

A Great “Thirst”

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“I thirst.” On the cross Jesus said love’s word. He thirsts for our thirst for him. He thirsts that we be as united with him as a branch on the Vine.

It was these words that Jesus spoke to our foundress, Mother Teresa, that made her run in haste across the world to satiate his thirst for her love, and for the love of the poor. In 1946 she confided to her spiritual director what Jesus had asked of her:

Little one, give Me souls;
give Me the souls of the poor
little street children. I long
for the purity of their love.
For them I long, them I love.
(from a letter to Archbishop
Perier, St. Mary’s Convent,
January 13, 1947)

In the diary of her first days after leaving the Loretto Convent for the slums in 1949 Mother Teresa wrote, “The children are simply thirsting for God.” Today, in the atrium, as we prepare the children for, and watch them receive, the beautiful gifts of God’s mercy and love in the sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist, we are especially able to see these two great thirsts meet, embrace,

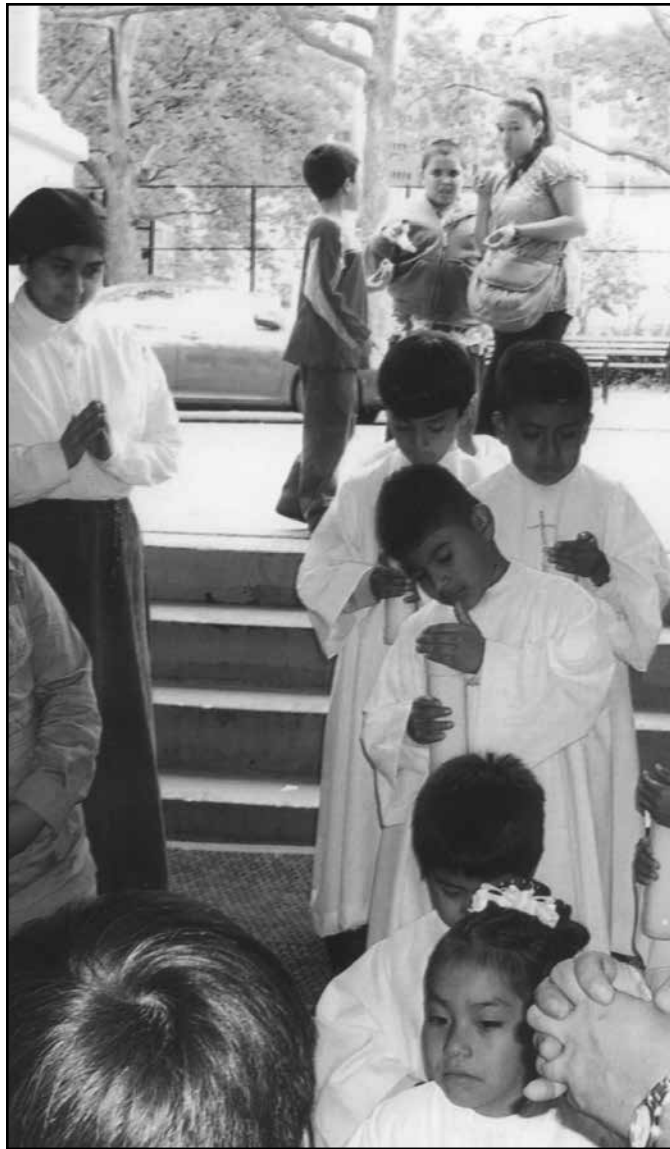


Photo from the collection of Sr. M. Claire, MC

and satiate each other: the thirst of God and the thirst of the Child.

The charism of the Missionaries of Charity is to serve the poorest of the poor. Our parish here, in the midst of low-income housing projects in the South Bronx, New York, is small, and poor, but very active. This is the seventh year that we have been blessed to have our atrium here. We have over one hundred children in Levels I, II, and III, most from very poor villages in Mexico. Once they come to our food pantry we visit them and see that most of them, families with four or five children, live in one very small room, often sleeping on the floor.

In preparation for this article I asked my fellow catechist Mary Kay what points she thought would be good to share. Mary Kay, a true angel who faithfully serves with us in

the atrium and has been present for our last three Communion retreats, said to write about how our children are so unique and how, because of this specialness, they receive so much from all that the preparation and retreat give them.

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We have fourteen different gangs in our neighborhood, a lot of drugs, and frequent shootings. Last year, on the first day of the Communion retreat, one of our children, Tanisha, and her grandmother ran in looking very shaken. On the street next to us there was a shoot-out and they got caught in the middle of it on their way to the retreat. A couple of our children have one parent in jail, and the other parent has died of AIDS or is on the street. We really became the mothers of these children. We had to go to pick them up for the meditations and the retreat, and we were the ones to dress them in their white garments. These children were especially close to the Good Shepherd and longed to receive him in Holy Communion.

The children who have fathers don't see them very often because the men have to work, sometimes seven days a week, for long hours at menial jobs just to pay the rent. One of the fathers couldn't even come to first Communion. The children in our first Communion retreat in 2011 had suffered much. One boy would always pray that his father would stop drinking. The night after that boy received Jesus for the first time his father came home intoxicated, broke the windows, and threatened to kill his mother. Another little girl's father suddenly died in the night a month after her first Communion. Another girl, Arelis, had to go for surgery the day after receiving Jesus in the Eucharist. When we went with our parish priest to give her the Anointing of the Sick and her second Holy Communion, she said, “The Good Shepherd came to me.”

Many of our children also have physical, mental, and emotional disabilities. Kevin, 7 years old, has a disease that affected his growth and is only two feet tall. Before he was in the catechesis I always saw him sad, now he is full of life and joy. These are our beautiful children, very precious pearls! Jesus thirsts for them in a special way and they hunger and thirst for him, for his love.

We have tried to follow the Rome model for sacramental preparation as closely as possible. After presenting the Eucharistic Presence of the Good Shepherd we announce to the children, “The Good Shepherd invites everyone to his banquet. Perhaps he is inviting you this year.” We leave a small basket on the prayer table with index cards so that if they hear his invitation they may respond by writing their names and putting them in the basket. This begins the process of discernment. We keep the basket of names on the prayer table and the

other children pray for them. On Sunday we have the Mass of Intention. After the Homily the children present their names to the priest and they are placed near the altar. The whole community prays for them. We share with the parents the importance of this time of discernment.

Each child has an interview with the catechist in the atrium and later, another with our parish priest. Together we discern their readiness to go forward. There is much joy, excitement, and peace during this time, and the children feel very special. After a decision has been made, during Sunday Mass we have the enrollment at which each child receives a Holy Bible that has been blessed. Father says, “Today we are going to give a gift to some of the children. These children are those who have given their names, asking to receive First Holy Communion, and we believe that the desire they have expressed is also the desire of the Good Shepherd. Therefore these children are beginning to prepare in a special way for their First Communion, which is a great feast. We can see that the feast is going to begin because they are receiving a gift.” Father calls each child by name saying, “Receive this Bible, may it be for you a great light in your life,” and the child kisses it with reverence as a sign of her love for Jesus. One day I asked the children, “How do you think we should treat the Bible?” They responded, “nice,” “good,” “with respect.” Little Silfrido, lisping for missing some teeth, said, “In the Bible are the words of God, words of Jesus, so we should treat the Bible the same way we treat Jesus.”

The time of intense preparation begins with the five-week meditation series. The parents do the meditations separately from the children in prepared rooms outside the atrium, and the response has been amazing. The parents and children have come faithfully to the meditations, and we see the fruit of this. A strong bond is created between the parent and child. This year we were happy to see almost all the fathers come!

A catechist from New Jersey gave us a beautiful idea that we do every year. After the first meditation on the parable of the True Vine we give each child a white canvas tote bag and fabric markers with which to decorate it. They use this bag to carry their Bible to the meditations and the retreat. One of the families has three children. This year Helen, 6 years old, made her first Communion; last year her brother, Silfrido, made his, and the year before, Gerardo. On her bag Helen drew a long table standing on a green grass floor; on it were grapes and a

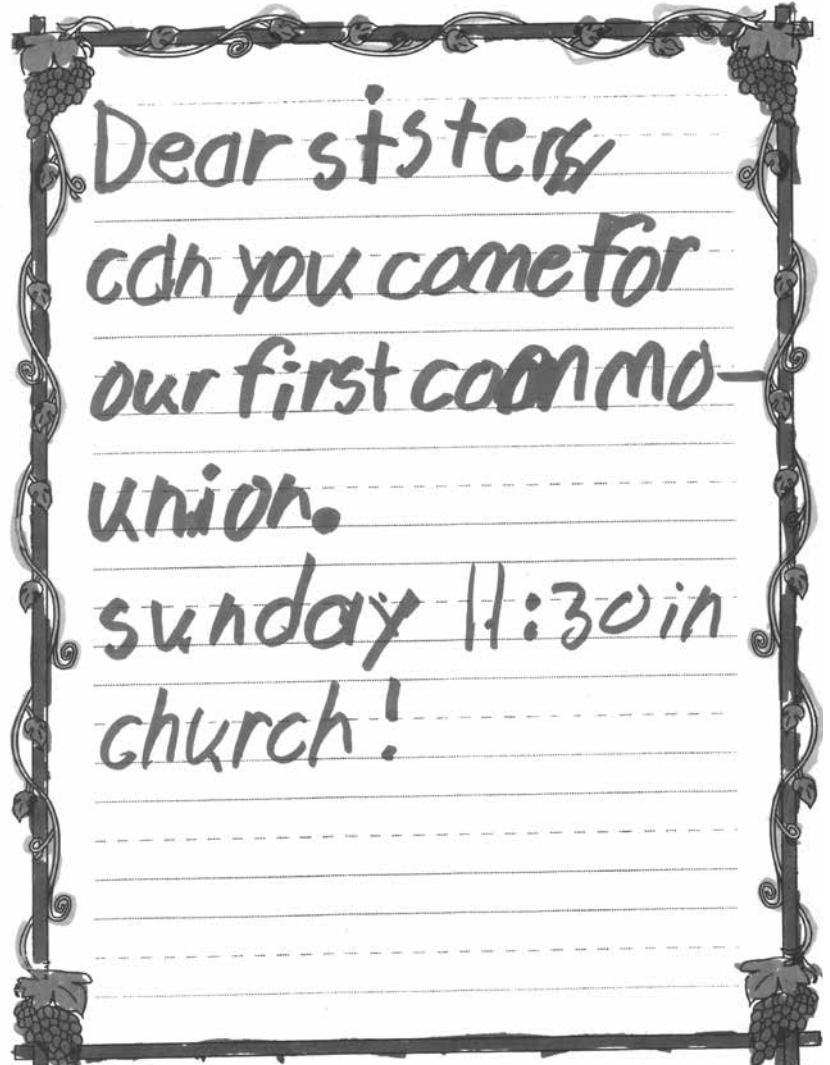
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chalice and paten, and there were three children sitting at the table. In case you didn't know who they were she put their initials near the heads of each (H., S., and G.).

The retreat runs from Thursday afternoon after school until late afternoon on Sunday, three-and-a-half full days, and takes place in a big hall right next to the Church. We prepare the room beautifully yet simply. We have two very big paintings, one of the Last Supper, and the other is Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*. The children have plenty of art materials and a lot of space to move around. They enjoy having their lunch and dinner as a community. Sometimes Father eats with them, and after the meal he plays some games with them so they get to run around; they love this. We have been blessed with priests who have been very supportive and understanding of the Catechesis, who already have a relationship with the children who come to the atrium.

On Thursday the children get acclimated to their new environment and prepare for the next day's liturgy. They have a special Mass every day, preparing the readings and music themselves. On Friday during Mass we have the solemn consignment of the Our Father. Father calls each child by name and gives him or her a small card with the prayer written in calligraphy, and then the children sing the Our Father, which they have practiced. On Friday afternoon we process, with Father carrying the Host in the monstrance, from the church to the retreat room while the children carry candles and sing “We are walking in the light of God.” Then we have an hour of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in the retreat room. Much of Friday is spent with the children working on sewing the crosses on their white garments, all of which are sewn by a generous neighbor.

In the retreat room we put the dry branches of a real vine in a pot on a stand. On Friday the children trace grape leaves on green paper and write their names on the leaves, punch a hole in each one, and tie a string. On Saturday, Reconciliation day, they each hang their leaf on a branch. On Sunday, they



*Gerardo, age 7
Atrium conducted by
the Missionaries of Charity
South Bronx, NY*

An invitation Gerardo made for the sisters for his First Communion: “A special child in the atrium from 4 years old and had many problems, he was aggressive and anti-social. Now he is an altar server.”

are surprised and excited to discover big bunches of grapes on the vine, artificial ones that I've put on before they arrived.

During the retreat the children are eager and full of joy. There is such a community spirit among them. We often saw

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the first group of seven children in a circle with their arms around each other. The children express their joy and peace: “I want to stay here forever,” “I want to live here.” There is so much for the children to do that the time goes by quickly. Besides the liturgies, meals, and working with the materials, the children practice for the upcoming celebrations, write invitations, thank you cards, and letters for their parents and Father, and make decorated signs to reserve the pews for their families in church.

On Saturday, before the celebration of Reconciliation we have a short meditation and examination of conscience, then we begin around 1:30 PM. The parents are already in the church as we process in, and all is bilingual for their sake. We listen to the Gospel reading the children have chosen, usually the parable of the Found Son or the Found Sheep. Father gives a short talk. The children pray the Confiteor together and then approach Father one by one for Reconciliation, the great sacrament of mercy. Afterward, all are invited to the sacrament. Each child receives a small San Damiano cross on a white cord. After the child has kissed it, as Father puts it around each child’s neck he says, “You have been forgiven by the Good Shepherd who laid down his life on the Cross for you. Receive now the sign of his love.” The parents are called forward one by one. As they dress their children in the white garments they say, “I will help you to keep it unstained until life everlasting.” The fathers are usually the ones with tears flowing as they dress their child. The children then renew their Baptismal promises and receive a lit candle. The whole ceremony usually lasts at least two hours. It is very moving for all. The children are full of joy and very peaceful.

On Sunday the children come at 9:30 AM as usual. Mass is at 11:30 AM. We practice a little and the children get dressed in their white garments. They are so attentive during Mass. They receive the Eucharist with such reverence. As they return to their places to kneel and pray, some seem to be in ecstasy with their eyes closed in an intimate union with Jesus. Many seeing them cannot hold back their tears. After Mass we have a thanksgiving meal in the school hall just for the children and their immediate families because the families cannot afford much. The children sing in thanksgiving. They return to the retreat room for a short while to share a moment in prayer together and place their name cards in a special box that is kept in the atrium.

The children’s parents have been wonderful in all of this. During the meetings we explain everything and they are so happy about the preparations, even the simplicity of the white garment, which was a surprise to us. The mothers took turns helping us prepare the meals for the children during the retreat. The parents are very simple, some are not able to read or write, even in Spanish, and very few are married in the Church. Now some of them have come back to the Church and are preparing for the sacrament of Matrimony and also to receive their first Holy Communion!

Our children who have received the sacraments have such a Christian maturity and dignity. Some of them sing in the choir or act as altar servers. They have sensitive consciences and frequent the sacrament of Reconciliation. It is these children who faithfully come every Sunday for Mass during the summer, while other children have dropped out.

One day during the first year I made a comment to our Superior, after moving all the furniture up and down stairs, “it is a lot of work,” and she responded, “but it is worth it,” and it is so, so true. I end with another quote from Mother Teresa’s 1949 diary of her first days in the slums:

On my way to the sick two little children, Agatha and Genevieve, came. Their father was dying, their mother had left them, the children begged and lived in an empty room or street . . . they are miserably poor. Neither of them have made their first Holy Communion—Bright, simple looking children—It is worth all the sacrifices of this world if I can keep for God Little souls” God thirsts with an infinite thirst to love and to be loved Our children are simply thirsting for God . . . to love and be loved. (*Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light—The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (2007), p.98. Ed. Father Brian Kolodiejchuk, New York: Doubleday Religion.)

Jesus says, “Remain in me, and I in you” (John 15:4).

It is very worthy “to be the matchmaker” as Sofia Cavalletti says, and also at the same time to be the thirsty one satiated at this wellspring of love as we altogether remain in him.