rest in peace! May you enjoy eternal joy and happiness in God's paradise!

Psalm 23 says: "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever" (Psalm 23:6). May you rest in peace in our Heavenly Father's house!

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Through the Valley of Darkness

By Teresa Ho Yok Kum,
based on an oral account
by Agatha Ho Kwai Chan

In the orphanage

I was born in 1937, the eldest of three girls. When I was about two years old, World War II (1939-1945) erupted, affecting even the many countries far away in Asia, including Singapore. On 15 February 1942, the Imperial Japanese Army invaded Singapore, and Singapore fell under the Japanese reign of terror. As a result, my childhood days were spent in an atmosphere of smoke and gloom. To escape from the cruel tactics of the Japanese army, I followed my parents into hiding in a hillside cemetery in what is now Tiong Bahru.

It was a difficult time waiting for peace to descend upon us again; but when it finally did, my father had unfortunately contracted tuberculosis and had to be hospitalised. I was only nine that year. To eke out a living, my mother found work as a domestic maid, but this meant she had to live in the house of her employer. This put Mother in a dilemma as she was worried that nobody would take care of us, her three young daughters. Father, who was by that time severely ill, urged Mother to seek help from a good friend of his who was working as a cook at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul on Queen Street. This friend kindly brought us to see the priest there and we

explained our current desperate situation. The priest suggested that we approach the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus to ask the nuns there if we could stay temporarily in the convent orphanage. So, Father's good friend led us on a short walk to the convent on Victoria Street. When the nun at the gate learnt about our plight, she requested that Mother and Father's friend wait downstairs while she brought the three of us children upstairs to meet the Mother Superior. I remember that this Mother Superior had a pair of large blue eyes. On learning our history, she looked at us with loving pity, gently shook her head, and very softly said, "OK." Although we were not orphans, the kind Mother Superior was willing to let the three of us move into the orphanage the very next day, allowing Mother to go to work with peace of mind.

Mother brought us back to our home in Chinatown to gather our things. 'Home' was no more than a few rented bedsits, but poor Mother could not even afford the \$40 rent for them, and the rent collectors had already wanted to evict us many times. The memory of that night will always remain with me – Mother packing our clothes and belongings while weeping copiously.

The next day, we parted from Mother. The only thing that was a reassurance to her was that our living accommodation and meals had been most fortuitously settled. On our first night in the orphanage, I tossed and turned, unable to sleep. I got up, tiptoed over to the window, and leant against the windowsill, looking out at the cars going by along Stamford Road below. In the depths of my sorrowful heart, I was thinking, *Why am I staying here?* When I turned around to return to my bed, I discovered my little sister weeping quietly, whimpering that she missed Mother, but I was so full of my own sorrow that I did not know how to console her. Biting back my own tears, I only managed to say, "Don't cry. We'll take it one day at a time."

After our relocation to the orphanage, arrangements were made for us to go to school; thus, we became part of the CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School community. I was placed in Primary Five based on my age, and Madam Li Wan Qing was my form teacher. In actual fact, I had previously only ever spent four months in Primary One and I could only speak Cantonese, not Mandarin, so I did not understand any of the teachers' lessons. Not long after, the end-of-year examinations began. I looked at my exam paper and my mind went blank. When Madam Li came to collect all the scripts, she discovered that the exam paper on my desk was 'blank'! After this incident, the school must have reassessed my academic abilities, because the year after, I found myself in the Primary Two class. From that time on, I could understand the lessons and my confidence in learning grew. I really treasured this opportunity to study and managed to produce satisfactory results for my monthly tests. Moreover, as the pupils in Primary Two were younger and subsequently more playful, I got along well with them and had a most enjoyable time in school.

I can recall that in those days, every morning, the children from the orphanage would attend Mass in the chapel, all neatly attired in our school uniform. But on Sundays, we would wear a different uniform and cross the road to attend Mass at the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd. Although I was not a Catholic, it was then that I began to be introduced to the rituals of the Mass. In the orphanage, the daily language of communication was the Malay language, so very soon I had picked it up and could communicate with the others. Thus, I slowly settled into life in the orphanage.

Life in the orphanage consisted not only of school lessons, but also chores. Each of us had our rostered jobs and these would be rotated every three months. The chores comprised assisting in the kitchen, doing laundry and ironing for the Archbishop, priests, and nuns, cleaning the chapel, washing and wiping the chapel kneelers and pews, and looking after the infants in the orphanage nursery — a job that included

feeding them their milk and washing their diapers. The work in the nursery required night duty too, but those on the night shift would get a cup of hot tea and two slices of bread in the middle of the night. At that time, this simple supper was a very rare 'treat' for us.

However, what the three of us most looked forward to were Mother's monthly visits. Mother would always buy some dry rations for us. The post-war food supplies were inadequate and although we had three meals a day in the orphanage, the reality was that we were often still hungry. Mother's biscuits, filled with her love, not only satisfied our hunger pangs, but also nourished our small hearts longing for maternal love.

Marriage and setting up a family

Back to my alma mater

I actually studied in St Nicholas Girls' School for only two years as the orphanage only took in young children, and by that time, I was already twelve. Being over-age, I had to leave, but my two sisters were still young and could continue to live in the orphanage.

Stepping out of the gates of the IJ Convent signified my departure from my alma mater. By that time, Father had died from his illness while Mother was still working and living in her employer's house. When Mother arrived at the orphanage to take me home, I was thinking, *Where is my home? I am all alone, all by myself, and have no home to return to.* As it turned out, Mother took me to my older aunt's home. There, I would squeeze into her rented bedsit, with Aunt on the bed and me on the floor. To earn a living, I started working at a rubber processing factory, earning a meagre salary. The year I turned fifteen, Aunt and Mother began discussions for me to be married into a good family. So, with the help of the elders, my marriage was

arranged. My husband was a diligent taxi driver of good character and we were a loving couple.

After I left the orphanage, I would accompany Mother on her monthly visits to see my sisters. I remember the time when Mother and I, with my few-months-old baby daughter in my arms, were waiting at the convent entrance for my sisters to come to us, and Sister Françoise happened to be sitting there. She heard us conversing in Cantonese and asked us, in Cantonese, why we had come to the convent. When she learnt that my father-in-law was looking after my daughter while I went to my daily job at a rubber processing factory, earning a daily wage of only \$2.40, she asked if I would be willing to work as the school cleaner, with a monthly salary of \$102. Comparing the two options, returning to work in my alma mater meant a much better remuneration. Sister Françoise gave me a day to consider her offer.

The very next day, I returned to the school to sign the contract with Sister Françoise. Just like that, I was back in my alma mater and was once again a part of St Nicholas Girls' School. I worked at the school until the retirement age. Many batches of students still recognise me as the school cleaner, affectionately calling me "Auntie Kwai Chan" (my name in Cantonese) whenever they see me.

Some time after starting work at St Nicholas, I was at Mass one Sunday at the Church of Saint Michael, near where I lived, when a parishioner asked me if I was Catholic. I shook my head. She asked if I would be willing to receive religious instruction in her home to prepare for baptism into the faith. I replied that as it was very tiring for my father-in-law to look after my child all day, I had to go home straight after work to prepare dinner. It would therefore be impossible for me to go out in the evening to attend catechism classes. This parishioner was so enthusiastic that she willingly offered to teach me in my home one evening a week. She was very

conscientious and responsible. If I forgot what had been taught in a previous lesson, she would patiently revise the lesson with me. I was extremely thankful that my father-in-law and my husband never objected to these classes. At that time, my whole family was living in one single room, so each time I had a lesson, they would quietly 'squeeze themselves' into a corner, fearful of disturbing us. Half a year later, I was baptised together with my five-year-old daughter, and officially became a Catholic. I was baptised as Agatha, and my catechism teacher, Mrs Lei, became my godmother. That was the year I was 26. A few years later, under the Lord's guidance, my mother was also baptised.

However, those happy and peaceful days ended abruptly one dark day.

That day, misfortune struck like a thunderbolt on a sunny day. I was informed that a mentally unsound youth, wielding a knife, had rushed into a coffee shop at Rochor Centre and stabbed three people. When he had tried to escape, he was restrained by a tall Caucasian man and arrested soon after. Of the three victims, two sustained severe injuries, but the only one who succumbed to his injuries was my unfortunate husband. Distraught with grief, I followed the police officer to the police station to assist in the investigations. I could not even go to the hospital to arrange my husband's funeral affairs. In fact, it was Sister Françoise who personally handled all the formalities for me at the hospital. When I was finally able to rush down to the mortuary, before I could even see my husband's body, the world around me began spinning and I fell in a dead faint.

That voice

My family was shattered. I had become a widow at 30. From that point on, all the responsibility of looking after the family rested on me — caring for my ageing father-in-law, bringing up my two young children, and the most pitiable of all — the third

child in my womb, a poor child who had lost his father even before he was born.

The death of my husband was a criminal case, and the trial process for such cases takes a long time. Before the verdict was announced, I was often summoned to court. Once, when they showed me photographs of my husband at his death, I was overcome with grief and nearly passed out. One day, while I was sweeping the stairs in the school, in a dark corner of the stairway, I suddenly heard a male voice calling me by my baptism name. It said clearly into my ear, "Agatha, you must forgive the one you are thinking about." I immediately looked around, but there was nobody there. I was terrified! I continued sweeping, keeping my head down. I had not even been thinking of anyone while I was sweeping. And so, I simply could not fathom what the voice had said. Anyway, the voice had disappeared in an instant, without giving me a chance to ask what it had meant.

Shortly after, the court met for the third session. That morning, Sister Françoise was unable to accompany me to court, but she had, a few days prior, meticulously prepped me on what to say before the judge. So, on the appointed day, I, already heavily pregnant, made my way to the courthouse alone. As I walked by myself, my mind could only think about that ruthless murderer. I had not known him, I had borne no grudges against him, but he had, with a heartless stroke of his knife, destroyed my family's happiness by ruining my family. A fiery rage, like a boiling hot spring, seethed in me. If I had had a knife in hand, I would have plunged it into him!

When I arrived at the courtroom, I saw the murderer's mother silently weeping by one side, her frail and emaciated body seemingly curled into a ball of pain. She gazed with spiritless tear-filled eyes at the person standing in the dock – her young and only son. I could not help thinking, *If her son was sentenced to death, she would have nobody left to support her. Would this broken-hearted mother commit suicide?*

That loving mother's tears seemed to turn into a bucket of cold water that poured itself all over me and quenched the flames of hatred in my heart. My feelings of animosity towards the culprit who had killed my husband suddenly disappeared, replaced by only pity for his heartbroken and desperate mother.

When the judge asked me if I had any requests, I completely forgot what Sister Françoise had taught me to reply, and only said, "Let it be done according to what you say." At that moment, I suddenly realised that the voice in my ear had wanted me to forgive this murderer standing before me. In actual fact, I had not truly forgiven him earlier; I had only felt compassion for his mother. But after I realised that the Lord had wanted me to forgive him, I decided to offer up a Mass for him and pray that the judge would spare him from a death sentence. At that time, the stipend for Mass offering was set at \$5, so I scrimped and saved, slowly accumulating my money cent by cent, and when I had finally saved \$5, I went to the Church of Saints Peter and Paul and offered a Mass.

That voice could have been the voice of our Heavenly Father or the voice of Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus was crucified on a cross. At the moment of his death, did he not also leave for all humankind a lesson in forgiveness? I thanked the Lord for his timely guidance and for granting me wisdom. I understood that it was necessary for me to resolve the hatred in my heart so that I would be able to face the challenges in my life with resolve, because it would take a pair of shoulders capable of overcoming weakness to bear the arduous task of looking after my family.

The angel that God sent

Among the many teachers in the school, I got on particularly well with Mrs Sequerah, who was an English Language teacher. We would communicate daily in the Malay language, chatting about everything. One day, out of the blue, she suggested that I go

to KK Women's Hospital for a health screening, as there was a special package being offered. What was surprising was that I did not reject her suggestion at the time, but actually agreed to it, on condition that she brought me there as I did not know the way by bus. She readily agreed. So I applied for a half-day's leave from Sister Françoise, and after school dismissal that day, Mrs Sequerah drove me to the hospital entrance and instructed me to register using my identity card. She was unable to accompany me further as she had to return home to look after her children.

It was during that health check-up that the doctor discovered I had uterine cancer. Due to the fact that it was only in the first stage, I had felt nothing and had had no symptoms whatsoever. The doctor suggested that I should have my uterus removed and advised me to consult my husband first. But when he learnt that my husband was already deceased, he immediately fixed a date for the hysterectomy.

Back then, even if people were unwell, they would avoid seeing the doctor as far as possible. I, for whom life had always been hard, had always believed that if you had no pain, you had no illness. I would certainly not have spent my money just going for a health check. But I knew that if you give cancer cells a chance to spread, your condition will worsen, the cancer will reach a more serious stage, and the pain will become intolerable. By that time, the illness is incurable and medicines become futile. If that had happened to me, my three very young children would have become orphans. God loves me so much! Our Lord Jesus is great! He had sent Mrs Sequerah, my angel on earth, to guide me to the health screening that got rid of the source of my illness and saved my life.

I truly believe that because of my smallness, my kind and loving God was always looking after me!

A road accident

One day many years later, my son was driving with me in the passenger seat. The taxi in front of us suddenly slowed down. My son immediately applied the brakes, but little did we expect the brake mechanism to fail, and consequently, our car smashed headlong into the rear of the taxi. The collision was forceful. My son's seatbelt saved him from injury, but my seatbelt split open and the force of the impact threw me heavily against the dashboard. At the time, I had no visible physical injuries, but by nightfall, I was experiencing severe chest pain and my whole body was in great discomfort. I managed to endure it till dawn and went to the hospital. The X-ray revealed that I had some fractured ribs, with a few almost totally broken. The doctor arranged for me to be operated on the very next day. It would be a major operation to repair the ribs and the process of recovery would be long and painful.

Before the operation, the doctor decided to take another X-ray for me. After he had studied the second X-ray, he told me that I did not need an operation. All I required was sufficient rest for my fractured ribs to self-heal.

After I had been transferred back to the normal ward, the doctor on duty looked at my report and told me I had been in a rather serious accident; in actual fact, my injuries were not minor, but what was strange was that I had not needed an operation. All the doctors thought I had been extremely fortunate. As I lay resting on my hospital bed, whenever any medical staff walked by and looked through my medical report, they would always quietly marvel to each other, "Such severe injuries, yet she does not need an operation. How lucky she is!"

Everybody said I was lucky! But only I knew that it was not luck, but truly and completely a miracle from God! God's almighty power! God's love! Thanks be to God! Praise the Lord!

During that period of enforced bedrest, I really felt God's love for me. I resolved, upon my hospital discharge, to be a fervent Catholic, carrying out my duties well to glorify God.

At present, I am in the Chinese Bible study group at the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I am also in the intercessory prayer group of the spirituality ministry of the Archdiocesan Commission for Apostolate of Mandarin-Speaking (ACAMS), which meets every Wednesday morning to intercede for the world and those in need. I pray the Divine Mercy devotion at three o'clock every afternoon and I also attend daily Mass. Each day, I long for evening time when I can go to the Church of Christ the King for the weekday Mass. I always make the effort to get there earlier to offer my own Rosary prayer, and then participate in Mass. I love to go to church to get closer to God as I feel at home there. I love to take part in the Mass and receive the Body of Christ because I love to kneel before the altar to receive Jesus into my heart. After Mass, my heart is always filled with peace and joy.

I am 83 this year. My daughter and younger son have both gone before me to be with the Lord. I thank God for hearing my prayers. My older son (my middle child) is diligent and enjoys a successful career; he has his own family and has given me two grandsons. God has also protected my only granddaughter (my daughter's daughter), who is still young but produces exceptional results at work. The Lord has granted me good health, allowing me in my lifetime to participate in various Church activities and enabling me to stay strong and rooted in my faith.

Looking back on my life, I can say I have suffered much, but God has never left me. "If I should walk in the valley of darkness, I fear no danger for you are beside me" (Psalm 23:4). Thanks be to God! Praise the Lord!

A reflection by Teresa Ho Yok Kum:

As I interviewed Agatha and listened to her narration, I realised that her calm demeanour and gentle voice could not suppress the power that lay behind a soul that has been moved and touched much. Each part of her narrative showed a facet of her fateful destiny, yet also demonstrated God's love for her. God's love for all humankind is essentially the same but is manifested in different ways. I believe that the love that God expressed to Agatha was the tough love of a 'strict Father'.

At the end of the interview, as I stepped out of her bright and spotless home, what came to my mind were the words of the psalm: "If I should walk in the valley of darkness, I fear no danger for you are beside me; your crook and your staff are there to comfort me" (Psalm 23:4). I feel that this verse from Psalm 23 best portrays Agatha's faith testimony. Hence, I entitled this story "Through the Valley of Darkness".



"And after the fire came the murmur of a gentle breeze. "

1 Kings 19:12



A Gentle Breeze

By Susie Seow

I was born in Penang in 1938. I am a middle child with an older sister and a younger brother. In 1941, the Second World War (1939-1945) spilled over into South East Asia. In those wartime days, all the children did not have the opportunity to go to school. When the war ended, my parents brought my siblings and me to Singapore where we resettled. I attended Chong Fu Primary School where many students, like me, were over-age. After finishing my primary school education, I enrolled with my classmates for the secondary section in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School.

In St Nicholas, I had some good friends who were Catholics. Due to the fact that their mothers had died early, my friends had learnt to make their own decisions early in life, including the decision to get baptised. I came from a Buddhist family, yet I followed my friends to Novena Church (also known as the Church of Saint Alphonsus) every Saturday for the Novena devotions, and on Sundays, I would attend Mass with them at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. When my parents were still around, I never ever expressed to them my desire to become a Catholic.

Without even completing my education in St Nicholas Girls' School, I went to

Melbourne, Australia, to study advertising art. Upon my graduation, I stayed to work in a related job. During my six years in Melbourne, I attended Mass on Sundays. When I returned to Singapore, I continued to pursue a career in advertising art and led a very busy life. Although my husband was not Catholic, he was willing to join me and our three children to attend Sunday Masses together.

When it was time for my daughter to enrol in kindergarten, St Nicholas Girls' School was just preparing to open a pre-primary section. With the backing of the principal, Mrs Hwang-Lee Poh See, the school organised a design competition for the new school uniform for the pre-primary pupils and invited the first batch of parents to submit their entries. I did not expect my design to win the competition! To be able to use my God-given artistic talents to make a contribution to the school this way made me feel so gratified. Praise the Lord!

With my daughter studying in St Nicholas, I found myself back in the warm embrace of the school. I became one of the founding members of the St Nicholas Alumnae Association. The first president of our alumnae association was Ee Nah, the wife of Dr Ow Chin Hock. When the alumnae association formed a choir, I also became a member and remain one till today. Although I was so active in the various school activities as an alumnae member as well as a parent, I do not know why I still had no desire then to be baptised.

In 1995, my family was living in West Coast, so we attended Mass at the Church of the Holy Cross. One Sunday, the parish bulletin announced that the parish would be starting RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) classes in English and Mandarin, and I decided to sign up. However, it was not with the intention of getting baptised, but rather to find out more about the Catholic faith. At the time, the English RCIA class time did not suit my schedule, and so, I registered for the one

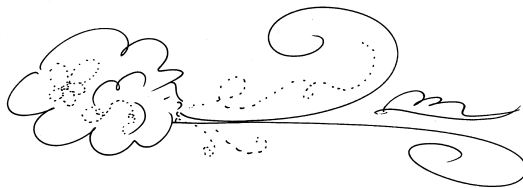
in Mandarin. The teacher, Joseph Ho, taught clearly and convincingly, leading me to a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith. After attending these classes for a year, I decided to get baptised.

Many people encounter numerous storms in their lives and deeply feel God's love for them as they receive his blessings and protection through their difficulties. As for me, my life can be considered smooth sailing in all aspects of career, health, and family life. Now, I am already a grandmother of seven. After the death of my husband, I still enjoy a happy and healthy life. Every week, I join the alumnae choir, play golf, play mahjong, learn ballroom dancing, and do aqua-aerobics. Occasionally, I ferry the grandchildren around. The Lord has always granted me a rich and vibrant life.

My faith journey was so simple and natural. It was just like the Prophet Elijah's encounter with God in the cave: "Then Elijah was told, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came the murmur of a gentle breeze. When Elijah heard this, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' " (1 Kings 19:11-13).

I have never encountered God through being tossed about in the storms of life. Instead, I have come to know God through friendship, enjoying the love of God as a calm, gentle breeze. The philosopher, Martin Buber, once said, “All men have access to God, but each man has a different access” (Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*).

May you also be able to experience God in the gentle breeze, hear his voice, and be immersed in his love.



Lead Me, Lord

By Helen Phua Kia Lee

I spent twelve years of my school life in the Victoria Street campus of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, from Primary One all the way to Pre-University Two, being in the very last batch of students graduating from the pre-university section. In those days, only the Catholic students were required to report early to school for their daily catechism classes, to learn about Jesus and the basics of the Catholic faith. Although I was not a Catholic, most inexplicably, the catechism class register had my name on it, and so, from the time I was in Primary One, I had to attend catechism class every morning. I still remember that my Primary One catechism teacher was Miss Teresa Ho Yok Kum.

Sister Françoise, the then principal, placed great importance on these catechism classes. Every day, when catechism class had ended, holding the class attendance in her hand, she would announce very loudly during assembly the names of those who had failed to attend, and question them for the reason for their absence. Once, having woken up late, I, too, missed the class and was the 'recipient' of one such announcement. It was most embarrassing, and from that day on, I always rose early and always attended catechism class.

In my student days, as I entered through the school gates each day, it was a habit for me to go into the chapel, dip my finger in the holy water, and make the sign of the cross (the stately Gothic chapel is now the banquet hall in present-day CHIJMES). If there was an upcoming test or examination, I would make a special petition to the Lord Jesus for his help. At the time, if a nun had passed away, her coffin would be temporarily laid out in the chapel, and Sister Françoise would encourage us to pray for the deceased. Out of curiosity, I would walk up to gaze upon the body inside, and surprisingly, the young me did not feel afraid at all. I did not know then, how to pray for the dead, and so I would recite what was familiar to me — the Our Father and the Hail Mary.

Later, by divine providence, I met my other half. Being a Catholic, he requested for us to be married in church, to which I had no objection. During the marriage preparations, the priest asked if I would be willing to have our future children baptised, and I agreed without hesitation. After we got married, I always attended Sunday Masses with my husband every weekend. When I think about all this, God's grace is truly amazing. Because I had studied in St Nicholas Girls' School, I had unwittingly grown up in a Catholic atmosphere, and thus, I felt very close to the Catholic faith.

My daughter received infant baptism soon after she was born. In the year she turned three, I suddenly felt that I should be baptised too. Otherwise, in a few years' time when she began attending catechism classes, how would I be able to teach her by example?

However, regarding my conversion to Catholicism, I had, for many years, nursed a hidden worry in my heart. I was the only child of adoptive parents who were not Catholic. They usually burned incense to worship their gods. When my adoptive

father passed away, the funeral rites for him followed Buddhist rituals. If one day, and that day will inevitably come, my adoptive mother leaves this earthly world, I would be the one responsible for her funeral affairs. When that time comes, if I were of a different religion, would I be unable to fulfil my filial duties to her? I decided that I had to ask a priest to answer this question for me before I got baptised.

That year, the Catholic Church had not yet begun RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) classes. Anyone who was interested in becoming a Catholic would be personally catechised by the parish priest, either together with others in a small group, or individually. I had one-on-one lessons with Monsignor Noel Goh. (*Editor's note: The title of monsignor signifies a priest who has distinguished himself and has been honoured by the Pope for his service to the Church.*) Before my first lesson began, I asked Monsignor Goh about the one issue that had always bothered me. Monsignor Goh listened, and in a calm voice, unhesitatingly answered me with words to this effect: "Your father and mother, who brought you up, are your loved ones. When we burn incense for them, it is a sign of our respect for them, not an act of idol worship. The Church understands this." Monsignor Goh's words enabled me to cast away the huge rock that had weighed me down for so many years. After this, I was able to focus on all my lessons, awaiting the day the Lord would grant me the grace of baptism. But before that, I had to decide who my godmother would be. I immediately thought of my first catechism teacher — Miss Teresa Ho Yok Kum. I approached her with my request, and she gladly and immediately accepted.

After my baptism, my family continued our habit of attending the English Mass every Sunday, although I only half understood the priest's homilies. Later, my Catholic friends were most surprised to discover that I had not been confirmed, and so they encouraged me to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. Originally, I had in mind a good friend to be my confirmation godmother, but she had to return to her home

country to be with a family member who had taken seriously ill. So, another good friend, Anna Lim, suggested that I ask Rosa Wong Mei Kwui, saying that since she was my senior from St Nicholas, she would be a perfect fit. But Rosa had been a prefect in my schooldays, and somehow, I had the impression that she was a very serious person. Although I was already in my 60s then, I was still behaving like a young schoolgirl in awe of her senior, thinking it would be too presumptuous of me to ask her. In the end, it was Anna who most obligingly took the initiative to contact her for me.

Afterwards, Rosa invited me to her home, and after a few hours of earnest conversation, she agreed to become my second godmother. At the time, she already had her own faith-sharing column — “Lamp for My Feet” — in *Hai Sing Pao*, the local fortnightly Chinese Catholic newspaper, and in fact, her articles were already the spiritual food that I looked forward to reading, but I always had to wait two weeks before the next one. That day, when we had talked face to face for those few hours, to personally hear her sharing about her spiritual epiphanies was an experience that yielded much for me. Through the many times that we have interacted since, and from reading her articles, I have discovered that she is an approachable and sincere person, and that initial impression I had had of her as being ‘serious’ also changed.

After my confirmation, my faith grew and strengthened. I thought that I should participate in the Mandarin Mass with its more familiar language medium through which I could more deeply understand the teachings of the Lord Jesus and get closer to God. And so, I decided to ‘part ways’ with my husband and daughter — they would continue to attend Mass in English, while I would attend the one in Mandarin and also be active in the Mandarin-speaking ministries in the Archdiocese.

I then discovered that many St Nicholas alumnae were very active in the Mandarin-

speaking community; some were cradle Catholics, while others, like myself, had been baptised as Catholics only in adulthood. Since joining the faith formation activities of the Mandarin-speaking community, I have rekindled ties with many former classmates and schoolmates. At present, I am active in the Mandarin-speaking community at the Church of the Risen Christ in Toa Payoh. With two seniors as my godmothers, under their guidance and instruction, my spiritual life has grown. Thanks be to God for the bountiful graces that he has bestowed upon me through my alma mater!

As an adult, I have come to understand that life cannot always be smooth sailing. I remember suffering a major setback one time, which threw me into the depths of despair. Feeling despondent and at a loss, I was just aimlessly wandering around on the road by myself, and while walking, I inadvertently wandered into a church. As I sat down facing the altar, my disordered senses suddenly calmed down and I knew that the Lord was at my side and in my heart and that I had never been alone. Till today, every time I feel helpless, dejected, or anxious, I would go to church to spend time in silent reflection, listening to the Lord's voice in my heart.

As I look back over the past decades, the Lord has always been leading me – through my twelve years of schooling in a Catholic school and the inexplicable way I started to attend catechism classes there. After leaving St Nicholas, because I had married a Catholic, the weekly Sunday Masses that I attended with my husband helped me to maintain my connection with God. The Lord patiently waited for me to be baptised and confirmed, then he led me back to the Mandarin-speaking Church community, where he now helps me to build a more intimate relationship with him as I serve and praise him together with my brothers and sisters in Christ.

From all this, I know that the Lord has never abandoned me. All along, he has been

sending different people to lead me. As I have matured in years, and amassed life's experiences, I also have a different perspective on many things now. On hindsight, the painful suffering that I had experienced during those dark days in my past were indeed painful, yet they were integral to my growth, and the process of growing also led to a change in my mindset. In particular, I now pray for the Lord to grant me wisdom and strength to meet the challenges that come before me, and to grant me faith and courage to face difficulties. As recorded by the apostle Saint Paul in these words from the Lord to him: "My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

I have come to realise that in my prayer, I should always, with a grateful heart, thank the Lord for all that he has given me. For whether in joy or in sorrow, in good times or in bad, he is always leading and protecting me, and indeed, through my weakness, he manifests his almighty power and compassion.



Freely, Freely

By Winnie Goh

I was born into a family with nine children, including me. Because of our family circumstances, one of my older sisters and I were put up for adoption. My adoptive parents were Catholic and before adopting me, they had adopted another girl who was six years older. It was only many years later that they had a son of their own.

When I came of age to go to school, my adoptive parents decided to enrol me at CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School. But why they did not send my sister, who was their first adopted daughter, to a Catholic school, was something I never understood.

I was extremely happy in my ten years in St Nicholas. I still recall how much I looked forward to answering questions during catechism classes in Primary One, because if our answers were correct, our teacher, Madam Ang, would give us a holy picture card. I will never forget the joy I always experienced from collecting those holy picture cards as a young child! In primary school, I was involved in the Joyful Vanguard, and when I went up to secondary school, I joined the Legion of Mary. Throughout my school life in St Nicholas, my principal, Sister Françoise, and vice-principal, Sister Cecilia, were both very fond of me. I remember that in Primary Five, they even gave

me a violin. In my secondary school years, I even considered becoming a nun!

When I grew up and entered society, I was still active in the Bible Association and in other Church activities, but after my marriage and having children of my own, my work and caring for my family kept me so busy that I only had time for Sunday Mass. However, I still made it a point to attend the annual 3-day-2-night retreat organised by the Church. Later, when the children were older and I began to have more time to myself, I started travelling overseas, being a fun-loving person. After these trips, I would continue to keep in touch with my new friends and we would often go for karaoke sessions and bowling. In these times of relaxation, our bonds of friendship would be strengthened, and whenever there were appropriate opportunities, I would tell them about the Catholic faith. In this way, I have led some of them to become Catholics. This was a most unexpected reward for me.

More than ten years ago, I accepted a friend's invitation to attend a Divine Mercy devotion session and I was deeply moved by the prayers. I decided to recommend this mode of prayer to my parish church, Saint Joseph's Church in Bukit Timah. My parish priest approved my proposal on condition that the prayer group would be completely led and managed by lay people. And so, I gathered a group of parishioners and we formed a prayer group to lead the Divine Mercy devotion in our parish on Sundays at 9:30 a.m. As we had quite a number of elderly people who were interested in this devotion, although the prayer session itself only lasted for an hour, we would stay an extra half hour to share with one another what the priest had preached in his homily during the morning Mass. Since many elderly people tend not to have a good memory, they enjoyed having these discussions.

Two years ago, I opened a public account on Facebook to reach out through social media to local and overseas followers of Christ, for the purpose of sharing about the

Catholic faith, and also to promote the Divine Mercy devotion. I also post excerpts from the diary of Saint Faustina that have touched me. I never expected such an enthusiastic response to this, and today, this Facebook page — “Brothers and Sisters in Christ” — enjoys the participation of over a thousand followers. All praise and thanks be to God!

In recent years, with my sons busy with their own families, I have had even more time to myself, but I have also come to cherish even more the opportunities I get to meet with my loved ones. Because of this, a few years ago, I contacted my biological siblings and organised a gathering to celebrate the Mid-autumn Festival together. At our first gathering, everybody turned up, and I felt so touched and deeply comforted. Now, our mid-autumn family reunion has become a yearly tradition.

Looking back on my life, I feel so blessed. Because of the Lord’s kind and merciful generosity, I have been freely given multiple families filled with peace and joy, with so many brothers and sisters. Apart from the siblings from my biological family, I also have an older sister and a younger brother from my adoptive family. When I entered St Nicholas, the school became my second home, with the principal and teachers as my elders and my classmates as my wonderful sisters. When I was baptised and became a Catholic, I became a member of God’s huge family, and all the people whom God loves are my brothers and sisters in Christ.

My blessings have been so freely given to me. As I give thanks for these blessings, I feel a deep sense of duty to serve the Lord through serving others. As it is recorded in the Bible, before Jesus sent his twelve apostles out on their first mission, he instructed them as follows, “As you go, proclaim that the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those suffering from leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:7-8).

At this point in my life, my heart desires to follow the example of Mother Teresa (Saint Teresa of Calcutta), by doing more for God to the best of my ability. And so, I recently registered for some caregiving courses on looking after the housebound elderly, with the hope of picking up some useful skills to serve the elderly. I also hope to have the opportunity to share the Word of God with them. I pray that God will grant me the strength and wisdom to lead others to know him and accept him, because I believe that the greatest gift is for me to be able to share with others the gift that I have received so freely from God. I fervently pray and humbly entrust everything to the Lord.



"Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth,
you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it,
you islands, and all who live in them."

Isaiah 42:10



Meeting Him Through Taizé Prayer

By Christina Cheng Hong Aik

My maternal grandmother and mother were both Catholics whereas my father was a non-believer who did not approve of having his children baptised from a young age. Because of this, my grandmother and mother had cherished the hope that if I grew up in a Catholic mission school environment, I would voluntarily accept baptism. This was why I was educated in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School from Primary One till Secondary Four. Upon graduation, I chose Catholic Junior College for my two years of high school education. Being immersed in a Catholic school environment for twelve years gave me the chance to learn about God and Mother Mary as well as participate in the Church's various activities. My husband, Frederick, was an atheist before we met, but before we got married, we attended religious instruction classes conducted by Father Paul Tong in the Church of the Sacred Heart. A year later, in 1983, we received the Sacrament of Baptism, becoming part of the big family of God.

Frederick and I love to sing. In 1985, we joined the Chinese choir in the Church of Saint Bernadette and it has been 35 years since then. During this period, we had gathered some like-minded church buddies to form a vocal ensemble called "Xin Yun

Choral Group” to spread the Word of God through the singing of hymns, and we also did some tape recordings of our singing for the purpose of evangelisation. Some time later, two of our members left to further their education overseas, and so, our choral group ceased its activities.

In 2000, our group leader, Veronica, formed a Chinese Taizé Community prayer group with the respected and beloved Father Paul Tong as our spiritual director. The Taizé Community was founded by Brother Roger in Taizé, a small village in eastern France, in 1940, with the aim of promoting Christian unity by advocating that all who believe in Christ should pray together. Taizé prayer involves the repetitive singing of simple phrases, usually taken from the Psalms or other verses from Scripture, to worship and praise the Lord.

Every Saturday evening at 7:30 p.m., we gathered in a classroom in the old parish activity centre at the Church of the Sacred Heart, using the prayer methods of singing chants, reading the Bible, silent meditation, and intercessory prayer, to be in communion with the Lord. At the start of our Taizé prayer sessions, we practise meditation by focusing our attention on the silence to feel the presence of God. Then, through the repetition of short chants, we allow ourselves to meet the Lord in prayer. After listening to a Gospel reading and a sharing by the priest or one of the members, we spend about 15 to 20 minutes in silence, pondering God’s Word, and at the same time, sensing the presence of the Holy Trinity through the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, allowing the grace of Jesus Christ to fill our hearts. After this period of reflective meditation, we offer our prayers of intercession to God and end with The Lord’s Prayer. Following this, we share in small groups the insights gained from our contemplation and how the Gospel message has enlightened us.

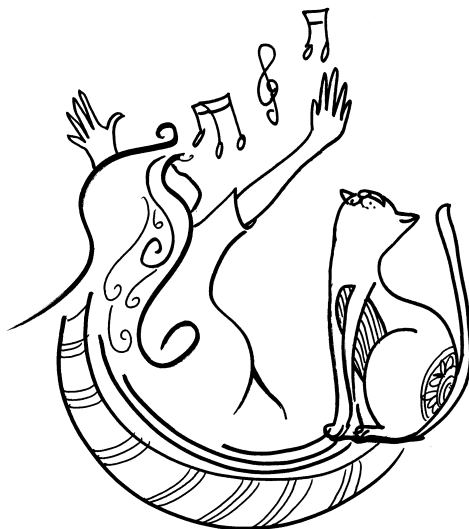
I initially joined the Taizé prayer group because I love singing hymns and I wanted to pray through singing to express my love for God. I am basically more of an introvert who is not fond of sharing my life experiences or insights from reading Scripture in large groups. So, the Taizé prayer format suits my personality very well as it involves mainly one-to-one silent communication with the Lord. Thus, every Saturday night, I would meet God in the silence. In actual fact, when we were first learning how to meditate, in order to focus ourselves to sense the Lord's presence, it was not easy at all. It took me several years to learn to focus.

I am so thankful for Father Paul Tong's insightful sharing of the Gospel, and I am grateful to the late Father John Baptist Tou, who took over as our spiritual director when we moved from the Church of the Sacred Heart to the Church of Saint Bernadette in the later years. I am also grateful to Veronica who guided us every week, as well as introduced books on prayer and spirituality to us. Through continuous practice, we can learn to let go and quieten ourselves to be in communion with the Lord. Our members come from different parishes to pray together, and we are blessed at different times to be led and inspired by the Holy Spirit to experience the presence of the Lord.

Thanks be to God for gathering this small prayer group (presently more than twenty of us) that has been praying together for the last twenty years, come rain or shine. When we bring contemplative prayer into our daily lives and meet the Lord through daily prayer, the subtle guidance of the Holy Spirit leads us to experience spiritual growth. Our annual retreats, in particular, have given us the opportunity to spend time alone with God, through meditation and contemplation, to experience how great and amazing our Creator God is. We also spend time in nature to appreciate the wonderful gifts of God's miraculous creation. And most importantly, during these retreats, I can feel the love of our God who is in us and everywhere. These brothers

and sisters in Christ are like a big family, a group of old friends. Thanks be to God for the special gift of this group that continues to nurture our spiritual growth while immersing us in God's love!

I am extremely grateful to my mother for sending me to St Nicholas Girls' School. I thank God for his leading, in granting me and Frederick the blessing of meeting the Lord through Taizé prayer, and also the blessing of receiving the abundant love of God through this loving prayer community.



Fresh Wind and Fresh Fire

By Agnes Toh

About twenty years ago, God touched a number of members in a certain community through a spirit-filled book entitled *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. Not a single person who read this book remained unenlightened or unmoved by the Holy Spirit. Under this irresistible spiritual force, an evangelical Christian community of ten called “Clouds of Praise” was born!

When I think back to the very beginning, every member could feel that God was calling and each resolved to respond. But as to why, what, and how? We had absolutely no clue! So, we gathered together every day to read the Scriptures, and imitating the life of the early apostles, we shared our resources and began a full-time ministry, without drawing any salary. Having such a Catholic lay community as ours was unprecedented in the local Catholic Church in those days; so I am thankful to have been a part of that history.

The Word of God is so sweet and God’s Word is a living word; the Lord really spoke to us through the Bible. In the subsequent days and months, all our plans, activities, funding, prayer requests, problems, and other issues found their answers through our

studying of the Bible. In that era when fax machines were still popular, while we were waiting for the Lord's response to a particular issue, an immediate answer would even come through a fax!

The gift of new songs

God not only taught us through his Word, but he also used us, his humble instruments, to manifest his almighty power. In our community, apart from one sister who had had some formal music training, the rest of us had had no musical background at all. Despite this, God graciously granted us the ability to compose hymns of praise, one song after another. God's standards are entirely different from human standards. On many occasions when our hymns were judged by the professionals to be not in conformity with the rules of music theory, those were the exact songs that God used to tug at heartstrings, comfort souls, and make people feel deeply blessed and anointed. We made CD recordings of our songs and sold them during the events we organised, using the proceeds to fund our activities. Despite having had no experience in song composition or music arrangement, we were still able to produce six CD recordings. Truly, we could not help but exclaim, "Alleluia! All glory be to God!"

God put these new songs into our mouths, enabling us to praise him and spread his love through our voices. Besides leading the singing during assembly in Catholic schools and during spiritual formation events, we also accepted invitations from Catholic communities in Malaysia to organise camps for children and youth. As we listened to the sharing from the youth, we felt deeply that the psychological damage caused by broken parent-child relationships was agonising, and so we became conscious of the need to organise family camps. Later on, each time such a camp ended, when we personally witnessed the almighty power of God restoring broken family relationships and healing two generations of emotional hurts, we would be deeply inspired and filled with joy. Praise and thanks be to God!

The Lord led us, step by step, to open up our ministry territory. Apart from the CD production of our own songs and the organisation of family camps, we also conducted the Alpha course in Mandarin as well as provided physiotherapy skills training for children with special needs. Among other things, we also presented musicals. Our activities were directed towards both Catholics as well as non-Catholics.

God never short-changes

Without a salary, total reliance on the sales of our CDs was simply unsustainable for us, not to mention the fact that we often had to arrange transport for our overseas missions at our own expense. This ‘zero income’ life of ministry posed a serious challenge to us and was like a dramatic roller coaster ride, compelling us to constantly cling to the Lord’s garment.

I remember an occasion when my utilities bill was due. That day, before I left home, I had left the bill on my altar, asking the Lord to ‘settle’ it for me, as I was short of money! Having left the problem in his hands, I left. Just before returning home in the evening, as per my usual habit, I checked my mailbox. I was dumbfounded — there was actually a \$50 note inside. At the time, our community members always helped one another out financially, settling things directly, never mysteriously like this, and moreover, I had not even mentioned to them that my bill was due. So it must have been God’s masterstroke! However, with a touch of mischief, I said with some puzzlement to the Lord, “My utilities bill is about \$70. I still don’t have enough.” The Lord’s humorous reply came back, “You can manage the remaining amount.” I was rather amused! But that incident helped me to experience what it meant to pray for my ‘daily bread’, what it meant to believe that God never ‘short-changes’, and what it meant to always trust that the Lord will provide everything and will never delay in doing so.

Perhaps some might say that that was pure coincidence, or that someone had put the money into the wrong mailbox! As for me, I truly believe it was a blessing from God who wanted me to rely on him even more. I was so touched by this incident that I wrote a song called “The Kingdom of God”, with the lyrics inspired by Chapter 6, verses 26-34, of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, writing it as a children’s song for adults.

The original intention of serving

There was another time when we rented a ten-seater vehicle to head north to a few places in Malaysia to conduct our activities. A few days before we set off, with all our materials already prepared, I received a call from a stranger. She had got my contact number through a few friends. She was a staff member from a certain vocational institute and had an examination script that needed urgent translation. She told me frankly that the school was only willing to pay a translation fee of \$50, a meagre wage for the work to be done. But out of charity, I agreed to help her, and over the telephone, I also shared with her about the outreach work that we were doing.

On the day of submission of the translated work, we finally met up. After she had paid me \$50, she also gave me a red packet, saying that the contents were more than half of her monthly salary, but she wanted to bless us in our forthcoming mission work in Malaysia. I asked her how she could believe all that I had said when we had only spoken over the phone. She firmly replied, “I just believe!” I thanked her for her trust, because at the time, there was a fair amount of suspicion and criticism of our work from some fellow Catholics. Later, I discovered \$500 in the red packet and was truly touched by her generous help. Thanks be to God for sending us this angel, whose offering we used as part payment for the vehicle rental fee. In return for my small act of charity, God had rewarded me ten times over!

Worthy of mention is the fact that the exam script that I had translated was for a hairdressing course. Coincidentally, before the establishment of our community, I had translated teaching resources for a hair salon training school, and of course the subject was hair. And during that time, our Bible sharing had been about the story of Samson in Chapter 13 of the Book of Judges. The Angel of God had instructed the mother of Samson thus: “No razor is to touch his head, for the boy is to be consecrated to God from his mother’s womb” (Judges 13:5). Not shaving the head, but instead, letting the hair grow long — what this means is that the hair is the offering and Samson belongs totally to God. Samson’s hair is used as a symbol here — a sign of the covenant between ourselves and God as well as a mark of our surrender to God. Three times God associated me with ‘hair’, reminding me to always remember my original intention of serving him.

Our lives influence others

Yet another time, we had a collaboration with a particular priest to lead a retreat for illegal migrant workers in Tokyo, Japan. The priest would preach the sessions while we would lead the praise and worship as well as share our testimonies. Air tickets for ten would be an exorbitant expenditure, but although we did not know where the money would come from, we believed that God had a plan. True enough, our good God granted one of our sisters a temporary job, with the remuneration that she received proving to be just sufficient for the airfares. After the retreat, the person-in-charge emailed to inform us that a few of the retreatants had decided to return to their home countries. They had left their spouses and children to work in Tokyo as ‘illegal labour’ for many years, hoping only to be able to provide a better life for their families, but the sharing given by the youths from our community during the retreat had stirred up many feelings and emotions in them, as they had been reminded of their own children back at home. Now, they had recognised that family was more important than money and had decided to return home. Of course, this decision also

meant that they would have to give up the opportunity to make money in Tokyo, as they would not be allowed back in once they left!

This made us experience once again how God uses us as his instruments. Through our sharing at the retreat, our lives had influenced others! I have truly felt that our God is a living God. He is with us everywhere, knowing everything about us. Whatever work he wants done, he will take care of everything.

In those “Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire” years of serving God, such stories like these were endless!

An abundant life

I am a cradle Catholic who studied in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School and I am active in the Church community. From when I was young, God had planted a seed in me, and had led me to serve him in the Church. However, that period of full-time ministry without pay was, without a doubt, a big test of faith for me! Looking back on my eight years of “Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire” ministry, I can say that till today, those times of grace were when I felt my life at its most abundant and when I felt closest to the Lord!



"In so far as you did this to one of the
least of these brothers of mine,
you did it to me."

Matthew 25:40



He Walks With Me

By Alice Cheong-Chan Wan Mui

The joyful children of God

I was born in China and only came to Singapore to be reunited with my family when I was seven years old. I remember one Christmas Eve, late in the night, when I was waiting up for my three older sisters, who were Catholics, to return home from midnight Mass, looking forward to the supper they had promised to bring back for me. In the wee hours of the morning, I heard the clear sound of laughter coming from downstairs. I hurried to the window and, looking down, saw my sisters chatting as they strolled along, singing “Silent Night” in between their conversations. In the silence of the nighttime, their happy banter sounded especially joyful and pleasant. I found myself thinking that it must be so enjoyable and pleasing to be a Catholic!

A deeper understanding

After I completed primary school, my mother sent me to CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School on Victoria Street (what is now known as CHIJMES), hoping that its strict instructional methods would tame my mischievous ways, and at the same time, provide a good foundation for my English. Because of this, I had the opportunity to receive a rigorous education from the nuns. This also opened my mind to know about the

Catholic faith. My older sisters studied in Saint Anthony's Convent on Middle Road (what is now the National Design Centre), with both our schools just separated by a less than ten-minute walk, and from our home, we would always travel the same route to and from school. I remember that on Fridays, my sisters would bring me along for the 6:30 a.m. Mass at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, located between our schools on Queen Street. We would wake up early in the morning every Friday to catch the 5:45 a.m. bus from Tiong Bahru to the church. After Mass, we would have breakfast in the coffee shop next to the church, then go our separate ways, rushing on foot to our respective schools on Victoria Street and Middle Road. Those happy journeys with my sisters laid the foundation for our deep bonds of sisterhood.

In secondary school, we had a compulsory Bible class once a week. I still remember Mrs Sequerah telling us Bible stories during those lessons, like the birth of Moses in the Book of Exodus, and how Moses was chosen by God to lead his own people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. Her vivid and lively storytelling, narrated in crisp, sweet English, was utterly captivating. That year, the movie, *Ben-Hur*, adapted from the novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, was being screened at the Odeon Cinema, and the school arranged for the students to watch it. This movie made me feel so profoundly the amazing power of God that I was sure he could help us out of whatever predicament we found ourselves in. After watching this movie, I also attended Sister Françoise's catechism classes held before the regular lessons to help me further understand the teachings of the Catholic faith.

At that time, I was still being deeply influenced by my mother who thought that the Catholic Church was overly restrictive with its too many rules and regulations, and had too strict an atmosphere. Consequently, even though I had God in my heart, I lacked the determination required to become a Catholic. I also followed some classmates to attend Protestant church activities. During these events, we sang and

danced in a relaxed and happy atmosphere. But my heart already believed in the Catholic faith, so I never accepted their invitation to become a Protestant Christian.

Lord, I am coming!

After graduating from university, I went back to St Nicholas Girls' School as a teacher. Whenever I encountered problems at work, in interpersonal issues, or in matters of the heart, I would naturally pray for God's guidance, asking for help to get out of my difficulties. At this stage, I was simply demanding from the Heavenly Father. In all matters big or small, in the day or at night, I would impulsively, greedily, and continually ask for the Lord's graces. Sure enough, the Lord gave me a stable life, a loving husband, and two lovely children. Despite the fact that I was not even serving God, and despite my hesitation to be baptised as a Catholic, the Lord still showed me extreme forbearance and patience.

I believed in God and I depended on him, but I did not want to be bound by the rules of the Church, and because of this, I missed out on enjoying an intimate relationship with him much earlier. I remember a particular morning in 1986. During the flag-raising assembly, I was in the spectator stand observing the pupils singing the National Anthem and the school song. Suddenly, I heard a voice saying, "It is time for you to come before me!" This voice drifted over and above the voices of the pupils and clearly resounded in my ears. I was suddenly enlightened! I answered silently in my heart, "Lord, I am coming!"

So I was baptised! One year later, both my children also received baptism. After my father-in-law passed away, my husband, too, decided to serve God. After my baptism, my biggest reward each day as I stepped into the school compound was to be able to lift my heart to God, and without any shame, say to God, "Lord, I am now going to look after your sheep, so you must look after my family." This was how I cheekily and

mischievously relied on God, enjoying all the graces he showered upon me.

Those who are good will enjoy peace

Two years ago, my husband, Robert, was besieged by various painful illnesses, including intestinal cancer, pneumonia, and multiple infections. He spent six months or so lying on a hospital bed, enduring much physical suffering and pain, but his deep reliance on the Lord manifested God's love. His lean face always had a gentle smile and he would occasionally joke with the medical staff. When relatives or friends visited him, he never complained about his pain. Smiling and nodding became his 'signature' expressions. Most of the time, he would be clutching his rosary, praying quietly. Our common prayer was: "Lord, we will follow your will. No matter what happens, we are willing to submit and obey."

Robert passed away on 31 August 2018. Although it was difficult for us to let him go, whenever I reflect that he has been completely freed of earthly pain and suffering to return to the Lord's embrace, and that a good person will always enjoy eternal peace and joy, I cannot help but be comforted in my sorrow.

Robert was a gift from God, and I am eternally grateful to my kind and loving God. The Lord gave me a good companion, he gave my children a good father, and he gave my husband's students a good teacher. This is such a great grace!

Sharing God's gift

What can I do for the Lord? There is nothing I can do. I can only share the joy that God has given me with those around me, using what God has given me to help others who are in need. I can see God in them because the Lord has said, "In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).

Lord, I will shoulder this mission to receive and welcome everyone, everything, every day, every month, every year...

Looking back on my life, Jesus was always with me, protecting me and waiting patiently for me to receive the Sacrament of Baptism. As I go through life now without the companionship of my husband, I know that Jesus still walks with me.

Jesus, I love you!



"At once, they left their nets and followed him."

Matthew 4:20



I Will Follow You

By Irene Tan

My mother, my siblings, and I sailed across the sea from a small Indonesian island to Singapore in the 1960s. These arrangements had been made with the help of our elders. We were given temporary accommodation with my uncle, who was a Catholic, and that was the time when I first heard about the Catholic faith. When I was young, watching my cousins walk to the nearby Church of Saint Michael for their various activities there, I longed to join them, but my mother was dead set against my going to church.

Throughout the ten years of my education in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, not a day went by for me without some contact with the Catholic faith. Every day, I would accompany my cousin, a cradle Catholic, for catechism class before the regular lessons began. In Primary Three, when the school stipulated that every student must take up an extra-curricular activity (ECA), I naturally joined the same ECA as my cousin — Joyful Vanguard — and stuck with it for eight years. While I enjoyed playing games with the other members and giving reports on our daily activities, I always treated it purely as an ECA and was never conscious of the existence of God.

In the two years that I was in Saint Andrew's Junior College, whenever the exams came round, I would make my way to the Church of Saint Alphonsus (popularly known as Novena Church) to attend the Novena devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, seeking Mother Mary's intercession to God for success in my exams, but never knowing the significance of the devotion. In all those years, never once did it cross my mind to become a Catholic, nor did any of my Catholic friends ever suggest that I should go for religious instruction classes.

I was just stumbling along as far as my faith journey was concerned. God and I were like two pedestrians, A and B, whose paths never crossed. Now I see that the time had not yet come. Full of kindness, God waited most patiently and silently; once I hit my 40s, he finally set alight the sparks of faith in my heart. It was a truly unusual encounter.

On that hot afternoon, I was sitting alone in my living room, feeling restless and wondering how to fritter away time, when suddenly, I heard a voice telling me to get to know Jesus Christ. Without a moment's hesitation, I contacted my senior from school, Mary Koh, to find out how to learn more about God. Very soon after that, I was enrolled for a Bible study class on Saturdays in the Church of Saint Bernadette. I really enjoyed my time in the Bible class as I made new friends and was captivated by their sharing and testimonies. Half a year later, I even represented my class in the National Bible Competition. As you can imagine, I fared badly in the competition because I had relied solely on memorisation. Ignorant me had thought that memorising the Bible verses well would be more than sufficient.

After the competition, I became somewhat disheartened and thought of leaving the Bible study class with the excuse of "I don't know God" so that I could have a carefree life. Unexpectedly, an enthusiastic friend from the Bible class, Florence Sim,

asked me to register for the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) class that was just about to begin at Novena Church, and she even offered to attend the first lesson with me. I put my heart and soul into the RCIA classes, listening attentively and taking copious notes. Thanks be to God! I was finally baptised in the Church of the Sacred Heart at Easter in 2006.

I did not want to be a mere 'Sunday Catholic', so I had a few ideas after my baptism. Initially, I had thought of returning to Novena Church to be a sponsor in the RCIA ministry, or continuing with the Bible classes at the Church of Saint Bernadette. However, quite by chance, a friend suggested that I offer my services at the Church of the Holy Cross, which is near where I live, so without a second thought, I decided to become a sponsor in the RCIA ministry there. However, I did not know anyone from that church and had no idea how to get started. After many enquiries and much patient waiting, the person in charge of RCIA finally contacted me. I am thankful to God for his calling, allowing me to be actively involved in the Mandarin-speaking community in the Church of the Holy Cross. Besides RCIA and the Legion of Mary, I have also joined an English-speaking ministry, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SSVP). At the Church of the Holy Cross, the guidance of the priests and my brothers and sisters in Christ has helped me to attain a deeper level in my spiritual growth, leading me to always feel closely connected with the Lord.

God loves me so much! He is always there when I am in any difficulty, motivating me, supporting me, and protecting me. Even when my blood pressure suddenly shot up to over 200 mmHg, he kept me safe and sound. I remember I was ill for more than a week and had consulted four doctors, but I resolutely declined the offer of my family members to accompany me, wanting only to entrust myself totally to God, relying on his plan. I reverently told God to take me with him if my time was up! I firmly believed that only God could save me.

In 2019, I decided to take semi-retirement. Amazingly, God always leads me one step at a time. In 2020, God arranged for me, his indolent sheep, to work for his kingdom. Now, God is with me at every moment. I carry a grateful heart as I work alongside my brothers and sisters in Christ. My heart feels more anchored, and I am definitely much more at ease now.

More than two thousand years ago, when Jesus set out to call his first disciples, he was walking by the Lake of Galilee when he saw Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and he called them to follow him. The four of them, just like that, left the people they were with and the things that they were doing to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:18-22). Lord, I, too, want to follow you, because when I walk with you, everything will be wonderful!



Secret Disciple

By Sylvia Chan

My mum was a devout Seventh-day Adventist. From when I was five years old, Mum would bring me with my older brother, younger brother, and younger sister to her church for the worship service and class. This meant spending three hours every Saturday in church. For us young children, having to be on our best behaviour just sitting there for three hours was torturous. We were so bored, but no matter how much we grumbled and complained, pleading for Mum to show mercy and spare us, she was uncompromising.

At the time I entered Primary One in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, all the Catholic students had to attend catechism class every day before the regular lessons began. I have no idea why my name had been mysteriously included in the register of Catholic students, and thus, I inadvertently joined the daily catechism classes for six years. When I advanced to secondary school, I joined the Saint Vincent de Paul Society (then known as SVDP, but now known as SSVP — Society of Saint Vincent de Paul), even becoming its assistant treasurer. The SVDP was an extra-curricular activity and its main aim was to assist the students from underprivileged families, but it was usually only the Catholics who joined it. I was not even a Catholic, yet I was 'mixing'

with them; it made me feel like a secret agent in a detective movie. I served in the SVDP for all four years of secondary school.

One Saturday afternoon after the SVDP meeting, my classmate invited me to join her for the Novena devotion at Novena Church (also known as the Church of Saint Alphonsus) to pray for our upcoming O-Level examinations. I had no objections. On our arrival at Novena Church, I discovered that it was located just opposite my mum's church, with both churches only separated by an overhead bridge! Was this a coincidence? Or was this God's plan?

Ever since that day, I have attended Novena devotions every Saturday, and till now, it has been exactly forty years. Every time I walk into Novena Church and gaze at the holy picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, I find comfort and peace, and even more importantly, I experience a feeling that courses through my heart like a warm current – that of being loved. I believe that it has been this power of love that, like a magnet, has drawn me to the Lord's side.

In these forty years of devotions to Mother Mary, she has taught me submission, obedience, forbearance, humility, and courage. These virtues have been the Lord's shields for me helping me to face the many challenges in my life.

My mum had always had the desire for our whole family to be baptised into her church. My younger brother and sister had converted in their teenage years and my elderly dad was also baptised at 80. My mum told me she was constantly praying that I would become one of them too.

Not wanting to disappoint her, nor wanting to 'fall out of favour' with my family, I kept my secret to myself, delaying the day when I would have to reveal the truth that

I wanted to be a Catholic!

This went on till 2012. One day, when I was in the bathroom, I suddenly felt a spiritual prompting that seemed to say, “You have been a fake Catholic for a long time!” At the time, my heart felt a slight jolt, but I was not afraid because I understood that it was God who was calling me. With determination in my heart, I thought, *It’s time to tell Mum the truth!* So, I plucked up the courage to do just that. To my great surprise, my mum told me ever so gently and kindly, “Just follow your heart!” Mum’s simple response was like a kindly light that penetrated my heart. I raised my eyes to gaze at my mum – wasn’t she just like the Mother Mary in my heart, so full of love?

Thus, in 2013, I parted with my “secret disciple” (John 19:38) identity and exchanged it for a true Catholic identity. My heart was filled with certainty and peace.

In order to follow Jesus closely, I joined the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) ministry as a sponsor the year after my baptism. During the first year of my service, I often felt so small and thought how insignificant I must be in God’s eyes. But as I reflected on this more deeply, I realised my thinking was erroneous. Each of us is precious in God’s eyes. As it is written in the Bible: “Before I made you in the womb I knew you. And before you were born I consecrated you. I appointed you as prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). The Lord knows me and has in fact already blessed and tested me so that I can be his instrument!

In 2014, I met the man who is now my life partner and we were married in church within nine months. Our relatives and friends were shocked when they received my good news, and even my mum was ‘struck’ by this ‘lightning-marriage’ news. She said she had been caught off guard because although she had been praying for my marriage for more than two decades, she had not dared to believe God would arrange

everything for me. Fortunately for me, my dear husband turned out to be a guardian angel sent by God, and not a fraudster sent by a marriage scammer!

Unexpectedly, less than a year after our marriage, I was diagnosed with second-stage breast cancer. Upon receiving this bad news, I turned to God in my distress, saying, “O Lord! This is too soon. Are you testing our marriage already?” After all, we were still in our honeymoon period! Moreover, I did not want my husband to be labelled a ‘jinx’, as his first wife had died of an illness. I prayed unremittingly to God, pleading for his merciful healing upon me to restore my health. After this, I packed up my need to ask God why, and began my battle with cancer. I went through surgery, followed by chemotherapy and radiotherapy; all in all, the treatment regime lasted ten months. Miraculously, I did not suffer any serious side effects apart from losing all my hair. I came to understand that it was only because our beloved Lord Jesus was always helping me to carry my cross and walking with me on this tough journey that I was able to calmly, positively, and courageously complete the whole treatment.

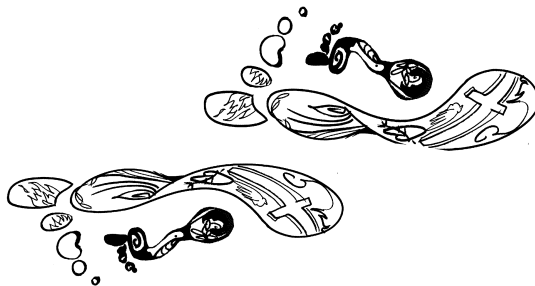
Having passed through and survived this low point in my life, I discovered that not only had I not lost anything, but in fact, I had experienced the boundless care and love of my family and friends. My family bonds are even stronger now. No matter what problems may arise, everybody is quick to chip in with a helping hand, mutually supporting each other, especially in the care of our two elderly parents. Because of this, I have been worry-free in these last few years.

I now know that whenever our merciful God closes a door, he always opens a window. After all, when I had reached the ‘mature’ age of 50, he had even sent me a ‘discipline master’ to make sure I keep to a healthy diet, with me no longer allowed to reject vegetables and fruits, and to remind me to exercise every day. I am even healthier today than ever before and my asthma and joint pains have disappeared. I believe that

if God had not sent my husband to accompany me during that haze-filled period of my life, I would not have recovered so quickly. Indeed, the Lord's plans are always perfect. Not only have we come out of this experience stronger, but it has also deepened our already loving relationship.

I want to thank my dear mum, who returned to heaven to rest in the Lord's embrace in August last year (2019), for leading me from when I was young to know about Jesus, and for laying a strong foundation for my faith. I am grateful to her for her generosity and openness in allowing me to choose my own faith and for respecting my religion. I am also grateful to my alma mater for nurturing and nourishing my love for God and for others, teaching me to generously offer myself for others.

Most of all, I thank the Lord for his love for me; this kind and loving God who always listens to my prayers, never rejecting anything that is beneficial to me. I, previously a 'secret disciple', am overwhelmed by the Lord's great love for me. I want to show my gratitude by proclaiming the Gospel to further God's kingdom. I am no longer a 'secret disciple' but a forthright true-blue soldier of God. I want to tell everyone around me about God and lead them to him.



Light in the Darkness

By Virginia

I never ever thought I would become a Catholic.

I grew up in a traditional Chinese family, following my parents in their practice of ancestral worship and offering prayers in the temple. My grandfather was a Chinese Language clerk who had become increasingly despondent about the discrimination he was experiencing at his workplace, so he had transferred my father to an English-medium school. Later, when my father grew up, he often used his connections to help his friends enrol their children in a particular English-medium school. However, by the time I came of age for primary school enrolment, the principal of that school had left, and so, I was unable to be admitted.

Fortunately, my father had a friend who knew Sister Françoise, the principal of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School. With his help, I was accepted for a place just two weeks before the start of the new school year. I still remember my mother bringing me to buy my school uniform in a building (this building, Caldwell House, still stands inside the compound of CHIJMES) opposite of which was a man-made grotto with a statue of a lady. I only found out later that it was a statue of Mother Mary.

In my ten years in St Nick's, I recited the Our Father and the Hail Mary prayers daily, and I knew Mother Mary was the mother of Jesus. However, I did not believe that there was a God in the universe, and I had never ever thought I would become a Catholic. Under the influences of both my mother and the ideological trends at the time, I believed in myself and in forging my own path. I believed that my destiny lay in my own hands, and that as long as I worked hard and persevered, I could do anything I set my mind to. Surely I had no need of a God when I could reach perfection by my own endeavours.

I was the firstborn, followed by two sisters. One day in the year I turned 17, Mum suddenly sat down in front of me, catching me completely unprepared, and poured out the pain she had been suppressing in her heart – Dad had been unfaithful to her during his recent business trip. She was heartbroken. As for me, I felt like I had been hit by a bullet; what I had always believed in had been totally destroyed. So, one person's weakness could annihilate what was true and good. Nobody was perfect!

In the days that followed, Mum would deliberately dress up, even applying make-up, and wait for my father to return. And Dad, surprisingly, would come home early from work every day. But during dinner, he would bury his head in his meal, avoiding looking at Mum seated by his side. Watching this scene, my heart would be cut to the core. Yet, I did not dare cry as I was afraid that it would sadden Mum even more. But my heart felt deep pain and endless grief for Mum, and for myself.

I do not remember for how long this situation lasted. One night, I could bear it no longer. Under the cover of night, I walked out onto the balcony that was shrouded in darkness and cried my eyes out, weeping piteously for the collapse of my beliefs and convictions.

“Is there anybody in this world who is without sin?” I cried out into the dark night sky.

“Yes, I am the one.” Suddenly, from the darkness, a gentle voice answered in my heart.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I am the Immaculate Conception,” the voice replied, and at that moment, the image of a lady floated into my mind.

“How can this be?” I questioned.

“Believe in my son, Jesus. Through him, all sins will be forgiven.” The gentle voice answered.

No! I thought to myself, *I cannot accept Jesus. He is a man! I do not trust men anymore!* But I decided to pray the Rosary daily in reparation for the sins of the world.

So on that deep, dark night, Mother Mary heard my pleas from her heavenly throne.

On that deep, dark night, I began my journey of faith.

On that deep, dark night, that glimmering star shone into my murky heart and led me, this persistent atheist, to see my own ignorance.

That star in the deep, dark night was my guiding light, leading me to a turning point in my life.

That star in the deep, dark night was like the mother of my soul, the pure and spotless Virgin, Mother Mary, under whose loving guidance I returned to her Son, my Lord Jesus Christ. I was finally baptised as a Catholic in 1983, and my mother was baptised in 2012 before she passed away.

May that star in the night sky continue to lead me on the path to holiness.

Editor's note:

In order to protect and show respect to her family, this alumna has never shared this faith story before, not even with her own siblings or with the brothers and sisters in Christ who have known her for many years. We thank her for wanting to be a witness for God by being willing to courageously publish this personal story under her real name. However, out of respect for her, the editors have decided to use "Virginia" as her pseudonym and to withhold the year of her graduation.



A Walk in the Desert With Our Lord

By Susanna Leong

I am a cradle Catholic from a middle-class Catholic family.

Those who are well acquainted with me know that I have had poor health from young and suffered from many ailments; also, that I seldom exercise and do not even like to exercise. Therefore, in May of last year (2019), when I, already past 50, actually completed the Camino de Santiago in Spain, a pilgrimage journey that involved 125 km of 'legwork', together with my husband and two children, those friends would know that it was truly an incredible feat for me. But God's plans are mysterious and beautiful. Catching me completely unawares, he led me through a transformation to give me the physical fitness and mental ability required for a long-distance trek, the most important things I would need for the Camino de Santiago. The Lord enabled me to take the first step of this transformation through my participation in the Gobi Challenge.

One day in 2014, I was having a meal with a group of my students, corporate executives in senior management positions who had come to NUS (National University of Singapore) to do the Chinese EMBA (Executive Masters in Business

Administration). I remember that I made a promise to them, that I would join them in the annual International Business School Gobi Challenge. I even assured them I would not regret it! At that time, my calm and cool exterior belied the fact that I was riddled with anxiety within as I knew only too well my own physical strength and capability. Nevertheless, to keep to my promise, I embarked on the year-long preparation programme for the challenge. Within that one year, I squeezed in time for my personal physical conditioning. Sometimes this meant getting up at 5 a.m. for a brisk walk, or walking at night after dinner, or reporting at the reservoir during the weekend for a 10km hike. In the beginning, even running 200m left me panting for breath, and the day after a 5km walk would find me in physical agony from muscle spasms and aching legs – the pain was unbearable! But slowly, I began to understand my body and could predict how my body would respond to the distance I was walking. Gradually, the blisters on my feet, the cramps in my muscles, and other manifestations of rigorous exercise became commonplace but also bearable. The first time that I lost a toenail was a warning to me that I had not been wearing my shoes properly and had not tied my shoelaces well enough! During the training period, I received encouragement, support, and love from family members, friends, teachers, classmates, and alumni members, and I also came to realise that this arduous journey towards my transformation was blessed by God's guidance and protection.

During the Gobi Challenge training process, I experienced several 'firsts'. Walking 20km for the first time — this was an unforgettable experience at the Yangcheng Lake in Suzhou, China, when my students and I hiked till the sun had already set, but we refused to give up as we wanted to complete the walk. Jogging 15km for the first time — this took place along the seaside of Sanya, Hainan Island, China, in the midst of a light rain shower, with the patient companionship of my students. For someone like me, who used to get breathless just running 200m, to be able to jog 15km on the beach was indeed an amazing accomplishment. Doing an 89km walk

over three consecutive days for the first time — this happened in Chengdu, China, on a farm owned by an alumni member. I overcame my psychological barriers and understood more clearly my own physical limits, but gained more confidence to finish the challenge! I had never ever imagined that I could be propelled to complete 89km in three days (let alone being propelled into a team training session so far away). I was beginning to feel that as long as I could start any new challenge, I could also complete it. By the end of the walk, my legs no longer felt like they were a part of me and the blisters were only a minor matter! Just completing this training challenge brought such incomparable happiness and gratitude for God's blessings and protection!

In May 2015, at the end of the four-day 112km Gobi Challenge, some people commented that I had not changed much, while others said that though I did not look any different, yet, my character had changed — I had become a tomboy! Regardless of what people said, I clearly knew that everything had changed. When I look back on the experiences of that year, I have discovered that transformation often takes place when you least expect it, and when you are finally aware of the changes, you are already face to face with a totally different self!

Those days spent trekking in the vast Gobi Desert stirred up many feelings and emotions. Out there in that immense and boundless expanse of desert was where the Lord touched me in an intimate way. Out there in the infinite embrace of Mother Nature, I felt so minuscule and unworthy. There were days with a scorching sun and unbearably hot weather with temperatures reaching a high of 50°C, and nights when the temperature plummeted to near 0°C, resulting in an extremely wide diurnal temperature range, as well as sudden gales and desert sandstorms; these uncertain and varied changes that we had to face filled our hearts with awe and respect for Mother Nature. We could only trust in the Lord's providence, each day putting one foot in

front of the other, and it was precisely because out there in the Gobi Desert, there was seemingly nothing except miles and miles of sand, that I realised we had nothing else to rely on.

The tranquillity of the desert gave me an opportunity to return back to basics. It was there that I discovered that one's joy and happiness could come from the simplest things. At the end of each day's journey, as long as we could return to our camp for food, water, and a tent to rest in – all these made us feel most blessed indeed! Each day's journey, though arduous, was bearable when shared with like-minded companions. Even if the way ahead was filled with unknowns and questions, with God in our hearts to guide us, giving us steady hearts and firm steps, the direction would become clear to us. No matter how long the distance, as long as we advanced one step at a time, we would reach our destination. Isn't life just like that? Each of us has a personal GPS (Global Positioning System) in our hearts pointing out the way to go. For us who are believers, Jesus Christ is that GPS, which all of us should be carrying (don't leave your GPS in your bag!). God will lead us to recognise our individual life's direction, and give us a group of good mentors and friends as our travelling companions. As long as we set out from our hearts, we can definitely reach our intended destination. No matter how the scenery looks, the journey will certainly be joyful and abundantly rewarding. And at the end of the race, I will surely cross the finishing line with a smile on my face for myself and my companions!



"For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life."

John 3:16



The Best Is Yet to Be

By Constance Yong

The elements that make up a good drama are logic and surprise. The story must make sense but also give people a surprise. I am from a non-Catholic family, and my journey to know God was like a wonderful drama — logical and reasonable, but also with a touch of surprise...

In the beginning – CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School

I have a vague memory of myself on a particular day in Primary One strolling on the school field during recess, when the principal, Sister Françoise, called out to me from a classroom, saying, “Come here and attend my catechism class!” Just like that, a group of us found ourselves sitting around her listening to her. Holding an illustrated Chinese catechism book in her hand, she explained the lesson to us vividly and dramatically. At a later time, the vice-principal, Sister Cecilia, also became our catechism teacher, and through them, I learnt to recite The Lord’s Prayer, and I came to know about God and Jesus.

When I was in Primary Three, I joined the school’s Joyful Vanguard, remaining a member until I graduated from secondary school. At every session, a group leader

chosen from among us would lead the younger girls in hymn-singing, explain the catechism to them, and facilitate the games. When there were national gatherings of the different Joyful Vanguard groups, I would also join them for Mass. In the activities of the Joyful Vanguard, I felt I was competent in teaching the songs and facilitating the games, but I was never confident teaching catechism, because although I had learnt some catechism, I only understood a little of it, and I felt my religious knowledge was quite superficial and limited.

Prayer — the convent chapel

In the school compound was a beautiful chapel that belonged to the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. The chapel was designed in the Gothic style with lovely colourful stained glass windows. Every time I walked inside, the serene ambience within filled me with peace and joy. So, every day after school, I would make a special effort to walk through the chapel, entering from one side door and exiting through the opposite side door, just to feel that inner sense of tranquillity before I walked out of the school compound. I would usually recite The Lord's Prayer in the chapel, followed by a prayer asking God to give me the strength I needed to face any difficulty courageously.

One day after school, there was a sudden downpour, and as I did not have an umbrella, I walked into the chapel to pray, asking God to make the rain stop. After praying, I stepped out of the chapel only to discover that in that short space of time, the rain had abruptly stopped.

Wow! Prayer works like this? I wondered. That moment of prayer is something I shall never forget.

Reflection — is there a true God?

When I grew up, I became a rationalist. Thinking back to that rainy day prayer, I understood that the heavy rain that day had just been a shower. Showers come in bursts, suddenly starting and then stopping just as quickly, no matter how heavy they seem. So, the fact that the shower stopped right after my prayer that day had a scientific basis. But how does the solar system's magnetic fields allow the planets to revolve around the sun in such an orderly manner? Due to the earth's revolution, we observe that there are four seasons in a year. Because of the earth's rotation, we observe that there is day and night. Because the moon revolves around the earth, we observe that the moon goes through different phases as it waxes and wanes. Scientists can only discover the laws of nature, but who created them? Applying logical thinking in my adulthood led me to believe with even more certainty that the universe has a Creator. This Creator's way of thinking far surpasses any human thinking. If I were to use my limited perception, my 'little mind', to reflect on and prove God's existence, and then choose to believe in a real God based on what I had worked out, then either I would have to wait for a very long time, or that day might never come. And while waiting for an answer, I might just miss some other important things.

Baptism — joining RCIA

Before I was baptised, I would attend Sunday Mass every week on my own. At that time, I thought that it was enough for me just to communicate with God and acknowledge his presence and power. I knew myself and could foresee that once I became a Catholic, I would become wholly involved in my faith and life would become very busy. But if I remained as a non-Catholic, I only needed to go for Mass once a week — the easier option. This was a most human way of thinking.

Over the years, whenever I faced any difficulty in my life, I would still pray to God.

In retrospect, my life had always been smooth sailing. Had the Holy Spirit always been watching over me? This made me reconsider my stand. I thought that perhaps I should give myself the chance to renew my relationship with God.

A few years ago, my classmate, Sandra, told me that she frequently prayed for me to become a Catholic, and she asked me if I wanted to attend RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) classes to prepare for baptism. Sandra was a fervent Catholic who had been baptised when she was 21. At the time of her invitation, I had just left my job and thus, had spare time. Moreover, there happened to be a church near my home, and so, I agreed. Sandra, upon noting that I had no objections, excitedly registered me and even personally accompanied me to my first RCIA class. Looking back, it was a combination of the right time, the right place, and the right company that brought me back to attending catechism class. I felt that God had used Sandra to invite me this second time round. Counting back to that first invitation given by God through Sister Françoise all those years ago, more than 40 years had gone by.

At the end of that one year of RCIA instruction, I chose not to be baptised, a decision that astounded many of my friends. I just thought that the time had not yet come, but more importantly, I wanted to exercise the freedom that God had given me. Why was it a 'must' to be baptised after the year-long course? I was just unwilling to do it, as I believed that what mattered most was what my heart was sensing in faith, and not just about getting an identity label.

And so, I decided to continue with a second year of RCIA, but this time, I decided to join the Mandarin RCIA, and at the end of it, I decided to receive the Sacrament of Baptism. That was in April 2018, with Sandra as my godmother. By then, my thinking had changed. If I did not embrace my religious identity as a Catholic, how then could I expect my heart to be sensing in faith?

Going deeper – nourishing my faith

Before my baptism, Sandra had signed me up for a retreat. So, a month after my baptism, I participated in the second Mandarin Conversion Experience Retreat, where I experienced deeply the great love of God and the fraternal love of community. At that time, I was very busy at work, and during the 5-day-4-night retreat, I even had to occasionally leave my seat to take phone calls from my boss. As soon as I had returned to my seat, Sandra, who was in the service team for the retreat, would pass me her handwritten notes of what I had missed, at the same time reminding me not to get distracted by 'the devil'. As a result, I was very serious and committed during that retreat, thanks to my godmother keeping a close watch over me!

Since then, I have gone for many other retreats and have come to know many more brothers and sisters in Christ. In the process of exchanging messages and news, we can see that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, granting us unending graces – this was something my 'little mind' of yesteryear had been incapable of understanding!

The words in the Bible have also become the nourishment for my faith. The eight Beatitudes that Jesus talked about fill my heart with joy. If we can be people who are poor in spirit, who are mourning, who are gentle, who hunger and thirst for uprightness, who are merciful, who are pure in heart, who are peacemakers, and who are persecuted in the course of uprightness, then indeed blessed are we. Since I know that these teachings are easy to learn but hard to put into practice, I have asked the Holy Spirit for enlightenment and guidance to enable me to use my whole life to put them into practice. If I can do it, my heart will be joyful; if I fail, I will ask the Lord to help me repent and courageously start afresh. The eight Beatitudes are what Jesus has given us as the guidelines for our lives, helping us to be a blessing for others as we strive towards the goal of holiness.

In March 2018, the famous theoretical physicist, Stephen Hawking, passed away. I was curious about the life achievements of this great scientist who had done much research in cosmology, and so, I began reading his books. In one of his books, *The Grand Design*, he wrote: “Our universe and its laws appear to have a design that is tailor-made to support us and, if we are to exist, leaves little room for alteration.” After my baptism, I served in the RCIA ministry as a sponsor, serving others and at the same time, enjoying the mutual benefits of being involved in church. Later, I also became a catechist for RCIA, being assigned to talk about the Book of Genesis. Now that I had read Hawking's writings, I was more able to use what scientists consider as inexplicable coincidences to share about the existence of God.

Through joining RCIA, I had gained from God the grace of my baptism, and at the same time, God has given me a mission – to bring others to know him. Jesus said to his apostles, “Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15), and to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19). Similarly, the priest sends us forth at the end of Mass with the words: “Go and proclaim the Good News”. I will take what I have learnt and share it with those around me to let them know that Jesus is always with us, and so, we do not need to doubt or be afraid. If we listen quietly to what Jesus is saying in our hearts, we will be enlightened. Observe carefully every aspect of life and you will witness the power of God. Always be alert to how to be kind and humble like Jesus, serving others out of love. Do not be tempted, but instead, make the effort to reject sin, big and small. When we can do anything and everything with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, loving God and loving our neighbour, God will surely give us unimaginable peace and joy. When we reach this point, it will be the ‘good drama’ we have always wanted!

Saint John the apostle has said, “For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Therefore, I truly believe that life does not end with death. I believe in eternal life because I believe that ‘the best is yet to be’.



"How beautiful are the feet
of those who bring the good news!
Their voice has gone forth to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world."

Romans 10:15, 18



"Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you.

In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!"

Acts 3:6



Here I Am, Lord

By Sandra Loh

I was born into a Taoist family. I first entered through the gates of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School to begin Primary One and left the school after I graduated from Secondary Four. Although I recited the Our Father every day and participated in the major Masses organised by the school, I had neither any interest in nor feelings of curiosity for the Catholic religion. Later on, when I progressed to junior college, I met an extremely pious Protestant classmate who would gather her fellow students in a little corner of the college sports stadium during her free periods, and she would lead them in prayer, Bible reflection, and songs of praise and worship to God.

She invited me countless times to join them, and always received my countless rejections, but she did not give up. One day, without knowing why, I finally nodded my head and went to join them. That day, she shared a story about a missionary who had gone on a mission trip to share the Word of God with a remote tribe. The village head had imprisoned him in an empty room and had given him one night to perform a miracle. The missionary, placing himself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, took a piece of paper that he had, and using the art of 'paper-cutting', tore the paper in some parts and folded it in others. When he finally opened it up, two

things appeared – the word ‘hell’ and the shape of a cross. This miracle allowed the missionary to escape persecution. That classmate also demonstrated to us how the word and image were created. For the first time, I found myself captivated by the power of Jesus. After that day, I followed her to her church to observe the service and discovered that the Protestant service was different from the Catholic Mass.

After this, I attended two or three services at a Protestant church near my home. One day, I unexpectedly bumped into an old classmate from St Nicholas. Although she was not a Catholic, she invited me to the Church of Saint Alphonsus (also known as Novena Church) for the Saturday Novena devotion. I readily agreed to follow her. I was quick to pick up the prayer rituals and proceedings and became very familiar with the Novena booklet. Later on, even without a companion, I continued to go every Saturday to offer up my prayer intentions.

My then Catholic boyfriend (now my husband) suggested that I follow him for Sunday Masses. And so, in addition to the Saturday Novena devotion, I would attend Mass at the Church of the Holy Family in Katong every Sunday. Once, before Mass began, someone came to me and invited me to be one of the bearers for the offering of bread and wine. I knew that those who had not been baptised not only could not partake of Holy Communion, but also could not bring up the offering, so I told her politely that I had not been baptised. She turned to find somebody else. At that moment, I felt a great sense of disappointment, and suddenly, an irrepressible desire welled up within me – I wanted to be baptised as a Catholic!

Because I had not understood that receiving Holy Communion was a grace from God, I had never felt upset about not being able to receive it at Mass previously. However, that one time when I was not able to present the offering at the altar kindled in me the desire to be baptised. In fact, that moment of disappointment was the beginning

of grace for me — that was how God called me!

I knew I had to attend RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) classes in order to be baptised as a Catholic. When I reached 21, I could finally decide my own religion. When the Church of the Holy Family announced the new RCIA schedule, I had been planning to register for evening classes for an accounting course, but the dates clashed. I decided to take up RCIA first, and then do the accounting course after my baptism, because I believed that when I had become a Catholic, God would prepare the way and arrange everything for me. In 1987, I was baptised in the Church of the Holy Family, receiving my new life with a heart filled with gratitude for God's love and mercy. Only my father was present to witness this precious moment of God's grace; my mother and four younger siblings were not there.

God is so good. He can bring out the best in any good or bad situation. Our future is already in his hands and we need neither be burdened by the past nor worried about the future. Knowing this liberates me. After my baptism, my heart was filled with joy.

From my point of view, those who are cradle Catholics can learn about Jesus through their family or church community, but for people like me who are from non-Catholic families, we must depend on those around us to find out about God's grace. From my personal experience of coming to know about God, I became passionate about spreading the Good News after I was baptised.

“I have nothing, but I can share the love of Christ with you. Jesus knows everything about you, including your past and your future. He is the all-powerful and almighty God. He loves you and so, he will take care of you. When you know him, you will not need to worry anymore.” This is what I share with my family and friends, and it is truly how I feel.

The apostle Saint Peter has said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!” (Acts 3:6). Yes, I want to be like Saint Peter, offering Jesus, the best gift ever, to my friends.

God is truly amazing. Some years after my baptism, my mother and four younger siblings also became Catholics, one after the other. The irony is that my father, the only one who witnessed my baptism, did not get baptised himself.

I also learnt about evangelising from my Protestant friend, remembering that no matter how many times I rejected her, she never gave up on me. So now, whenever I encounter rejection from those I try to evangelise, I, too, will not give up. Neither am I discouraged by my late father’s rejection, as I believe that each person’s moment of grace is in the hands of God. That year, my Protestant classmate had sown the first seed of faith in me; then God had arranged for me to unexpectedly meet that non-Catholic old school friend who led me to attend the Novena devotion. Indeed, she was the second angel sent by God. All these experiences have helped me realise that in the mission of sharing God’s Good News, my work could be as a sower of seeds or as an unexpected messenger of God. As long as I do my best in my work as a sower, whether or not my seeds sprout, or the person I approach becomes a Catholic, whatever happens is by the grace of God.

Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2).

I am ready to be summoned by God as his labourer, to be his sower and to be his reaper.

Light for My Path

By Teresa Ho Yok Kum

As recorded in the Gospel of John, Jesus said to his disciples, “You did not choose me, no, I chose you” (John 15:16). Jesus spoke these words to the twelve apostles before sending them out to bear lasting fruit, just as he is also saying to each member of the Church. I, too, was chosen by God; when I was a little girl in Primary One, he chose me.

Born into a family of non-believers, I spent my childhood in Chinatown. At the time, Yang Zheng Primary School, on Cui Lan Hill on Club Street, was near my home, so that was where my siblings and I went to school. Back in the 1950s, this popular school offered evening classes apart from the usual morning and afternoon sessions. These evening classes were for mature students to further their education, as well as for the regular day students to have supplementary lessons. Since the school was within walking distance from my home, my parents did not pass up on these extra learning opportunities for me. They thought that having me sit in a classroom tutorial would surely be better than leaving me immersed in my own world of fantasy and fiction; after all, I was known for being an avid but non-discriminating bookworm. And so, I ended up in the evening tuition classes.

Basic facilities were lacking during the Colonial Era and power outages were common. Whenever the power went out, our classroom would be plunged into darkness. In the pitch-blackness, those demons and ghouls that inhabited the fictitious stories I had been reading seemed to prance all around me, rendering me speechless with fear!

One such time, Su Qi Lian, the classmate who sat beside me, said to me in a voice trembling with fear, "I'm so frightened. Let us pray to the Lord Jesus." She clasped her small hands together, turned to me, and whispered, "Follow me. Let's pray together." I 'obeyed' by lowering my head, listening as she spoke to Jesus. At that very moment, the light of God dispelled the darkness in my heart. Out of his love for me, the Lord Jesus had chosen the cowardly me, and he had also chosen Qi Lian, his kind and pure little angel, to sow the seeds of faith in my unenlightened heart. From Qi Lian, I learnt about God and Jesus Christ, and learnt to pray in all circumstances. Qi Lian was a Protestant Christian and her mother had taught her about Christian beliefs and how to pray from a very young age. And so, from that tender age, I, too, learnt that Christianity was about believing in Jesus and Jesus always listened to our prayers.

In Primary Three, my English teacher was Mr Paul Lee Muk-Lung, who was a devout Protestant. Mr Lee did not deliberately preach to his students, but his every word and action naturally revealed his love and concern for them, especially those with weak learning abilities or from underprivileged families. As Mr Lee's words and deeds so exquisitely reflected Jesus' universal love for all, I held him in high esteem. His kindness and compassionate love deepened my faith in Jesus.

When I was in Primary Five, my form teacher, Miss Lum, took me to church with her every Sunday. I was given my first Bible then. From then on, I could explore its pages, reading for myself what I had been taught, and revisiting all the stories I had heard about Jesus. Miss Lum knew I loved to read and she would regularly lend me

books she had borrowed from her church. These were not religious books, but they served to inculcate in their young readers good moral character and strong virtues, inadvertently spreading the message of the Gospel.

In time, Miss Lum invited me to join the church choir. I sang and practised with a group of senior members, fitting right in with them. I felt at ease with them because they never saw me as just a naïve young student. Their regard for me strengthened my resolve to live my life with integrity.

Towards the end of my Primary Six year, Miss Lum went overseas to further her studies. Her absence caused me, an introvert, to lose all motivation to participate in my usual church activities, and I conveniently gave the excuse of needing to do preparations for the Primary School Leaving Examination. However, although I did not go to church, I still continued to read my Bible secretly. By then, reading the Bible and saying my prayers had already become a part of my life.

Reading the Bible had always been my personal secret, as was my attendance at church, continuing to be so even when I grew up because my parents were strongly opposed to religion. They felt they had good reasons, while I, too, had mine for opposing theirs. Whenever they rebuked me, I would never contradict them, but my heart remained in silent defiance. I was convinced that going to church and reading the Bible could not be bad. I had kept in mind the words of my principal at my primary school graduation: “Be the salt of the earth and the light of the world”. Although I did not fully understand the meaning of those words then, what I did remember was the story of “The Salt Princess” from *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, so I knew that salt was indispensable to life, while light could expel darkness; their importance was obvious to me. Could I not, therefore, become a person of excellent character and virtue, with the qualities of salt and light, too?

Having completed my primary education, I bade farewell to the old school campus on Cui Lan Hill and headed for another hillock, atop of which was a secondary girls' school. Before, going to school had been a mere ten-minute walk, but now, I had to ride two buses to Selegie Road, and from there, trek up Emily Hill. The adjustments that I had to make because of these changes in my circumstances stressed me unduly and gave me daily gastric problems. After school, I had to bear the gastric pain every step of the way home, as I trudged from school to Prinsep Street to board first one bus, then transfer to the second. The pain was unbearable and I really suffered.

The bus I rode every morning to school took me along Victoria Street, passing CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School. The sight of the students entering the school compound always filled me with envy, and I would inevitably raise my head to look at the top of the Gothic chapel and gaze at the cross on the steeple. Entrusting my hope to Jesus, I would humbly beg, "O Lord! Please allow me to study in this school!" Whether Jesus would answer my prayer was not something I could be sure about, but I was not too concerned about the result because chapter 18 in the Gospel of Luke talks about "the need to pray continually and never lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

So I prayed, resolutely and obstinately, but I never revealed my heart's desire to anyone because I was still a non-believer. I held out little hope; to me, it was futile and impossible. Yet, "by human resources, this is impossible; for God everything is possible" (Matthew 19:26). I did not give up! As it turned out, the good Jesus answered my prayer!

During that period of time, the students from Chinese-medium secondary schools were involved in protests and strikes. My father grew worried that I might be influenced. Father had always seen the value of a bilingual education, believing that it would give me brighter prospects. He also felt that the strict ethos in Catholic

schools would keep them immune from the protests. Although Father was not a Christian and did not like the idea of me becoming a Christian, he still felt that if I were kept within the confines of the convent and its four walls, I could focus on my studies. Thus, he employed every means possible to get me transferred. As a result, I began Secondary Two in the ‘paradise’ in the heart of town — St Nicholas Girls’ School. Just that, unbeknown to, and unexpected by my father, I later settled down so well in this school that it became my second home, where I still am today.

The environment and ambience in St Nicholas were totally different from my previous school's. The Gothic chapel in the school compound, belonging to the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, was open to the staff and students from both the English and Chinese-medium CHIJ schools, and the statues inside gave me a strange but novel sensation. Students were allowed to enter the chapel to pray at any time of the day, and I began to follow what they did as they arrived at school each day — entering the chapel, praying before the crucifix, and entrusting to Jesus our studies for the day.

During those days, we assembled in the long corridor before the day’s lessons began, and either the principal or a Catholic teacher would lead us in prayer. Bible Studies was a compulsory subject for all secondary students. The Catholic students also had daily catechism classes before the regular classes began. Now that I was a part of St Nicholas Girls’ School, I began to discover the Catholic faith. Previously, I was already familiar with the Our Father and, to some extent, the Glory Be; now, I learnt about Mother Mary as well as how to pray the Hail Mary and the Rosary.

My class had quite a number of Catholics; one of them was Ee Nah, a lively and cheerful girl who often invited me to join the Catholic activities. She liked giving me little cards with pictures of sacred statues. On one particular card, which I still treasure, she had written in the tiniest handwriting filling the back of the card about

the importance of prayer, encouraging me to trust God and pray constantly. When the Young Christian Students (Saint Catherine of Siena section) was established with Ee Nah as the leader, she invited me to join it. We would frequently arrange to meet on Sundays for Mass at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul on Queen Street, and thereafter, adjourn to the Catholic Centre on the corner of Queen Street (where the NTUC Income Centre now stands) for fellowship. Our discussions invariably revolved around faith. Not long after, Ee Nah suggested that I attend religious instruction classes with Father Paul Tong. She also gave me a pocket-sized book containing the four Gospels and reminded me to follow God's Word. Under Father Tong's guidance, my knowledge of Catholicism deepened, especially my understanding of the Holy Spirit.

During that period of time, I was in very low spirits, perhaps due to the pressures from my studies and of life in general. So, I would go for daily Mass and receive Holy Communion spiritually. Receiving Jesus spiritually into my heart never failed to give me an indescribable peace. In the early years when I was learning about Christianity, studying the Bible had given me a firm foundation for my faith. Now I felt a strong desire to be baptised and to receive the True Presence of Christ in Holy Communion, because I wholeheartedly believed that Jesus was truly present in the Eucharistic Host. I wanted nothing more than to receive him wholly into my heart. I decided then to do what I firmly believed was right. Even though I had not yet come of legal age, I made my own decision to be baptised. After my baptism, praying and reading the Bible became my daily 'homework'.

I feel so glad that I know how to rely on God. Prayer gives me strength, and the Bible is the light that leads me on the path forward — a light that had begun shining since my childhood days in my young and tender heart.

Those melancholic days of my youth drifted away with the relentless passage of time, and what followed was the taste of misery in the working world. Our human weaknesses such as the quest for fame and fortune, feelings of disgust and hatred, moments of stupidity, the harbouring of doubts and suspicions, as well as our pursuit of relationships or material possessions, will often turn into a burdensome darkness that can blind us to the path ahead, causing us to fall into despair and lose our direction in life.

I once was lost, too. There was a period of time when the stresses of life, the setbacks at work, and various negative emotions left me feeling out of breath, with trembling hands, insomnia, and gastric problems, and I felt that I was becoming a candidate for depression. And so, I went to consult a psychiatrist. The doctor gave me a sedative to take daily at a regular time. I took this medicine for one day. Suddenly, a huge question mark popped up in my head and I wondered, *Would I have to depend on medication for the rest of my life?* I was at a loss. I secreted myself in my room, fell on my knees, and prayed. At that moment, God's light illuminated my heart and I realised I had been drowning in negativity, consumed by my daily worries and distress, and I had forgotten about prayer and reading the Bible. In actual fact, I should have been looking for God, for Jesus, instead of a doctor! Psalm 42 reminded me of this: "My soul, why be so downcast, why all these sighs? Hope in God! I will praise him still, my Saviour, my God" (Psalm 42:5). After some soul-searching, I realised that my unhappiness had come from wanting something not meant to be mine. I had done my best, but my hopes had been dashed, and I could not let go.

I stood up, discarded the medicine, and took out my Bible, turning to Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing" (Psalm 23:1). The Lord had already given me all that was good for me. What else did I want? Whom did I envy? In my prayer reflection, God comforted my soul. I was sure he would lead me on the right path

(Psalm 23:3). So, what did I need to worry or be fearful about? Our lives are like cups. Some are large, others are small; some are deep, others are shallow; but whether mine is large or small, deep or shallow, the Lord's grace already fills it till it is overflowing (Psalm 23:5). Material possessions, relationships, career advancements, salary increments, recognition, and rewards — these were what I had craved before, even seeing them as returns for my hard work. I instinctively questioned myself whether I had really taken my primary school principal's message to "be the salt of the earth and the light of the world" as my own motto. If so, then I should know that for salt to be effective, it must first dissolve and become invisible. If I want to be salt, then what I give is unseen by others. There is a close relationship between light and salt. Our hearts must have salt for us to give out light through our actions, and this light, in turn, gives others warmth and comfort. If I want to be salt and light, I should not be coveting illusory and vain rewards. If I had a firm faith, I would not be worried about earthly, secular matters. If I pray often, sincerely praying with gratitude, God will surely grant me inner peace.

Saint Paul the apostle said, "Never worry about anything; but tell God all your desires of every kind in prayer and petition shot through with gratitude, and the peace of God which is beyond our understanding will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). God granted me wisdom through the words in the Bible to turn my negative emotions into a positive force, giving me a positive and constructive attitude to face life's challenges.

Indeed, prayer gives strength. The power of prayer cleared the murkiness that clouded my eyes. The Bible was the light that dispersed the darkness in my soul, and the darkness was scattered and disappeared for ever. Although I did not take the medicine again, life was manageable and comfortable. In fact, the Lord had already prepared a solution for me to get through all life's problems. These 'secrets' are recorded in

the Bible. Thanks be to my kind and loving God, for he, not wanting me to lose my way again, has granted me and continues to grant me so many opportunities to keep close to the Bible.

God's Word is truly the lamp for my feet and the light for my path (Psalm 119:105). Whenever I face any confusion, I just need to humbly and reverently open up my Bible and read it carefully. The light from within its words and lines will lead me from the dark night into the dawn of a new day, because what the Bible contains is the light for my path!



Rebellion of a Good Girl

By Rosa Wong Mei Kwui

Once upon a time there was a good girl. From young, she had been a good student. She was attentive in class, conscientious in her homework, obedient to her teachers, and never gave them any cause for worry. And so, every year without fail, she would hold a leadership position either in class — as a class, assistant class, or row monitor, or in her extra-curricular activities (ECA) — as a president or group leader, and she even became a school prefect in Secondary Four.

Contrary to appearances, the Good Girl was actually a brat at home, as she had been spoiled rotten by her parents. But in school, she was a one-hundred-percent good student. Why was this so? As it turned out, she was a very timid girl who was terrified just by the sight of her classmates being scolded by the teachers. But the person who most terrified her was the ‘fat’ principal who, with her booming voice, gave the fiercest scoldings, so whenever the Good Girl saw the principal coming from afar, she would make a deft U-turn to avoid her. In fact, the Good Girl did all she could to avoid being scolded and thereby became a perfectionist. Of course, this made her even more desirous of everyone’s praises.

When she was in Secondary One, the Good Girl joined a drama group at a commercial radio station where she learnt to speak in standard Mandarin. Moreover, not only did she learn how to act in radio dramas, but she also learnt how to write scripts for plays. This training vastly improved her command of the language and gave her many opportunities to perform, as well as compete in speech and composition-writing competitions outside of school, where she won many awards and became the school's pride and glory. She took all her successes for granted and was unaware of her teachers' great hopes for and high expectations of her. Sadly, the higher the expectation, the greater the disappointment.

After graduating from secondary school, the Good Girl enrolled at Singapore's only junior college at that time – National Junior College. In those days, most secondary schools had a pre-university section, and so, by doing that, not only had the Good Girl chosen not to continue her studies in her alma mater, but she had also broken her teachers' hearts and 'betrayed' their ten years of nurturing and grooming.

The Good Girl knew nothing of all this. Not long after she started college, the Good Girl, smartly attired in her grey National Junior College uniform, gleefully went back to visit her alma mater, anticipating the excitement of the reunion with her teachers and schoolmates and wanting to show them her affection for the school. However, the moment she stepped through the gates, the first teacher she saw greeted her sternly, saying coldly, "What did you come back for?" The Good Girl felt as if someone had doused her with a bucket of cold water and was speechless, as she had always been this teacher's pet student.

So, she turned her back and left, resolving never to go back to the school, or to church, and in fact, she left the Church 'for good'. And all this happened in 1972.

How did the Good Girl become so rebellious?

The Good Girl grew up in a traditional Catholic family. From young she had followed her parents to church and studied in a Catholic school. Before her regular lessons, she attended catechism class, and in secondary school, she was forced to join the Legion of Mary. The Good Girl never dared to flout any rules or defy any orders, but in actual fact, her faith was not rooted at all. From her point of view, God was merely a heavenly figure up there whom she saw as a stern teacher who would not punish her as long as she did not commit any wrongdoing. Moreover, she had always led a smooth sailing life, and had never had to ask God for help. So to her, God's existence did not matter. As she grew up, she also felt that she had closer relationships with her non-religious friends and the outside world was more attractive, and she gradually began to believe that "Religion is the opiate of the masses" and so, the Good Girl became an atheist.

While she had still been struggling with the idea of leaving the Church for good, that encounter with her teacher (who represented the Church) who had treated her with such cold indifference had been the final straw. In addition, the knowledge that a particular senior was no longer church-going increased her boldness and determination. Her conscience was clear; there would be no return once she severed her connection with the Church! And her parents could not stop her!

The Good Girl did not know that God was far from what she had imagined him to be. Like the father in the parable of "The Prodigal Son" (Luke 15:11-32), God was patiently waiting for her to return home. The Good Girl left the Church when she was only 17 years old, but 14 years later, she wished to 'go home'. How did this happen?

One day, when the Good Girl was 30, already married and a mother, she was carrying her year-old daughter at the void deck of her apartment when she suddenly felt a brief spell of dizziness. Perhaps it was just due to tiredness, but she was so fearful that she did not dare sleep lest she could not wake, so she got her father to accompany her till three or four o'clock in the morning before she finally succumbed to exhaustion. Why did she have such an unreasonable phobia? It turned out that her mother had suffered from familial hypertension (an inherited form of high blood pressure that tends to run in families) and had died suddenly at 49 from a cerebral haemorrhage. In fact, during her first pregnancy, the Good Girl had been diagnosed with pre-eclampsia, and her blood pressure was so high that she had to have a caesarean section. Although her blood pressure returned to normal after the birth of her baby, the experience of being so near death's door left her unable to control her imagination, and remembering what had happened to her mother, she feared that a similar fate awaited her. After all, she had always been timid — fearing humiliation, fearing condemnation, fearing being misunderstood... and now, another one — fearing death!

Now that the Good Girl had tasted fear in the face of death, although it was just in her imagination, the experience taught her that death was inevitable, and she had to face it courageously. The only thing she could do was to surrender to God.

Just as she was deciding to revisit the Christian faith, there appeared a colleague who was willing to guide her in studying the Bible. Together, they read about “The Perfect Housewife” in the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs, and the Good Girl was so captivated by the words in the Bible that it seemed as if she had never read a Bible before.

From that time, the Good Girl began fervently reading the Bible although she did

not return to Church for Mass. But when she had her second pregnancy and suffered from pre-eclampsia again, and once more required a caesarean operation, she came face to face with death yet again. This time, the Good Girl finally broke down, but it was still a frustrating struggle because even though she had chosen to believe, she still could not bring herself to truly believe in God's existence.

This time round, the Good Girl decided to attend Mass again after a fourteen-year absence. Amazingly, the moment she stepped into the church, she heard the priest saying, "Have patience, for faith is like a seed sown by a farmer; it takes time to grow." It felt as though God was speaking directly to her through the priest, to solve her confusion, and it was the first time she felt that God was real! That was just before Christmas in 1986.

A few days later on New Year's Day in 1987, the Good Girl was at the market and found that she had unwittingly bought far more than she could carry home. Unable to get anyone at home to help her, she decided to test out the efficacy of prayer; not to ask too much, just for strength from God. Just as she finished her prayer, a domestic helper who coincidentally lived in the same block came by to help her. This was the Good Girl's first experience of God answering prayers. God was indeed real!

A few months later, on Good Friday, she was standing outside church carrying her six-month-old infant in one arm and holding the hand of her three-year-old daughter, feeling physically weary after the two-hour-long service, and not looking forward to the fifteen-minute walk home. Once again she decided to pray for God's strength. God answered her prayer again, this time sending a colleague passing by in a car, who offered them a lift home. It was too uncanny to be mere coincidence and the Good Girl's faith grew some more that day.

One day, the Good Girl was reflecting on the identity of Jesus. Coincidentally, the next day's Gospel reading was about the Transfiguration of Jesus — "... suddenly from the cloud there came a voice which said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!' " (Matthew 17:5). The answer was so obvious! Jesus was God's beloved Son, and he was also God. God the Father was telling us to listen to God the Son. From then on, the Good Girl paid close attention to all that Jesus said in the Gospel and tried her best to obey him.

The Book of Revelation says, "If only you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:15-16). The Good Girl had always been an obedient girl. When she had left the Church previously, she had been 'cold'. Now that she had returned, she was determined not to be 'lukewarm' but to be 'hot'. She began to take a keen interest in the Church's activities. Among the activities she attended was the Life in the Spirit Seminar (LISS) organised by the Mandarin Charismatic Renewal, which helped her to experience the reality of the Holy Spirit, leading to her baptism and rebirth in the Holy Spirit.

Ever since her encounter with the Lord, the Good Girl's spirit was revived and she could finally hear his words. Jesus said, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63). Indeed, God's words had come alive for her. During a retreat in 1997, the Good Girl heard the Lord speaking to her through the prophet Jeremiah, and these words made a profound impact on her: "Yes, I know what plans I have in mind for you, plans for peace, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. When you call to me and come and pray to me, I shall listen to you. When you seek me, you will find me because you will seek me with all your heart. I shall let you find me. I shall restore your fortunes" (Jeremiah 29:11-14).

Yes, only God knows his plans for us, and these are wonderful plans, not of disaster, but to give us a future and a hope. When we call to the Lord and pray to him, he will listen. When we seek him, we shall find him because we are seeking him with all our hearts. God will reveal himself to us and lead us back to where we came from.

The Good Girl found that these promises of God were all fulfilled in her life. Completely forsaking her own plans, she began to seek God's plan for her. Through her husband, God led her to open an orchid farm in Lim Chu Kang to hone and strengthen her faith, because working in this line meant learning to rely on God's providence. After eight years of testing, God led her to leave the orchid farm — freeing her from this suffering! Unexpectedly, she was diagnosed with breast cancer six months later. Unlike the previous time when she almost fell apart, this time, the Good Girl calmly accepted the doctor's diagnosis, and with peace in her heart, responded, "Thanks be to God! Praise the Lord!" Jesus had given his peace to the Good Girl because she had learnt to obey him. That was in 2007.

The Good Girl's name is Rosa Wong Mei Kwui, born in 1955. That's right, it's me! I entered Primary One in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School in 1962 and graduated at the end of Secondary Four in 1971. I am sharing all this with you to tell you that God truly exists and he speaks to us through the Bible. He has a wonderful plan for each and every one of us, and if you choose to listen to and obey him, he will lead you on the path to happiness.

All glory be to God! Amen.





Chosen

By Ruthie Kee

“Mum, why did you choose to become a Catholic?” asked my daughter, just entering her teenage years. She is a cradle Catholic, but apparently, this question had been on her mind for a while.

Why she had asked that question was because she had been questioning the need for religion. And indeed, at her age, she was doing a rethink of her own identity. In today’s secular world, teachers train their students to conduct research, read widely, and analyse deeply before making any decision.

I became a Catholic when I was in my twenties. My parents were non-believers, but they allowed me to choose my own religion. I studied in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School for ten years and the first church I ever stepped into was the one in the school compound — the chapel belonging to the IJ Convent. In school, I had come to know a few nuns and priests, and during our assemblies, I had learnt to recite the Our Father in both Mandarin and English, and sing hymns.

As a student, my prayers had been invariably about my schoolwork or the things that

irked me at home.

“Lord, please help me to remember what I have learnt for my tests.”

“Lord, please don’t let me get sick during my exams; otherwise, I will do badly and get a scolding.”

“Lord, I didn’t do well this time; please grant that I don't get scolded by my dad and mum.”

When I graduated from Secondary Four, I went to Canada to further my studies. Quite by chance, the college that I had enrolled in happened to be a Catholic institution. Among my fellow students was a fervent Catholic who often went for the college Masses, and so, naturally, I followed her for Sunday Mass.

After college, I was offered places at two universities, one of which ran a course that I particularly liked, so I made my decision very quickly. Coincidentally again, this university also turned out to be a Catholic institution, and within its campus was a church, and as I was living in the university dormitory, it was most convenient for me to go to church.

During my schooldays in St Nicholas, I had known that the universe had a ruler, and my heart had desired to follow him in order to know him. So whenever there was Mass at the university, I would attend most willingly. Perhaps it was another coincidence that among my fellow students and dormitory mates were quite a number of Catholics, and so, I always had lots of company as we happily attended Mass together on Sundays.

In 1985, I returned to Singapore after my graduation, but because of an economic downturn, jobs were hard to find. My older sister, also a St Nicholas alumna, had been baptised many years before, but even before her baptism, she was already going to Novena Church (also known as the Church of Saint Alphonsus) every Saturday to pray. Upon her suggestion, I began to attend the Novena devotion every Saturday to ask Mother Mary to intercede for me to find a job. I cannot remember how long it took, but I did finally get a job I really liked. Was it yet another coincidence that my office was so near Novena Church that on Saturdays after work I could just walk over? And so, I continued attending the Novena devotions. Now that I was an adult, I found myself longing to know more about the Catholic faith, so when Novena Church announced a new RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) class for that year, I registered for it. After work, it was just a ten-minute walk to my RCIA class; I was so thankful. A year later, in 1988, I was baptised and confirmed in the Church of the Holy Family, in Katong.

At the time, my boyfriend was a non-believer, but when I requested for a church wedding, neither he nor his parents objected. I was overjoyed! We had a simple church wedding, but more importantly, we received the Sacrament of Matrimony, so steeped in meaning. Even though my husband was still a non-Catholic, he would always accompany me and our three children to Mass every Sunday, unfailingly.

I remember one particular day in 2005 when our oldest child, who was seven then, said, "Daddy, you are the only one in our family who is not Catholic. When you die, you won't be able to be with us."

I had been praying for my husband's conversion for many years, but I had never ever raised the subject with him because I believed the Lord had his own plan for him and that his time had not yet come. As it happened, the Lord used the words of my

daughter to touch my husband's heart. When he expressed his desire to attend RCIA, I collected all the RCIA schedules from the different parishes and finally found a church with a class that could fit into his busy schedule. One year later, not only was he baptised, but he also immediately became a catechist for the children in the primary level, and he still is one today. God is truly great! God is amazing! All that is good always happens in God's time!

Like everyone else, my family life and career have also been through many struggles and challenges. However, during these 'storms', I have clung tightly to Jesus, asking him to be with me to help me overcome all the obstacles. Currently, I am still studying God's Word, learning how to discern his will, and how to distinguish between the desires that arise from my own yearnings and those that come from the devil's temptations. Prayer discernment is the most important area in my faith that I am working on now.

My road to conversion really had a lot of coincidences. But in the eyes of our almighty God, were they coincidences, or were they God's deliberate plans?

As for the question my daughter had asked: "Mum, why did you choose to become a Catholic?", how did I answer her?

"You did not choose me, no, I chose you" (John 15:16). This is what the Lord Jesus personally said. It is only by the grace of Jesus that we believe in God. And so, in response to my daughter's question, I said, "I did not choose to become a Catholic; I was chosen by God!"

"Do not worry about your life...
Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow;
they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you,
even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."

Matthew 6:25-29



A New Mom's Journal

By Felicia Zou

Both my husband and I grew up in Catholic families. We met each other at the National University of Singapore, and in 2011, we celebrated the Sacrament of Matrimony in the Church of the Holy Spirit, receiving God's blessings upon us. Two months after that, my husband headed to Oxford University, in England, to read for his Master's degree. I applied for no-pay leave and tagged along with him to enjoy a 'life of leisure'. In our one year there, we frequently visited the many museums, libraries, historical buildings, and landmarks, and we also travelled around the United Kingdom and Europe. Of course, we even watched Liverpool FC play at Anfield, twice. I also honed my cooking and meal-planning skills while we were overseas, skills that would prove most useful when I became a homemaker later in life.

A new mom

Our first daughter was born in 2013. At the time, we were living with my parents-in-law, but despite their help, being first-time parents, we were still overwhelmed by our new responsibilities. Almost every single thing that happened was a new experience for us and came as a shock to me. I realised I knew next to nothing about parenting a baby! It was a very unsettling feeling. The first few days, weeks, and months were

crazy; everyone was exhausted just looking after that one baby! During the nights when my newborn was marathon-feeding, I would be frantically googling to find out why my baby cried so much in the middle of the night. But even before I could find any answers, she stopped doing that and started sleeping through the night.

Each time my baby reached a developmental milestone, she would fuss. It was only later that I understood that as long as I was with her during these crucial times to give her a sense of security, she would pass smoothly through each of them. I realised that she was not the only one learning and growing — I, the new mom, was too. I learnt to let go and have faith in her, and in myself, believing that things would turn out well. And indeed, as she gradually grew up, things did become more relaxed, and I became more self-confident, even thinking that we would be more than ready for baby number two.

A second-time mom

People often say no two babies are alike. But I never expected such a great difference between my two daughters. Initially, all was well during my second pregnancy, but towards the halfway mark, a bombshell dropped — our second child had a congenital heart defect. She had TGA — transposition of the great arteries. This had been discovered during an ultrasound scan. I can only recall the room spinning as my tears flowed. Fortunately, my gynaecologist recommended a very good cardiologist to me. This surgeon assured us that he had successfully done the corrective surgery for TGA many times before. Although I was still very frightened and nervous, as I looked at this skilful and confident doctor before me, my anxiety immediately eased.

However, this was not the worst news. A month later, I was diagnosed with gestational diabetes, a condition that put both me and my unborn baby at high risk. This news immediately threw me into a state of panic. I told myself that it was vital for me

to control my blood glucose level to ensure the best possible outcome for my baby before her scheduled heart surgery. I went into overdrive, obsessively controlling my diet and checking my blood glucose level a few times each day, even more times than was required. When my glucose levels spiralled out of control, I had to give myself daily insulin shots. For some reason, I started to develop a phobia about injections and would hesitate with the needle a few millimetres above my belly. But I knew I had to do it; I was the only one who could protect my baby. So, despite my growing fear of needles, I dutifully injected myself with insulin three times a day.

As the baby's due date drew nearer, I started to panic again. This child was safe while in my womb, but once she came out, she would have to manage on her own, and I did not know if she could. A good friend of mine told me that she admired my faith through all this, but I admitted to her that I felt hopelessly unprepared and completely underwater. I swung between moments of panic and moments of peace, the latter especially when people told me they were praying for us. In the end, I decided I just had to face reality even though I did not feel ready for it.

In the remaining few months before my daughter's birth, I prayed the Novena devotion to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux every day.

By God's grace, our little girl was born healthy and stable. At the tender age of ten days, she was wheeled into the operating theatre for her open heart surgery. That day, I spent the worst eight hours of my life waiting at home while my husband kept vigil at the hospital. I shut everything out, pretending that all was normal. When he called to tell me the surgery had been successful, I felt the room spinning again, but in a good way this time!

The baby recovered quickly in the hospital. Every day, I would deliver my expressed

breast milk to the hospital for her, but the bitter taste of departing from her in the nursery was unbearable. How we longed to be able to bring her home soon to meet her little 'big sister'.

It was another tough month for all of us, but we were finally able to bring 'our little warrior' home to meet her big sister, whose familiar voice she had heard chattering nonstop while she had been in my womb.

Being Simple in Virtue, Steadfast in Duty

Although I grew up in a Catholic family, as my mother was not an alumna of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, I had to strive for a place in the secondary school using my academic results. The school motto — Simple in Virtue, Steadfast in Duty — represents so many virtues: resilience, courage, elegance, compassion, humility, confidence, perseverance, determination, and many others. Of course, it was only with hindsight that I realised this.

I had always assumed that you only needed courage when you went out into the working world, but I have since learnt at first hand that what the working world demands falls far short of what the domestic world demands. Domestic 'work' is never-ending and is often routine and boring, but it can suddenly be spontaneous, challenging, or even dramatic, and of course, downright terrifying when your child has a medical emergency. Comparing the two, I much prefer boring and mundane paper-pushing in the office, come to think of it!

Simple in Virtue, Steadfast in Duty — these six words (or four in Mandarin, 德纯义坚) have much significance. They teach us to distinguish between right and wrong, and that no matter how difficult the circumstances, or how much we need to sacrifice, we should still do our best. I am not referring to sacrifices such as giving up your

career, paycheque, or lifestyle, but other sacrifices — choosing to be patient with a fussing child, choosing to be gentle in the midst of her screaming tantrum, choosing to guide and teach lovingly instead of yelling at the young ones in anger, and most difficult of all, leading by example and not merely by instruction. This means dying to all my bad habits and undesirable behaviours, and actively living out the positive and good ones.

Becoming a mother

I took a year off work because I wanted to personally look after my younger daughter. This also meant that I had more time with my older one. I began to realise that I had missed out on time spent with her because I had been working. The thought of quitting work began to surface and kept resurfacing.

I attended the Conversion Experience Retreat in 2018. For some reason, during this 5-day-4-night retreat, the message I kept receiving was about the importance of being present for my children from the moment they were conceived. As a result, after the retreat, I decided to quit my job and become a full-time, stay-at-home mother. My husband's full support regarding this issue also eased my worries.

Although I feel happy about choosing to leave my career and becoming a full-time mom to my two girls, there are still times when I wonder if we had made an impractical decision to just rely on my husband's salary to manage all the household expenses.

One morning, when my heart was beset with worries yet again, I noticed some Bible verses on the wall outside the adoration room in the Church of the Transfiguration in Punggol, with the title "Lilies in the Field" followed by, "Do not worry about your life... Consider the lilies in the field and how they grow. They don't work or spin yarn. Luke 12:25-28".

These words from the Bible brought me immense comfort. How strange it was that although I had been to the adoration room so many times before, that was the first time I had noticed those words that were bigger than my face! Later, after my lunch, I picked up my phone to scroll through my social media accounts and saw that a friend had posted those same verses on her Facebook page.

Thanks be to God for giving me those words twice in one day, reaffirming my decision to be a stay-at-home mother. I could really feel God reassuring me, telling me not to worry because he will take care of everything my family needs, just as he looks after the lilies in the field.



"Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called children of God."

Matthew 5:9



Grace Upon Grace

By Clara Yen-Sum Sow Kheng

“For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16).

I am an ordinary person with an ordinary life, ordinary experiences, and an ordinary career. I often feel that I have had a most ordinary and lacklustre life. Yet the Master of my life is anything but ordinary – he is our Creator God. Because of God’s extraordinary love, he has bestowed upon me extraordinary graces, given to me bit by bit; and so, filled with gratitude, I am always mindfully counting all his blessings.

I thank God for a smooth journey to my baptism. I grew up in a non-Catholic family with parents who were open-minded about their children’s religious beliefs. I studied in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School from Primary One all the way till I graduated from the secondary level in 1962; those ten years encompassed the events that would lead me to my chosen religion.

My alma mater’s campus was originally on Victoria Street, within the compound of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. When I arrived in school each day, the first thing I did was visit the convent chapel. Every day before the day’s lessons

began, everyone assembled in the long corridor to recite the Hail Mary. These actions became the norm for me, what I felt I should do, and it was only after praying to God and reciting the Hail Mary that I would feel calm and be at peace.

At the time when I was in secondary school, there were no after-school activities. Ee Nah, a Catholic senior, enthusiastically invited me to stay back once a week after school to sing hymns taught by our school principal, Sister Françoise. I loved singing hymns and always looked forward to these weekly sessions. Some time later, Ee Nah encouraged me to take up catechism with a priest. At the time, Bible Studies was compulsory for all secondary students and we had a Catholic English Language teacher teaching us Bible History. However, I had found it difficult to understand the archaic words used in the text, like “thee” and “thy”, as well as many other terms. I felt that learning the catechism would give me a better understanding of the profound Bible History lessons, and so, without hesitation, I told Ee Nah that I would do it. She took me to see Father Peter Abrial from the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (M.E.P.). Father Abrial taught me for a while before he was transferred to another parish, and after he left, I was taught by other priests. However, as these priests also left one by one to serve in other parishes, my learning was intermittent until Father Paul Tong came to the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. Under his tutelage, I finally completed my catechism journey. In 1963, with my parents’ approval, I received the Sacrament of Baptism and officially became a Catholic.

I thank God that on my faith journey till my baptism, and even after my baptism, he had blessed me with a group of similar-age sisters in Christ who accompanied me, an “infant in Christ” (I Corinthians 3:1) as I gradually grew in faith. Every Sunday, we attended Mass together and then adjourned for fellowship over a drink, to share our faith experiences. We supported each other in our faith journeys in the spirit of love.

It is natural that throughout these 74 years of my life, there have also been many events that have caused me to feel anxious, at a loss, or indecisive, but by God's grace, I was able to get through them safely. In 1963, just before I was due to begin training at the Teachers' Training College in Singapore, a medical examination revealed that I had lung disease. This meant that not only did I lose the opportunity to be formally trained as a teacher, but I also lost my temporary teaching job. This was a crushing blow to me, both physically and emotionally, and my spirits plunged to rock bottom. However, I relied on God with my whole heart. Because "God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has been my salvation" (Isaiah 12:2).

The responsibility of educating the next generation is an onerous task with an extremely heavy workload. I believe God had alerted me to the early discovery of my lung disease so that I would give my health immediate priority. I thank God for helping me to face this reality with courage. Physically, I followed God's will to rest and recuperate, and spiritually, I earnestly prayed that he would make me healthy enough to return to teaching — a vocation that I truly loved. In 1965, I was completely cured! I was reaccepted by the Ministry of Education and completed my training to become an official teacher. What was once lost, but found again, was a miracle from God, given by his grace! Above all, I thank God for sending me Sister Françoise — the person whom I will always cherish, respect, and love — to accompany me to the Ministry of Education to send in my application.

God's blessings never end. Another gift to me was that of a happy and fulfilling marriage to a loyal and reliable life partner. My husband, Cletus, was given the grace of baptism in 1964 before we married, and from 1964 to 1967, he was assigned to work in London, England, and so, we were separated by distance. In those days, there was no way to keep in touch except through letters. I believe this was God's special

plan for us. Aside from gaining valuable work experience, Cletus, being on his own overseas, learnt to trust God in all things; and as a result, he grew in faith day by day. Indeed, the three years we spent apart were a good test for us as a couple, helping us to affirm and treasure our relationship.

We were married in the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in 1969. How time flies — 50 years have since passed. Under God's loving care, we have worked conscientiously, attentively, and honestly, to nurture our God-given union so as to make our marriage in Christ an effective sign of his presence. 24 November last year (2019) marked our golden wedding anniversary. The day before, on 23 November, we celebrated our golden anniversary with a Mass in the same church we had been married in. The Mass was presided over by Father Thomas Lim, whom we had the privilege to invite. Everything was arranged by our children and their spouses, together with our three lovely grandchildren. I look forward to another 50 happy years with my husband!

Not only was I blessed with a happy marriage into the Yen family through the gift of a wonderful husband, but God also gave me a good mother-in-law who treated me like her own daughter. But to describe my mother-in-law, Madam Lee Wai Heng, as 'good' does not do her justice at all. My mother-in-law lived with us after we were married as it was the understood thing given that my husband was her only child. She was not Catholic, but she was open-minded. Not only had she agreed to her son's baptism, but she had also allowed us to hold a church wedding, which she had joyfully attended. As for our church-going on Sundays and the baptism of our children when they were born, her kindly face never ever expressed any displeasure. Regarding our practice of abstaining from meat on Fridays, my mother-in-law accommodated us by not cooking meat dishes. We also learnt from her to be inclusive in our acceptance of different religious beliefs and to respect her beliefs and customs, such as worshipping ancestors and sweeping graves. My husband is an extremely filial son who often

accompanied her to the shops to buy the incense sticks and other products that she needed for her acts of worship.

Being a diligent, thrifty, and capable woman, my mother-in-law insisted on not hiring a helper but managing all the household chores herself. This enabled my husband and me to be free from worry, thus allowing us to focus on our work. On the two occasions when I gave birth, it was my mother-in-law who took great care of me. She prepared all my meals throughout my confinement period, giving me food that aided my recuperation and rejuvenation. Her loving care nursed me back to health. I remember one time when I had stayed in school past 3 p.m. to mark my students' assignments. My mother-in-law, worrying that I would be hungry, sent lunch over to me in the school, which was across the road from our home. For a period of time when I had Chinese ink painting classes in the evenings, she would specially pack dinner for me so that I would not go hungry before the lessons.

This kind-hearted lady was always tolerant, always accepting of her son and daughter-in-law in all aspects, taking to her heart our friends and my siblings who all became her well-loved 'young friends'. During her daily trips to the market, her chats with the neighbours were neither judgemental nor glazed with gossip. Our family conversations were filled with positive energy.

With her positive and contented attitude, my mother-in-law enjoyed a carefree life. In the year she turned 93, she passed away in her sleep, free of illness. The seventh Beatitude says: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Although my mother-in-law did not become a Catholic, purity of heart is a prerequisite for peace, and her loving kindness and patient forbearance were surely pleasing to the Lord. May our loving and merciful God look upon her favourably and grant her the grace of seeing his glorious face for ever.

Actually, we often overlook many events in our daily lives that are really moments of God's grace. I remember one such incident in 2007, when Caden, my grandson, was only three years old and attending nursery school. One day, the ring finger on his right hand got caught in a metal fence inside the school. It was a serious injury — the skin and flesh on his fingertip were nearly torn off — and he was immediately sent to the National University Hospital. We panicked, feeling at a loss. I remembered Saint Peter's letter to the Christians living in Asia Minor, encouraging them to "cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Therefore, all our family could do was to rely on the Lord, praying fervently and entrusting Caden's little injured finger to our almighty God. We knew that "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13), so I went to Novena Church (also known as the Church of Saint Alphonsus) to offer a Novena devotion asking for the intercession of our Mother of Perpetual Help. My daughter, Charlotte, and son-in-law, Soo Earn, made a special trip to the Carmelite Monastery to ask the nuns to pray for Caden as well. Thanks be to God for his miracles! Caden's finger recovered completely! When he was in secondary school, he learnt to play the erhu (a two-stringed traditional Chinese musical instrument played with a bow) in the Chinese orchestra, and today, at the polytechnic where he studies, he still plays the erhu. In the Book of Psalms is a verse that says: "Praise him with tambourines and dancing, praise him with strings and pipes!" (Psalm 150:4). Whenever I hear Caden on his erhu, to my ears, his music is transformed into many songs of praise to the Lord. Thanks be to God for his grace!

God has showered endless graces upon our family. Under my daughter and her husband's strict upbringing, Caden, together with his older brother, Cavan, and younger brother, Cavin, are of excellent character. These three grandsons are the precious treasures of me and my husband. My son, Clement, has also started a family. Although his wedding was held in church, his wife, Lynda, was not a Catholic then,

but once again, God blessed our family. During Caden's Confirmation Mass, Lynda's heart was touched by the Holy Spirit. Actually, Lynda had been schooled from young in a Catholic school, and when she grew up, her Catholic friends had invited her to join RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults), but she had always turned them down. On that particular day of the Confirmation Mass, Archbishop William Goh's homily, filled with wisdom and interspersed with humour, had enlightened her. The moment she left the church after the Mass, she decided to join the RCIA class at Novena Church. In 2019, she began to study the tenets of the faith, and I believe she will soon receive God's grace of baptism.

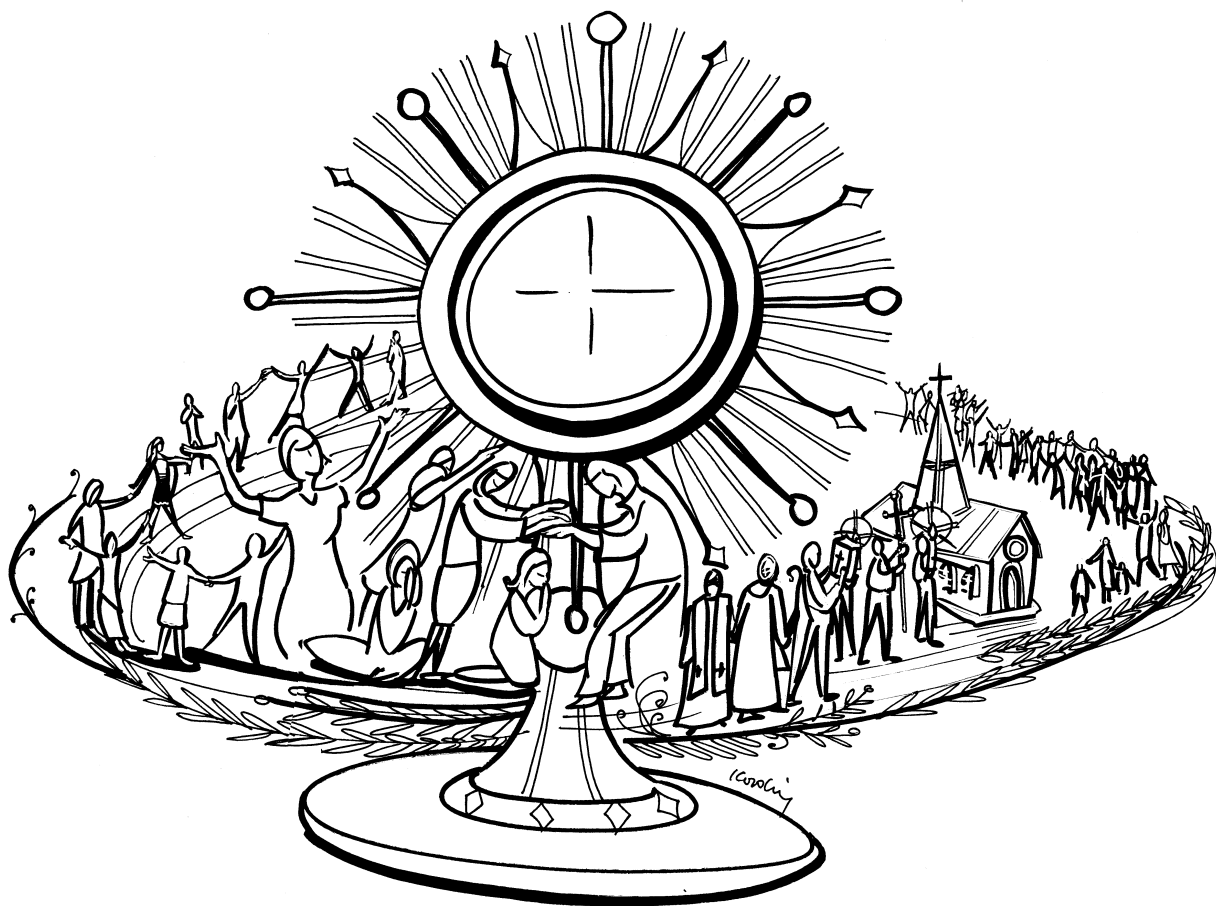
As I write this, I give thanks to God for blessing me with so many other people who love and care about me. They had always appeared whenever I needed them, at the right time and in the right place, certainly not by coincidence, but by God's divine providence, because of his love for me.

In my self-reflection, I recognise that God's grace has always been with me, and that it has truly been a never-ending grace upon grace. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever" (Psalm 23:6). I rely on the Lord, I praise him, I implore him, and I thank him. Not only do I desire to spend my lifetime counting the Lord's blessings, but I also pray that God will empower me to spread the Gospel through my words and deeds.



"Jesus answered, 'Amen, amen, I say to you,
no one can enter the kingdom of God
without being born of water and Spirit.' "

John 3:5



Crash Course

By Caroline Kwauk

In early 2003, SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) broke out in Hong Kong. The hospitals were in chaos, and right in the midst of this critical period, I discovered I had a tumour in my womb. I decided to return to Singapore for medical treatment. Immediately upon landing, I voluntarily placed myself in self-isolation in a hotel, my fears looming before me — Was the tumour malignant? Had the cancer spread? Would I be able to see my husband again in Hong Kong?

It has been seventeen years since, and early this year, once again, we are facing an even more sinister Coronavirus — COVID-19. I returned to Singapore from Hong Kong for a break and found myself writing my faith story on Ash Wednesday, at the start of the Lenten season.

Bargaining

I am a cradle Catholic and like my mother (who was from the fourth graduating cohort), I spent ten years of my student life in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School on Victoria Street. I joined the church choir from the age of nine all the way till university and always participated in various Church ministries and activities. However, not

long after I entered the workforce, the attractions of the secular world held sway, taking precedence in my heart. But every now and then, whenever I felt my conscience prick me, I would bargain with the Lord.

In my 20s, I said to God, “Lord, I’m really busy now. I just don’t have the time to pray more or do charitable deeds. If you let me work hard and earn more now, I can retire at 40, and spend my time organising charity balls to raise funds for the poor.” In truth, I was banking on God granting me early retirement and giving me plenty of opportunities to dress up and enjoy the life of my dreams.

In pursuit of greater achievements in my job, I went to Indonesia, and eventually got married and moved to Hong Kong. All the time, I worked non-stop. In my 30s, I said to God, “Lord, it looks like I can’t retire at 40, so how about 45? Please look after me so I can continue to make money!”

In 2002, at 39, I had just bought a new home and set up my own company. I was filled with ambition and all ready to realise my potential. Suddenly, the dotcom bubble burst and I was overwhelmed by the subsequent work pressures. My dream of retiring at 45 was clearly impossible. Straightaway, I added 10 years, telling God, “I’ll think about retiring at 55. Then I’ll serve you.”

The epidemic erupts

A year later, the SARS epidemic hit Hong Kong and work came to a standstill. To add to my dismay, the doctor discovered a tumour in my womb and recommended that I undergo a biopsy to ascertain if it was cancerous. I was stunned. Not only had my income been cut back as my new company had only been operational for a short time, but I also had no health insurance. By all accounts an extremely optimistic person, this setback felt as though ‘the sky had fallen on me’ and I truly began to

panic. I was 40 that year, the age at which I had initially promised God I would serve him. Three months before leaving Hong Kong, fearing that it would be my last birthday, I threw a birthday party and invited lots of friends.

Two nights before my flight, while my husband and I were strolling along Causeway Bay, I decided to buy a few DVDs of comedies to occupy myself during my time of voluntary isolation in Singapore. As I entered the music store, the first DVD I saw had a cover picture of a woman dressed in white, staring unsmilingly at me. It was obviously not a comedy, yet for some unknown reason, I picked it up to read the synopsis and to my surprise, it was about the protagonist's battle with ovarian cancer!

Rooted to the spot, I felt a stream of cold air gush from my head down to my feet; this was not a supernatural event but pure fear. Right at that very instant, the piped-in pop music switched to heavy metal rock. Like a movie soundtrack, it matched the scene playing out in my mind's eye – six little devils, three on each side of me, all of them jeering as if saying, “Finally, we have scared her to death!” My husband, trying to console me, announced to the air around us, “If you have the guts, come out and fight. The one that hides in order to frighten others is a coward!”

I rushed home in fear. I realised that I had lost touch with my Catholic friends, but fortunately, I managed to get through to three Protestant friends who consoled me and prayed for me over the phone. Despite that, I still endured a sleepless night.

Surrounded on all sides

I stumbled up the plane in a haze and only when I was inside did I remember that it was Wednesday of Holy Week. For the whole of the Lenten season, I had done nothing – no self-reflection, no prayer, no sacrifice... nothing at all. Because of the epidemic situation, my mother had advised me not to stay in her home upon my arrival. This

was because if I was already carrying the virus and she came into contact with me, she would not be able to see her young grandchildren. That year, those who contracted the SARS virus always presented with certain symptoms, unlike the sufferers of the present-day COVID-19 virus, who may not show any symptoms at all. So, my self-imposed 'quarantine' was not because of the government's precautionary measures, but because of my own family's strict instructions. Thus, before I left Hong Kong, I had allowed the travel agency to arrange my accommodation, but I had not paid any attention to the details. I only knew that it was probably somewhere along Orchard Road and I was even thinking that I could just step out of the hotel and do some shopping!

Upon arrival in Singapore, I boarded a taxi and gave the driver the printed form with my hotel details, fully expecting to be driven to a location on Orchard Road. However, when the driver stopped outside Hotel Royal on Queen Street, I was momentarily stunned. When I alighted from the taxi, I looked up and my spirits immediately soared. Right opposite the hotel was the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, the church where Catholic students from St Nicholas, including myself, had received the Sacrament of Confirmation. On my left across the road was the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, and to my right just a few steps away was Saint Joseph's Church. I remember that to both sides of the hotel were also Protestant churches. I recalled the pure fear I had felt two nights before when I had been beset on by 'devils', and now, here I was, surrounded by so many churches! Indeed, God had heard my cries for help.

A hundred names

When I decided to undergo surgery in Singapore, I had started to make a list of a hundred people, intending to ask them to offer a three-hour prayer marathon for me during the operation (I was still upholding our 'kiasu' Singapore spirit!). After

adding all my Catholic and Protestant friends and my family members, I was still short. So, I had decided that when I got to Singapore, I would contact the Church friends and priests I had known in my youth. I knew that the priests are transferred to different parishes every few years, and although I had been out of touch for so many years, what I did have was time, and so I resolved to go 'seek them out'.

After I had dropped my luggage at the hotel, having nothing better to do, I decided to go and copy the Mass schedules (the mobile phones then did not have as many functions as those today), so I took a leisurely stroll to the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. Right at the entrance was a large horizontal banner with these enormous words: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few". I said to God, "Lord, I have received your message."

After I had copied the Mass schedule, I walked over to Saint Joseph's Church, and just as I arrived, the bell rang for the start of Mass – it was exactly 6 p.m. So I walked in and attended my first ever weekday Mass, because in all my life before that, I had never known of the existence of weekday Masses.

After Mass, I walked over to the Cathedral, and while I was copying the Mass schedule, a churchgoer noticed me and came by to chat, leaving me some health tips. Before he left, he said, "Since you are so free, come and join us for Mass at 10 a.m. tomorrow!"

At the time, I was thinking, *Why is there Mass at 10 a.m. on a weekday? Don't people need to work?*

The next day, during my breakfast, I recalled the invitation extended to me the day before and wondered if I should go. After a few moments of internal struggle, I decided I would attend the 10 a.m. Mass. When I arrived at the Cathedral, I saw the

Archbishop with more than 200 priests preparing to process into the Cathedral. I was astounded, and when I looked inside, it was already completely packed. It was an extremely solemn Mass, and no wonder, it was the annual Chrism Mass, always held on the morning of Holy Thursday, the day before Good Friday. There would be the special blessing of the holy oils by the Archbishop, the oils that would be used in the administration of the sacraments throughout the diocese for the year. At this Mass, all the priests would also reaffirm their priestly ministry by renewing the vows made at their ordination.

The front pews had been reserved for the priests, and after the priests had taken their seats, there were still two empty pews. Just before the start of Mass, the Archbishop invited those still standing to take a seat in the front, and so, I walked up and sat in the pew right behind the priests. In my excitement, I thought about the words on the banner I had seen, and resolved to be the Lord's labourer. The best thing that happened to me was that when Mass ended, I had no trouble at all locating the priests on my prayer list, and I invited them to pray for a successful operation for me. Thanks be to God!

Healing hands

During my time of 'quarantine' in Singapore, I went daily to church to ask God to be lenient with me, not to call me 'up there' too soon. One day, I went to the Cathedral for the lunchtime Mass, and after Mass, a churchgoer came over for a chat and when she learnt of my illness, she told me not to be afraid, but to kneel in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, and the light from the Body of Christ would bring me healing. And so, I also began to go to church for Eucharistic Adoration. It was only later that I understood that spiritual healing is the most important healing of all.

On another day at the Cathedral, I saw a flyer on one of the pews, and learnt from

it that there was a prayer group that met on Tuesday afternoons in the chapel of the Marymount Convent near Thomson Road, interceding for various people in need. So I took the flyer and found my way there. When I arrived, I saw several people lining up. The prayer team stood in a circle surrounding the person asking for healing. This was the first time I experienced up-close this Charismatic prayer method of laying on of hands. After this, I went back for almost every Tuesday session because I discovered that the sense of fear that had pervaded my heart was gradually diminishing.

Encountering God

In the end, I was in Singapore for half a year and I did not have an operation. In fact, it was only at the end of 2014, after a retreat in India, that I had a hysterectomy, but... that's another story.

I can clearly see how God used an epidemic to bring me back from Hong Kong to Singapore, enabling me to set aside worldly interferences, giving me plenty of time through reading the Bible and religious books, as well as through Church activities and Church members, to seek him, to encounter him, to spend time with him, and to build a closer relationship with him.

In my 40 years as a Catholic, I had not known about weekday Masses, I had never been for Eucharistic Adoration, and I had not known about the Charismatic Movement nor witnessed the laying on of hands for the sick. I am a Science student – everything requires evidence and reasoned arguments to be proved. But all those big and small incidents that happened within those six months in 2003 made me re-examine my faith.

God used the SARS crisis to give me a six-month crash course in faith! Thanks be to God!



Sister Françoise Lee



Mrs Hwang-Lee Poh See



Mrs Alice Cheong-Chan Wan Mui,
in school uniform, together with Sister Cecilia
Chew at the school's Golden Jubilee celebration.

"Take care not to perform righteous
deeds in order that people may see them;
otherwise, you will have no recompense
from your Heavenly Father."

Matthew 6:1



Love Letters

By Julia Wong Soo Mei,
based on an oral account
by Agatha Ho Kwai Chan

Dear Sister Françoise,

You were my school principal when I was nine. In the year I turned 21, I met you again at the school gate, this time with my baby girl in my arms; she was just a few months old. You asked me to consider taking up the position of school caretaker. The day after that, you became my boss, my ‘towkay’. I cherished the opportunity that you had given me and dedicated myself wholly to the job.

On every festive occasion, you received gifts from parents expressing their love and respect for you. You never failed to share these gifts with the nuns in the convent, but you would also put some aside in your office. You never knew this... but I had long discovered your secret. I knew you were not keeping them for your own enjoyment. Many a time you had instructed me — select a few cans of food and dry rations from your office cabinet, place them in a brown paper bag, and leave it under your desk. Later, after school dismissal, while cleaning the corridors, I would espy a random student walking by carrying that very same bag. I would just feign ignorance. On occasion, the said student would run happily over to me, saying, “Auntie Kwai Chan,

look! Sister gave me this! With these cans of food, Mother can cook several dinners and she can save the food money!" This was your secret! You were doing good deeds without anyone knowing. I knew that the Gospel of Matthew said something about this, that you should not do good deeds in front of people just so that they will see you doing them. If you do, you will get no reward when you see your Father in heaven (Matthew 6:1-4).

I have watched the docu-drama *From Victoria Street to Ang Mo Kio* produced by our alumna, Eva Tang. In the film, the actress who portrays your character shouts at the students, but she also treats the poor students with much kindness and love. Those who have watched the film would know that although you had an unsmiling and stern exterior, you actually had a very kind heart.

Did you know this? Actually, I was also terrified of your temper, especially when you raised your voice. I used to pray about this frequently, especially before entering your office, I would be mumbling to myself, "Dear Lord, please help Towkay. Don't let her roar at me like a lion." I understood that being the principal of both the primary and secondary sections of a school, which also had to share the same compound as the Town Convent, was no mean feat. There were inevitably times when you got angry even before you had found out the whole truth, and I as well as others would be wrongly scolded by you. Sometimes, when I was so upset about having been unjustly scolded, I could not help but confide in the teachers. I would comfort myself by thinking, *Towkay is not bullying me or looking down on me just because I am a school caretaker. Even the teachers get scolded too!* In fact, when I realised you treated everyone equally, I no longer felt upset. When I thought about all the good things about you, especially your concern for me and the poorer students, I completely forgave you. The kindness that I saw as your 'true colours' gave me the peace to work in the school all the way until my retirement.

Your kindness is something that nobody can deny. With my limited life experience, there were many situations that I could not handle. I want to thank you for your unstinting help and counsel during the many difficult times in my life. When my husband was killed by a mentally unstable youth, I was heartbroken and totally lost, and you were the first to extend your help and support. Later, it was you who arranged for my son – born after his father's death, and only a month old – to be looked after by the nuns in the convent orphanage, so that I could focus on working and supporting my family. I was widowed at 30. Many friends and relatives, particularly my mother, worried that with my low salary, it would be too strenuous for me to rear my three young children by myself. They encouraged me to remarry so that the responsibilities could be shared. However, you repeatedly advised me not to remarry. You told me that my daughter was a beautiful girl and if I chose a stepfather of bad character, he could become a danger to her. And so, between the choice of remarrying or remaining a widow, I took your advice and made the decision to work hard to bring up my children by myself.

You always had my best interests at heart. You knew that because my salary was limited, life would be hard, and I would not be able to provide my children with higher education. When my daughter was due to begin her primary education, I thought it was obvious that I should enrol her in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, but you suggested that she should go to CHIJ Town Convent to receive an English-medium education. The Town Convent and St Nicholas shared the same compound, and so, I would not have to worry about sending and fetching her. It was also generally believed that the English-educated had better prospects. With my daughter receiving an English education, she would be able to find a job after Secondary Four to ease my burden. This matter shows your pragmatic nature as well as your selflessness in not seeking just to boost the school admission numbers by insisting that my daughter attend St Nicholas.

You treated me as your confidante, sharing your problems candidly with me. At times, when you were troubled by problems in your daily life or at work, after your dinner at the convent, you would walk alone along the unlit corridor back to your office to put in more hours. I often told people that our relationship was inseparably intertwined. After all that has happened, I truly thank you!

Dear Sister Françoise, you returned to the Lord on 16 August 1986. Your offering to the Lord, completed with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, was your final “examination script”. These were the words used by a group of alumnae in an obituary in the newspaper, and during your funeral Mass, the presiding priest, Father Paul Tong, concluded his homily with this metaphor of a “completed examination script” to affirm your dedication to your life’s work.

Towkay, you are God’s precious and beloved one. You sacrificed your life for so many daughters of St Nicholas Girls’ School, enabling them to experience the love of God. Today, please allow me to call you, not Towkay, but Precious!

With love and respect,
Kwai Chan



Dear Sister Cecilia,

I came to work as the school caretaker in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School when I was 21. You were a Primary Five teacher then. When you became the vice-principal, I would bring a mug of warm milk to your office early in the morning every day. That was how our friendship began.

You loved to rear birds and fish as well as grow orchids. You had a fish pond built in the little garden in the school compound, you placed a big fish tank not far from the school corridor, and you even had two ornamental birds that were kept in a cage. You taught me how to rear fish and birds, and how to take care of the costly orchids. In the end, I only learnt how to look after the fish; the birds were looked after by the other caretaker, Elizabeth, and you personally tended to the orchids!

In school, the principal would scold me, but I knew she loved me in her heart. You, on the other hand, demonstrated your love for me through both your words and your heart. Whenever you spoke to me, you always held my hands gently and talked to me softly and slowly.

After your retirement, you served in both the Mandarin and Teochew-speaking communities in the Church of Christ the King in Ang Mo Kio. For your convenience, the priest specially rented an HDB unit (a government-subsidised apartment) for you within walking distance of the church, and as I was in the block just next to yours, I could often meet you. I thank God for such a wonderful arrangement. Before my retirement, I would always attend the Mandarin Mass on Sunday morning, then return home, whereas you would be busy all morning in church, returning home only after noontime. I would then bring over the lunch that my mother had prepared for you, accompanying you for a little while. Those were the beautiful times we shared.

After you retired and were no longer my superior, you stopped calling me Kwai Chan, and began endearingly calling me Precious instead, and you even told the parishioners that I was your precious one. It was so heartwarming for me to hear you calling me that. Up till today, whenever I recall your voice saying “Precious”, and I am reminded that I will never again hear you calling me by that gentle nickname, my eyes would well up with tears.

Besides being involved in faith formation for the parishioners in church, you who were still fit despite your age also made time to organise outings for the elderly residents in the neighbourhood for them to go out and enjoy themselves. Although you were getting on in years, before each outing, you would ‘stand guard’ at the door of the big bus counting and checking the attendance, as if you were counting chicks. You also made a special arrangement with the younger parishioners from the Bible class, encouraging them to join in to help take care of the elderly, thus inviting them to live out the Christian spirit of loving our neighbour.

As you became increasingly older and frailer, you were admitted to Saint Joseph’s Home in Jurong. By then, I had also retired and was able to spend more time with you. It usually took me an hour and a half by bus to reach the nursing home, and when you saw me, you would take me to your bed, clear some space, and insist that I lie down for a ten-minute rest while you sat on a chair by the bed reading the newspaper. Doesn’t this conjure an amusing image? You even refused to let me speak until I had rested for ten minutes, and only after that would we begin chatting.

As time passed, you began to develop dementia and you could neither recognise people nor remember many things. As you lay on your deathbed, unresponsive to all around you, be they the nuns or your loved ones calling your name, I knew then that you were about to leave us to go back to the Lord. I was so reluctant to let you

go. I held your hand, suppressing the pain in my heart, and softly called out, “Sister Cecilia.” You immediately opened your eyes, saying, “Kwai Chan!” Oh, you had not forgotten me! Your response took everyone by surprise.

“I have known Sister Cecilia for so many years; of course she remembers me,” I told them, proudly. But while my heart was feeling immeasurable sweetness, my tears were flowing uncontrollably.

Sister Cecilia, you returned to the Lord’s embrace on 22 May 2015. You are the Lord’s precious and beloved one. You were also the precious one in my life. I miss you! Please allow me, today, to gently call you Precious!

Your precious one,
Kwai Chan



Dear Mrs Hwang-Lee Poh See,

When you took over the baton from Sister Françoise to become the principal of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, you were just over 30. You were not a nun; in fact, you had your own family with elderly members and two young sons to look after, with the addition of another little son later, and you had to manage a school that comprised classes from kindergarten to secondary level. I always admired you for your capability in managing both your family and career; you handled all the school affairs so well and systematically.

Those who have watched the docu-drama *From Victoria Street to Ang Mo Kio* produced by our alumna, Eva Tang, will fully appreciate that the relocation of our school campus under your leadership from Victoria Street to Ang Mo Kio was indeed an arduous process. Teachers and students alike were allocated to different temporary sites for classes. During that period of time, I also had to move around with everyone, working in the various school compounds. I guess we could have been considered as fellow 'wandering vagabonds'. Prior to that, you had fought hard with the Ministry of Education for a bigger site on which to build a new and larger campus for St Nicholas Girls' School, to provide for her future development. Your foresight, bold courage, and spirit of self-sacrifice were evident to all.

In the past, I used to think that the school compound on Victoria Street was huge, like a labyrinth. Only when I set foot on the new school campus specially selected and conceived by you did I realise how the old school grounds paled in comparison. I still remember a particular spot that was overgrown with weeds at the far end of the stadium; this obstructed the drainage of water flowing down from the slope, causing the water to pool on the running track. Students were prone to fall when they ran on the slippery track, and although the injuries were usually not serious,

they still attracted complaints from the parents. As a result, you instructed the school caretakers to remove the weeds once a fortnight, and we empathised with your difficulty. However, because the new school compound was so huge, even if you called me on the PA system, I would not necessarily have been able to hear you. Fortunately, walkie-talkies had already been invented, so I always carried mine in order to respond to your instructions promptly.

Mrs Hwang, as you progressed through the 29 years of your principalship, I was growing increasingly older and had more health issues, and so I often needed to apply for medical leave to visit the doctor. You always approved my requests unhesitatingly and never required me to report back to you when I returned from my appointments. Thank you for showing me such respect, trust, and compassion.

“Precious...!” This was the way you would affectionately address your students.

“Oui...!” This was how the students would loudly respond. Over time, “Precious... Oui...!” became your trademark — the ‘secret code’ between you and your students.

Mrs Hwang, you are also the Lord’s precious and beloved one. You dedicated your own precious youth, time, and energy to St Nicholas Girls’ School, and shed much sweat and tears. You are the precious treasure that the Lord bestowed upon the school. May the Lord continue to bless you and your husband, as well as your children and grandchildren, with peace and good health!

With respect and affection,
Kwai Chan

Dear Mrs Cheong,

You said that the students often commented on the attire and appearance of the school staff, and your impression of me was that I always had two handkerchiefs — one draped over my shoulder for wiping away sweat, and the other tied behind my head that protected my nose and mouth from the flying dust as I went about my cleaning tasks. Nowadays, when you see people wearing masks, you will think of me.

To tell you the truth, when I was working in the school, I used to observe the students — particularly the secondary students — as a form of entertainment during my work! Girls in their youth are like budding flowers. Out of all the secondary schoolgirls, you gave me the impression that you were more of a gentle and quiet person, preferring to stroll alone around the school, rather than chatting and laughing with your classmates during your free time.

Later, after your university graduation, you came back to serve in your alma mater as a Chemistry teacher in the secondary section. On one occasion when I was cleaning the staff room, I overheard you telling senior teachers that you did not wish to be promoted to vice-principal. I remember that both Madam Liu Chein Sin and Madam Hu Shu Ching encouraged you to take up the challenge, saying they would support you.

You served so many years in your alma mater. As a school leader, you must have faced numerous situations when you were unable to please everyone. You must have experienced much sadness and grievance, as well as times of gladness. But most importantly, you had your most loving husband to return home to.

I am so glad that you responded to the Lord's call, and you and your whole family, including your son-in-law, were baptised to become God's precious ones. In the blink of an eye, you and I have already retired for so many years, and we have both experienced the loss of our spouses. But I am so happy to know that you are living a very fulfilling life at present as an active member of the Chinese Toastmasters Club. Besides singing in the choir and at karaoke sessions, you now devote more time to your passion — Cantonese opera. We are both Cantonese, and I will definitely support you in all your performances! Your singing and acting skills are indeed getting better and better!

May we work together to glorify God, and may our lives become even more exciting!

Yours truly,
Kwai Chan



Editor's note:

By Teresa Ho Yok Kum

On 6 March this year (2020), Rosa, Julia, and I visited Agatha in her home to invite her to share her faith journey with us. After interviewing her, we wrote her testimony “Through the Valley of Darkness” based on her oral account.

Agatha had worked in her alma mater for many decades and she was very closely connected to many of the people and events there. During the interview, Agatha spoke fondly of many of the colleagues whom she remembered, but when she began talking about the former principals and vice-principals, her face spontaneously lit up with pleasure. Agatha's story testifies to the many times God had continuously blessed her and watched over her. Widowed early in life, Agatha had to shoulder the burdens of life alone, but the Lord sent her people who helped to cushion those shoulders with their unconditional care and love. These people were the precious treasures in Agatha's life, and she was supported by both the friendship with these precious ones, and the love of the Lord Jesus, who was always quietly carrying the other end of the yoke. Thus, her yoke became easy and her burden became light (Matthew 11:30).

We requested Julia to write “Love Letters” as a way of recording Agatha's memories of the snippets of her life shared with the four principals and vice-principals, as well as her feelings and emotions. Desiring to use Agatha's kind and gentle tone of voice to praise God's great love, using the letter-writing format helped us to more faithfully capture her expressions and emotions.

Afterword

By Teresa Ho Yok Kum

I want to sing for ever of the Lord's grace, and proclaim your faithfulness from age to age (Psalm 89:2).

Quite by chance, I received a gift, a most precious gift, and that was the opportunity to be one of the first few to read *A Blessed Gift*. Not only did I read it once, but multiple times, as I carefully read each of the 40 faith testimonies. After finishing each one, I would muse over it, and instinctively raise my head to gaze at the boundless sky, where I know that from the highest place above the sky, the Lord my God is bending down to look (Psalm 113:5-6), and I feel the urge to open my lips and declare his praise (Psalm 51:17), "O Lord! My Abba Father! You are truly good!"

I always feel linguistically challenged whenever I proclaim the glory of God and praise his goodness. No matter how many times I search through a dictionary, I would never be able to find words that could accurately and precisely describe God's loving kindness. And so, I can only use the simplest and plainest word – 'good' – to talk about God's benevolence, his greatness, his omnipotence, and his assured faithfulness. With delicate pen strokes, our 40 sisters have given us specific examples

of God's goodness throughout their personal faith journeys.

Speaking of God's goodness, a picture appears spontaneously in my mind. In it, the Lord is bearing a gift, and, with uplifted hand, knocking on a door. But that door is not an ordinary door — it is the door to these writers' hearts. And that gift is not an ordinary gift — it is God's gift of love, the gift of his son, Jesus. However, when hearts are tightly closed, not every person can see the radiant glory of this gift. As a result, each person's response was different. Apart from a few who respectfully and humbly accepted this gift in their childhood, others responded with indifference, suspicion, hesitation, or procrastination... Yet, as it says in Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans: "God gives us, by grace, life everlasting in Christ Jesus, our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Jesus himself has also said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Conceivably, this gift is the means to salvation for each of us. Our kind and loving God will not abandon anyone. He was waiting at the door to every heart, waiting with forbearance and patience, just waiting... and trying various ways to enable these sisters to open wide their hearts, and in the process of doing so, revealing the mysteries of God.

In this anthology, these sisters have most generously shared the 'story' of how they accepted the gift. Having received God's loving kindness as well as the salvation that Jesus Christ had won for them, what is gratifying is that today, not only do they have a steadfast faith and a lively hope, but they are also loving others with the love they have received from God, in return for his great love for them. In their respective social circles, they are enthusiastically proclaiming the Good News to bring more people to know God.

I believe that this will not be the only anthology of faith stories. Pope Francis, in his message for the 54th World Communications Day on 24 May 2020, said that

each person's story is a divine story. "In the history of every person, the Father sees again the story of his Son who came down to earth." Each person's story can become inspired and rebirthed, once again being transformed into a masterpiece, becoming a new chapter of the Gospel. All of us know some stories that carry the fragrance of the Gospel, including our own. Hence, all who have received this gift should share their story, so that many more people may know about the grace of salvation won by Jesus Christ on the cross, and they, too, may come before the Lord Jesus to be soaked in his saving grace, to receive this perfect and free gift that the Lord has specially prepared for them.

May the Lord use *A Blessed Gift* to inspire others to do likewise; that from today, more brothers and sisters may willingly share their wonderful stories of their encounters with the Lord, in response to the appeal of Pope Francis to tell these stories to our children and our grandchildren, using them to sing of the Lord's graces, and proclaim his goodness and faithfulness from age to age (Psalm 89:2).



"We are only the earthenware jars that hold this treasure,
to make it clear that such an overwhelming power
comes from God and not from us."

2 Corinthians 4:7





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A Blessed Gift is a collection
of 40 authentic and
insightful faith
stories by Catholics,
each one thought-provoking,
unique, and captivating, but all bearing the same
Good News of God's salvation plan.



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