



FRANCISCAN SISTERS, T.O.R.
of Penance of the Sorrowful Mother

DECEMBER
2021

Under His Mercy

COME TO BETHLEHEM

In this issue of *Under His Mercy*, two of our sisters share their experiences of making their way to Bethlehem - in prayer and through encounters with others.

The Gift I Give to Jesus

BY SR. SOPHIA GRACE, T.O.R.

There is power in stories. As children, we ask our parents to read them over and over again. My nieces and nephews love to hear stories about things they did when they were little. We get caught up in the stories of great adventures, romances, and tragedies in books and movies. As we mature, we often reflect back and tell story after story of memories from years gone by. As we end this year of St. Joseph, I felt called to share with you a story about St. Joseph in my life, which just happens to include the story of the birth of a poor king.

Some years ago, I had the privilege to make a 30-day silent retreat. As I prayed through the life of Christ in the Scriptures, my retreat director encouraged me to enter into the scene using all of my senses. By using my imagination to enter into the story, something much larger happened: I was invited into a family, the Holy Family. And so the story begins...

I began in Nazareth in the house of Joseph and Mary. I was watching them as a young girl, like a servant's young daughter, an outsider. They were moving about the house getting their things together to travel to Bethlehem for the census: food, clothing, and all of the necessities. Just before we left the house, I saw both Mary and Joseph each pack a special gift. I didn't see what they were.

After helping Joseph try to make the stable livable in Bethlehem, I was at the entrance of the cave sitting with him. As we sat in the utter stillness of the night, we heard the Word utter His first cry. A tear ran down Joseph's cheek. I looked in and saw Mary gently washing and wrapping Jesus. When she was finished she delicately tucked a rose into a fold of His swaddling clothes. This extraordinary gift was cut from the garden where, nine months earlier, the angel Gabriel came to her and told her that she would "conceive in her womb and bear a son" (Luke 1:31).

After a time, Joseph and I entered the cave and as Joseph was holding the baby, he invited me to sit on his knee and look at Jesus. As I sat there, I whispered to Joseph and asked him if he had a gift too. As I continued to sit on his lap, he began to tell me the story of the angel Gabriel and he said that Jesus will be great and a throne would be given to Him and that He will have a kingdom that will not end (cf. Luke 1:32-33). I innocently asked, "So, He is going to be a king?"

"Yes, He is. That is why I made Him this ring. Every king must have a ring." Joseph had hand carved a ring out of wood; that was his gift. It was tied on a string and again tenderly tucked into the swaddling clothes.

Sometime later, Mary unexpectedly placed Jesus in my arms. She pulled me up close next to her and she put her arm around me. I nuzzled noses with Him and then just held Him close. The three of us dozed in and out of sleep while Joseph kept watch. The longer I held Him, the closer I wanted to be with Him and I knew all He wanted was to be with me. I laid Him on my chest, all the while feeling His little heart beat and smelling His sweetness. As Mary, Jesus, and I slept, Joseph placed a cloak over us. One of the shepherds who had come to see Jesus had left it there. He left it to keep the baby warm.

I was no longer an outsider. Joseph and Mary brought me into their story. Joseph shared part of their family story with me. I was able to be with them in some of the most intimate moments of their

Continued inside...



... he invited me to sit on his knee and look at Jesus...

lives. I experienced their tender and protective care for me as their daughter. I particularly relished Joseph's attentiveness to me and the security I experienced knowing that his fatherly eye was always keeping watch over me. Most importantly, they both introduced me to their Son, Jesus. Yes, He is a great King, but He became poor, so that I might know that all He wants is to be with me.

As I contemplated Mary and Joseph each offering a gift to Jesus and I experienced the incredible gift of receiving Jesus himself, I felt a desire well up from within me. I wanted to give Jesus a gift too! I didn't really know what to present to Him. What do I have to give? The only thing that I could and did offer to Him was the key to my heart. Then He could make His home in me and find a place to rest.

All of us have a gift that we bring to the Christ Child this Christmas. Whether it's the sacrifices of the past year, a sorrow we went through, the joyful moments of the day, the offering of our prayer and work, the gratitude of answered prayers, our service within our families, the inner workings of our heart: we all have something to offer Him.

As we enter into this Advent and Christmas season together, maybe we could each imagine ourselves at the crib and holding out this offering and gift to baby Jesus. How does He respond? What do Mary and Joseph say or do as you offer Him this gift?

You have a gift to give Him.

Thank You for Being Like St. Joseph to Us

MISSION ADVANCEMENT CHRISTMAS MESSAGE AND THANK YOU

Thank you for being like St. Joseph to us. These words from our Share His Mercy Benefit echo in my heart, as I realize how our life and ministry would not be possible without your sacrificial love. My heart is filled with gratitude not only for your financial contributions, but also for the witness of your lives. I and a few other sisters recently returned from visiting several benefactors in the Cleveland area. As I listened to them share about their lives, their challenges, and their families, I was inspired by the depth of their faith and the sacrificial love that marks their lives.

During our recent annual Share His Mercy Benefit, I shared about how St. Joseph had many struggles to overcome at Bethlehem and in Egypt. He had to trust in God to guide, provide, and protect the Holy Family. Bill Talerico, in his testimony at the Benefit, shared how St. Joseph reflects God the Father's Merciful Heart. Bill has chosen St. Joseph as his model for being a good spouse and father because he lived a life of sacrificial love. As I share about Bill and our friends in Cleveland, I am aware of you, your goodness to us, and the witness of your lives of struggle, faith, and love. **Thank you for the ways you do this for your families, your parishes, and for us.**



Sr. Mary Gemma shares a song from her recently released new album at our Benefit

As we approach the birth of Jesus, like Sr. Sophia Grace in the cover story, let us help St. Joseph prepare the stable of our hearts to welcome the Child Jesus. **Let us enter into the stable with him and accept his invitation to gaze upon the Babe in his arms.** Let us remember the invitation of St. Joseph who reflects the overwhelming love of our Heavenly Father who gave us His only Begotten Son. We have a God who wants to be with us and even to dwell within us through our baptism and with each Eucharist.

Thank you to those who supported our Share His Mercy Benefit (\$123,000 raised). If you did not get a chance to view it, it is not too late. The full program and smaller segments are posted on our website under the tab events. Thank you to those who have responded to our end-of-the-year appeal, "Going Forward in Faith." **If you have not made a donation yet, please prayerfully consider supporting our life and mission. Your generosity enables us to do the following:**

- To promote vocations and train our new sisters. We currently have three postulants, two novices, and five sisters in temporary vows
- To support our spiritual enrichment ministry, the motherhouse, and general services, which are necessary to run a religious community, as well as to care for our retired and infirm sisters
- To provide for our four sisters who serve the poor in downtown Steubenville, Ohio.

May you know the unconditional love of our Father this Advent and Christmas Season as you gaze upon the amazing gift of Jesus in the stable and in your hearts!

Celebrating God's Love and Goodness,
Sr. Katherine & the Mission Advancement Team - Sr. Anna Rose, Sr. Sarah Rose and Kylie



P.S. Thank you to all of our benefactors. Our life and ministry would not be possible without you. A special thank you to KB Bio-Energy, Inc. and Kurtz Bros. Central Ohio, LLC who sponsored this Christmas Under His Mercy newsletter.



Bill Talerico sharing his testimony at our Benefit



Sr. Bridget, one of our novices, during her mission house experience at Florida State University

Words to Light the Road to Bethlehem

BY SR. AGNES THERESE, TOR

As we all begin to look to Bethlehem and consider the poverty of that first Christmas, I have been considering my own journey to Bethlehem and my own journey deeper and deeper into poverty. Obviously, I have made a vow of poverty as a religious sister, which means I have rescinded the right to possess and acquire. Eleven years into my life in community, I am seeing that every year includes an invitation to a deeper reckoning with this vow, gift, and call. It turns out that giving up excess “stuff” is just the tip of the iceberg of poverty! I have found that it’s much more frightening for me to “give away” other “riches” in my life: my sense of responsibility, my self-importance, and the respect and esteem of others.

The invitations to poverty Jesus continues to extend have become for me a road to Bethlehem and Christ’s own poverty. As I walk this road each day, I am confronted by my helplessness to “fix” the grinding pain in the lives of those I know, the lack of measurable productivity in my days, and the incomprehension with which my life is met at times.

Along the road, God has used the words of others as “lights,” helping me to trust that this ever-deepening poverty is still His will and His calling, even when it’s hard and even when I feel like I’m failing. I wanted to share some of those “word-lights” with you to offer you a glimpse of our life and apostolate in downtown Steubenville:

“THERE YOU WERE – HERE YOU ARE”

True confession: though I asked and advocated strongly for the use of a cell phone for ministry (a flip phone, for the record!), I have sometimes been concerned that it is a concession to worldliness. That concern was shattered by these words by a former guest of the Urban Mission shelter. I was impressed by the deep faith I saw in her – a faith she shared in Bible study and in her friendships with other guests. But I didn’t know if I’d ever see or hear from her again: after her short stay at the shelter, she left town, and that was in my pre-cell-phone days.

Six months after our meeting I got a message letting me know that this woman had called for me, asking for prayer. Since that first tearful call, we’ve been keeping in touch here and there as she is courageously rebuilding her life. One of these conversations ended with her expressing what it meant for me to be “around” during those hard days at the shelter and what it means that she can still call. “There you were – here you are” were her last words on the subject.

PRAYER:

Jesus, when we doubt that “being there” wherever You call us really matters, remind us that it is You we carry into every place we go and You matter tremendously.

These words from those we minister with cast a gentle glow in my heart. They reassure me that my poverty is not an impediment to bearing the Gospel: Jesus dwells in my flesh and so I can be confident that He will love and console His beloved children through me. When the world around me looks dark and a shadow is cast over my own heart, these precious words serve as little lights, showing the way to Bethlehem.



Sr. Agnes Therese helping with the food pick up at Urban Mission, where she serves our friends in downtown Steubenville

“YOU GAVE GOD TO ME, AND NOW I GET TO GIVE HIM TO MY SON.”

One of the surprises of the past few years has been the number of people I meet who have never heard the Gospel, or never heard it told clearly enough to know what it had to do with them. This is particularly true of the people I’ve met at the Urban Mission shelter in downtown Steubenville. Last spring, I offered a Bible Study at the shelter each week. I was shocked when, I taught on the parable of the Prodigal Son/Merciful Father and was met by breathless excitement from the guests who came. They had never heard the story – none of them – and were dying to know what happened as I told it little by little. One of the women from this Bible study has become a friend and we get together for instruction on the faith and on prayer. Recently, she called me after taking her young son into a church. I was floored by her words, “You gave God to me, and now I get to give Him to my son.”

PRAYER:

Jesus, when we doubt our effectiveness as your ambassadors, help us to believe that we are “giving You” to the people we meet.

“YOU ARE A PASTOR, SISTER.”

These words, solemnly proclaimed by Pastor Toni, stilled a gale of laughter at the Urban Thrift a few months ago. We – Pastor Toni, a few other sisters, and myself – had been laughing because in the midst of an earnest conversation, Pastor Toni had slipped and called me, “Pastor.” As we laughed, she reconsidered, looked me in the eye, and said, “But you *are* a pastor, Sister.” This word was a promise and a challenge to me: a promise that my life and love are shepherding people to the one fold of Jesus and a challenge to accept that gift and that responsibility more fully.

PRAYER:

Jesus, when we feel our lives are small and our work is unimportant, help us to know that You entrust us with the care of souls and we can lead others to You by our life and love.

FRANCISCAN SISTERS, T.O.R.
of Penance of the Sorrowful Mother
369 LITTLE CHURCH RD.
TORONTO, OHIO 43964
ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

NON-PROFIT ORG
U.S. Postage
PAID
Mailer's Choice

You're invited to our
ADVENT RETREAT
SAT. MORNING, DEC. 4TH, 2021



CONTACT US! (740) 544-5542
WWW.FRANCISCANSISTERSTOR.ORG



FOLLOW US ON  SUBSCRIBE ON  YouTube

"To Glorify God and make known His merciful love"

MEET THE POSTULANTS!

Preparing for the coming of Christ with the Holy Family

The Advent retreat will begin with registration at 8:00 am and will end with Mass at 10:45 am with Fr. Tom Sparacino of the Pittsburgh Diocese. Sisters will give a talk, testimony, and guided meditation. You also have an opportunity to be a part of a sister-led share group after the retreat to share about the day's graces. You can sign up for these groups on our website. Day-of sign up for the groups is possible, but cannot be ensured.

There is limited seating in our Chapel, so we encourage registration beforehand. The retreat will also be livestreamed and virtual small groups (sign up on the website beforehand is required) will also be offered.

FOR MORE INFO:

Go to our website, hover over the "Events" tab, and click on "Advent Retreat 2021."

Plans are subject to change due to Covid - we will keep you posted on Facebook and our website!



Our postulants Monica, Amanda, & Christin (left to right) filling bags for the Urban Mission drive through food pick-up

Amanda:

- from Leopold, MO - studied Human and Environmental studies
- she has worked as a social worker and administrative assistant
- she has enjoyed living in a supportive fraternity with the sisters

Christin:

- from Pleasanton, KS - studied Nursing
- she worked as a nurse before entering
- she has appreciated the nourishing silence after entering

Monica:

- from Canton, MI - studied Zoology
- she did youth ministry and veterinary work before entering
- she has appreciated the "normalcy" of the sisters (*debatable☺)