

4-1-2022

Behold Your Mother: Wives and Mothers as Partners in Christ's Priestly Mission

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**Behold Your Mother:
Wives and Mothers as Partners
in Christ's Priestly Mission**



Honors Thesis

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Department: Religious Studies

Advisor: William Trollinger, PhD

April 2022

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Abstract

This research explores the Catholic Church's teaching on the priesthood of the laity and, specifically, how the lay priesthood of women, as wives and mothers, works in tandem with and complements the ordained priesthood. The concept of lay priesthood is rooted in our baptism - where we are invited into and given the power to participate in Jesus Christ's priesthood through our own prayers and sacrifices, our ministering to others, etc. In this study, the lives of five lay women from the 19th and 20th centuries, who are either canonized saints in the Church or who are on their way to canonization, are examined. This research seeks to demonstrate the connection between the tasks of the ministerial priesthood and the abilities of women in their lay priesthood - in their motherly mediation, prayer and offering sacrifices, and in their giving life physically and spiritually to the Church.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. William Trollinger for his mentorship and support throughout this process. He has always challenged me with new perspectives and has shown me the importance of always being open to new possibilities. I would like to also recognize Dr. Christine Dalessio who further inspired me to do research in this intersection between vocation and women in the Church. Thank you to my family and friends who have encouraged me and supported me in all facets of my work during my time at UD - you inspire me to give the best of myself and to trust that I have something valuable to offer. I would also like to recognize each of the women I've included in this study who have become my own spiritual mothers and friends in a way. They have shown me what it means to follow Jesus wholeheartedly and to recognize that I too, as a woman, am chosen by God for something significant. Their lives have renewed my excitement for what women can do in the Church. I hope my own work in highlighting the lives of these holy women can in some small way also bring glory to God.

This honors thesis is dedicated to women who may feel forgotten or left out by the Catholic Church - may they know there is a place for them too in leadership *alongside* and even *for* the men they accompany.



**University of
Dayton**

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Introduction

Jesus' words to "Come, follow me" reverberate from the waters of the Sea of Galilee into our hearts. This bold invitation still remains even in a world drastically different from that of Christ's own time. As they prepared their nets for a catch, Simon Peter and Andrew were invited into this privileged encounter with Jesus as the first disciples to be chosen. This exchange at the Sea of Galilee is the first recorded account of Jesus' personal invitation to a radical life of trust and surrender. For reasons unknown, the Son of God chose to call these humble fishermen, seemingly unqualified and probably ill-equipped, to be a part of his mission. He selected them for a divine purpose, seeing great potential in them even when they perhaps did not see it themselves. Despite not knowing this stranger, the brothers, *at once*, left everything behind to follow him. This encounter by the Sea of Galilee urges the rest of us to consider, "How am *I* chosen? How does Jesus call *me*?"

For women specifically in the Catholic Church this is a question that has surfaced often in an institution that is considered by some to be misogynistic, out-of-date, and irrelevant. Questions consistently surface about how women can be active participants in a Church that, from the outset, appears to privilege men as priests and spiritual leaders. As women observe that first encounter at the Sea of Galilee as well as the moment Jesus gave his apostles the authority to be priests, it may be easy for them to lose sight of the role that Christ has for them specifically *as women*. It is often the ministerial priesthood specifically, passed onto the apostles by Jesus Christ, that may be considered one of the greatest stumbling blocks for women in the Church.

The Catholic Church's teaching on the ministerial priesthood has been confirmed and emphasized time and again through documents such as *Inter Insigniores, Ad Catholici Sacerdotii* and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. This paper does not seek to uproot or challenge Church teaching on this subject; rather, it seeks to shed light on the roots of the feminine priesthood already established before us. Through a qualitative study of the lives of five women, either canonized saints or on their way to sainthood, this study highlights the ways in which women *have answered* and *continue to answer* Christ's call to "Come, follow me," exercising their God-given lay priesthood in a uniquely feminine way, particularly through their motherly mediation, sacrifices, and giving life to the Church. Additionally, this work seeks to bring awareness to the reciprocal relationship between the Catholic lay priesthood and ministerial priesthood.

The priesthood of the laity

Despite the words of 1 Peter 2:9 emphasizing that, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation," members of the body of Christ have either neglected or been misinformed about their share in Christ's priesthood. There is often a greater emphasis on the role of priests, bishops, and deacons, for example, and not as much on the laity's involvement in the Church.

In *Lumen Gentium*, the Vatican II document on the "Light of the Nations," the royal priesthood of all believers is highlighted in section 10: "The faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist. They likewise exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity." This document emphasizes that the lay and ministerial priesthoods work in tandem. Lay people are given a share in Christ's

priesthood to make the Church present in all places (33), to “consecrate the world itself to God,” (34) and to “go forth as powerful proclaimers of a faith in things to be hoped for,” (35) among other responsibilities. It is undeniable that *both men and women*, in the image and likeness of God, are called to this priestly mission, but perhaps in different ways. Both men *and women* are called to be other Christs, other anointed souls, to bring forth the Good News in the world.

The women of this study

In this paper, the lives of Zélie Martin, Elisabeth Leseur, Concepción Cabrera de Armida, Gianna Beretta Molla, and Catherine Doherty will be examined. These women primarily lived out their vocations as wives and mothers, but they still found themselves in unique positions to serve Christ in a more immediate way. It was precisely *because* of their roles as women, and through their influence as wives and mothers, that they were able to have a share in Christ’s priestly mission. They were doctors, social workers and entrepreneurs, writers, and intellectuals all working with the hands of Christ to minister to others, perhaps even in a way that ordained priests could not. A more in-depth and personal biography of each of these women can be found in the appendix section of this paper.

Just as Christ invited women to be “guardians of the Gospel message” during his earthly ministry (*Theology of the Body* 464), he calls to women individually today to continue playing a role in the salvation of the world. While they were not called to be ministerial priests as the apostles were, they, like all the laity, do in fact have a share in Christ’s priesthood. *Lumen Gentium* states of the laity that we are called to “live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life...exercising their proper function and led

by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven” (31). They, in a unique way, “make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity” (31).

Motherly Mediation

Rooted in the Old Covenant and fulfilled by Christ in the New Testament, one of the primary roles of a priest was to serve as a mediator, or representative, between God and God’s people. An example of this can be seen as Moses consults God on behalf of his people, pleading that God not be angry with them for building the golden calf (Exodus 32: 11-14). The priesthood of Christ is described in *Lumen Gentium* as being “shared in various ways both by the ministers and by the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is really communicated in different ways to His creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source” (62).

The Virgin Mary is perhaps the most perfect example of a motherly mediator. Her mediation does not detract from Christ’s power; rather, she always points the way to him. Mary, as our ever gentle mother, lightens our load, she holds our hand, and she introduces poor souls to Christ who have not met him. Just as parents serve as a sort of go-between for their children, helping their children navigate the sometimes scary situations and lessons of the world, there is Mary standing next to us, clearing our path to reach Christ. As mother, she may be more approachable for many people – a resting place, a shelter for all who may be hesitant or timid in approaching the grandeur of Christ. In *Redemptoris Mater*, Pope St. John Paul II’s encyclical on the Blessed Virgin Mary in the life of the Church, we can understand Mary as putting herself in the middle,

“coming to the aid of human needs,” placing “herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of their wants, needs, and sufferings,” pointing out the needs of her spiritual children to her Son (21). Women in the Church today are especially significant in ministry. For some of the Church’s children who may struggle with seeing God as father due to familial issues or a dysfunctional relationship with their own father, women have a unique opportunity to be a mirror of the gentle and tender attributes of God in a way that men may not always be able to.

The female saints in this study continue to embody the motherly mediation modeled by the Blessed Virgin. While their mediation is always secondary to Christ’s own saving redemption, these women have been invited to share in the goal of salvation in a variety of ways, including the communication of God’s love and goodness to all those around them.

Elisabeth Leseur – Spiritual Mother to Those Who are Lost

One woman in particular who demonstrates a unique tenderness towards God’s people is Elisabeth Leseur. Elisabeth was a French woman who, today, is most well-known for her spiritual diary in which she writes in detail about her days of agony and suffering from chronic illness, as well as the tumult of her marriage to a publicly professed atheist – Dr. Felix Leseur. Elisabeth, unlike the other mothers in this study, never received the gift of physical children, yet God offered her the invitation to be a spiritual mother to many. She was incredibly devoted to her family members and doted on her nieces and nephews. She worked with Catholic Union and even founded a boarding house for girl-workers for a short time (Chovelon 23). Her spiritual motherhood extended to her role as unofficial spiritual director. For example, in her correspondences

with a nun, it was not Sister who provided counsel, but, often, Elisabeth who enlightened her and taught her more about the divine (Leseur 28). Furthermore, Elisabeth's own spiritual director, a priest, did not hesitate to consider her a saint, and it was often she who instructed and helped his faith to flourish (15).

Elisabeth was a devoted friend and companion to people of all different walks of life, different beliefs, and different backgrounds. To everyone, she radiated kindness and love. In a way, she was a sanctuary and a safe haven, overflowing with peace and generosity to anyone who came to her. Her life is reminiscent of Jesus as the Good Shepherd – always seeking out the lost and far from home, bringing them back. However, Elisabeth never sought to convert anyone - she believed only God can change hearts, and her mission was simply to be a receptacle of divine love, pouring out for anyone who came close. Even those who deeply opposed her faith were drawn to this woman who loved without bounds.

Elisabeth had a gift of discernment and the ability to meet people where they were. She understood the delicacy of human souls, careful never to turn someone further away from faith by judging or rebuking (something we often fail to practice in the Church today). She writes about those who do not believe: "Let us try to speak the language they can understand, and with them stammer eternal truths" (86). She understood what it meant to sow the seed and trust that the Master Gardener would do the rest (78). It is said that anyone who came to her, "marveled at her...she exercised the greatest influence on those around her, that her room was most frequented by people who came to her for moral guidance. It was from her invalid's chair that she directed the greatest number of souls, and became the source of the extraordinary spiritual radiance

that shone from her in her last years” (18). In each person Elisabeth encountered, she saw a child of God no matter how far they may actually be from Him. Many of her closest friends were atheist or agnostic, yet they nevertheless enjoyed enlightening conversations together on life, literature, and art. Her friendship also extended to those outside of her immediate relationships - she wrote letters to people of all backgrounds including Jewish friends, nuns, and atheist university professors to name a few (28).

To Elisabeth, every person was a precious soul to be loved and cared for, someone from whom she could also learn and whose life had purpose. She understood every being as someone who could bring profound meaning to her life and someone who deserved to have their opinions heard no matter how much she disagreed. She writes, “More than others I love these beings whom divine light does not illuminate, or rather whom it illuminates in a manner unknown to us with our restricted minds...I know that only God performs the intimate transformation of the human soul and that we can but point out to Him those we love, saying, ‘Lord, make them live’” (55). Love and kindness were perhaps her greatest tools of evangelization. Atheism or agnosticism were never obstacles to Elisabeth’s evangelization; she always saw the great potential for faith, no matter how small, in each soul she encountered. While she often did not speak directly of faith, everyone she met would be able to ascertain a certain light about her, a light and joy not of this world.

Through her motherly mediation, Elisabeth is a comfort and friend especially to those who have never encountered God. She is the face and body of Christ for those who are often turned away or forgotten, and especially for those who have never had an encounter with him.

Elisabeth's role as a mediator of God's love and mercy had a *most* profound effect in spurring her husband's conversion after her death. Not only did Felix come back to faith, he actually became a priest. In reflecting on Elisabeth's death, he writes: "I perceived clearly the inner meaning of her existence, so grand in its humility, and I began to appreciate the splendor of the faith of which I had seen such wonderful effects...Although Elisabeth had apparently disappeared, I felt her come to me, to direct me...my former hostility quickly gave way to the wish to know Catholicism" (Leseur 33). His beloved wife, as a mediator, revealed the unspeakable depths of God's mercy and forgiveness in a way he could not perceive on his own. It was *through her* that he came to know and ultimately find God again.

As we experience, and are even the instigators of, isolation and division in our world, Elisabeth's kindness and forgiveness are needed now more than ever. She is the face of Christ to those who seek belonging and all who have felt less than or abandoned by the Church, especially today. Elisabeth, the woman whose intention was always to love first, is undoubtedly a staunch prayer warrior in heaven today, interceding for those who, like her husband, seem the most unlikely to come to God. Her words urge us today to "open our hearts to admit all humanity" to "learn to find in each soul the point at which it is still in touch with the Infinite, with God" (58). After her death, Felix attributes the words of St. Vincent de Paul to her life: "You bring souls to God by your sweetness, by your compassion for their errors, and by the feeling that makes you share their misfortunes" (25). Each of us can be a mediator, a communicator as Elisabeth was, of God's unending mercy and compassion, bringing souls to God who might otherwise be lost.

Catherine Doherty– Spiritual Mother to Priests

Similar to Elisabeth’s affirmation of the divine spark in each person, Catherine Doherty, a Catholic social worker, is well-known as a spiritual mother to countless individuals primarily through her lay apostolate at Madonna House in Canada and particularly in her work with priests.

Catherine’s spiritual motherhood parallels the Virgin Mary’s own spiritual motherhood to the apostles at Pentecost and Calvary. Here, the Blessed Mother served as a sort of mediator, stoking the flames of faith in the hearts of the apostles, helping them to see Christ more clearly, and giving them a model in how to devote themselves even more closely to him. For this reason, *Lumen Gentium* describes Mary as “Advocate,” “Auxiliatrix,” and “Mediatrix” (62). Similarly, Catherine encourages and reminds priests to be what Christ has called them to be.

Joseph Windle, the former bishop of the Diocese of Pembroke, Ontario, states that Catherine’s focus is to “encourage, to inspire, to protect, and to *activate* the priest as Christ’s ambassador of love to all members of his flock” (*Dear Father*, preface). Furthermore, Fr. Patrick McNulty, who worked closely with Catherine, said of her, “She truly did have an incredible, indeed mystical, sense of Christ’s priesthood and thus of those ordained to that priesthood. As she poured over us the healing balm of her heroic love and compassion which flowed from her suffering for us, she was not afraid to speak to us the ‘prophetic’ and powerful truth about ourselves” (13).

As the Church increasingly finds itself in the crosshairs of doubt and skepticism regarding the ministerial priesthood today, Catherine’s motherly mediation strengthens priests for battle, and she reminds them what it truly means to be Christ’s priest, to be the

Good Shepherd. Just as Mary and Mary Magdalene remained at the cross of Calvary while the apostles hid in fear, Catherine also defends Christ and upholds his mission today.

As a lay woman, Catherine is able to clearly remind priests of the needs of God's people. A true motherly mediator and representative of God, she brings the needs of God's children before priests who serve in the person of Christ. Like Mary who held her son's body after his death, Catherine's heart goes out to all the priests who feel discouraged or fearful; she comforts and uplifts them when they feel like giving up on their vocation, saying, "I would like to come with the oils of my love and the wine of my compassion to heal your wounds, for I know some of them are deep" (27). She encourages the Church to address the wounds of its priests, providing support for their own ongoing spiritual formation.

Catherine remembers, even as a child, that she "loved priests with my whole heart...I firmly believed that Christ left us priests because he didn't want to leave us orphans or to part from us" (51). Like the Blessed Mother at the wedding feast of Cana, Catherine is attentive to the needs of her children, hastening to help or redirect them. Like Mary Magdalene running to the apostles at Christ's Resurrection, she is the "apostle to the apostles" as she reminds them of their identity in Christ and urges them on to everything they are called to be.

In many ways, Catherine's letter to priests is both a blueprint for seminaries across the world and a wake-up call to the ordained. As our Church grapples with the aftermath of sex abuse scandals and the reality of misguided shepherds, Catherine's words are blunt and honest. She warns priests that they will be crucified "by the

lukewarm and indifferent amongst your flock; by the rich and greedy in your front pews” (19), their soul will be “steeped in this utter darkness” (20), and “loneliness will be your constant companion” (21). Many priests today have lost sight of what it means to become another Christ, to die to themselves. Our lukewarm culture of contentment and stagnation has frequently enveloped our priests, who have succumbed to selfishness, division, and consumerism.

Catherine reminds the rest of the Church of the humanity of our priests. She reminds us of the doubts and fears they, like us, face every day. Like the Blessed Mother, she never tires holding them close to her heart, affirming their vocation and their identity in Christ, consoling their wounds and hurts. Simultaneously, Catherine also cries out to priests, “We need to hear your voices clearly and we need to hear them now. Our pastures once so green and nourishing for us are being scorched by the searing heat of materialism, selfishness, and doubt” (52). She pleads, “Do not desert us in order to fulfill personal ambition or your own immediate needs” (55). She affirms the complementary relationship between priests and their flock: “Give us God and *we* shall go into the ghettos... you have shown us how because you have seen and felt and touched who you are and who he is...you will send us forth like a thousand sparks of the Holy Spirit... Together we shall renew the face of the earth” (28-29). Just as Jesus’ apostles, his priests, passed on the ministry to spread the Good News, so too do priests today hand over Christ’s saving work to the laity. As we carry out Christ’s mission, consecrating the world to God, we still need a reference point, a guide, like Christ, to look back to when we get lost. As the virgin Mary certainly guided and reminded the apostles of their

mission in Christ, so too does Catherine serve as mediator, making Christ's call clearer to priests today.

Offering Sacrifice

A second correlation between the ministerial priesthood and the lay priesthood is the duty of priests to offer sacrifice. Section 1539 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church posits priests as "appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins." Therefore, not only are ministerial priests mediators between God and God's people, but they are also, as seen particularly in the Old Testament, responsible for offering sacrifices on behalf of the people to God. This can be seen in Hebrews 5:1-3, and Exodus 29:10-29, among several examples where sacrifices were offered in hopes that a relationship with God might be restored. Sacrifice, in its most basic form, is meant to bring veneration to God, offering something of ourselves to be more in communion with him. A sacrifice is freely given out of submission and reverence towards God; it is not something that is done simply to please God, but so that we ourselves may also be transformed and made holy. In the Old Testament, Moses calls Aaron to offer a calf, a lamb, and an ox as offering to the Lord. He states in Leviticus 9:7, "Draw near to the altar and offer your sin offering and your burnt offering, and make atonement for yourself and for the people."

Sacrifice, especially recurrent sacrifice, reorients us towards God and purifies us to give ourselves wholly to him rather than to other gods in our life (such as technology, lust, food, etc.). The sacrifices found in the Old Testament prefigure Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the Cross, the offering of his body and blood, for the forgiveness of sins. Christ's words at the Last Supper give the apostles the authority to carry out and continue

this sacrifice through the Mass. Today, the laity too are invited to offer sacrifices, joined to Christ's perfect sacrifice, through a variety of ways: fasting, denying ourselves of something such as during Lent, saying no to an activity so we can spend more time in prayer with God, etc. All of our "works, prayers, and apostolic endeavors...all these become 'spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ'...the laity consecrate the world itself to God" ("Lumen Gentium" 34). We are each called by Christ in a unique way to take up our cross(es) and follow him. The mothers and wives in this study, similarly, gave themselves for the advancement of souls to heaven.

Gianna Beretta Molla – No Greater Love

Gianna Beretta Molla, an Italian pediatrician and mother of four, is perhaps most well-known for the sacrifice of offering her life for her daughter to live. During her fourth pregnancy, Gianna was diagnosed with a uterine tumor. Doctors gave her the option to either abort her child, in which *her* life would be spared, or to remove only the tumor, which was far riskier. Gianna chose the latter option, which was successful at first, but led to infection and ultimately her death. Some may say Gianna, a pious woman, thirsted for martyrdom and was reckless in leaving her family behind. Many critics question how she could leave behind her husband and her other three children still in need of a mother. It is important to note that this woman who loved life so greatly longed to live more than anything.

Prior to this notable act of courage, Gianna lived quite an ordinary life. While she had three of her own children on earth, her role as mother extended to those she doctored. Her work and her own personal relationship with Christ imbued in her a deep sense of compassion and an awareness of the innate human dignity of each person she

encountered. Gianna understood her work as a doctor as geared towards not only physical healing, but also towards the spiritual healing of her patients. She said of her work, “Whoever touches the body of a patient, touches the body of Christ” (73). She articulated her mission as a doctor in her writing: “We have opportunities [as doctors] that a priest does not. Our mission is not ended when medicines are of no more use. There is the soul to take to God... as the priest can touch Jesus, so we touch Jesus in the bodies of our patients – poor, young, old, children. May Jesus be able to make himself seen through us” (75). Her words echo, again, that theme of motherly mediation as well as the reality of lay ministry surpassing the reach of ordained ministers.

While each of us is called to “take up our cross” in a myriad of ways, Gianna’s cross, in the sacrifice of her life for her unborn child, especially resembles that of Christ’s in His words that, “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that a person will lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12-13). Her body given for her daughter further mirrors the words of Christ at the Last Supper, “This is my body given up for you” (Luke 22:19). Gianna’s act impels the rest of us in the Church to consider, “What must *I* give of myself?”

While most of us are not literally called to lay down our life for those we love, we are each given the opportunity to sacrifice something of ourselves – perhaps our pride and our ego, our desire to be right, our own material needs - to take care of the person directly in front of us. Gianna’s sacrifice certainly encompassed an element of God’s agape, uncompromising love; as a parent, the love for her unborn daughter was unmatched and uncompromising as she felt the call to protect and sustain.

So often the notion of sacrifice is met with clenched fists and skepticism. We are hesitant to give up something of ourselves because we are fearful of discomfort and the change of lifestyle that sacrifice might demand of us. Gianna, however, recognized fundamentally that her life was never hers to begin with -it always belonged to God. Her example calls us to live with the same trust that God will use our sacrifices (big and small) for good; he will multiply our good efforts beyond what we planned or imagined.

Cardinal Giovanni Columbo, at Gianna's beatification ceremony, said of the beloved mother that she "exalts the sublime heroism of a Christian wife and mother who, in her respect for all life, which is always God's gift to humanity, sacrifices her own young life in order to say 'yes' to the Christian duty of love" in a world that "through selfishness and violence, it has become too easy to kill in every way, be it hidden or open" (Pelucchi 133). Today, she is considered the patron saint of mothers and physicians, just as she dedicated herself wholeheartedly to both missions during her earthly life.

Concepción Cabrera de Armida – Becoming the “Man of Sorrows”

Of the women included in this study, the sacrifice and suffering experienced by Concepción Cabrera de Armida, more affectionately known as Conchita, are perhaps the most dramatic. Conchita was a Mexican wife and mother to nine children. Interestingly, she is also considered to be a mystic in the Church as she demonstrated a profound union with God. After her husband's death, Conchita entered what some scholars consider to be a spiritual wedding with Christ. On March 25, 1906, the Feast of the Annunciation, the Lord revealed to her precisely what it meant to live out a lay priesthood, in union with His own sacrifice and suffering (Philipon 61). Here, she is told, "Upon increasing Myself

in your heart I had My designs: to transform you into Me, *the man of sorrows*... You have received the sublime mission of a priest...the ability to be a priest, not that of holding Me in your hands but in your heart and the grace of never separating Myself from you” (65). Christ emphasizes Conchita’s lay priesthood in her ability to offer up her own suffering and, through her Works of the Cross apostolate, which emphasizes a devotion to Christ’s priestly mission, join millions of souls to him.

In his words to Conchita, Jesus makes the distinction between a priest who holds him in his hands, as in the Eucharistic consecration at Mass, and a priest who holds him in their heart. Through Conchita’s surrender to becoming another Christ, another offering, she received the grace of never being separated from Jesus. We too are called to give up our lives, to become Christ’s victim in some way, to be used however he sees fit. As he has given us the gift of his own flesh and blood to consume, we too, as the priesthood of the faithful, must be so consumed *by him* that all our lives are an overflow of God’s mercy and love flooding the hearts of those near us.

Just as Christ asked Conchita to give herself fully to him, we too are called to conform our lives to Christ, regardless of our vocation. Conchita, as not only a mystic but also a wife and mother, provides an example of what it means for an ordinary lay person, a woman, to dedicate their life to Christ. Though we are tempted to shy away from pain and suffering, Conchita describes her suffering for Christ as a union that is “stronger, more indestructible than that of love, the one producing the other. Union on the Cross makes spring from the soul the most sublime and selfless love. The love of suffering is the love of Jesus, solid and authentic” (30). She even describes suffering and sacrifice as “this illuminating, formidable presence of my God within the innermost depths of my

being, an infinite thirst, an irresistible and constant impulse toward this unique Being...I felt inside of me, a kind of harmony and resemblance to God Himself” (42).

As stated before, while Conchita was not permitted to offer the Lord’s sacrifice on the altar as a ministerial priest, she herself was called to be put on the altar to “crucify myself, to desire suffering, martyrdom, to give my blood every day for the salvation of souls” (58). Conchita’s life was lived in such close imitation of Jesus that witnesses at her death bed stated she died not with the face of a woman, but the “Countenance of the Crucified,” the man of sorrows (109). Conchita embraced wholeheartedly her lay priesthood through not only her example of spiritual motherhood, but the offering of her whole life to God.

As Christians, if we keep our eyes fixed only on Christ’s sacrifice and death on the cross, we will only see pain and sorrow incited by a cruel and unsparing God, rather than a God who brings victory and life out of suffering and death. Similarly, if we dwell on the pain and suffering that accompanies our earthly sacrifices, we fail to see its redemptive quality. While we often think of sacrifice as a physical or even a bloody act, as members of the laity, we are invited to offer up *every* aspect of our day, of our life – “all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (*Lumen Gentium* 10). A primary way the laity are invited into this is through their taking part in the sacrifice of the Mass where they “offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with it” (11). The laity are called to sacrifice their time and offer their gifts and resources so that the whole world may be transformed into the Body of Christ, consecrating the whole world to God. Additionally, “all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their

ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne” become spiritual sacrifices that can be offered up (34). Suffering does not have to be meaningless – it can be a springboard to a deeper and even more intimate union with Christ. Like Gianna and Conchita, we each can live out a priesthood of holding Christ in our hearts. As the ordained priest stands in the person of Christ at each Mass and says, “This is my body given up for you,” the rest of us are encouraged to consider what we will give of our lives in sacrifice for one another and for the sake of the mission Christ has for each of us.

Newness of life / Restoration of the Church

A third role of priests, as seen in Numbers 15:27-28, is to forgive sins. Priests were to “make atonement before the Lord for the person who goes astray by an unintentional sin, making atonement for him so that he may be forgiven.” Jesus gives this authority to his apostles at Pentecost in his words: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20: 19-23). While only God can forgive sin, the priest serves as a mediator, a messenger and communicator of God’s mercy, a go-between for the penitent and the Lord. Like offering sacrifice, confessing our sins is not to be seen as a duty or a chore, but an opportunity to come before God, humbling ourselves in recognition of our weaknesses and failings, allowing God to enter in and heal us. Penance and the sacrament of reconciliation offer us a “radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart” (CCC 1431). Additionally, penance and the forgiveness of sins is intimately linked to the restoration and revitalization of the Church. By receiving the

grace of this sacrament, an individual is given the opportunity to be reoriented once again into the body of Christ and to receive new life, restoring fuller communion with God, our neighbor, and ourselves.

Far too often, our Church is wrought with division and condemnation. Many are lost in the Church because they feel as if their sin is too great or too burdensome to be forgiven. As Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their legalism, he also calls us to lead with mercy in bringing the lost back home. Jesus' ministry was always first to affirm the dignity of the sinner, to meet them where they are, and then to call them to repentance. Jesus restored the dignity of those he encountered, reminding them of their identity first as a child of God.

As seen in *Lumen Gentium*, "the laity go forth as powerful proclaimers of a faith in things to be hoped for...this announcing of Christ by a living testimony as well as by the spoken word, takes on a specific quality and a special force in that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world" (35). Like the Virgin Mary who was both "nursing mother" and "associate of unique nobility," the women in this study are also imbued with "burning charity" aimed towards the "restoration of 'supernatural life to souls'" (*Redemptoris Mater* 39).

While the women in this study could not themselves forgive sins, they, serving as co-workers with Christ and his ministerial priests, opened the door for those around them to know the everlasting love and mercy of God and to be reoriented once again to living in the light of Christ. These women spoke truth and love to the suffering and the broken, reminding them of the life they are invited to with Christ. To those they ministered to, they ultimately served as guiding lights to Christ himself, the true priest who never tires

of offering redemption and newness of life. As mothers and wives, they both figuratively *and* literally bring new life into the Church, continuing Christ's saving mission. Through the minister of the sacrament of reconciliation, the Catechism explains that reconciliation with God brings about a true "spiritual resurrection," restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God" (1468). So too can women spur a beautiful spiritual resurrection in the hearts of those near them, inviting them to embrace their identity as children and to say yes to the Father's friendship.

It was the Virgin Mary's "yes" that brought about the redeemer and that initially planted the seeds of life in the Church. Today, in her apostolic mission, the Church seeks to *continue* bringing forth this life of Christ in the hearts of each of the faithful, spurring the surrounding world always towards revival and restoration.

Zélie Martin – The Domestic Church

It is one thing to *be* a saint as Zélie Martin and her husband Louis were, it is quite another to raise and bring life to new saints. Zélie Martin is most well-known for being the mother of St. Therese of Lisieux, a great saint and doctor of the Church today. The "yes" Zélie gave to motherhood led to new life that would bring about the salvation of many other souls (as seen through her daughter's sainthood). Just as the Church as mother "gives birth to, educates and builds up the Christian family, by putting into effect in its regard the saving mission which she has received from her Lord," Zélie and her husband took very seriously the weight of parenthood and bringing up their children in the faith (*Familiaris Consortio* 49).

Zelie and Louis' experiences with parenthood resembles closely that of the modern experience of those in the domestic Church. Though they were a family of saints, they did not escape the trials and tribulations that every other family experiences. Her motherhood was marked by joy and pride in each of her children, even amidst the baby cries for "thirty-six hours without stopping" (Mongin 54), the early morning work before the children woke, and the trials posed by the outbursts and misbehaving of their more "difficult" daughter, Leonie (55). Like all of us, Zelie knew what it felt like to be distracted and exhausted in the pew, presumably after waking to tend to her youngsters in the night, and to not "feel anything" at the sermon, but to trust God's graces were at work (Mongin 39).

While the ministerial priest, through penance and reconciliation, serves in the place of Christ to offer new life and restoration to all those who are broken and weary, mothers, *unlike* men and priests, have the opportunity to bring life forth *physically* – a most unique share in God's creative power. In their own domestic church, Zélie and Louis did not force their daughters to believe or practice the faith in a certain way; they simply provided opportunities and invitations to know Jesus more personally (Mongin 72). They provide an example for the domestic Church today of the importance of planting seeds of faith that one day will flourish. It was because of the family's strong foundation in prayer and devotion to God that the children not only were strong in faith themselves but that they also had the ability to inspire future generations in the Church.

Catherine Doherty – Revitalization of the Church

As stated earlier, Catherine Doherty had a deep love for the priesthood but, additionally, she had a heart for renewing the Church through the youth and the laity

directly. She firmly believed in the ability of youth and lay apostolates to bring new life into the Church, but she was staunch in her proclamation that they needed to be set on fire with the Holy Spirit first. Religious education was one way Catherine saw fit to regenerate the Church's mission and activate young people. In the 1950s, Catherine wrote a letter to a religious sister for whom she served as a sort of spiritual director. Though the letter was written over sixty years ago, Catherine's words are prophetic for our own time: "Are our lamps ready and trimmed and filled with oil so that we can light a man's path and lead him to God who is truth? Or are we like the foolish virgins of the Gospel, running around, wondering where we can borrow a drop or two of the oil of His truth" (*Dear Sister* 40). She encouraged Sister to be bold in how she teaches the faith to youth – she emphasized that the youth want the truth, they want Jesus, they don't want anything less.

Catherine's letter calls our Church today to action. She cries for a Catholicism that is "lived utterly, passionately, without compromise, daily, everywhere, at home, at school...Not the diluted, passive, lip-service, moderate, emasculated Catholicism that has been passing for the real thing for so long" (35). Catherine's words come to us in a time where we are quite content with just getting by; most of us have no desire or motivation to delve deeply into the mission that Christ has for us. We have let timidity and indifference get the best of us. Her words are empowering in that she, as a spiritual mother in heaven, calls us to more just as Christ does. She urges us not to be content with being lukewarm, but to remember that we, the laity, are also called to be apostles, as each of us has been "commissioned by Christ himself to preach the Gospel, both by word and by the implementation of its words into our daily lives, so that...the fire of the Holy

Ghost...may, through us, seep into the whole of this our frightening, cringing world” (38).

Catherine was a woman who was not afraid to boldly proclaim the truth of the Church. She was able to encounter God in everyone she met, even those society would be quick to deem unworthy. At one point in her life, she heard Christ say to her, “Catherine, I am sending you to preach the Gospel because your words are words of fire. Perhaps you shall never know how your words are fire to listeners. You preach the Gospel with your whole being. That is what I need” (14). She lived her life proclaiming Christ’s love to the poor, communists, and those left out by the Church, seeking to activate Christ’s spirit within them too. Catherine’s work is a wake-up call for us as well, to recognize the divine life within each of us, to not grow stagnant in pursuing holiness, and to bring to life faith in those around us. We each are called to reconcile those around us to God, to extend the invitation of Christ’s mission, and to rekindle the fire in those who deem themselves too far from God, too broken, or unworthy.

Women as Partners in Jesus’ Earthly Ministry

This idea of women as partners in Christ’s priestly mission or living out their “lay priesthood” is not new. While Simon Peter and Andrew may have been the first disciples recorded to heed Christ’s call to mission and, while Christ chose them to be his priests, from the beginning God has *always* had a place for women in his divine plan for salvation too. This is evident in how he regarded the women of his time. The two women perhaps most prominent in Jesus’ life, and certainly in Scripture, were Mary, his mother, and Mary Magdalene, the woman “from whom seven demons had come out” (Luke 8:2).

Mary - “Queen of the Apostles”

We would be remiss to neglect the fact that without Mary, the Mother of God, there would be no fulfillment of the priesthood in Christ. Mary’s “yes” is precisely what gave birth to Jesus Christ, the Eternal High Priest. In a way, she is the first to go before and prepare the way for her son, becoming a “model of the Church in the matter of faith, charity, and perfect union with Christ” (“Redemptoris Mater” 5). As she accompanies her son, she is also a mother to his disciples. This is evident especially in the wedding feast at Cana, in which she encourages her son to perform his first miracle, therefore, nourishing the faith of those present and providing an opportunity for her son, her priest, to do good works. Another profound example of Mary’s impact on the apostles is at the cross on Calvary. Here, the beloved disciple, John, is given to her as her son and she as his mother. Not only does she receive John into her heart as her son, but she also receives the totality of her mission as spiritual mother to the children of the whole human race.

As seen in Mary’s example, God chooses woman as *a key instrument* in His divine plan. John Paul II uses the word *entrustment* to describe God’s humility in using a woman to bring the Word, Jesus Christ, to life (Gaitley 94). Our all-powerful God surely could have brought Christ to the world in a number of ways, but He *chose* to use Mary, a simple woman, to have a hand in the world’s salvation and to be a *co-creator* alongside him. In following the will of his father, Jesus also understands women to be key to his ministry on earth. Mary is the mother and *queen* to the apostles, and to all of us, because she is the model disciple. She shows unwavering faith and devotion to God in her *fiat* at the Annunciation, and she cooperates perfectly with the grace that God gives her to carry out His mission. She nourishes the faith of the disciples from the very beginning of Jesus’

ministry, in her inaugurating his first miracle at the wedding of Cana. In the Gospels, we can infer that she would have been a comforting presence and a listening ear to the men and women who were called by her son, encouraging and supporting them in their needs. Mary serves as a model once again as she shares in the suffering of her son on the cross. It is here that John Paul II states that Mary fully enters into her maternal mediation – “a unique cooperation in Christ’s work of redemption and a sharing in his mediation” (Gaitley 99).

Additionally, at Pentecost, Mary is often depicted at the center of this event. This is because she served as an anchor, a guiding light, and a model for the apostles to give their full “yes” just as she did herself at the Annunciation. Mary is the ultimate motherly mediator as she “places herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of their wants, needs, and sufferings” (*Redemptoris Mater* 21). For her unique share in Christ’s mediation, the Church names her “Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix” (*Lumen Gentium* 62). In doing so, she points out her children’s needs to her Son while also revealing his love to those who need it most. She was the *first* “spiritual mother” to priests, the apostles, demonstrating for them what a life for Christ should truly look like. She was the *first* woman to live out her lay priesthood in tandem with the mission of Christ’s ordained priests.

Mary Magdalene – “Apostle to the Apostles”

Like the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene was also chosen by God as an important witness in Jesus’ earthly ministry. Not much is known biographically about her, but she is most praised for being the first witness to the Resurrected Lord. Her conversion and encounter with Jesus Christ were significant enough to lead her to give herself entirely to

him and his mission, for she was one of the women who stayed at the cross while almost all of the apostles abandoned him out of fear and pride. Mary was undoubtedly a friend and sister, perhaps even a mother figure, to Jesus' disciples. It is likely she faced discrimination due to her status as a woman in her time, yet she knew her identity was ultimately rooted in Christ; she knew whose she was as Jesus reveals himself to her in calling her *by name* at his resurrection.

Mary is so convicted of Jesus and his life that she doesn't hesitate to *run* to the apostles to share the news that he has risen. She does not shy away from speaking the truth, despite how unbelievable it may have seemed. Mary is a witness to the newness of life that comes with God's Kingdom, the restoration that one can receive, and she extends this truth to all who will listen. It is significant that Christ entrusted Mary, *a woman*, with this facet of divine truth. He has entrusted her, and subsequently all women, with the task of spreading God's Kingdom through feminine gentleness and humility, nourishing the faith of others and, therefore, leading others ever closer to heaven. Mary's privileged encounter with the Risen Christ allows her to be a model of faith, like Mother Mary, for all the other apostles and disciples to look to. Perhaps Jesus chose Mary because he knew she would follow *wholeheartedly and unreservedly*, unlike what we see of the other apostles at the cross.

The Feminine Genius

A phrase popularly coined by Pope St. John Paul II is the "feminine genius" that he praises in his 1995 "Letter to Women." In this letter he states, "Perhaps more than men, women acknowledge the person, because they see persons with their hearts...They see others in their greatness and limitations; they try to go out to them and help them. In

this way, the basic plan of the Creator takes flesh in the history of humanity...and in a particular way on women” (12). Besides the two great accounts of the faith of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, there are certainly many other accounts of Jesus going out to women so that they then may go out to others. In Mark 5, Jesus praises a hemorrhaging woman for her bold faith in seeking healing; she is a witness to those in the crowd of the importance of trust and surrender. In John 4, Jesus engages a Samaritan woman in conversation asking her for water despite the cultural norms of the time that prohibited Jews from associating with Samaritans; it is a woman that he *first* reveals Himself as the Messiah to. John Paul II states in his *Theology of the Body*: “Christ speaks to women about the things of God, and they understand them; there is a true resonance of mind and heart, a response of faith. Jesus expresses appreciation and admiration for this distinctly ‘feminine’ response” (465). It is these women who first walked with Christ that demonstrate a loyalty, courage, and steadfastness, unparalleled by their male counterparts. Although they did not receive the same mission as Christ’s apostles to be ordained priests, these women serve as forerunners, guiding lights, and role models for the priests they accompanied. Similarly, women today can do the same.

Conclusion

As outlined in *Lumen Gentium*, each member of the body of Christ has a vocation and a call to the priesthood in some way— a call to offer sacrifices joined to the one sacrifice of Christ, a call to sanctify and consecrate the people and world around them to God. We are each invited to extend Christ’s invitation to new life and his call for each of us to become disciples. We each have a responsibility to be Christ’s hands and feet, to be other Christs in the world. Women, in living out their own priestly mission, do so in a

way that embraces the nurture and beauty of motherhood, but also showcases their boldness and determination in leadership and service. Their work extends beyond the reach of the ministerial priesthood as they go to the margins of society, reaching places and people that are sometimes left in the dark by our priests today.

With this in mind, perhaps a “no” to ordination does not mean a rejection of women’s abilities; what may seem to be a limitation may actually be an *invitation* to something more. Because the Catholic Church states it does not have the authority to ordain women as priests by decree of what Christ established in His own ministry, it does not appear this is a teaching that will be changed (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* 2). In our Church today, we should seek to measure holiness not by our status in the Church or by what we can do but, rather, by the degree in which our lives are conformed to Christ, whether or not we are living as *who* Christ calls us to be. Though not permitted to hold him in their hands as the ordained, perhaps it is women who are invited into an even *more* intimate union with Christ, holding him in their hearts where he reveals himself fully and allows us, if we are receptive, to never be separated from him.

Appendix – Extended Biographies

Zélie Martin (1831-1877)

Born on December 23, 1831, in Alençon, France, Zélie Martin was raised with her two siblings in a Catholic family with their parents Isidore and Louise-Jeanne. Growing up, the Guérin household was particularly cold as her mother reserved her affections primarily for Zélie's younger brother (Wust 15). In conjunction with her mother's severity and the loneliness this caused, Zélie suffered significant physical and mental illnesses (Mongin 15). Those who suffer from anxiety and self-consciousness may find comfort in Zélie's own experience with feelings of worthlessness and troubles with self-confidence (16).

Zélie Martin is perhaps best known for her role as mother of the "Little Flower," St. Therese, however, she never dreamt she would parent. From a young age, Zélie desired to join the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul but, to her dismay, she was turned away (Mongin 17). She was heartbroken at this news; she was certain this was the vocation God had for her and she had remarkable faith to pursue this wholeheartedly. Like all of us at times, Zélie may have been so focused on her own plans that she was blind to the beauty and goodness of what God would later have in store for her, a plan far greater and more abundant than she could imagine. Louis Guerin entered Zélie's life in 1858. A skilled watchmaker and a sensitive soul, Louis experienced a vocational journey nearly identical to Zélie's (Mongin 13). He was drawn to monastic life, and, like Zélie, he was turned away from entering religious life. The couple married after three months. Although she certainly loved Louis greatly, Zélie still struggled with the loss of what she believed to be a call to consecrated religious life. She was unprepared for all that

marriage entailed and, as a result, she and Louis lived in abstinence for ten months.

Zélie's own struggle to get acclimated to marriage is a comfort to those in similar situations. She can walk with men and women who have had to say no to a great 'yes,' like her desire to be a nun, to God's greater 'yes' for her true vocation.

Not only did Zélie spend her days as a wife and mother, she also devoted a great deal of time to her lace-making business, which she started with her sister, Elise, in 1851 after receiving a prophetic message on the feast of the Immaculate Conception: "You are to make Alençon lace" (Mongin 17). Zélie's work was incredibly tedious and required great attention to detail. Fr. Stephanie Joseph Piat, avid researcher of the Martins' lives, describes it as a task with "almost imperceptible needles and thinner and thinner threads" (Mongin 75). Zélie largely handled the business by herself, retrieving materials, delivering orders, and taking care of sales (76). She acquired other employees later in her career and Louis eventually closed his watch shop in 1870 to help her full-time. Like any small-business owner, Zélie was often overwhelmed by the mountain of work. She admits it felt impossible to keep up with; her work was often a burden especially in the days she worked from 4:30 a.m. to 11:00 pm (Mongin 77). Despite the demanding nature of her job, she enjoyed the craft and her employees spoke very highly of her considerate nature, always giving them what they were due and making sure their needs were attended to (76).

While she was often humorous and playful, Zélie also experienced bouts of depression and anguish. While Zélie is a saint today, this does not mean faith was always easy, rather, her spirit was marked with the will to be holy, the conscious choice to keep trying amidst difficulty. She was distressed that she did not have as much time to pray as

she would have liked. She struggled greatly at times to emulate Mary's *fiat* in letting go of her own desires and needs (Mongin 49), and she often looked forward to the end of a penitential fast, admitting, "Fortunately it will soon be over...I am weary for my stomach's sake, and above all I am so lax that I would not be doing this at all if I listened to my nature" (Mongin 44). In the many trials of her life, she did not hesitate to cry out, "My God! How weary I am of suffering! I have not got a dime's worth of courage!" (Mongin 99).

Though it seems Zélie's vocation of wife and mother was clearly set before her, this did not guarantee a lack of suffering and heartbreak. Though she and her husband, Louis, had nine children in total, three of them died very young (Mongin 55). Zélie suffered greatly from these losses as well as from her long battle with breast cancer with the first signs appearing in 1865 at thirty-four years old. Resigned to the will of God, she proclaims, "If he [God] found me very useful on earth, he would certainly not have allowed me to have this sickness, because I prayed to him so much not to take me out of this world as long as I was needed by my children." Again, she understands, "I do not see things darkly, and that is a great grace that God has given me...Whatever happens, let's profit from the good times that remain and let's not worry ourselves. Besides, things will always be what God wants" (Mongin 111).

Zélie Martin died on August 28, 1894, at the age of forty-six, with "a striking expression of majesty and youth...the relaxed face of the one who, after having worked so hard, finally knew rest" (Mongin 129). Though she prayed God would let her continue on in her earthly pilgrimage, she did not doubt His plans for her life. Zélie's last years were a model of unconquerable faith in divine providence which would sustain her daughters

and husband in their own difficulties after her death. While she was not a martyr, nor was she known for self-mortifications or long hours spent in prayer, she did the duty of God, and she did it well. Zélie can be remembered for her unwavering trust that God's plans are greater than our own and for her steadfast commitment and devotion to the duties of the present moment, to whatever and whoever God placed in her path. Zélie and Louis were the first couple to be canonized together in 2015 by Pope Francis.

Conchita (1862-1937)

Concepción Cabrera de Armida, or “Conchita” for short, was an energetic Mexican woman regarded not just as a mystic, but also as a wife and mother. Engaged at a young age, thirteen to be exact, much of Conchita's life may seem foreign to us, but to those who knew her, she was nothing but ordinary. When she and her husband married after a nine year engagement, they had nine children together (Philipon 9). Like Zélie, Conchita knew the pain of losing a child at a young age and, like any mother, she mourned the loss of her children as they grew older and moved away. Throughout her entire spiritual diary, Conchita is adamant that her marriage and love towards her husband never interfered with her faith or relationship with God. In fact, the Lord told her one day, “You married in view of My great designs for your personal holiness, and to be an *example* for many souls who think that marriage is *incompatible* with holiness” (243). In loving her children and her husband, her love for Christ was purified (8).

When she was twenty-seven, Conchita attended a spiritual exercises retreat and heard Christ speak to her: “Your mission will be to save souls” (24). As she continued to feel the call to help others encounter Christ, she made the decision, with the permission of her spiritual director, to engrave the initials J.H.S. on her chest for the

name of Jesus (27). What she describes of this moment in her diary is nothing short of supernatural: “The ardor of my soul far surpassed the burning sensation of my body and I experienced an ineffable joy on feeling I belonged wholly to Jesus, just as a branded animal to its owner” (27). It was a sort of out-of-body experience for the young woman, one in which she felt transported to another dimension.

Following the engraving, some theologians posit Conchita’s relationship with Christ as a spiritual wedding (28). Conchita began experiencing detailed visions of the Holy Spirit and a heart that was “alive, beating, human, but glorified, surrounded by a material fire which seemed to glow, and sparkle as in a hearth” (31). Tongues of fire and thorns encircled the heart as Conchita received her mission of founding the Works of the Cross for “bringing about the union of the suffering of the faithful with the immensity of the sufferings of [Christ]” (33). This apostolate was founded to renew the world through the cross, through Christ’s Cross, and focused especially on strengthening the ministerial priesthood. Soon after her visions of the Holy Spirit, she also received visions of the entire Trinity. These mystical experiences did not prevent Conchita from living out marriage and motherhood, rather, they prompted her even more to be faithful in all her duties and loving toward each person she encountered.

Conchita’s mysticism draws parallels to that of St. Catherine of Siena. Both women experienced a profound revelation of God’s Being and a recognition of their dependence on Him (43). Conchita never received formal theological training; under the guidance of her spiritual directors, she was encouraged to write her spiritual diary and any mystical experiences while simultaneously being forbidden to read any spiritual works other than *The Imitation of Jesus Christ* (114). At the end of her life, Conchita

spent the last three years in bed with pneumonia and a host of other illnesses. Prior to this, she begged her spiritual directors to destroy her spiritual diary and writings. Had they listened, the Church would not have received her more than one hundred volumes of writing; the sixty-six volumes of her diary alone exceed that of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologia*. In a culmination of her life lived in imitation with Jesus Christ, Conchita died not with the face of a woman, but the "Countenance of the Crucified" as witnessed by her sons and the priest in the room (109).

After she passed away at age 75, each of her surviving children insisted she was absolutely normal. While she wrote constantly, Conchita never spoke directly to the Lord in the presence of her family, and nothing was exaggerated about her prayer or behavior (95). Her youngest daughter, Lupe, says of her mother: "She led an absolutely normal life, just like everybody else at home and in society. She laughed, told pleasantries, gossiped, played the piano, sang and amused her nieces and nephews, even more than their own mama" (99). She is even said to be a jokester with a sense of humor who carried around a notebook to share banter with others (97). Lupe states her mother's only shortcoming was her slight gluttony - she found it very difficult to turn down an opportunity to go to the sweets shop (99). Conchita's other children describe her as sweet and energetic. While she was a very pleasant person, she was firm and resolute, stubborn even. She was the life of the party in a way, entertaining guests and able to converse with anyone she met. Guests met the power of her presence, both those who came to visit and those she hastened to accompany. Her son, Ignacio, says she was certainly one of God's souls and "when she gazed with her eyes into yours, she looked deeply within," yet, again, "she was a mama like yours, like all mamas" (97). Her children, especially, paint

the portrait of a woman who, though she received great graces, was extraordinarily normal in her external appearance and in her dealing with others. She was beatified in 2019.

Elisabeth Leseur (1866-1914)

Born in 1866, Elisabeth Leseur, an avid writer and lifelong learner, was raised in a devout Christian family. Much of the education she and her four siblings received was under the direction of their mother, Madame Arrighi, who ensured that they not only knew the love of God but also had knowledge of French history and the ability to read and write (Chovelon 17). In her youth, Elisabeth acquired a fine taste for literature, theater, and art influenced largely by family outings to plays and private education from tutors within the home (Chovelon 21). Her upbringing could be described as loving, gentle, and intellectual.

Elisabeth's love of learning followed her throughout the remainder of her life, and it is what brought her to meet her husband, Felix Leseur. Also raised in an intellectual household, Felix was exposed early to adult conversations about culture and politics, and he was drawn to history and geography specifically. Felix's parents, like Elisabeth's, were affluent yet practiced charity as devout Christians and were involved in organizations like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (Chovelon 23). With so many things in common: fine taste, good conversation, and ambition, Felix and Elisabeth were married after only a few months of knowing each other. Elisabeth, twenty-three when she married, though not naive, perhaps could not see the trials and tribulations she would soon experience. There is no doubt that Felix and Elisabeth loved one another when they exchanged vows at the altar, but it quickly became apparent that their commonalities

would give way to divisive differences. Shortly after their 1889 summer wedding, Elisabeth began experiencing symptoms of an intestinal abscess, the beginning of a long relationship with suffering and pain that would follow her until her death (Leseur 15). Despite the undoubted pain and trouble that surely accompanied her illness, perhaps nothing gave Elisabeth as much sorrow as the religious hostility and deep-seated hatred held by her husband.

When they married, Felix had every intention of allowing Elisabeth to live out her faith and to respect that, to support her in it. Up to this point, Felix had attended Mass with Elisabeth and respected her beliefs although he was not practicing Catholicism (Chovelon 43). However, Felix's mere tolerance of Elisabeth's faith ultimately led to annoyance and resentment. Felix, himself, admits that he "made Elisabeth the object of my retrogressive proselytizing" (Leseur 12). He sought to deprive her of her faith by first passing on Protestant and modernist literature to water down her beliefs that would pave the way for a more radical agnosticism (13). Felix did not succeed at first as Elisabeth, firm in her faith and staunch in her beliefs, would not fall for a less than truthful reading of God. Even the choice of his friends Felix used in an attempt to draw Elisabeth away from the faith he believed her to be prisoner to (Chovelon 38). He secretly hoped even spiritual pilgrimages and visits could somehow be twisted to distort Elisabeth's perceptions. It would be illusory to claim these tactics did not discourage the young Elisabeth at times or raise doubts in her (they did) and, though the high-class and cultural whims of France may have tempted her, she never completely turned her back to God. Felix's efforts to dismantle her faith only moved her to redouble her *intellectual* faith. She armed herself with the Church doctors, mystics, and the Gospels (Leseur 13). She let

this be her armament from which she would fire truth and love to all who came close, especially her husband.

Elisabeth died on May 3, 1914 after a three year battle with breast cancer (Leseur 251). Felix, rocked by his beloved wife's death, discovered her spiritual diary in which she wrote of her prayers and conversations with God and, more importantly, her pact with God in which she vowed to exchange her life for the sake of Felix's conversion (Leseur 33). While his heart had gradually been softened in Elisabeth's last years, her death and the discovery of her journal prompted him with a greater desire to truly know Catholicism and to immerse himself in the Church's truth. In 1915, his return to faith was made official and, soon after, with the encouragement of priests and laypeople, Elisabeth's diary was published for the purpose of providing solace and inspiration for lost souls like himself (Leseur 34). As if this turn of events wasn't shocking enough, Felix entered religious life in 1919 and he was ordained a priest in 1923 where he served until his death in 1950 (Leseur 252). Elisabeth's cause for canonization was opened by the Church in 1936; her current status is as a Servant of God.

Catherine de Hueck Doherty (1896-1985)

Born in 1896 on a train in Russia, Catherine Doherty, the same day, was baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church as there was no Roman Catholic Church nearby (*Fragments of My Life* 9). Due to her father's work in foreign affairs, Catherine had quite a wealthy upbringing which granted her a very diverse and well-traveled life (14). Not only did traveling enhance her academic ability, Catherine's youth brought her a real openness to life and a deep love for humanity. Exposure to different cultures and people enabled her to see the world endowed with great wonder and mystery. This instilled in

her great respect for the dignity of each human person, something she would embrace for the rest of her life. To Catherine, especially in her youth, each person was a child of God, someone to be loved and respected, someone whom she could learn from regardless of their race or religion.

Wealth did not keep Catherine's family from God, rather, both her mother and father were deeply devoted. Raised Orthodox, her mother was especially drawn to the liturgy of the burial of Christ, and her father would often bring home olive oil from the Garden of Gethsemane (21). Catherine explains her great devotion to the passion of Christ came from her parents. The family's love of God was wrapped up in their love for people. As a wealthy family, they had servants, but they were a part of the family often attending events together and supporting one another in life events. Catherine's father lost his job sometime around the family's departure from Egypt where they returned to Russia. Characteristic of his trust in divine providence, her father simply stated, "God has given, God has taken away. The will of God be done" (30). Each member of the de Hueck family was deeply aware of God's providence in their life and they had been too blessed in good times to worry that He would not provide in difficult times.

The de Huecks moved to Paris, eventually, where Catherine first learned what it meant to be poor. When they regained financial stability, she and her brother, Serge, were distraught. They loved "being ruined" (31)! Catherine states, "not being ruined turned our whole childish world upside down." With prosperity and a return to their Russian estate, Catherine was soon immersed once again in the finer things of life. Yet she also became aware of the Russian feudal system and developed an early understanding of hierarchy and class (38).

Catherine married her first cousin, Boris, when she was fifteen years old. They were married in the Orthodox Church, but the marriage was also recognized as valid in the Catholic Church. They both served in World War I; he as an engineer and she as a Red Cross nurse. They later went to Petrograd, St. Petersburg, Russia after communists began to take over (54). While the de Huecks would have been considered “bourgeoisies” or aristocrats due to their nobility, they were among the poor and lived poor. While Catherine had experienced some element of brief poverty in her youth, nothing compared to the horrors and difficulties they experienced here. She writes of scavenging for food, witnessing an aristocratic woman being shot to death for wearing a fur coat, and walking in on a starving woman boiling her child to eat. Boris and Catherine eventually made their way to Murmansk, Russia where they joined the Volunteer Army, or the White Army, and Catherine worked again as a nurse. She even received a decoration from the British government after serving as an interpreter and identifying the location of stolen dynamite (63).

The de Huecks received a breath of fresh air when Boris was offered an opportunity to do landscaping work in Canada where they soon sponsored other Russian immigrants. Catherine also found out she was pregnant during this time and out of work as World War I veterans began taking up jobs once again (68). At the offer of her priest, she left her husband and six-month old son, George, behind to find work, and profit, in America. While she may have found a job, Catherine made only seven dollars a week as a laundress. Not only did she barely have enough money to rent a piece of bed (a piece of bed meaning three girls sharing a bed), there was barely enough left over to eat. Much of her diet came from literal scraps off rich people’s plates sold from local restaurants (75).

Life was incredibly hard for Catherine, so much so that she was once tempted to end her life. What saved her was the face of Christ staring back at her in the waters below the Brooklyn Bridge (77). She remarks that, though times were tough, she never slipped into despair, because she had faith (89). After this encounter with Christ, Catherine later worked as a gym instructor, went back and forth with waitressing jobs, and worked at Macy's of all places.

A turning point in Catherine's poverty came when she was invited to lecture with a Chautauqua group that provided entertainment, learning, and music to communities. She went from making seven dollars a week to \$20,000 a year. Catherine's escape from Russia largely shaped her lectures as she spoke out against both communism and the US' recognition of the new USSR (86). She and Boris eventually divorced; the annulment of their marriage began the dawn of her lifelong mission and apostolate. While the whispers from Christ to "Sell what you possess...come follow me" emerged clearly at this time, her first inklings to live poor may be seen looking back to her childhood. The fruit of sharing in Christ's poverty was born with Friendship House (99). Her little dream or, *poustinia*, brought her new connections including a friendship with Dorothy Day, another pioneer in the hospitality movement, as well as the opportunity to travel and report on *Catholic Action* in Europe, always becoming more in tune with the needs of the Church, "and indeed of all mankind" (135). Catherine also became an outspoken advocate for interracial justice; she taught classes for Black Catholics in Harlem and was influential in securing their admission to universities across the country (*Fragments of My Life* 153, 154).

In 1943, Catherine married Eddie Doherty, a reporter and frequent visitor to Friendship House (170). While Catherine appears unmatched in her generosity and her trust in God's providence, Eddie proved to be a steady support and an eager comrade in sacrificing his own life and comfort too. The couple moved to Canada in 1946 after Catherine's vision for mission and apostolic life was rejected by her Friendship House community. While she was heartbroken, the seeds planted in her heart by God flourished into Madonna House which became a training center for lay ministers where they would be strengthened and educated to restore the Church (180). Her pioneering work in this community is a culmination of her spirituality and who she was as a mission-minded woman always aware of God's presence in each soul she encountered and always on fire to build up the Church in the world, preaching the Gospel without compromise. Her cause for canonization was opened in 2000 by Pope St. John Paul II.

Gianna Beretta Molla (1922-1962)

Born in 1889 to Alberto Beretta and Maria De Micheli, Gianna Beretta Molla was one of thirteen children living in the busy Beretta household in Milan (Guerriero 26). A very close family, the Molla children took up music lessons and studied together; they accompanied one another in prayer and in attending Mass (27). No stranger to tragedy and loss, losing several siblings during her youth, Gianna developed the zealous faith instilled in her by her parents. From a young age, she knew what it meant to rely on God and turn to Him in her trials.

While the family had the means to guarantee a quality education for the children, Gianna's parents instilled in them an understanding of service and charity towards others. Every good thing given to them by God was understood to be used in service and

generosity towards others. Gianna, naturally ambitious, desired to serve others through missionary work; she did this through the organization “Catholic Action” in which she became president (28). Outside of Catholic Action, she was involved in a variety of other volunteer organizations including St. Vincent de Paul and the Young Women of Catholic Action where she worked primarily with the elderly.

While she struggled in school during her younger years, Gianna was hard-working and dedicated to earning a specialization in pediatrics after graduating in medicine and surgery in 1949 (30). Here, it is evident that her life’s work continued to be wrapped up in caring for the lives of others. Perhaps it was these early experiences that imbued her with a deep sense of compassion and an awareness of the innate human dignity of each person she encountered.

At the age of thirty-three, Gianna married Pietro Molla, an engineer, in 1955. The couple were acquaintances for a while but became fast friends and objects of equal admiration for one another, soon writing love letters during their engagement, and never shying away from expressing the good seen in the other. They lived quite ordinarily and faced similar struggles to married couples today - long days of separation, stress and exhaustion from work trips apart, and unfulfilled hope in waiting for a child to come. Through it all, Gianna nevertheless had complete confidence that her marriage to Pietro enhanced her love for God (Pelucchi 85).

Desiring others to share in the life they so loved, Gianna and Pietro had three children and, like most ordinary parents, they often needed childcare. Gianna, a working woman, would drop them off at her sister’s house as she headed to her office everyday. A wonderful mother Gianna was, and the vocation to which she perhaps felt most called.

According to Pietro, she took great care to not only prepare for the arrival of her children, but to consecrate each of them to Our Lady of Good Counsel after their baptism (Guerriero 60). Raising her children in the faith and teaching them to pray was a given, and this was the rock on which their family was set. Daily Mass was a priority for Gianna and she prioritized silence in her prayer life, often making trips to visit the Blessed Sacrament (61, 68). Her faith in God was constant and steadfast but, nevertheless, ordinary and attainable for the common layperson.

It is her unconquerable faith that saw Gianna through, undoubtedly, the most difficult time of her life. In 1961, she and Pietro excitedly announced their fourth pregnancy. Unlike her other pregnancies, Gianna began experiencing abnormal symptoms that, unfortunately, revealed a life-threatening uterine tumor (Pelucchi 97). Doctors gave her the option to terminate the pregnancy, which would save her life, or to remove only the tumor which would be riskier for Gianna's safety. Trusting in God's providence and holding fast to hope, Gianna was confident in her decision to prioritize the life of her unborn child (Guerriero 47). While the operation appeared successful at first and her pregnancy continued healthily, Gianna began to decline after her daughter was born on April 20, 1962. She suffered from septic peritonitis and died on April 28, 1962 (Guerriero 48). Gianna was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 2004.

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