

# Catholic Mothers, Catholic Saints

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Our Models of  
Motherhood

A Product of



# Introduction

What is it that you fear?

When I was a little girl, I was afraid of the air vent.

I would often have dreams that it would come alive. I imagined that it would freeze me, and I would be unable to move or speak. I remember trying to talk to it once and in a dream it spoke back to me. I tried to get away in my dream, and the fear became greater than ever. Now my fears look different; fears of drowning or losing my family are among the top contenders for “things I am most afraid of”.

This is fear personified—fear binds us and holds us captive.

What does fear do? It paralyzes you. You can't think straight. You aren't free; you are a captive in your own body. You do things you wouldn't normally do, or hold back from things you would normally do.

So many of us have been groomed by the world to fear certain things.

Fear of being judged or talked about.

Fear of being found out.

Fear of being not enough or too much.

Fear of loneliness.

Fear of failure.

Our fears impact our behavior. When we're afraid of being judged, we hide what we don't want others knowing. If we're worried about not being enough, we try to be something we're not. When we're afraid of being too much, we hide ourselves and hold back. If we're afraid of being lonely, we tend to seek out attention in all the wrong ways and in all the wrong places. When we're afraid of failure, we don't even attempt to succeed.



As I look at my life, probably the sneakiest fear that holds me captive is the fear that I will not be a good mother to my children. It's not a fear that has a distinct image, or one that I can picture as a scenario. It is one that leads to a whole host of other sins, such as comparison and judgment, and second-guessing myself.

This is what happens when this fear finds its way into our motherhood: it paralyzes our ability to parent well and lead our kids to Christ. The ultimate goal for ourselves and for our children, sainthood, becomes completely off-limits, and we count ourselves out of the running.

We buy into lies that can sound something along the lines of—

“God could never use me, just look at my past!”

“I'm too busy to think about sainthood.”

“How can I lead my kids to Christ when my husband isn't even Catholic?”

“How am I supposed to teach my kids to pray when I'm not good at it myself?”

“What if I mess up?”

But God knows our limitations and imperfections, and has given us incredible saints as examples. Saints, mothers, who have been through it all and have come out the other side perfected in Him. Their lives looked completely different from one another, but no circumstance was too great for God to transform them and make them holy.

St. Margaret of Scotland carried the faith of the family alone and had 8 children.

The Virgin Mary, just one child.

St. Zelie Martin had a happy marriage.

St. Rita had a difficult one.

St. Margaret of Cortona chose life when facing an unexpected pregnancy.

St. Helena was a single mother.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was a widowed mother.

St. Anne was a stay at home mom.

St. Gianna Molla worked outside the home.

These are just a few of the amazing women saints we have in our Church, and they are all so different. Yet they all lived out the call they were given. They became who they were meant to be, even when faced with fear. When our experience of motherhood doesn't look like the “ideal”, we can remember that sainthood is found in whatever it is that God is asking of you, despite your circumstances. No circumstance is too big for His grace.

God is calling you to be like them in the sense that He wants you to be who *you* are made to be. It means being the best version of yourself. We all have things to overcome, and we will continue to receive things to overcome throughout life. That might mean letting go of a friendship that is leading you away from God. Or making a real effort to go to Mass on Sunday, or starting daily prayer. It could mean letting go of the music or movies that you like. You may already have something in your heart that you know God is asking of you. Don't ignore it.

This e-book is a collection of stories from women with different experiences of Catholic motherhood. While their journeys are different, the destination is the same. Heaven, and sainthood, are our pursuit. We are tempted to fear, but God gives us the grace to have courage and keep going.

As St. Catherine of Siena said, "Be who you were meant to be, and you will set the world on fire."

# **Our Models of Motherhood**

St. Margaret of Scotland, who carried the faith of the family alone

St. Margaret of Scotland, mother of 8

The Virgin Mary, mother of 1

St. Zelig Martin, of a happy marriage

St. Rita, of a difficult marriage

St. Helena, a single mother

St. Anne, a stay at home mom

St. Gianna Molla, who worked outside of the home

# Margaret

## A MOTHER CARRYING THE FAITH OF THE FAMILY ALONE

I adore my husband. Even when I do not like my husband, I adore him with every fiber of who I am. We have been together for 35 years and just celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary. From the ages of 18 and 19, our lives have been an interwoven journey of joys, trials, and heartbreak. At our wedding, there were tears -- but not all the tears were tears of joy. We were coming into the marriage with a 3-year-old son, a lot of judgment, and trying to find our way. But we were committed to making our marriage work and raising a family against the odds.

When we hear the priest say in marriage preparation that our role is to get each other to heaven, we nod and appreciate the imagery but I'm not sure any young couple truly understands what that means. I wish I could tell you that on that beautiful day in March after such a hard road to the altar, the fairy tale was complete, but I would be leaving out the most important part of the story.

To be honest, life and marriage are often a climb up very rocky terrain. My husband lost his mother when we newly married; we have lost babies to miscarriage, had infants in the NICU, babies born with medical issues, very difficult sleepless toddlers, teenagers struggling to find their way, the loss of employment, our family home, and struggles that have brought us to our knees.

In those losses, our trust in each other grew, not because those seasons magically brought us closer, but because those seasons brought us to our knees. We were forced to increase our prayer, improve our communication, and surround ourselves with good people to journey with. Those times demanded that we simplify our home, our expectations, and become laser-focused on our children's emotional well-being. We learned to live in each moment because it was all that we had. Perfection and control are illusions. There is something truly beautiful deep in the pain of life that the only other person who truly knows and shares in your heartache is your spouse. Even with all the trials, we both will tell you we have a beautiful life filled with love, life. We have 8 children, 2 grandchildren, and being a witness to our children's lives is an unspeakable joy.



For the first 12 years we were together, the first 7 we were married. I carried the faith of the family alone. My husband was raised Episcopal, but his family didn't practice. He says that they went to church on Christmas and Easter, but if the parking lot was full, they went home. I was raised in a Catholic home, but we did not attend Mass regularly or pray at home. When our first son was born and the situation was so difficult, I searched and found God again. There I was with a 4-month-old sneak watching EWTN learning how to pray the rosary, listening to Mother Angelica. I read my way back to the faith, and began riding my bike to daily Mass with my baby on the back. I found new friends that shared the faith and came alive for the first time. For my husband (boyfriend at the time) it was a challenging time -- the girl he loved that he was fighting to keep was now different.

As the years went by, I attended Scripture studies and mothers' groups and we met families that were faithfully practicing. I wanted so badly for our marriage to look like theirs and our families to be like others. I wanted to join the homeschool group and keep the kids home, but he said no. I desperately felt called to have more than the 3 children we had, but he wasn't sure. My husband was still saying, the church is your hobby and mine is golf. He always came to Mass with us on Sunday, but that was it. I tried everything to convert his heart. I dragged him to couples prayer groups, played Jesus music in the house, and read my books out loud to him. Even though my heart was in a good place, I wanted him to be something he wasn't.

If you are in this type of marriage, I hope to share what my dear mentor shared with me when we were struggling: When a woman's contentment comes from her relationship with God, and it used to come from the husband (who is not spiritually in the same place), the husband can feel rejected and betrayed. She told me, you are to be his helpmate, his counsel, and the heart of the home. He should want to come home to you. She also shared that she had a spiritual director correct her one time by saying "You are not the Holy Spirit. There are so many women who have husbands that are not faithful, that gamble away their money, or have died. Be grateful for the man he is. Even if all you can do to begin is to thank him for putting a bowl in the sink, show him gratitude." I left not realizing she was correcting me, but that her wisdom to start small was what I needed to hear.

What a blessing she was in that season of life. I began to pray early in the morning before the kids got up, always beginning with Psalms in case my time was cut short --they truly do encompass the human heart. I did my best to stop focusing on what I did not have. Slowly our marriage returned. I don't think I realized how bad that season was until it was over. My husband was (and is) kind and loving and he



had missed his wife. Sanctity often comes through humility.

I don't remember if it was my mentor that suggested Saint Margaret of Scotland to me, or if I had discovered her at the same time. Saint Margaret and her family had to flee their native country to Scotland around the year 1070, and they were devout Catholics. King Malcolm III offered her family protection and befriended them. He fell in love with Margaret and married her; together they had a happy marriage and eight children.

Malcolm had a similar view of faith that my husband did. He did not see much importance in religious things since he had far more important things to worry about. Because he loved her, he allowed her to carry on with her faith, but only saw it as her pastime. But -- he was watching. What he witnessed was the authentic beauty of her authentic commitment to prayer and others. What he loved in her was the gentleness that her faith brought to their family. His heart softened and eventually, he too learned the value of prayer and devotion to God. She was my saint, and I prayed for her intercession.

A couple of years later I was painting a mural in the private chapel in the home of that mentor and my husband brought baby number 4 to me to nurse in the middle of the day. She said, 'Chip have you ever seen the house...' and proceeded to take him on a tour. I did cringe a little because I knew she was up to something, but couldn't hear the conversation. As they descended from the stairs I heard her ask him, 'So tell me Chip, why aren't you Catholic?'. Silence. My heart pounded. He replied, 'I don't know, I never really thought about it.' She invited him to RCIA. That moment was the beginning of a new chapter for us. Two years later he came into the church. He now says that coming into the Church was a more profound moment than our wedding day and the birth of our children. God met him exactly where he wanted him to be. His timing is perfect.

Shortly after we were invited with 20 other couples to study the Church documents on marriage and family. His men's group had men from all different walks; doctors, lawyers, helicopter pilots, and carpenters, all there to study the role of being a Godly husband. One night he came home from his meeting and sat on the couch with me. He had something to say so I put my book down and listened. He said, 'I get it. Now I know why our marriage is so good right now.' I paused. He continued, 'Before I came into the Church, I had no understanding of what the sacrament of marriage was all about, and now, I'm starting to understand. We are both finally in the same place, I am in a state of grace, and God has blessed us with something incredible.' I was speechless. Twelve years of waiting and two more

years of his spiritual growth and every heartfelt prayer I had prayed was answered. I could say nothing. A year later our 5th child was born, Margaret Grace, after Saint Margaret of Scotland.

If you are in an unequally yoked marriage, and your husband's journey seems very different from your own, dig deep in your prayer life. Open your heart to complete abandonment to God and His timing. Use Margaret of Scotland as your intercessor, and to help you be a gracious wife. Let your husband see that your faith truly makes you a more peaceful, loving, and giving wife. Don't worry that harm is being done or that your marriage doesn't look like others do. Know that God is working in your journey and using everything for good.

Our oldest son, that baby that I used to bring to daily Mass on my bike, the one who was 3 when we married, is now a priest. He says that a pivotal moment in his call to the priesthood happened when he was 12 years old. It was at the age of 12 when he stood next to Monsignor as he anointed his father and eleven others at the Easter Vigil the night he became Catholic. I promise you the Lord will use all of the journey for good. Trust in God's timing, whether it is 12 years or 20.

### **A Prayer for Your Husband and Marriage**

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. *Proverbs 3:5-6*

Father God, I thank you for the provision and protection you grace our family with, even if it is not how I envision it. I thank you for 'enough'. I thank you for the ability to see the call and deeper meaning of the mission of our family.

I thank you for bringing to the surface wounds that need to be healed. As painful as it is to experience the purge of those emotions, through your grace, we are made whole.

Help us to remember that the answers to prayer often come after the upheaval. That you cannot act with barriers we (or others) have placed in our way. To remove those barriers can be deeply painful. Painful but necessary to open and clean our hearts to prepare them for your mercy. Remind us to always unite that suffering to yours.

I thank you for the gift of resiliency that you have built in our marriage. I thank you for the covenant and sacrament that unites us as one. I ask you to continue to bless our union and the mission of our family. Continue to guide us and use us. Help us to see the path that you have chosen for us. Help us to joyfully choose that path in unity and love.

Amen

*Melissa Dayton is the wife and mother of 8 children and 2 grandchildren. She has over 25 years of experience in marriage, family, and youth ministry. Melissa is an artist, speaker, and author. In 2013 she completed a five-year Lay Ecclesial ministry formation program in her Diocese with a Masters Certificate in Theology and Ministry. Melissa is the co-founder of a nonprofit serving teens in her community and speaks in high schools nationally with her husband Chip. She currently is the Director of Fatih Formation at a large parish in New Jersey.*



# Margaret

MOTHER OF 8

Up until the birth of my first child, I was fairly convinced that I could do anything I set my mind to, so long as I worked hard enough. It was a principle born of experience as I made my way first through college and law school, graduating both with honors. As a result of sheer focus and determination, I believed, I landed my dream job at a top law firm in Boston. During law school I had also met and married a dreamy fellow law student from England. We began our life together full of hope and promise, sure that we were in control of our future.

It probably won't surprise you to learn that neither of us was Catholic at the time. I had been raised Protestant and my husband, Jewish. We had been on a journey of faith together practically since we had met. We were married by an Episcopalian priest and were eventually received into the Catholic Church around the same time our first child was born. I had never heard the term "vocation" (at least not in the Catholic sense). I had lived my entire life without ever knowing that "dying to self" was a good thing, or that I should be thinking of what my path to sainthood might look like. Enter our first child...As soon as he was born I knew I could never follow through with my original plan to continue my career. It was already becoming clear to me that my life might not go exactly as I had planned all those years.

I had dreamed of my sweet baby. Of course he would be adorable, peaceful, and very well-dressed. Indeed he was all of those things. He also wouldn't sleep unless I was holding him, NEVER wanted to be put down, hated riding in the car, and made me the laughing stock (I imagine) of my Mommy and Me exercise classes. While all of the other newborn babies slept blissfully in their strollers while their mamas worked hard to lose that baby weight, my little darling screamed like he was on fire while I desperately tried to keep him content so I could do a few squats. My final attempt at consolation was an electric toothbrush I placed behind the pads of the stroller seat, hoping that the white noise and vibration would keep him happy. It worked for a while. I buzzed through a few more classes with an only moderately irate baby. My husband and I gazed enviously at all of the other couples in restaurants with THEIR cherubs snoozing in car seats, allowing

their parents to continue on with date nights as if their lives hadn't changed at all, while we sang, bounced, and sweated our way through our dinners out in an effort to keep our extremely alert newborn from disturbing fellow diners.

All throughout that first year (not to mention all the years to come), our little one defied convention and expectations like it was his job. I was doing everything right and working so hard, just like I always had; why was my little boy not holding up his end of the bargain? The scales were falling from my eyes at a rapid rate. I knew I couldn't mother on my own, but the "experts" and checklists were failing me. Slowly but surely, I started to turn to the Ultimate Expert on my son, the one who had chosen me, inadequate, headstrong, overly-confident ME, to be his Mama.

But you see, old habits die hard, and once things settled down a bit I started to return a bit to my independent ways. I began to feel like I had this mothering thing DOWN. After all, if I could survive the baptism by fire that was our first son, everything else should be a piece of cake, right? But again, God. Unwilling to leave me to my own devices, he blessed us with 7 more babies during the next decade. Believe me when I say, we were NOT expecting that. Just to keep things interesting, we had a few babies we weren't expecting (but were DELIGHTED by) and a few newborn adoptions along the way. Each twist and turn, clearly orchestrated by God, reinforced the message that I was not in control of my story. God has continued to teach me this lesson (I need a lot of reminding) in big and small ways through the years. For one thing, he called me to homeschool our children. No one was more surprised by this plot twist than me. I don't think I had ever even met a homeschool mom until God let me know that I was to become one. But once he did, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that it was his plan for our family.

As is the case with many things, however, I think the most significant lessons are the ones I learn day-by-day, minute-by-minute, in large family life. My children are still fairly young (12 years and under). As I write this, our youngest is a newborn. I will be honest, many days the constant cacophony of need from so many small people is overwhelming. After a dozen years of motherhood I am still learning to balance all of the duties of a homeschool mom, and I fall short in some respect practically every day. Despite all evidence to the contrary, part of me still wants to believe that if I just worked harder or smarter everything would magically fall into place, and raising a large family wouldn't be so exhausting. And then our Lord reminds me of what I didn't know all those years ago when I started living out my vocation: THIS is my path to sainthood. The laundry, the meals, the cleanup, the constant conflict-resolution (no, law school does not help with this, in case you are wondering), they all remind me that no matter what I do, I will never be



enough. I can never do all of it under my own power. As I go about my day, I send up prayers in a fairly steady stream; prayers of gratitude, and prayers of petition; some general (“Lord, please make them saints”), and some very specific and immediate (“Lord, please help us make it through breakfast.”). Motherhood literally brings me to my knees and I am so grateful for that.

Lately, I find myself asking for the intercession of Saint Margaret of Scotland. Having raised 8 children herself, she is the patron saint of large families. Not only a mother but a queen, Saint Margaret is known for her charity to those around her as well as her devotion to her own family. She brought about the release of many prisoners, frequently fed orphans, and lived an austere life of prayer and study. She personally oversaw the studies of her children who are generally recognized as bringing about two hundred years of peace in Scotland.

Saint Margaret of Scotland, pray for us!

*Keri Rome is a mother of 8, raising and homeschooling her children in the suburbs of Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas with her amazing husband. She loves her family, the Traditional Latin Mass, reading, nature study, and coffee.*

# Mary

MOTHER OF I

My road to motherhood was an unexpected one. Some girls know from the time they are potty-trained that they are going to be mommies, but I was never like that. I enjoyed being an older sister (little Katie was five years younger than I was), but Katie was enough for me. I didn't want my own kids. I wanted to be everyone's sister . . . I was going to join the convent. I was sure of it. I would pore over the lives of the saints and contemplate those strong, independent women of yesteryear, who risked everything to devote their lives to God. I began counting down the days until my eighteenth birthday when I would finally be able to join the convent.

In the meantime, I lived in the confidence of a child who has figured everything out. I shrugged off the affections of boys who had crushes. I protested to my doctor the injustice of menstruating when I would never use my uterus. I laughed as my friends fainted during THAT video in sex ed, glad I would never have to live through something like that. Nuns don't have children. I was safe.

The night before I was to join the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament in the summer of 2007, I had a dream. Not a dream. A vision. In it, I was walking toward the convent, prepared to begin my affiliation and become a pre-novice, when I heard a warm voice that echoed around my head.

"Where are you going?" it asked.

I proudly explained that I was going to the convent, which I could see directly ahead. God wouldn't find me to be a Jonah, balking at His will! I was eagerly going to serve Him!

"But you're going the wrong way."

I had always wanted to be a nun. I had always prayed about my vocation and gone to stay at convents for overnight retreats, and I had yearned for this my whole life! But you don't argue with a dream like that.

So, at age eighteen, my life started over and I began a several year journey to find the “right way.” I did my best to go the opposite of the convent while still being a devout follower of the Lord. I began going on dates, learning boundaries, and healthy interactions, handling heartbreak, etc. Sweet Sister Brendan confessed to me once, “I’m praying the menfolk away. How is it going?!” I told her to tweak her prayers. She wasn’t praying all the menfolk away, only the good ones!

I graduated from college and began teaching, which reaffirmed the fact that I loved children but was in no hurry to have any of my own.

And then -- five agonizingly long years after walking away from the convent -- I met Bernie. Bernie was unlike any man I had ever met before. When I left our first date, I texted my mother, “I just finished having dinner with my future husband!” And I was right!

Naturally, as a good Catholic couple, we discussed how many children we would want in our marriage. Originally, he told me he was open to “however many God will bless us with.” That changed after he helped volunteer at a second grade function I was leading. “No more than two,” he always swore after that. “No more than two!”

We married in December 2014, two days before Christmas, and immediately the questions started.

“When are you having kids?” the DJ at our wedding reception asked.

“When are you having kids?” my in-laws asked, playfully patting the bed when they visited.

“When are you having kids?” my mother asked as she handed us Christmas presents.

“When are you having kids?” my students asked when I returned from the Christmas holiday.

The response was always the same -- “In God’s time, not mine!” -- but the truth was we were abstaining. We were both teachers and I was at a Title I Catholic school. We barely had money to cover bills and put food on the table, much less bring another person into the equation.

Eventually, this struggle between God's time and my time began weighing on my soul. My mom had two children before she turned 30. I had gotten married at 25 and my clock was ticking. My husband is a very careful man with a profound desire to provide for me and protect those whom he loves, so the idea of having children before he felt like we could adequately provide became a major sticking point.

By age 27, the yearning in my heart became so overwhelming that I couldn't see babies in any format without weeping. Even going to Mass was heartbreaking because I would see so many parents bringing their children, and I wondered if I would ever be blessed. I felt like the biblical Hannah, praying and vowing that this child would be God's as much as mine.

And then it happened! After years of saving and switching to a job at a local charter school for a pay increase, we conceived. I knew pregnancy would be difficult, but nothing could have prepared me for the suffering I endured with hyperemesis gravidarum. Noises were overwhelming (did I mention that I teach?). Smells were torture (. . . I teach 6th grade. Enough said.). Morning sickness was more of an all-day sickness to the point where I was having seizures from dehydration. I learned how to drive in rush hour traffic while vomiting into a trash can perched on my lap in front of the steering wheel.

In order to survive the nine months of misery, I offered my suffering up to the Lord and relied upon the intercession of several saints, especially Gianna Beretta Molla and the Virgin Mother. Despite all the education I had received and all the preparations I had taken and all the desire I had held in my heart for a child, I was surprised by how difficult pregnancy actually was physically, mentally, and emotionally. Holding the stories of these powerful holy mothers (and THE Holy Mother) helped me feel united to a strength far greater than my own and gave me the power to take the pregnancy one day at a time.

Mary's fiat, her allowance for things to happen per God's will, her absolute and unshaking trust in the Lord's plan, was my source of strength during my weakest moments. If Mary could trust God through conception, pregnancy, raising the actual Messiah, and watching her own Son be crucified . . . I could trust that God would give me the strength to endure a rougher-than-usual pregnancy.

I quickly learned, though, that this is easier said than done. There's a reason why Mary was chosen of all women and not me! As cure after cure failed and I grew round and heavy and depressed, my powerlessness was overwhelming. I really only had two choices, either to despair or to rely on God. I turned to the Bible



for reassurance and found comfort. I let the pages fall where they may and marked them, surprised at how these words, although they were not originally meant for me, spoke through the millennia and echoed in my heart.

The one that stood out the most was in the third chapter of Proverbs, one of my favorite books. Solomon wrote, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." It struck me that, despite all my lip service, I had not really trusted in the Lord. Not entirely. As a child, I had closed my heart to His will and insisted on being a nun only to be shaken by such a strong dream at the last minute. As a married woman, I had waited until my bank account was ready for a child instead of trusting that God would provide what I could not. I had relied on myself over and over, sure that I knew what was best . . . and God had lovingly made my twisty-turny path lead straight to Him. Though the rest of my pregnancy was no easier, I had a newfound peace.

Of course, the pregnancy was simply the harbinger of the labor to come. Despite the labor being relatively short, it nearly killed both me and my daughter. She was aspirating and (being the go-getter that she is) did not wait for my body to be ready before "forging her own path" to escape. I distinctly remember the chaos of the delivery room and the moment that everything changed. After hours of nurses barking orders and my husband reminding me to breathe, I stopped listening. Instead of focusing on the noise, I searched my soul for the peace I had after reading Proverbs. I trusted in the Lord. In that moment, I felt utterly and completely vulnerable . . . but I wasn't powerless. I had God on my side, and God was all-powerful.

Within minutes of my surrender, my daughter was born Smurf-blue and was rushed to the NICU. I nearly bled to death and required 56 stitches and emergency fluids to save my life. These things were beyond my control, but they weren't beyond God. I just had to trust in the Lord.

By the grace of God, both of us survived and she had no side effects from her oxygen deprivation. We named her Rosemary -- half after our mothers (Rosa and Mary) and half after Sts. Rose of Lima (a woman not unfamiliar with suffering) and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

No sooner did we recover and reintroduce ourselves to functional society that the new round of questions began.



“When are you having another?”

“When will you give her a sibling?”

“Will you try for a boy as well?”

“You’re Catholic! You’re not going to stop at one, are you?”

Perhaps God may bless us with another baby one day, but we are in no rush. God has filled us with a sense of peace these days, as close to serenity as you can get around a toddler. We will never have the traditional Catholic “stairstep” children, separated in age by only a few months. We will never populate an entire soccer team with our offspring. We will never take up an entire pew at Mass with our family. And that’s okay. After all, Mary only had one child and she was the first and best Catholic!

It can be easy to get caught up in plans and forget to live . . . forget to trust. God’s plan always works out, maybe not in the way you expected or the way you wanted, but it always works out for the best. It is a humbling experience to put your trust in a higher power and out of your own hands and control, but the rewards are hundredfold. My plan these days is simply to trust in God; He hasn’t let me down yet, and I’m pretty sure I’m finally going the right way.

*Brittany Revia de García is blessed to be the wife of Bernardo García, the mother of Rosemary García, and a teacher to many.*

# Zelie

## OF A HAPPY MARRIAGE

I am not cynical about Valentine's Day.

That sounds like an opener about how awful Valentine's Day is from someone who is in fact very cynical about Valentine's Day. But, honest, I'm not. I am not bitter about mushy love. I happen to love my husband in a mushy way. I do not roll my eyes at what is written on Valentine's Day cards. Well, maybe sometimes, but it is not because I don't agree with it. I am not the least bit stubborn about being romantic on command and the commercial spectacle of red and pink doesn't bother me. I am not cynical about Valentine's Day.

There's a "but" coming. Can you hear it?

I guess the reason that Valentine's Day gets a shrug and a "meh" from me is not because I fundamentally disagree with it, but instead it is because I think it leaves out too many details and covers up too many truths. I am convinced that covering something up is the same thing as lying and has the same effect on our spirit. I'm just a stickler for the truth, that's all. And Valentine's Day tells such a small part of the truth, covering up and leaving out all of the best that love has to offer.

I feel like Valentine's Day urges us to leave out love's best detail, and that detail is not a romantic comedy or a reservation-- that detail is a big fat mess, full of starts and stops and second chances. Love's best details are gritty and intimate and tell the story of those who have almost lost it all, have had every reason to run away, but have kept on trying anyway.

My husband and I are raising five kids, and when the youngest was born our oldest was only four. We often think back to our days before kids. We call them our "single days" even though we were married because it turns out children are much heavier balls and way thicker chains than a spouse. We lived in San Diego when we were "single" and did things that young and hip people do. We had a great apartment overlooking a marina. The weather was nice. We would take long walks on the beach in the evenings. We lived on an island; technically, it was

a peninsula, but you get the idea. We were both working with great jobs so we had money for a lot of dates. We walked to go get sushi on Friday night and crepes on Sunday morning. I sat across a table starry eyed, in a cute dress and uncomfortable shoes. We tried each other's food. We made toasts. We slept in. (We slept in!)

And I won't say that I wasn't in love then because I was. But it was different. Our love hadn't really survived anything yet. It was a Valentine's Day kind of love. And new love is great, but old love is better and I think that's true because there is a great deal of beauty in the struggle. I might have been my husband's Valentine, but I wasn't yet his Beloved. Not yet.

These days there aren't so many hot dates. Our nights look startlingly different than they used to. In fact, our nights are spent with one common goal at the forefront. Trust me, it isn't which wine to try -- now our one common goal is to get all kids sleeping at the same time so we can finally be together uninterrupted and share our days with each other while sitting on the couch. That's it. It sounds simple, doesn't it? So we make a plan, say a prayer, give a cheer, and divide and conquer. He takes the big kids and I take the little ones. With our devised plans like militant strategies, we sing and story tell and manipulate and pray pray pray prayers to Jesus for sweet dreams and for the One who can part seas to make their little sweet selves GO TO SLEEP. It's hardly romantic as I army crawl out of their bedroom as not to wake them up and then collapse into the couch and high five my husband for a job done. Maybe not well done, but done. And we sit and we celebrate just being able to sit next to each other.

My husband and I have transitioned into something much less conventionally romantic and the challenges are intricate. Our nerves are frayed. Our patience is low. We are not communicating as effortlessly as we once did, back when we explained things well, or always understood each other fully. Instead, there are the perfunctory exchanges and the curt language of hectic schedules and a chaotic pace with real life stressors. And with all that come the little rejections as simple as shrugging off a kiss or a hug because our thoughts are elsewhere.

These intricate challenges might not make our love perfect -- I don't think we'll be making it to the seasonal section at Target or find ourselves in the center of a Hallmark card any time soon -- but they certainly make our love real.

I could have stopped at the Peninsula-Marina-Overlooking-Apartment-Sushi-Dates-and-Beach-Strolls story about my husband. I could've stopped at Valentine's Day. Because army crawling and collapsing into a couch is not exactly the stuff



that cards are made of. But I have learned something valuable about intimacy.

Intimacy is where our story starts. It turns us into more than a pretty package, prideful and plastic. Intimacy turns us into Beloved.

Beloved love is a little battered, a little bruised. It has been patient. It has taken one for the team. It has stayed up late and woken up early. It has held its tongue and celebrated wins and grieved losses that have nothing to do with self. It has lost its temper. It has persevered. It has swallowed its pride and met in the middle. Sometimes it has skipped the middle all together and raced after the only thing that matters. True love has grieved and yelled and cried and worried. True love has involved itself in another's life so deeply that they can hardly be separated. Beloved love isn't always pretty, but it is certainly beautiful.

As a young person, when I thought about what it meant to be a Saint -- well, army crawling didn't have much to do with it. I thought I would be in Africa doing something noble in a pair of khaki shorts. I would read the details of the lives of some of our most famous Saints, like Catherine of Siena, Theresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux. I would make glorious plans of solitude and contemplation. But once I was married and army crawling, I read about their lives and thought, "Of course they are saints! They lived in solitude and contemplation!" What about people like me who feel like their biggest accomplishment is being able to perfectly time how long the milk will last?! What about me?

I recently came across Saint Zelie and a shift came in my soul when I read she had nine kids. The shift was this: Whether it was marriage, motherhood, or sainthood -- I had Valentine's Day ideas about them all.

Our God is not content with Valentine's Day Love.

And, truthfully, a lot of times, I think we are.

When it comes to God we are content with a love pretty enough to package. We are fine with a love that hasn't been tested and tried. We haven't embraced the idea that our love affair with God, just like our love affairs here on earth, is going to be filled with times of exhaustion, desperation, and loneliness. Saint Zelie taught me that I was insisting on a warm, fuzzy, nicely packaged walk with Christ, what I imagined Saint Therese and the gang experienced. Saint Zelie taught me that I was using Valentine's Day perfection as an indicator that I was on the right track. I was looking at the familiar Saints and wrongly telling myself when trying to

conjure up their lives that Love Stories are supposed to be easy. Saint Zelig and her robust family (I feel certain she army crawled) taught me that what I knew to be true about Beloved Love because of my husband, was true with God too.

God craves our intimacy. The Lord reveals this desire of His in a way that tickles me. Throughout Scripture He asks questions He already knows the answer to. He does it often and I think it's possible He is trying to see how intimate we're willing to be. How much are we willing to give Him? Just the "good" stuff? Or all of it?

God asks Adam in the garden: "Where are you? Who told you you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree, Adam?" (Genesis 3:9-11) He of course knew the answers to all of these questions, but was Adam willing to admit his failure? Was Adam willing to have a real relationship?

Then Jesus says from the shore: "So, boys, did you catch any fish?" (John 21:5) He knew they hadn't had any luck at all that night. But what is it that they would they say? Would they let Him in? Or would a pat answer, "Not many," give the intended, "Why don't you mind your own business?"

Or this one, at the well, also from Jesus: "So, daughter, why don't you go get your husband?" (John 4:16) He knew that she had five. But what would she say? Would she let Him love her anyway? Despite her mess?

Life as a wife and a mom is hard. I thought marriage was going to be a lot of hand holding, joint dinner making, and cute fights about forgetting to take the trash out again -- oh you! But instead it is a lot of unmet expectations, hurt feelings, and accepting that love changes with time.

When my husband and I walked into parenting we thought it was just a lot of rule setting, snack fetching, car seat buckling, playing, and really, what could possibly be so hard about that? But in reality, it is turning out to be a lot of juggling, weighing, committing, debating, worrying, and countless sleepless nights, because, as parents, we have never cared about anything as fiercely as we care about our kids.

Beloved Love is in acknowledging, embracing, and celebrating the ways that we struggle. It's those intricate challenges that have turned my husband and I into each other's Beloved. They are where our story has started and thickened and triumphed and become breathtakingly beautiful. Our story is ours. Only ours. It is something that no one else would ever even want. Unique, fitting, intimate. Starts and stops and second chances.



Beauty in the struggle, Beloved.

*Allison Sullivan is a wife to Seth Sullivan and mom to five children, four biological, one adopted from China. In addition to doing her best to raise her kids to be little disciples, she has written a book (Rock Paper Scissors) and she hosts a podcast (Sinner Saint Sister). She travels to speak and teach for youth and women's ministry events. Most of all, she loves knowing the Lord and trying to make Him known.*

# Rita

## OF A DIFFICULT MARRIAGE

“So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together no human being must separate.” (Matthew 19:6)

Twenty-five years later in my marriage this passage is so dear to me. Sadly, I can't say it had any worth to me until as recent as the last ten years of my marriage. What sounds to be very concrete and lasting, is actually very hard to accomplish. I am constantly encouraged by God's grace shown to me and the opportunities for me to show grace to others. It is my pleasure to share my story with others, and my prayer is that together as a community we can learn from each other.

I was born and raised in Dallas, TX by my parents who were common-law married. Our home was simple, we were poor, and we did not share faith as a family. My mother was baptized as a Baptist but did not attend church. My father was a fallen away Catholic, so my sister and I attended the Baptist church down the street from time to time. While I know my parents tried their best to provide a home for us, my memories of childhood are not fond. Both of my parents were alcoholics and experimented with drugs, which led to constant domestic violence. I thought this was normal behavior for a family, and that everyone's home life included this level of dysfunction. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “The things that we love tell us what we are.” Were the behaviors of my parents and what they loved something I should love? Somehow, I loved my parents but hated their behavior. I had no positive examples on how a family should function, so I relied on popular culture and characters from TV shows to inform my behavior.

Jesus said, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing” (c.f. Lk 23:34)

My teenage years consisted of rebellion, disobedience, and a pattern of sin. My parents eventually separated, and my sister and I grew distant. Before leaving high school, a friend invited me to her youth group where I met a very handsome, fiery young man and we quickly formed a relationship. We were young, hopeful, and in love. We set our sights on being married, going to college, and starting a

family. Although the importance of having a family was not something I was raised to value, I wanted this life and made it my new goal; I would stop at nothing to make it happen.

Being married in the Catholic Church was a bit foreign to me, but I knew in order to marry this man, I would need to become Catholic. So I became Catholic and received my first Holy Communion on my wedding day. At the time, I did not realize the significance of the sacrament of marriage. Even my cradle Catholic husband did not understand it. The strength of our sacrament would not be recognized until almost 15 years later in our marriage.

We quickly started a family and were blessed with three children. We fulfilled our “Catholic duty” of baptizing them into the Church, and attended Mass on Easter, Christmas, and family celebrations of sacraments.

“For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”  
(James 2:26)

Fast-forward about 14 years, my husband and I were living the American dream. We had both managed to finish college and secure successful jobs. Our values now focused on wealth, title, and how well our kids could perform in sports and academics. I thought this was an incredible accomplishment, considering I had come from such humble beginnings. Being busy was what life was about! I convinced myself that there was nothing more important than making this good life for my family and I.

As my career took off, my attention turned away from family and toward myself. Oprah, Dr. Phil, and The View all told me and women like me that we needed to “go do you” and “go out and find your own happiness.” So I went to look for it and I went without haste. My values changed from wanting to be a mother and wife to wanting success and glory. I started to spend more time with personal trainers and success gurus than I would at the soccer field or the library with my kids. I started to travel for work and I looked for new friends that could mirror my new interests and goals. My husband dove into his own work and started a business, and we started to drift apart. Our marriage and family life became a simple vow of commitment and duty.

Even so, God was always tugging at my heart asking, “Is this what matters to you most?” I would answer, “Yes. This is a great life, and why would God want anything less for me?” My husband would hear God ask the same question, but would

begin to ask himself, “Is this really it?” He started to search for the answer to that question. Is there more to life, and if so, what is it? He found his answer in the Church’s teachings. He drowned himself in books, podcasts, Scripture, and prayer. He wanted to know everything there was to know about the Church and quickly became an apologist for the faith.

This shift in our relationship felt like someone had hit me with a truck.

Suddenly the man that once obsessed over me, obsessed over wealth, and desired power was now obsessed with God. He wanted the world to know what he knew, and he took every opportunity to publicly announce his beliefs. His outpouring of sacred Scripture and catechesis was intense and came off as downright offensive to our extended family. They could not handle the sudden change and rejected him and our family. Some also chose to reject the Catholic Church altogether. I was furious with my husband and with God. Why did his conversion have to be so hard on us? Why do we have to abide by these new Catholic values which we seemed to be doing fine without up until now? Why did his values need to be my values? It was a tough road that I did not think we would be able to endure. I rejected the whole idea and associated him and the Catholic Church with pain.

My husband struggled for a very long time trying to make our family understand his newfound love. I did not see the value in giving my whole life to the Church. I knew we had been disobedient, so to make up for it I vowed to return to weekly Mass, tithe, and even throw in a Rosary occasionally. Why would God ask for more, doesn’t He know I’m busy? But God was not asking for more, he was asking for it all.

“What you own belongs to the Lord and is given for the good of all.” (Leviticus 25:23-43)

I know now that it was my husband’s constant prayer, novenas to the Blessed Mother, and devotion to the Eucharist that helped me start to see what God wanted me to see. Eventually I agreed to attend a retreat, and I began to open my heart to know Jesus. It was not enough that my husband took control of the family and took us on a journey; I also had to find the value in the journey. Slowly, Jesus began to open my heart to what the Catholic Church had to say about values and virtues, especially in a Catholic marriage.

The hardest part was wanting it for myself.



When I finally listened to God and really heard what He had to tell me, I felt so free. I was so excited about making Jesus, not myself and my ambitions, the center of my life and our marriage. I had to start doing my part.

My conversion happened just as my kids were coming to their own realization of Christ's love for them. What did it mean for them to value Jesus in their life? They needed a good mother; a good role model and my husband needed my support and love as a faithful wife. I could not let them down. It was so freeing to have the Church's teachings to guide me. Chastity, purity, the right to life, human dignity, and the lives of the saints became the standard for how we formed our values.

It was unfortunate to see our extended family separate, and I was truly devastated over the loss. Sometimes in life things must fall apart for God to put them back together again. Out of the dust, my own small church arose. My husband and I, now separated from the larger family, were forced to look inward and evaluate ourselves as a domestic church. What characteristics of our extended family needed to stay with us, and what did we have to shed in order to thrive? Our marriage was in trouble. This was a very hard and lonely reality to face and I did not know what to do. I know now that God had to pull me in toward Him to save my marriage. It is very much like a rose bush; if not pruned will not bloom again. I had to be pruned of bad behaviors, a false sense of community, and unfortunately some of my extended family for me to bloom.

God just keeps giving and giving if you let him. Since we decided to follow God's will, our marriage has been made new. Our commitment to serve God as a couple in our parish has grown, and we have been blessed to witness so many conversions. It is truly amazing to do his work.

God has given us so many amazing saints in our Church that have been through nearly every sort of life experience. It's easy to think of saints as "perfect", but so many of them endured incredible hardship in life. St. Rita is one of those saints, as she had a difficult marriage. In a way, I feel mine and my husband's story is like St. Rita and her marriage, but flipped! I am like her husband, whom Rita constantly worried about and prayed for his conversion. My husband, while not initially on fire for our faith, came to know God before me and our conversions were years apart. How lonely Rita must have felt! Yet she did not abandon her marriage or give up on her husband. St. Rita is an inspiration to both my husband and I, as we continue to understand how their lives speak so closely to our lives today. Even though we are a long way from becoming saints, we have both vowed that is our goal... to become saints!

*Krystal Rodriguez is a proud wife and mother of three who converted to Catholicism in her early twenties. Her passion to serve the Church has been through Catechism and Youth Ministry where she has taught alongside her husband for over 15 years. Krystal and her husband look forward to retirement when they can open a Catholic bookstore and coffee shop!*

# Helena

## A SINGLE MOTHER

I always wanted to get married. As a woman who grew up in a culture where marriage and family played a big role, it was something that I and my family deeply valued. As time went on and as I lived out my twenties, I kept the hope of meeting someone special. I had a great job that I loved, working as a sub-contractor at NASA, but still I had a desire to have a family. I prayed to God that if it was His will, He would bring me a husband.

Then one weekend, I met someone. After going out a few times, I realized that he did not believe in Jesus and had a low opinion of God. Because I had met him so soon after my prayer for a husband, I remained sure that he was the man God had brought me to marry. I believed that he would come around and eventually believe in Christ, so I chose not to think anything of it.

Even though he was not a practicing Christian, he agreed to be married in the Church because he knew it was very important to me. I found out quite soon how difficult it was being married to someone who did not care about God, or did not have some of God's characteristics, like faithfulness and humility, which are some of the fruit that the Spirit of God produces (Galatians 5).

"Self-giving" and self sacrifice are necessary for a godly marriage. As my pastor put it, "The best example of self-giving is found in the Reading from Isaiah, in the figure of the Suffering Servant, and from the Passion Narrative of St. Mark, where Jesus says, 'This is my body, this is my blood, poured out for many.' The Word of God is unmistakably clear; the greatest measure of success in this world is realized in service and self-sacrifice." I soon discovered that my husband did not understand the need to sacrifice himself. Our marriage and the relationship became not about the other, but about the self.

As time passed, it was clear there were many things that we were not united on, and communication became difficult. Important decisions became "me versus you" situations, rather than the two of us working as a team or a united front. We did not share the same values, so we did not come at decision-making from

the same angle.

We waited 4 years before we had children. I had a great job at NASA that I thoroughly enjoyed, but I was in my thirties and my husband was concerned about having children at an older age. So we planned our first child, but I kept my job. I did not realize how difficult it was going to be leaving my child to go to work. I wanted to quit work, but I didn't know how to tell my husband, so I kept my job.

We waited two years before we had our second child. I knew then that I could not go back to work, and I told my husband. I had a feeling he didn't approve of the idea, but he accepted it. Then two years later we had our third and last child. I would have liked to have one more, but my age had caught up with me.

After our third child, there were warnings from him that I chose to ignore. He was very conservative money-wise, and I spent more than I should have. He told me to look at our finances, but I was too busy with house chores and the children, and frankly just too exhausted to look at the finance books.

And then he left.

We were married almost eighteen years when he told me he wanted a divorce.

I pleaded with him to stay even if it were just for the children, and even asked if we could go to counseling, but he said he was unhappy and wanted a divorce. Yes, he loved his children, but his happiness came first. I believe the vow "till death do us part" at our wedding was just words to him. Marriage is a sacred commitment, something that is intended to last. But neither God nor commitments were important to him, so it seemed to me that it was easy for him to leave.

When my husband left me, I felt abandoned by the one I had planned to spend the rest of my life with. I felt lied to by his words "till death do us part". I felt angry for him not being there every day for his children. I felt sad for my children when we were at functions and track meets where other children had their dads with them for support, and theirs was almost always absent.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, we read that if our roots are deep in Christ, we will become stronger in our faith (Col 2:6-7). The end of my marriage was the beginning of my intimacy with God. I felt I was able to talk to Him when I could not talk to anyone else. I would cry out to God all of my anger, my great feelings of abandonment, and all of my frustrations. I found myself being drawn to my Bible,



and made it a priority to read and learn as much as I could. Even though I was abandoned by my husband, I sought the One that I knew would never abandon me. The words of Scripture gave me hope of heaven, and hope of a greater love than I could ever experience on Earth. I grew to love and depend more on God as I read His word in the Bible. The more I read His word, the more faith in God I felt I had. "The Holy Scriptures are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (2 Tim 3:15).

I always hoped my husband would come back home, but instead he remarried. I can't describe how painful it was to know that he was with another woman. But again, God was faithful and helped me through the tragedy of my failed marriage. As the Psalmist says, "If your law had not been the source of my joy, I would have died from my sufferings." (Ps 119:92).

I have acknowledged the fault that I had in our relationship, asked forgiveness, and have a peace in my life; a peace that only Jesus Christ can give. He made the difference! In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we are promised that God's peace surpasses our own human understanding. That means that God will give us peace even when it doesn't make sense to us; when all our circumstances demand that we despair, God's peace will overcome our circumstances.

It was difficult raising my three girls without my husband. Even though he did not live very far, he was not involved in their lives. While their earthly father was absent, I prayed that their Heavenly Father would become ever-present. I relied on Him, asking for wisdom and discernment, especially in times of discipline when I had no one else to turn to. Raising children is a task that is difficult enough for two parents. Doing it alone felt almost impossible, and I made mistakes. Even so, God stayed faithful to me.

God wants us to be with Him so He keeps giving us opportunities to turn to Him. He sent His only Son Jesus to die for us because He knows we just could not do it alone. That's our God!

Yes, the pain of my husband leaving was still there, but in a different way. It was not a pain of despair. I choose not to dwell on pain, because the devil wants to keep me in bondage of pain, anger, and unforgiveness. God has set me free to forgive and love, and I will not give Satan the opportunity to keep me in bondage.

Today, I try to spread the love of God to those that are lonely. God does not abandon His children, and I know I am called to spread that message. My mission is to

the elderly, who I visit and assist in nursing homes and living assistance. I pray with them and bring them the Eucharist, and show them that they are not forgotten.

My story of my divorce is not unlike that of a great saint of our Church, St. Helena of the Cross. St. Helena became the wife of Constantius Chlorus, and in the third century they had a son, who became Emperor Constantine. At the end of the third century, St. Helena's husband abandoned her for another woman. Helena, although rejected by her husband, went on to do great things for the Church. Her prayers and intercession for her son Constantine ended the persecution of Christians in Rome, and she lived her life giving freely, especially to the poor and destitute. She is especially remembered for leading the expedition that discovered the true Cross of Jesus.

St. Helena gives us an example of a true evangelist; that despite her loss in the abandonment of her husband, she was able to overcome because of her faith in God. In faith, she gave of herself and spread the good news, and spared thousands of Christians from torture and death. Her life did not end at her divorce; rather, God purified and sanctified her in that pain, and used it for His glory.

Because of my faith in God, like St. Helena, I also was able to go on with my life knowing God was at my side. And my story is not over; God intends to continue to purify me and sanctify me every day, to get me ready for the day that I meet Him in heaven. He is making me new every day, as I journey toward heaven and strive for sainthood.

*Sylvia P. Masters is a former Senior Software engineer at NASA, mother to three daughters, and grandmother to three children. She is the author of the book, "The Psalms for Our Times", and now works part-time as a caregiver to the elderly.*

# Anne

## A STAY AT HOME MOM

As the popular internet meme goes, “Stop, Drop, and Roll was always a big deal as a kid... I really thought I’d be on fire more than this as an adult.” While I was prepared to say no to drugs and to extinguish a fire on my body should ever the occasion arise, I have to say there was nothing that came close to preparing me for what has turned out to be the wildest ride of my life.

Motherhood. Being a stay-at-home mom. A hidden woman.

I am part of the generation that was told we can “be anything we want to be.” As a child, I flitted from imaginary future job to imaginary future job. I was a doctor, a vet, a marine biologist, an interior designer, a musician, a chef, a writer, and a whole long list of occupations. To me, the “anything you want to be” phrase always implied that I was supposed to be doing something great and worldly. It meant money and notoriety. It meant security. It meant fun. It definitely did NOT mean sacrifice or obscurity. Long days, and even longer nights. Hard work without appreciation. No salary or hourly wage.

On paper, it looks like a job for fools. But I have found it to be more than a job -- it is an answer to a calling.

As a teenager, I attended a competitive all-girls college prep high school. The goal was high scores on our SATs, and as many scholarships as we could physically apply for. Getting into a college was not a goal, it was a given. Every class, every assembly, and every teacher prepared us to be women of the world and glass ceiling-breakers; future CEOs, doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and engineers. No matter where our career choices led us, we were prepared for just that -- a career.

In the midst of this, I had an encounter with Jesus Christ. My world suddenly shifted perspectives. No longer was I living life for myself, but for Christ. To know one is loved by God is one thing; giving your life totally for Him is quite another. It wasn’t until college where I truly had to reconcile the ambitions of the world



with being called by God. I took the plunge, which at the time consisted of breaking off a dead-end relationship, changing my major, and diving head-first into a life of daily prayer. No longer was I interested in whatever money or pleasure had to offer me, because I was on to something bigger -- eternity.

## Sainthood.

It is found in doing whatever God is asking you to do in life, no matter what that might look like. It was completely counter to everything that had been poured into me. I was being asked to forsake my identity as a “woman of the world” and embrace a way of life that cast my own ambitions aside. But what was it exactly that God was asking me to do for Him? Where does my path to sainthood lie? It was clear that He had something big in mind. Was it youth ministry? College ministry? Pro-life ministry? In order to fully embrace God’s plan for me and discover my mission, I relied on my programming for ambition and got a Masters degree. Cue the irony.

Fast forward several years, I got married and started a family. I was a missionary with Ablaze Ministries as the Campus Minister at the local Catholic high school when I became pregnant with our first baby. I absolutely loved my job. I loved the kids, our ministry, everything. But I felt a tug on my heart to stay home once the baby came. God was calling me to leave everything behind and follow Him. To drop my nets. This is where my sainthood would be found. There was so much guilt, and so much inner turmoil. What about everything my mother went through to put me through private school? What about my Masters degree? What about my insane amount of student debt? What about my years of ministry experience? Was all of that for nothing? But sainthood calls.

Was everything I worked for lost to poopy diapers and spit up? Actually, that is the very furthest thing from reality. God has used me -- all of me, just as I am -- to make me the best mom to my kids that I can possibly be. I use my background in theology while I explain “Jesus’ boo-boos” to my two year old. I use my perseverance and goal-oriented nature to make sure we get to every play date, appointment, and activity on time. I use my knowledge and love of saints to teach our girls about our many Catholic superheroes. I use my ministry experience to share the love of God with my kids, especially when loving is hard. To count every instance where I use my prior knowledge and experience for my kids’ education and holiness would be impossible. God knew my vocation long before I did; He knew my path to sainthood, and prepared me to take on some incredibly difficult tasks through all the events in my life. All glory to God.



My path to sainthood requires that I die to myself every day. It requires sacrifice, humility, and patience, almost always when I am least willing to choose it. But God knows that by the Refiner's Fire, He is making me more like Him every day. He burns away all my imperfections and purifies me for His glory through sacrifice and self-gift, despite my egocentricity and selfishness. Nothing forces you to prioritize The Other over The Self quite like a baby.

There is one saint in our treasury that doesn't get much attention, but who plays an important role in salvation history. St. Anne, whose name we gather only from the second-century work, The Protoevangelium of James. St. Anne, stay-at-home mom extraordinaire, tasked with raising Mary, the soon-to-be Mother of God. And we know almost nothing about her. But that's the crux of the issue, isn't it? All effort on her part is completely focused on raising her daughter to glorify God with her life, keeping no glory for herself. In turn, Mary models her mother Anne by giving all she has to her Son. There is no Mary without Anne, no Jesus without Mary, and no salvation without Jesus! Anne, the Hidden Woman, affected the course of eternity by being just who God made her to be. He called her to sainthood in her stay-at-home motherhood.

This is where God has called me to be a saint. Because in everything, there is grace. Grace, in begging my infant to go to sleep. In celebrating a successful trip to the potty. Grace, in wincing in pain as my teething baby nurses, and in comforting a toddler who is scared of the vacuum cleaner. Grace, in hearing my daughter exclaim, "It's Jesus!" during the consecration at Mass. In just snuggling. Grace, in being at the right place at the right time to catch vomit. In receiving a sweet kiss, or in uncontrollable laughter. In cleaning up the second poop explosion through the last back up outfit at the 9/11 memorial.

I don't know how God will use my children in their lives. I hope and pray that He will make them saints, through whatever vocation He calls them to. What I do know is that I will continue to love them, pray for them, discipline them, laugh and cry with them, and lead them to Jesus. And yes, I will teach them to "Stop, Drop, and Roll" should they ever find themselves on fire.

*Jennifer Stavinoha lives in Bryan, TX with her husband and three daughters. She enjoys reading, baking, and judging international figure skating from her couch. Jennifer is the CoDirector for Ablaze Families, the parent outreach ministry of Ablaze Ministries.*

# Gianna

## A MOTHER WORKING OUTSIDE OF THE HOME

Doctor. Wife. Mother.

I was called to the practice of medicine when I was in high school. In medical school, I enjoyed almost every specialty that I participated in; however, I was drawn to Family Medicine. I loved that I might get to take care of individuals within the setting of their family and through all of life's stages, from pregnancy, birth, childhood, through the elderly and the end of life. To me, it is such an honor to be allowed to be present at some of the most joyful and sorrowful times in a person's life, and to be a source of calm and wisdom during those times. I have been privileged to accompany my patients and their families during countless life-altering experiences, and hopefully, if I've done my job well, I have not only cared for their body but their mind, and above all, their soul. It is a life of service, and as such, it is not without personal sacrifice. I feel it puts me in a unique position to speak truth into the lives of people who might never enter a church. I can minister to them in their time of greatest need, as if they were each Christ waiting to be cared for. I pray that I am fulfilling that call well, though I'm not always sure I am.

You see, I am also a wife and a mother of six. I met my husband, Matt, after I was already firmly on the path to medicine as a career and a calling. Matt is my vocation, and I am certain that he sanctifies me more each day. But I was never going to be a stay-at-home wife and mother. I feel there is great nobility in staying at home, but I would be denying a large part of who God made me if I did not continue to care for my patients as well. My work has also allowed Matt to pursue his calling to ministry in a way he never could have if he was working to support our family alone. My work has blessed our family and all those reached by Matt and his ministry.

The hardest part for me has been balancing my calling as a doctor and my role as a mother. I have six children ranging in age from 15 years to 18 months. Each time I had a baby, I wrestled with the question of whether I should return to work or not. I weighed heavily the effect of my absence on them, and the exam-

ple I might provide by putting service to others ahead of tasks at home. Ultimately, I decided each time that I would return to practicing medicine, and that would be an example to them of how they might be called to a life outside the home.

I hope I am giving them a good example of what working motherhood can look like; that you can simultaneously love your job and serve other people, and fiercely fight for and serve your family as well. It is not without challenges, and I definitely fall short at times. My house is often messier than I would like to admit, and the laundry never seems to get completely done. But my children do not doubt my love for them. I'm not sure they understand how hard it is to keep things running at work and at home, but I think that is the curse of motherhood -- perpetual underappreciation. I think it makes us holier.

In today's culture, I find that it is easy to get caught up in the competitiveness of raising children. Are they taking the right classes, are they participating in the right sports, and what about college scholarships? It is so easy to get distracted from the eternal by the mundane, and I believe Satan is counting on just that. I pray that I can keep an eternal perspective. The most important, most vital, most enduring thing I can do for my children is not to help them get into college or the NBA, but to introduce them to Christ Jesus and foster their love for Him above all else. My hope is that I live that, by my own example of love for Christ and obedience to His call on my life. Only time will tell if I've been a success.

A few years ago, I was introduced to a Saint whose path in life is so similar to my own that I can't help but think we would have been good friends had we lived in the same time and place. She is a frequent intercessor of mine, and I call on her especially during difficult labors on behalf of my patients. I ask her to pray for a safe and healthy delivery, and to give me wisdom and right judgement during those difficult times. Her prayers have never failed me yet. I look to her example of joy in medicine and in motherhood as an example for myself, and I hope I am living up to her standard. She is my favorite kind of saint: one who is accessible and relatable. Her life is so much like mine, but she received the reward of heaven, and so I try to follow in her steps. She is all of the things I hope to be...

Doctor. Wife. Mother. Saint.

Gianna Molla was born in Italy. She wanted to be a missionary like one of her brothers. Her health was too poor to endure the travel necessary, so she decided to dedicate her life to the practice of medicine. She viewed medicine as a way to reach into the lives of people and minister to them when they needed it most.



She wrote of the practice of medicine, “Everyone works in the service of man. We doctors work directly on man himself... The great mystery of man is Jesus: ‘He who visits a sick person, helps me,’ Jesus said... Just as the priest can touch Jesus, so do we touch Jesus in the bodies of our patients... We have opportunities to do good that the priest doesn't have. Our mission is not finished when medicines are no longer of use. We must bring the soul to God; our word has some authority... Catholic doctors are so necessary!”

Gianna especially loved taking care of children because it allowed her to minister to their mothers; women who she felt needed love, guidance, and support in the difficult task of raising children. She set a moral example for all mothers by her own virtue, and her job as a physician contributed to her sanctification and ultimately her sainthood. She is the first “working mother” to be canonized, and her example stands as a light to those who feel called both to work and to family life.

Like me, her first calling was to medicine and the care she could give her patients. It was only later that she was called to marriage and family. Her marriage was a source of holiness for her as was her own motherhood. She looked forward to her marriage with much excitement, and was eager to have children with her husband Pietro. They were blessed with four children, but Gianna's life took a devastating turn during her fourth pregnancy.

She was diagnosed with a large fibroid tumor. At the time, doctors recommended that she have an abortion in order to operate on the tumor. She refused. As the pregnancy progressed, the tumor became very painful. She ultimately consented to surgery, but was very clear that if it became a question of saving her life or the baby's, her husband and the doctors were to save the baby. She wrote prior to the surgery, “I trust in God, yes; but now it is up to me to fulfill my duty as a mother. I renew to the Lord the offer of my life. I am ready for everything, to save my baby.” The surgery was a success, and she carried the baby to term. She delivered by cesarean section after a difficult labor. Within days, she developed an infection that would end her life. During her last days she endured tremendous suffering, but never lost sight of God or His plan for her life. Her suffering was rewarded with heaven and unity with the God who she tried to serve fully in all aspects of her life. She is an example to all of us who work outside of our homes; that we can be faithful followers of Christ, raise godly children, and support our husbands to greater holiness -- all while working in whatever job God has called us to.

*Dr. Weslei Rice is Board Certified in Family Medicine and founded Pure Family Medicine in Bryan, TX. She specializes in family care and obstetrics. Weslei and Matt were married in June of 2001 and have six children.*



# CATHOLIC MOTHERS, CATHOLIC SAINTS

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