

to bring fuller life to others



*Congregation of the Sisters
of the Sorrowful Mother*

Third Order Regular of Saint Francis of Assisi

November 2014 # 6

Dear Readers,

In this edition of our newsletter, “to bring fuller life to others,” we are continuing to develop the theme *Franciscan witness for evangelization*. In this sixth issue we offer a reflection on *today’s challenges of Christian life* by presenting the personalities of some holy women: Elizabeth of Hungary, Gianna Berretta Molla, Josephine Bakita and a testimony on Mother Frances Streitel, our foundress. These holy women experienced the challenges of Christian life in a normal background. They lived and expressed their faith, hope and charity through gestures of love for God and neighbor.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, wrote this about Saint Bakhita: *Through the knowledge of this hope she was ‘redeemed,’ no longer a slave, but a free child of God.* This is everyone’s goal. Even though we have both the promise of Jesus to be with us always until the end of time and the encouragement of the Church to not be afraid, we often experience that our faith wavers when we face life’s trials and challenges. The example and testimony of persons who genuinely lived their Christian faith and behaved consistently do not always touch us deeply enough. We have difficulty in putting Christ above all and tend to easily compromise our faith. I think that this question of Jesus regarding faith speaks to us today: *However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?* It can be addressed to us who often adapt ourselves to the proposals of a contradictory society and are not prepared to face our daily challenges and make choices of justice according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The characters of the women that we present in this issue can help us understand that the fundamental challenge of the Christian life is to believe that Christ is the message of hope for the world and that that strength and renewing power can be found in the Gospel. Pope Francis reminds us not to be afraid of being Christians and of living as Christians; he also reminds us that the Church was entrusted by Christ with the mission to forgive the sins of humanity, grow the kingdom of love, and sow peace in people’s hearts.

Sr. M. Teresina Marra, SSM
General Superior

Reflection

We are all called to give witness to our faith through our gestures and choices in our everyday life and in the way we make the small and big decisions of our life.

Faithful Witness of Yesterday

Elizabeth of Hungary lived in union with Christ, and her life experiences teach us that living a life of service means “getting our hands dirty.”

Faithful Witness of Today

Josephine Bakhita and Gianna Beretta Molla are, for all of us, two strong and bright models of lives lived in joy though in the midst of suffering and total self-giving.

M. Frances Streitel

M. Frances can be a model for today’s Christians of how to live a life of total trust in God with hope and charity.

Today’s challenges of Christian Life

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Reflection

The Passion of Acts of Patience



Acts of patience come. Acts of patience, these little portions of passion ... since from the morning we are confronted by them: it is us when we are too irritable or too slow, it is the crowded bus, it's the spilled milk, it's the chimneysweep coming, it's the children who mix everything up.

It's the ringing phone; it's those we love who don't love us anymore; it's us when we want to talk, to speak and must stop talking. It's us when we want to go out while being home or we want to stay home when we should go out... it's the monotony of doing the same thing every day; it's the restless desire of those things which don't belong to us.

Our acts of patience come this way and they always forget to tell us, they are the martyrdom prepared for us....it's the passion of acts of patience.

(Madaleine Delbrel, French laywoman servant of God)

There are many places in the world where living one's own Christian faith means suffering persecutions, violence and hostilities, discrimination, risk of death. The Christians living in these places experience their friendship with Jesus every day and their being witnesses of faith in God. They face great risks; and martyrdom is an actual and very realistic possibility.

While reading these lines most of us are not confronted with such dangerous situations as a consequence of our faith in Jesus Christ. But maybe we faced or we are facing situations in which witnessing our faith in Jesus means to be subjected to discrimination and mockery. I meet young Christian couples who are ridiculed for their decision of being joyfully open to life and are now expecting their second or third or even fourth child. "Think of yourselves and just enjoy life now while you're young," "think of how to keep your job rather than having babies," these are the comments of their friends and families. It is quite rare for young people to choose to spend their holidays in spiritual retreats or in voluntary work camps. If they do this they are often excluded or made fun of by their classmates and colleagues. It is unlikely that those who choose consecrated life and priesthood would receive support and encouragement in the environment where they live: relatives, friends and colleagues are shocked at their choice to leave everything in order to follow the Lord in this form of life.

Above all, we are all called to witness our faith in our ordinary life, within our families, within our religious and ecclesial communities, in our working place, with our friends, in all the contexts where we live and work, in the way we behave with one another, in the way we make our choices and small or major decisions of our life. Maybe one or more times in our life we have to face great events and dramatic choices due to our faith, but we are constantly called to renew and choose the way of Jesus in our *daily lives*, or by using Madeleine Delbrel's words, in the martyrdom or in the *passion of the acts of patience*.

The words *witness* and *martyr* have the same meaning: they identify those who saw, who touched, who experienced something and became messengers of this fact for others. It is the essence of our Christian life: the experience of the love of God that reaches us in our life, our inner being, and allows us to realize that we are precious creatures in His eyes and we are loved with our limitations and weaknesses. We can bring this experience of love and salvation to others, becoming humble and trustworthy witnesses of the good life of the Gospel. In this way, we contribute to the mission of Jesus who came so that others might have life and have it more abundantly (John 10,10). Without this intimate and deep experience our faith will be limited to an ethical code or a number of devotional rituals, to a style of honest behavior: these are all good and remarkable things, all necessary dimensions of our faith because they manifest it and make it visible. However, Saint James would say: *Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.* (James 2:17-18)

But without experiencing the love received from God and without giving it to others, our faith is missing its essence, its spring, its joy.

Sr. Samuela Maria Rigon, SSM



Faithful Witness
of Yesterday

Saint Elisabeth of Thüringen

(Born in 1207, probably in Hungary - Departed on November 17, 1231, in Marburg, Germany).

The basic information of her life in brief: engaged at the age of four; confronted with death early in life, married when she was fourteen, bore three children, became a widow after six years of a happy marriage, left home, founded a small hospital, dedicated to helping the poor, became sick and died at the age of 24.

What are the important challenges that we can learn from her for our lives as Christians?

Our life history has an impact on us, but a growing out of it is possible.

Elisabeth was a spirited child. She had to leave her Hungarian home at age four and was taken to the ruling family in Eisenach and engaged to Herrmann. She received a religious education from her mother-in-law, Sophie. When her fiancé died suddenly, she married his brother Ludwig and had three children with him. She was blessed with power and goods from birth but Elisabeth chose with her whole heart to live a life of simplicity and poverty.

Life means serving and getting one's hands dirty.

The marriage of the ruling couple was a happy one. Her husband supported her. However, she never felt at home living in the family home, the Wartburg Castle, with its customs and manners. She didn't want to conform to the customs and the manners of the Castle because she wanted to devote her time and attention to the people. She even went down to the slums of the city with baskets of bread to deliver to the poor.

Learning to cope with a difficult life

When her husband died after six years of marriage, she was inconsolable. The world and everything it could offer her seemed to have died. Now she had to choose again, either to adjust or to leave her heritage, the Wartburg Castle. With the little money she received, she built a small hospital that she named after her great model, St. Francis of Assisi. Her hospital cared mainly for patients that were not admitted to other city hospitals either because of their diseases or their poverty.

Creating life anew

Konrad of Marburg, a Norbertine priest, worried about her soul and demanded a lot of her. At the same time, he tried to lead her dedication and sacrifices towards a reasonable measure. Elisabeth decided not to remarry and expressed her piety through an unselfish service to her fellow human beings. She had housed her children somewhere else so that she could dedicate herself completely to the service of the poor. The hospital later became a place of mercy and pastoral care.

Never lose sight of your source

Elisabeth's love was unrestricted and not calculating. seems to me to fit better here. Her source was the Christ she experienced and encountered in the proclamation of the Word, through visionary experiences, the Sacraments, and working with the poor. Besides her strict and consuming piety, she also radiated an immense happiness. She wanted the people she dealt with to be happy. It gave her great joy when through her charitableness and love for the poor she was able to help them laugh, sing and feel good about themselves.



Faithful Witness
of Today

Josephine Bakhita

(Born in 1869 in Sudan, Africa - Died on February 8, 1947, in Schio, Italy)



Our life history has an impact on us, but a growing out of it is possible.

Bakhita was born in the western province of Sudan. Her father was the brother of the village chief. When she was about six years old, she was abducted by Arabian slave traders. During her eight years of slavery she was sold five times on the slave markets. The trauma of her kidnapping led her to forget her own name. Later on, she decided to be baptized, and her new name Josephine Margarita stayed with her, together with the name she received by the slave traders (Bakhita, the Arabian word for “happy”).

Life means serving and getting one`s hands dirty.

Bakhita was frequently treated very brutally during her captivity. The son of one of her owners once beat her so badly that she could not get off her straw bed for a whole month. Later she identified her worst remembrance as the one of her fourth owner, a Turkish general for whose mother-in-law she had to do slave services. This general had marked her as his possession by a kind of a tattoo.

Learning to cope with a difficult life

In her recordings she wrote in Italian many years later that a woman once brought flour, salt and a blade, drew a pattern on her skin, cut along them, and filled her wounds with salt to create an irreversible scarring. More than 60 of such cuts were made on her breast, belly and arms.

Creating life anew

Bakhita`s last owner became an Italian consul who treated her well, and apparently planned to set her free. But then he changed his mind and handed over sixteen-year-old Bakhita to his friend Augusto Michieli. She was brought to Italy and became the nanny for his daughter Mimmina. Later on, Bakhita and Mimmina were taken in by the Canossian Sisters in Venice. In 1890, Bakhita chose to be baptized and received the name Josephine Margarita. When the Michielis wanted to take their daughter home, they also wanted to take Josephine but she didn`t want to go back. Mrs. Michieli wanted to force her return to her household, but an Italian court discovered that slavery in Sudan had been banned by law before her birth, and that the Italian laws also didn`t allow slavery, so that Josephine had never legally been a slave. In the meantime, Josephine had reached early adulthood and for the first time was able to decide what she wanted to do with her life. She chose to join the Canossian Sisters.

Never lose sight of your source

On December 8, 1895, Sr. Josephine professed final vows. In 1902, she was sent to a house in Schio in the northern Italian province of Vicenza where she spent the rest of her life. Sr. Josephine spent most of her time as a receptionist in the convent. Serving in this position she had a lot of contact with people. Through her kindness, her pleasant voice and her perpetual smile many people got to know her. Her order recognized her special charisma and encouraged her to write down her experiences and to talk about them. In this way she became known throughout Italy. Her last years of life were marked with pain and illness, but she maintained her kindness. When she was asked how she felt, she always smiled and responded: “how the Lord wants it”. During her last days Sr. Josephine was spiritually drawn back to the time she spent in slavery and cried out in her delirium: “Please loosen my chains... , they are so heavy”. Sr. Josephine Bakhita died on February 8, 1947.

Sr. Gudrun Maria Schellner, SSM

Gianna Beretta Molla

(Born in Magenta, Italy, on October 4, 1922 - Died in Ponte Nuovo, Italy, on April 28, 1962)

Some time ago, I was visiting a Catholic bookstore in the United States; I was curious when I saw a large number of books on the shelves about Gianna Beretta Molla. I asked the clerk a few questions about the large number of books that were written about her, and she explained to me that this saint was very well known and venerated in that area.

Gianna Beretta Molla is a great model as a woman, wife, mother and pediatrician. In 1994, she was proclaimed blessed as a faithful mother by Pope John Paul II. Her message and the devotion of people to her, had reached the five continents even before her canonization; her canonization was celebrated on May 16, 2006, in Rome in the presence of her husband.

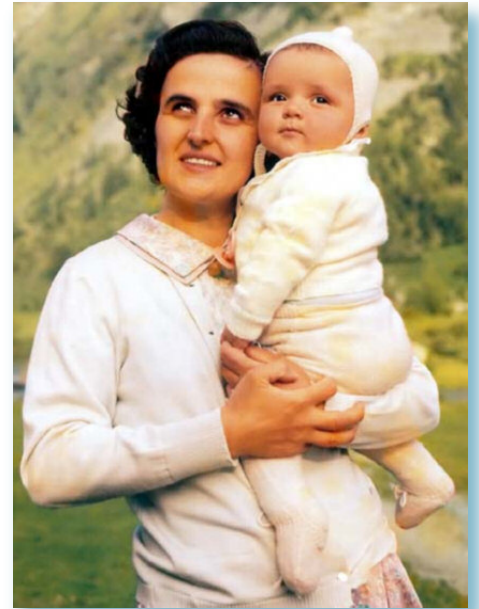
Gianna was born on October 4, 1922, in a small town in Northern Italy. Her parents were Franciscan tertiaries so she grew up in a Christian atmosphere, developing a Franciscan sensitivity for the poor and missions. At the age of fifteen, she was already considering what her vocation might be, praying and asking for prayer, because she believed that *our earthly and eternal happiness depends on following our vocation without faltering* (from her letters).

After finishing secondary school, she studied medicine specializing in pediatrics in Milan in 1952. She was a woman who loved life, had a deep faith and was very generous. As a doctor, she preferred to work with the poor, the mothers, the children and the elderly. Her leisure time was devoted to doing some activities in the parish and she also took time for music, painting, skiing and climbing as ways to express her great *joie de vivre* and to enjoy the enchantment of creation.

Later on, she met Pietro Molla who became her husband in 1955. They had three children named Pierluigi, Mariolina and Laura. With simplicity and balance, Gianna knew how to balance being a mother, a wife, a doctor and, at the same time she enjoyed life.

In September 1961, towards the end of the second month of pregnancy, she was touched by suffering and the mystery of pain; she had developed a fibroma in her uterus. Before she had surgery, knowing the risk that her continued pregnancy brought, she pleaded with the surgeon to save the life of the child she was carrying, and entrusted herself to prayer and Providence. The child's life was saved, for which she thanked God. She spent the remaining seven months of her pregnancy with an unrelenting strength of spirit and dedication to her tasks of being a mother and doctor. A few days before the child was due, she was ready to give her life in order to save that of her child while always trusting in God's Providence: "*She told me clearly,*"—Pietro, her husband, recalls—"*If you must decide between me and the child, do not hesitate: choose the child—I insist on it. Save him.*"

Pietro knew Gianna's generosity and spirit of sacrifice and understood her insistence on decisions very well. He felt that his conscience forced him to respect her wish even if it meant that he and his children would have to face extremely painful consequences.



To Gianna it was clear that she was only the instrument of God's Providence for the child to be born. As for her other children, for their education and growth, she trusted in God's Providence through her family members.

Gianna Emanuela was born on April 21, 1962, Holy Saturday. Shortly after her birth, her mother's health began to deteriorate, and despite all efforts and treatment she died on April 28, 1962, at the age of thirty-nine.

The choice made by Gianna was guided by her conscience both as a mother and a doctor and can only be understood in the light of her great faith, firm belief in the sacred right to life, together with the mystery of maternal love and full trust in God

St. Gianna is a hymn to life for all of us, a significant witness to the Gospel of Jesus. The gift of self in death crowned the journey of love and faith that she had lived all of her life.

Sr. Samuela Maria Rigon, SSM

***The secret of happiness is to live moment
by moment and to thank God for all that He,
in His goodness, sends to us day after day***


(Gianna Beretta Molla)

M. Frances Streitel

I have always loved Mother Frances Streitel, first of all, because she was the foundress of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, and then because through her intercession I received an extraordinary grace of protection and healing. I had a desire to learn more about her life. I have read everything that is published on the congregational website and other brochures, and I am struck by her consistent life of faith as a Christian and religious woman. She always tried to fulfill God's will; both in her difficult and ordinary choices, she entrusted herself to Him, the good and merciful Father. Also today, her consistent life of faith, hope and love, is something very important for us as Christians to model. We can

so easily forget that God is both Father and Mother, that He is good and cares deeply for us; but at times we easily turn to other idols in order to solve our problems which Mother Frances referred to as daily crosses. After my healing experience I have made even greater efforts to get to know her better. Learning more about her deep faith has helped me to grow and deepen my faith which has helped me to grow closer to Him, our God, the Giver of all good things. I want to give more testimony of God by the way I live my life and devote more time to prayer.

Maria Nevina Ambrosino



It is sad to find Christians who are no longer the salt of the earth, and we know that when salt loses its taste, it is no longer good for anything. ...This is why it is necessary to renew oneself by continually drawing sap from the Gospel

(Pope Francis, Angelus, August 31, 2014)



The Lord gave this woman a strong faith, confident hope, and a glowing love. He guided her on unexpected and unusual ways to strengthen her fidelity in His chosen service

(Mother Frances of the Cross Streitel, Letters to Father John Francis Jordan, 2,2)