

LUIGI GINAMI

**GOD IS
THE ROCK OF MY
HEART**

**Mom Santina's Human and
Spiritual Portrait**

Translated by Maria Trionfini

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*When considering the mystical body of the Church
I could not identify with none of the members St. Paul
Had described, or better, I wanted to identify with all of them.
Charity offered me the foundation of my vocation.
I realised that the Church has a body made up of several members
But there is one member it cannot do without,
The most necessary, the most noble.
I realised that the Church has a heart,
A heart burnt by love.
I realised that love only stirs the members of the Church
To action and that if this love was extinguished,
The apostles would no longer have preached the Gospel,
The martyrs would no longer have shed their blood.
I realised that God encompasses all vocations,
That love is everything, that it encompasses all times
And places, in a word, that love is eternal.
Then, with great joy and ecstasy of the soul I cried:
Oh Jesus, my love, I have found my vocation at last.
Love is my vocation.
Yes, I have found my place in the Church
And this place you gave me, my God.
In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love
and this way I will be everything and my wish will come true.*

From the *Autobiography* of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, virgin
(*Manuscrits autobiographiques*, Lisieux 1957, pgs 227-228)

To Doctor Paolo Ferrazzi
and to Doctor Luca Lorini
with eternal gratitude.

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PREFACE

Mgr. Raphael Minassian

God is the Rock of my Heart

Before reading this book, the title inspired me and took me back to my beloved Armenian Nation. Over the centuries, the land and its people have both witnessed for the glory of the Lord. The land with its mountain, Ararat, the unbeatable rock, received God's chosen people with Noah's Ark. The people as the first Christian Nation in the world who carried the Cross of our Saviour Jesus and still continue to do so with love and devotion. For many centuries The Armenians have been persecuted for this choice. The last persecution of their Christian faith was in 1915 when one and a half million people were martyred for the name of Jesus. One and a half million were massacred just because of their Christian belief!

As though in a dream I saw the Armenians laying on this Rock which Mgr. Luigi Ginami took as the title for his book and witnessing for it.

Yes, I saw my own Armenian people, through their brilliant history, witnessing to their faith in God, the unconquerable Rock. I saw their national character firm as a Rock and understood their continuing martyrdom as finest expression of their loyalty and love to this Rock, which is God.

It would not be too far fetched if I said that in the Old Testament God chose the Jewish people to prepare for the coming of His Only Son, the Saviour of the world but in the new Testament He chose the Armenians to witness to His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

So I ask, why should these two peoples be always persecuted down the centuries by all people a cross the globe? Is it simply because

the Jewish were chosen to prepare for the coming of the Messiah and the Armenians to witness to Him?

We can see the answer in Mgr. Luigi Ginami's book when he enters the operating theatre for heart surgery and sees and meets with his mother's heart. In this encounter between mother and son it becomes possible for us to understand the deep feeling and connection between these two persons and God.

Needless to say, it is not easy to enter the Operating theatre to see on the one hand your mother and her heart in another part. Nor is it easy to watch your mother's heart in the hands of the doctors who are cutting, sawing and playing with it like a toy.

It is not easy to stand before this heart and recall in your thoughts how that heart was beating for the first time in love as you were brought into this life. Not only this moment but for it to continue and lead you to the holy Altar of God. She gave you her milk to nourish you and lead you in the spiritual life.

It can not be easy at all to stand without confusion and fear in front of this reality. Moses on Mount Sinai stood in front of the Holy God who called him to go up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments but fear prevented him from looking at God. I should feel the same were I to stand before the heart that gave me the free gift of life. For Mgr. Ginami the facts are different. Through his book, Mgr. Ginami generously brings us to think with him and link our daily life to the real life linked with God. That is the real picture which impressed me most.

“ God is the Rock of my heart” is one of the easiest books I have read; rich in spirituality as well as in the presentation of the real

value of the medical modus operandi without excluding the presence of God who is the Rock on which we should rest. God is the only person, on whom we should rely – as a person, a people, and as a Nation.

What a joyful sacrifice to stand with Mgr. Ginami as he passed through all the phases of the crisis- with the doctors, the Operating theatre and finally with the heart of his mother Santina to God the Creator and owner of all, who gives it to us freely and generously.

Mgr. Raphael Minassian
Exarch of the Armenian Catholics
Of
Jerusalem & Trans Giordan
Bergamo, October 14th 2005

PRESENTATION

Rula Jebreal

The place where I spent my childhood and my youth, the wonderful and tormented Jerusalem, has the power of inspiring everybody, no matter their age and class with deep thoughts about life and death, joy and sorrow, the greatness and the littleness of men. In its past there is a mystery that led the witnesses of the great monotheistic faiths to consider this land holy, a land whose claim of possession has caused wars and endless fighting. In its recent history there is the folly of a conflict between peoples and between religions, which keeps on shedding blood in the religious sites believers of all religions love most and revere in every corner of the world, in the places that inspire feelings of peace and tolerance in all human beings.

If I had not lived among these lacerating and undying contradictions, if I had not seen life wasted and broken in the denied search for a future, I could not have done anything but show my affection for Father Luigi by trying to relieve his suffering and fortify his faith when confronted with the most painful of trials, the most difficult to accept. However the touching serenity with which Santina has faced her illness and is preparing to reunite with her God is too important a lesson not to set it like a precious gem on the golden mantle that covers Jerusalem, under which the most varied experiences of man in his earthly and transcendental aspiration are hidden. I think I can see it, my city, the city of all human kind: if you look at it at the twilight from the Mount of Olives it is like a white mirage spread out on the plateau, spotted with light yellow, pink and indigo of the falling night. At this time of the evening the dome of the Al Aqsa mosque reflects the softest and most intense light and the entire city seems to be covered with gold. The low

roofs that frame the lanes, the massive walls of light-coloured stone interrupted and outlined by merlons, spires and the bas-reliefs of the doors. I think I can hear the voices of the city getting ready for the night and see the pilgrims entering the gate of Damascus. They have different nationalities, they wear very different clothes that mark them out in an unequivocal way, but from where I stand they look like a single river of people who walk along the same road, towards the same goal, as if attracted by a centre of spiritual gravity they cannot resist. They go down the same steep slope that leads south where the scents of flowers mix with the smells of spices, towards a labyrinth of narrow lanes embellished by the colours of the beautiful shops and of the products they display at the bottom and by the roses and jasmines in full bloom on the terraces at the top.

They are just a few dozen metres of large steps made of white stone but they represent the common journey of men driven by different faiths and for this reason they are one of the strongest symbols of tolerance and dialogue.

The pilgrims are bound to separate: the Christians on the right towards the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Muslims on the left, just a few blocks away, climbing up to their Noble Sanctuary with all its mosques and the Jews down towards the Western Wall, but without even knowing, they are all going to pray to the same God. Symbols divide , prayer unites. It is in this sense that in spirit I feel close to Santina and her great lesson. Santina is always in communion with her God, He dwells in her heart in such a pure, ethereal relationship that she does not need any time or space reference, as many humans do, thus showing their weakness. It seems as if the wisdom of these millenary stones which have witnessed sieges and conquests, the predominance of one of the three religions by turns and which have witnessed the poverty of the human con-

dition, could be reflected in the love and prayers of such a strong and brave but also modest and devout woman. A frail mother who reminds us that God is everywhere and His charity is with us in every moment of our life.

Jerusalem is the city of the holy rocks, the rock of the Golgotha which shattered when Christ's earthly life ended, the rock of the mosque from which Muhammad ascended into Heaven. In their blindness men have often forgotten the profound spiritual message of those rocks and have only claimed their possession or dominance over them. This is why in their lives they have believed that success, money and power could be the rock to which to cling. The history of Jerusalem, which is reflected in Santina's sweet smile, tells us that the real strength of man is in his spirit, in his quest for a life which continues beyond the earthly experience. Those who live this way, whether or not they have received the gift of faith, can count on the sincere and deep love of their children, who will miss holding their hand terribly and stroking their head but will never feel lonely in this life's pilgrimage.

I, a Muslim, would like to thank Father Gigi, a Catholic, for everything he has given me and for the precious teaching he conveys in this book. I have always felt that he had the impression that I could understand, that I could share his grief. As if I, daughter of this land bound to suffering, had the code to decipher and share the deep sense of his personal tragedy beyond his impeccable outward composure. I think Jerusalem helped Gigi cope with his sorrow. In the place where everyone feels close to God and expresses their hopes and fears with the greatest spiritual tension, Father Gigi certainly opened his heart and felt the relief his faith and purity of soul deserve. What he probably did not know or had not experienced personally was that sensitivity increases considerably, as well as an unsuspected tendency to embrace the others and feel embraced, in

communities for which grief is a daily experience. In Jerusalem there is a special contact with the other in the hearts of men, there is the surprise of seeing that your own private feeling is shared by an entire city.

Here, the lives of those who arrive on a pilgrimage driven by the hope offered by prayer, meet the lives of those who constantly endure the never ending contradictions of the Holy City: so many different stories whose common grounds are the bitter mark of destiny and the attention to the others. In this respect and in others, too, Jerusalem stands immutable through the centuries, as if its duty were to warn us against human frailty and transience, whereas the modern world is constantly looking for new achievements, new artificial heavens, where suffering is banned and where, as a consequence, those who suffer, even with discretion, are isolated. Luckily, beautiful, simple souls possess a great power of feeling which manages to stay intact even where there is wealth and progress. Every day Father Gigi is a precious witness to this.

Rome, July 18th 2006

INTRODUCTION

Francesca Armogida

When Father Luigi Ginami asked me to write a little introduction to his book, *God is the Rock of my heart*, I felt very honoured and pleased of having the opportunity to share my experience and to write about human suffering and how tackle it.

A situation similar to that of Father Luigi happened to me as well when, almost twenty years ago, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, a disease that is killing tens of thousand of women every year and striking hundreds of thousand more. Since that time on I have been realising that knowledge and determination are the most powerful tools for overcoming such adversities.

I did not have the chance to meet mamma Santina personally yet, however through Father Luigi's book and his recounts of her suffering, I managed to dawn a picture of her being a strong woman, who, like my mom, suffered a lot but did never give up. Mamma Santina and my mom have spent their lives by giving unconditional love, by taking care of their families; by having the ability and boldness to overcome many hindrances they faced during their everyday lives, without losing their strong faith in God.

My mother has always been a woman of great patience, kindness and willingness to help others. I still remember when she was diagnosed with breast cancer the first time. I was attending high school and I did not fell the news about her disease in a very concerned way, just because of the fact that her inner strength made me think that she was able to win that race.

My mom's illness has been going on, with ups and downs, for almost twenty years, but I never saw her being taken by desperation, depression or anger. Hope strength, peace of mind and a great determination have been helping her in taking charge of her destiny. Five years ago, after having had a mastectomy, she decided to sup-

port the efforts of an international foundation aimed at fighting breast cancer, the Italian affiliate of the Susan G. Comen for the cure from Dallas, Texas. My mom's experience with breast cancer and her enthusiasm empowered her to get closer to other women affected by the same diseases, showing them that they can battle it, like she did, and that they can still live their lives to the full.

From my mom's and mamma Santina's suffering and coping with it, I learned that human suffering, even in the darkest days, can help us understand how lucky we are in enjoying life and being part of this world. When one faces a serious illness, everybody can help, but one must be his own very best friend, without underestimating the power of spirituality and faith as well.

Last December I was diagnosed with the formation of a fibroadenoma, a benign non-cancerous tumour, in my right breast, through this experience I learned a lot about myself. I understood that hope and humour are also very important and one person cannot live without. Being empowered by my mom's experience and after having acquired certain knowledge about the disease, with the support of my family and friends, I had the chance to face that challenge with a lot of serenity. I felt I had to use my personal situation to enlighten people about the need for more research and the importance of early detection. I felt I had to get more involved and took part in the activities of the breast cancer foundation, as my mom did. I met many survivors from all over the world, who are now engaged in the fight and volunteer for the foundation.

Today I am glad to have the opportunity to give advice and support to all those women who are scared or confused about breast cancer, who sometimes are so devastated and need only a little help in order to take charge of their lives by being more positive and smarter.

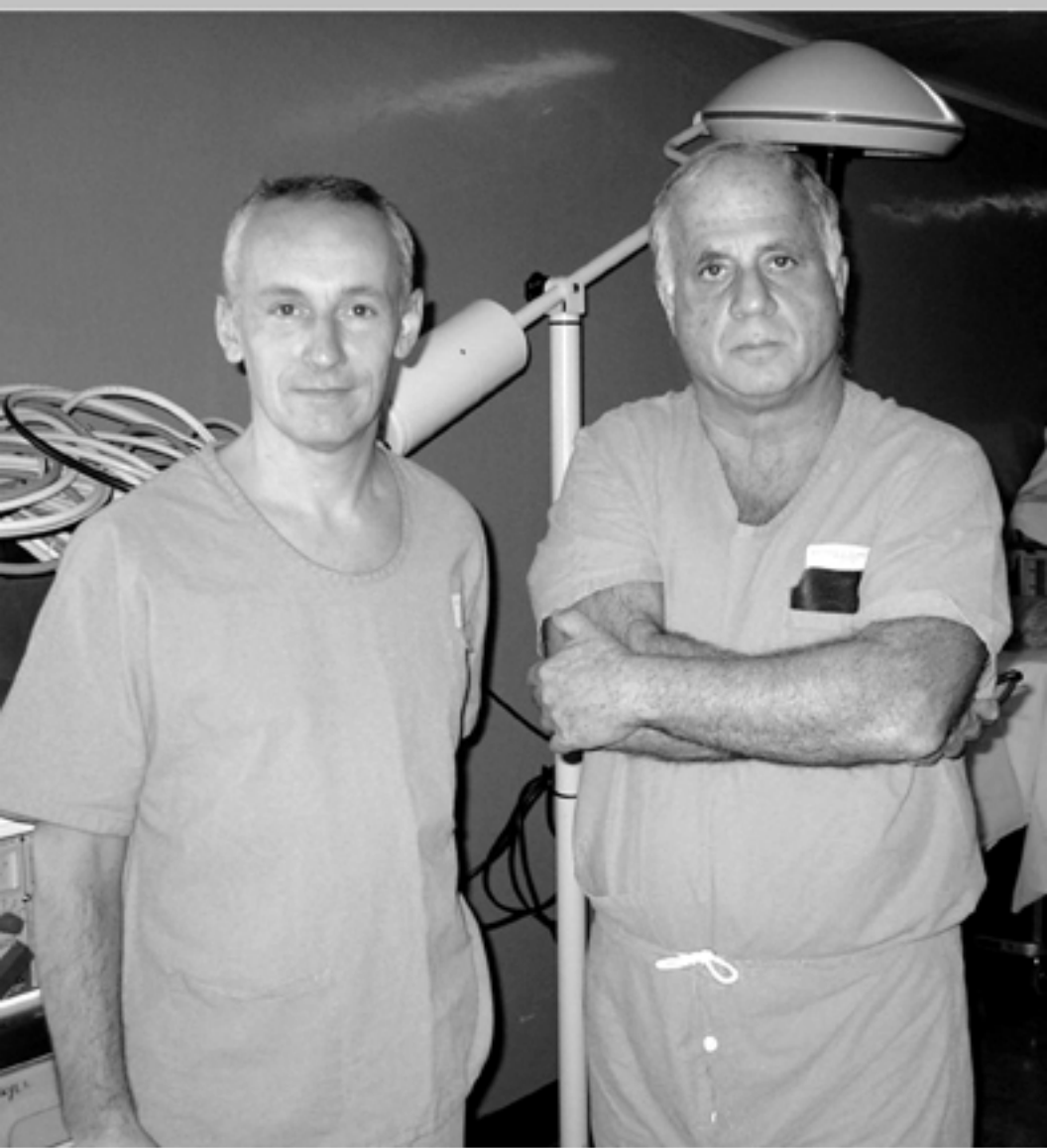
Most of the women are unprepared to deal with the impact of being diagnosed with the breast cancer. The services offered by the foundation are a source of inspiration for other women, sharing crucial

information that can help through difficult times.

In order to face human suffering we have to change ourselves, our conventional wisdom. Being guided by the faith we could also change the way we think and the weird culture in which we live. I know, is it not easy task? Disparities in our societies are great; economic, social, cultural factors play a major role. With a very close relationship between science and society and believing in the power of making a difference, we can overcome those divides and progress can be made in order to ease human suffering, decrease mortality and save lives.

Mamma Santina and my mom are two good examples of realist people, who have believed in miracles.

Francesca Armogida
Rome 9/10/2007



“In the Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul deals still more fully with the theme of this “birth of power in weakness”, this spiritual tempering of man in the midst of trials and tribulations, which is the particular vocation of those who share in Christ’s sufferings. “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us”(76). Suffering as it were contains a special call to the virtue which man must exercise on his own part. And this is the virtue of perseverance in bearing whatever disturbs and causes harm. In doing this, the individual unleashes hope, which maintains in him the conviction that suffering will not get the better of him, that it will not deprive him of his dignity as a human being, a dignity linked to awareness of the meaning of life. And indeed this meaning makes itself known together with the working of God’s love, which is the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit. The more he shares in this love, man rediscovers himself more and more fully in suffering: he rediscovers the “soul” which he thought he had “lost” because of suffering”
Salvifici Doloris, n. 24

PART ONE
DEAR MOM

“We ask all you who suffer to support us. We ask precisely you who are weak to become a source of strength for the Church and humanity. In the terrible battle between the forces of good and evil, revealed to our eyes by our modern world, may your suffering in union with the Cross of Christ be victorious”

(Salvifici doloris, n. 31).

**I WANT TO SING
IN GOD’S HONOR**

Let us begin with a prayer: Miriam's song in *Exodus*,15

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord:

“I will sing to the Lord,
For he is, highly exalted.

The horse and its rider
He has hurled into the sea.

The LORD is my strength and my song;
He has become my salvation.

He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.

The Lord is a warrior;
the Lord is his name.

Pharaoh's chariots and his army
he has hurled into the sea.

The best of Pharaoh's officers
are drowned in the Red Sea.

The deep waters have covered them;
they sank to the depths like a stone.

“Your right hand, O Lord,
Was majestic in power.

Your right hand, O Lord,
Shattered the enemy.

In the greatness of your majesty
you threw down those who opposed you.

You unleashed your burning anger;
it consumed them like stubble.

By the blast of your nostrils
The waters piled up.

The surging waters stood firm like a wall;
the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.

“The enemy boasted,
I, will pursue, I will overtake them.
I will divide the spoils;
I will gorge myself on them.
I will draw my sword
And my hand will destroy them.’
But you blew with your breath,
And the sea covered them.
They sank like lead in the mighty waters.
for ever and ever.”

“Who among the gods is like you, o Lord?
Who is like you —?
Majestic in holiness,
Awesome in glory,
Working wonders?
You stretched out your right hand
And the earth swallowed them.
“In your unfailing love you will lead
the people you have redeemed.
In your strength you will guide them
to your holy dwelling.
The nations will hear and tremble;
Anguish will grip the people of Philistia.
The chiefs of Edom will be terrified,
The leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling,
The people of Canaan will melt away;
Terror and dread will fall upon them.
By the power of your arm
They will be as still as a stone—
Until your people pass by, o Lord,
Until the people you bought pass by.
You will bring them in and plant them

On the mountain of your inheritance—
The place, O Lord, you made for your dwelling,
The sanctuary, O Lord, your hands established.
The Lord will reign
For ever and ever”

As we read in the *Introduction* it is true that: “Jerusalem is the city of the holy rocks, the rock of the Golgotha which shattered when Christ’s earthly life ended, the rock of the mosque from which Muhammad ascended into Heaven. In their blindness men have often forgotten the profound spiritual message of those rocks and have only claimed their possession or dominance over them. This is why in their lives they have believed that success, money and power could be the rock to which to cling. The history of Jerusalem, which is reflected in Santina’s sweet smile, tells us that the real strength of man is in his spirit, in his quest for a life which continues beyond the earthly experience”. (Rula Jebreal, *Introduction*). Good Friday 2005. Here I am in Jerusalem to live the rituals of the Holy Week in the places of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. From the window I can see the Holy City bathed in the morning sunlight with Omar mosque shining with gold. My mother is with me. I look at her while she is bending on the drafts of my latest book, *Praise of Weakness*, and is correcting them in our hotel room at the Notre Dame Centre. We are here to spend a few moments of relaxation and communion together, to talk and meditate, to tell each other our lives: hers, very simple in Bergamo’s Old Town, mine sometimes hectic and full of things to do in the distant chaotic Rome. These moments are precious to us. Mom Santina and I treasure each moment together. A look, a smile, sometimes a little quarrel, are enough for us to reveal each other our hearts. We need this to fortify ourselves, to recover our strength and continue our

journey towards God.

Spring is in full bloom. Suddenly Mom lets her mind wander and looks spellbound at two little birds eating the crumbs she placed on the windowsill: “Father Gigi, look how beautiful they are! They are simple creatures and they are pleasing to God... We are here in Jerusalem to pray during these holy days! I am reading a page of your latest drafts. How strange, this is Holy Week but today is also March 25th, Annunciation Day. In your book you talk about another very simple woman called Annalena Tonelli. I admire this woman and I like this remark of hers very much listen! ”.

Mom gets up and sits down near the window from which we can see the old walls of Jerusalem, and starts reading the page of my book she has just corrected: “ Let us remember that man has limitations. He absolutely needs God’s effective and gratuitous intervention. The light is not from this world, it came into this world, but from above. “...Who will free me from this body doomed to death?...” “...when I am weak, it is then that I am strong”. This is the example offered by the lay missionary Annalena Tonelli, who was really able to live according to this sentence. “I am nobody, no one. In a sense I don’t belong to any religious organization. I am religious at heart, but I have never belonged to any congregation. When I was a child I wanted to be poor. I wanted to be for God only. I really wanted to be nobody. I have made it. I live like nobody, without anybody, without any power, without any protection. I want to keep on like this, this is the sense of my Life”.

Mom puts down her glasses, watches the little birds that keep on pecking the crumbs undisturbed and, looking in my eyes, says: “ The Virgin Mary and also this woman are great in their weakness! I agree with Annalena and maybe I have lived in the same way up to now. I am nobody, I live my solitary life and at home, in silence, like Annalena: “ I live like nobody, without anybody, without any power, without any protection. I want to keep on

like this, this is the sense of my Life”. I go up to mom and kiss her on the forehead, I stroke her hand and say: “ Mom, you know I am always by your side with my heart! ”. “Of course I know! But Jesus and the Virgin Mary are always by my side, so I am never alone. They never leave me and I am serene with them!”

“Let’s stop reading, let’s prepare to go out. This morning in the old streets of Jerusalem we are going to relive the Way of the Cross. The Old Town is full of pilgrims coming from far away places to relive God’s Easter”.

“That’s true, Father Gigi! I was about to forget. Today is Good Friday and we must take part in the Way of the Cross”. The little birds flutter away quickly, a fresh breeze comes through the open window while we hear the muezzin’s call from the minaret for the traditional Friday Muslim prayer.

An hour later, while I am walking down the wonderful streets of Jerusalem, the passage with which Mum had prepared me to the way of the cross comes to my mind...I look at mom breathing heavily up the slope. She is concentrating, her eyes are full of inner light, she smiles at me and I think Annalena Tonelli’s quotation describes her inner life well: “I live like nobody, without anybody, without any power, without any protection. I want to keep on like this, this is the sense of my Life”. Who would have thought that special day, full of joy and peace foreshadowed the painful way of the Cross Santina would live a few months later, the way of the Cross-I want to describe in this booklet?

“Carolina, will you take me to the church?” (Tuesday, August 30th 2005, 7.30 p.m.) . This is the first place mom asks my sister to visit in one of her first strolls on her wheelchair, not yet dis-

charged from intensive care. “Carolina, take me to the Cathedral”. This is her second request, uttered with a feeble voice because of the tracheotomy. The following day (Wednesday, August 31st 2005, 7 p.m.), as she is lying in her bed in intensive care, with oxygen in the tracheotomy tube once again because of a relapse due to a regurgitation of bile, mom Santina tries to get up with the little strength she has. “Mom, where do you want to go at this time of the day?”. “I must go to Mass!”. “But churches are closed now!” “But I must go to Mass...!”. “Let’s say the rosary then”. At the end of her visit Carolina leaves mom with the rosary in her hand and, even if she has not got the strength to run her fingers along the beads, you can see it is an object she knows very well.

I wish I had mom Santina’s faith! A faith that is so rooted in her heart that she experiences it even at a subconscious level, when her mental faculties do not allow her to reorder her ideas, when space and time are blurred. In that thick fog mom was able to see the unfailing guide of her life: the strong, unflinching, indestructible faith that has guided her each moment of her life. This was the case when her husband died in 1963 and she decided not to remarry and bring up her little children by herself through her hard work. And this was the case when she went downstairs very early in the morning, at 5, to clean the floors of the Banca Cooperativa Diocesana (the Diocese Cooperative Bank) and sang songs to the Virgin to take heart. I had sleepy eyes and I was five years old when I went downstairs, into the bank offices and I heard her song from afar... *Very sweet is your name.*

With her great faith she consecrated me to God well before I was born and she lived the most beautiful day of her life: the day of my Ordination. With that same faith she went to Maria Carolina’s wedding and she has been living a serene solitary life for so many years, filled by the romp of her grandchildren’s games and by my weekend visits.

Through that faith she has brought up Martina, Daniela and Paolo, who have learnt their prayers from her and from her get their daily sweets before going to school.

Finally it is that great faith that has her devote her time to charity work for the missions on Sundays and take part in the monthly meetings of the Relatives of the Clergy. And it is through this same faith that she goes to the nearby

Benedictine convent of Saint Grata, where she is a lay sister with her new name of Santina-Luigina!

In the first days of her gradual “awakening”, when she was recovering consciousness and space and time were still blurred for her while she was in intensive care, where artificial lights and medical treatment suspend the normal rhythm of sleep-wakefulness and stop the passing of days and weeks, mom Santina expressed her wish to go to church twice! She did not ask my sister to take her home, she did not want to go into her kitchen or her bedroom, and she asked to be taken to the Cathedral. She preferred the Church to her house, so much so that I wonder what Santina considers her true home. At home mom prefers praying near the small window from which she can see the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore and imagine the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle.

The very morning of the operation mom had to undergo, I celebrated the Holy Mass with my uncle, Father Luigi, in the Heart Surgery ward and my mom received Communion. During the Liturgy of the Word we read the passage of the release of the Jews from bondage in Egypt and the responsorial psalm was represented by the wonderful victory song of Exodus 15: “I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled

into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song”. In my short sermon I commented how mom was about to cross the Red Sea to be set free from a nasty heart disease! It was a difficult crossing of the Red Sea, indeed, a Blood Red Sea, like the blood used during the operation, the blood from the many wounds and piercing she had suffered. For my mother the shores of this nasty, treacherous sea were her prayers! Prayers, before the start of the operation, on July 18th 2005, and prayers, when her feet started to touch the shore, on August 30th 2005; Mom Santina was not on dry land yet, she was to spend long months of suffering, but the most serious risks were over by then: more than 50 days of difficult crossing, during which the old woman had to undergo a long heart surgery, a heart failure, dialysis, another operation, tracheotomy, feeding through a gastrostomy tube called PEG and, several intravenous drips, besides suffering from a nasty sepsis and decubitus ulcer.

Mom stayed in hospital for 9 long months: from July, 8th 2005 to April, 10th 2006. After spending 109 days in Dr. Lorini’s intensive care, mom was sent to the Maugeri Hospital in Gussago, near Brescia, for rehabilitation. She was alive but very weak; the intensive treatment of Dr. Massimo Benigno’s team of doctors and nurses made her stronger and stabilised her. Mom left this specialized centre on January 30th 2006 to start physical rehabilitation at the Gleno nursing home in Bergamo. The experience in this clinic was not very happy, even if mom made good progress. Full of joy, even if not as self-sufficient as before, Santina left that nursing home for good and went back to our house in the old town on Good Monday, April 10th 2006, where she is now first nursed by Fabiola, a very kind thirty-year-old Bolivian girl, and now by Olinda a wonderful Peruvian lady, Carolina and I would like to thank very much.

This has been a time of pain and suffering in which my sister and I have felt deeply involved. I have often felt deserted by many people I considered my friends, but many others have given us their support. All these people I would like to thank in this booklet, for example Rula with her touching introduction to the second edition. This booklet is an opportunity for inner purification, in which mom Santina is a master through her life and experience! Her time of suffering has been so meaningful and important to me that I cannot risk forgetting how much she has suffered.

That is why I have written this booklet, where I collect 5 reflection and prayer notebooks I have prepared for my friends. These notebooks do not deal with all the 9 months mom spent in hospital but with her stay at the Ospedale Maggiore in Bergamo. In times of distress I ask for prayers, and to attract attention, I have written a few guidelines containing the experience of the operating theatre, the thirty-one letters mom wrote me, the fifty-three sentences she left me in my Bible and her time in intensive care.

Thus this booklet is a sort of dialogue between my mother and me. The title of the first part is “Dear mom”: it contains an account of her heart surgery, which I witnessed the chapter “John Paul II caress on mom’s lacerated heart, and the letter I wrote to her on the day of my Ordination in order to thank her. In the second part of the booklet, “Dear Father Luigi”, it is Santina’s turn to speak: it is a collection of letters and sentences she wanted to address to me first as a seminarian and then as a priest. The result is a fascinating collection, dominated by the portrait of a simple woman, of rare, superior inner strength, which is able to anchor her life to the safe shores of prayer, that same prayer that opens and closes the most painful part of her hospital stay. The book goes on with an extensive meditation on *the sense of that suffering* and on the value of a

life enlightened by faith, hope and charity. Finally, in the Conclusion, we are going to discover the value of the biblical expression: “God is the rock of my heart”.

“Down through the centuries and generations it has been seen that in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ, a special grace. To this grace many saints, such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius of Loyola and others, owe their profound conversion. A result of such a conversion is not only that the individual discovers the salvific meaning of suffering, but above all that he becomes a completely new person. He discovers a new dimension, as it were, of his entire life and vocation. This discovery is a particular confirmation of the spiritual greatness which in man surpasses the body in a way that is completely beyond compare. When this body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and the person is almost incapable of living and acting, all the more do interior maturity and spiritual greatness become evident, constituting a touching lesson to those who are healthy and normal”.

Salvifici Doloris, n.26

**I CLUTCH YOU TO MY BOSOM
AND PLANT A BIG KISS ON YOUR CHEEK**

Mom's Heart Surgery
July, 18th 2005, 3 pm - 8.40 pm

The heart is the place where the mystery of man transcends in the mystery of God

“Today I’ve lived the most important, the greatest day of my life since the day of my Ordination: I’ve seen my mother’s heart! The heart that has fed me and beaten for me for so many years! I’m moved and full of gratitude for my wonderful Creator and the surgeons’ skill! I don’t deserve it! I’m amazed and full of gratitude! Thank you for being close to me! The fight was hard but, despite my weakness, I’ve won (July, 19th 2005, 1.44 a.m.)”. With this text message, copied from my mobile phone, I start these pages, which fulfils my eagerness to tell my friends, as well as myself, the terrible but at the same time wonderful experience of witnessing the surgery on my mother’s heart in the operating theatre.

Why go into an operating theatre when I am not a doctor but a priest? Why watch, witness, take part in such a difficult operation when a lot of people and friends had strongly warned me against this choice? In the morning of July 18th, the most important day of my life after the day of my Ordination, *in my heart* I kept asking myself this very same question... Another text message copied from my mobile reveals what I felt that morning: “Today I must do my best, fight hard and live each moment with all my energy”. I owe this to myself and I owe it to my mother. The fear is great but I can win it with fortitude, it’s a terrible struggle with myself and I’m all alone because it is only in absolute solitude that you can find yourself! I’m going to go into the operating theatre and I’m going to stay there because that is my place today, the place where my mom will be suffering, not in the church, because my real church is where there’s pain. My sister is washing my mother. I’ve had two coffees (July 18th 2005, 12.33 a.m.) These impassioned lines reflect what I felt that afternoon before the preparatory meetings with the Chief of Anaesthesia, Doctor Luca Lorini and with the

Chief of Heart Surgery of the excellent ward of the Ospedali Riuniti di Bergamo, Doctor Paolo Ferrazzi. I was thinking about the thousands of meanings we usually attribute to the human heart from a sentimental, philosophical, even biblical and theological point of view.

To this regard I choose the definition of *heart* given by the great German theologian Karl Rahner: “ The heart is the intimate and unifying reality that evokes the mystery which resists all analysis, the silent law which is more powerful than all organisation and technical exploitation of man. The heart is the place where the mystery of man transcends in the mystery of God: in the heart the empty infinity he experiences within himself cries out and invokes the infinite fullness of God. (...). Heart means love, unseizable, selfless love, the love that wins without looking for profits, that triumphs in frailty, that gives life when killed”. I was about to see my mother’s heart, not any heart, but the heart that had beaten for me, the heart that had fed me when I lived inside Her as a small embryo: the heart that had wept, laughed and worried about me, the heart that is constantly waiting for me and looking forward to my arrival from Rome from the small window of our house in Bergamo’s Old Town; the heart in which I could find all of myself, my life, my existence...Looking at my mother’s heart, admiring that *masterpiece*, seeing how great God is in His Creation. Amazement, wonder, silence were the ingredients my heart and my brain needed to understand what was going on. The road of suffering was the road along which I had to walk in order to be allowed to contemplate her heart, I would see my eighty-year-old mom’s heart because it was ill and needed medical, surgical treatment. How strange, in order for your heart to be revealed you always have to follow the road of suffering: on the Cross Jesus showed us His heart, a love-torn heart,

through suffering, too! I would never have made it by myself! In order for all of this to happen someone with surprising skill was required: men with great professionalism and competence, with great technical skill but driven by a heart overflowing with generosity and love: only other hearts could show me my mom's heart, the heart of my life! Paolo and Luca, Doctor Ferrazzi and Doctor Lorini performed this miracle!

A Priest, In the Operating Theatre?

You cannot look at your mother's heart the same way you look at other realities. Admiring this mystery of a mother's heart was a gift God prepared for me over the twenty long years in His service. Delving into my past I found an experience, similar, even preparatory to the one I lived on July, 18th 2005 from 3 p.m. to 8.40 p.m. In 1986 I was a young priest in Rome, where I was concluding my studies and where I chose to carry out my ministry in the Ospedale del San Giovanni, a big hospital a few steps from the Pontificio Seminario Romano, where I was a boarding student. This experience had me deal with the reality of the operating theatre several times, so this pages I am writing was born nearly 20 years ago. At the beginning of my priesthood I was asked to witness an operation on the skull...how strange: mind and heart, the two vital organs so rich in enormous meanings! Here is what I wrote in 1986. To understand July, 18th 2005 you need to understand the operation whose teachings had a deep influence on my life and which prepared me to witness my mother's surgery.

“A powerful lamp lights the operating area marked by sterilized green drapes which blend with the surgeons' gowns. The mask, which covers my nose and mouth lets in a mild smell of dis-

infectant mixed with the acrid smell of the electrocute. The rhythmic breathing of the anaesthetic machinery drowns the noise of the scalpels. In the silence of the operating theatre the atmosphere is calm and serene. Doctor Roberto Colantoni and Doctor Marina Avitabile are performing skull surgery. I must thank them for their kindness and friendship because they lead me through each stage of the operation. Then, I find myself in wonder at their skill and professional competence, combined with their surprising confidence and precision. After Doctor Avitabile clear explanation of the type of operation they are performing, Doctor Colantoni described me each stage. Watching an operation is strange: it feels like being in a sanctuary whose centre is man. An ingenious sanctuary, built not to worship a hero, a strong and valiant man but an inert, bleeding one...a priest in the operating theatre? Why is he there? He learns! He learns what man is. That evening I discovered the mortal nature of man, his poverty. I saw the patient a fragile inert little man; I wondered: see, what you are, see how little you are! All this disturbed me but at the same time I could see it was that very same man with that very same brain who was performing such a delicate operation! This was how I discovered the greatness of man. It is extraordinary to see poverty and frailty combine with greatness and strength in an operating theatre: you feel a contrast that requires an explanation. I take an interest in man, too, in a different way but possibly as important: like a surgeon I experience this contrast of poverty and greatness. This contrast asks for an explanation and this is offered to me by a strange man...A strange man who claims he is God, who was born in a stable...talks about eternal life and dies on the cross... Therefore a man who loves contrast, experiences and embodies it: Jesus Christ. Then I realize that it is really worth believing in man and serving him with dedication I saw in those careful surgeons' eyes that evening. It does not matter how. What matters are understanding that the sense of life is right in this con-

trast and that each little man claims his infinity and immortality” (Skull Traumatology Operating Theatre, Ospedale del San Giovanni, year 1986).

I thank God my mother can receive such sophisticated and specialised treatment

Holding her hand I follow mom’s bed as she is wheeled into the operating suite. Then I have to leave her because I have to change and wash. I have to remove my clothes, leave them in a locker and wear a short-sleeved green shirt and a pair of green trousers, white socks and clogs. I put on a surgical cap and a mask. Then there is the systematic ritual of washing your elbows, arms and hands: the sign over the **swr** orders to wash and rinse for at least three minutes. Before going into the operating theatre I am given a sterile gown to wear over my new clothes. I find mom in the room next to the operating theatre, we joke together and find the time to say a Hail Mary and a prayer to the Guardian Angel. The preparatory operations have already started even if she is not aware of them: basal anaesthesia is starting to work, the results of the first blood tests have already arrived (during the surgery they are going to test her blood several times) and they indicate to the anaesthesiologists the medicines they have to use. Luca, the Chief of Anaesthesia, joins us and encourages us. He will be responsible for overseeing the administration of anaesthesia process. Process, which is unknown to the uninitiated but of great importance. Dr. Lorini is going to direct this long operation as to the medicines to be administered constantly and with great care in order to keep my mother under anaesthesia.

A perfect operation results from a sort of symbiosis between the surgeon and the anaesthesiologist and this symbiosis is

co-ordinated by such gifted chiefs as Lorini and Ferrazzi. Mom falls serenely asleep with one hand resting in mine. Half an hour follows in which Luca organises the anaesthesia: they have to intubate, switch on the monitor which measures blood pressure and heart rhythm and give artificial respiration. Meanwhile, the blood vials to be used arrive: number, expiry date and blood type must be checked.

While witnessing these preparatory phases, I notice the operating theatre is very crowded and looks like an industrious beehive where each person has to do his/ her duty without making mistakes. Ward sister, Cristina Pifferi, checks everything with great care, encourages and corrects any imperfections.

The anaesthesia team uses sophisticated equipment that allows Luca to show me the first images of mom Santina's heart and the imperfections the coronary angiographies performed by Dr. Valsecchi had revealed. It is incredible to see how much surgery, anaesthesia, pain therapy and intensive care treatment have developed over the last twenty years. The images are extraordinary; they arouse an initial amazement in me, which is due to increase during the difficult but perfect operation performed by such competent professionals.

Another team of specialised technicians are preparing another instrument which will be indispensable when the operation requires the extracorporeal circulation of mom's blood: these technicians are going to keep the patient alive during the following two hours and forty minutes. I ask God to direct their hands as well as their minds.

Another team, led by Dr. Ferrazzi, is composed of the heart surgeons who are going to start the operation in a few minutes: they are two assistant doctors, First Assistant Dr. Samuele Pentiricci, a very determined young doctor with a wonderful hand, and Dr. Costantin Dinieka, who is about to remove part of the saphenous vein from the leg for the coronary bypasses. They are aided by a zealous, precise theatre nurse, Anna Maria Urtis (who is going to assist the Chief during the second operation the night between July, 29th and 30th 2005 after Mum's heart failure), quick in understanding the immediate needs of the surgeons and in passing them what is necessary for the operation.

Besides these three people, some nurses, among whom Maria Berardelli, come and go according to the necessities.

Other doctors and nurses are at work outside. They have to check the lab results the Chief of Anaesthesia needs in order to anaesthetize mom, they also sterilise and prepare the knives.

So many competent, motivated people all around my mom's heart, whereas a lot of poor people have no medical attention and die of starvation. I thank God my Mother can have such sophisticated, precise treatment. We really do not deserve it; it is a gift from Providence and from our beautiful town, Bergamo!

I am filled with admiration and wonder at how the Creator has made a masterpiece of each one of us

The operating theatre is ready and Samuel starts the surgery while Costantin incises the leg in order to remove the saphenous vein. The operation aims at placing 3 bypasses on the calcification of the coronaries and at replacing the aortic valve, which is calcified, too. Chief Ferrazzi will perform these operations, but, before

that, the surgeons have to work for about an hour. Eyes focused, skilled hands cut and sew the bleeding vessels, isolate the mammary artery and prepare it, so as to be able to use it during the operation. Once again, like 20 years ago, the theatre gradually becomes silent; it seems silence is the condition allowing me to see the heart! Little by little, under Samuel's skilled hands, the flesh and sternum are opened to reveal the lungs first, and then the heart.

I feel a very strong, deep emotion and gratitude for that old heart overflowing with love for me. It is a sick heart, swollen with exertion and with the love it has given her husband, her children, her grandchildren, those she meets in the streets every day, the poor, the forgotten, the missions, but above all her priest son: "My Luigi!" I remember what she wrote in an old letter she sent me on October 11th 1981, as soon as I arrived in Rome for my studies: "I love you so much and you are always by my side, especially when I receive God in my heart, I talk to Him about you and I ask Him for moral support". On that occasion mom revealed her heart to me in such a different way! I thank God for the gift of my mother, what she has been and what she still is for me. The operating theatre is like a sanctuary, in the middle of which there is a heart beating for me. Today my church, my parish is here, as I wrote in my text message:

"That is my place today, the place where my mom will be suffering, not in the church, because my real church is where there's pain". A perfect harmony reigns in our body, which seems like a prodigy. The heart throbs rhythmically, the lungs give oxygen to the body: I see a wonderful harmony, which is maybe the most beautiful sign of the spiritual harmony that gives mom Santina the serenity with which she meets the others in her life imbued with prayer, silence and solitude. May the Lord of Life allow me to live a few more years with her aid, advice and strength.

While I am formulating this prayer, Paolo is washing and enters the room with a box containing special glasses and lenses to be used during this very delicate operation. His hands get down to work; he works on millimetres of tissue and cannot make any mistakes because of the calcifications on the coronaries. It is a very careful, patient job, in which the stitches are almost invisible: a cough, a move can cause irreparable damage. His attention is great, his experience and professional skill never fail him. He works with utmost precision, calm and method. Little by little I focus on him, we have reached the most delicate phase of the operation: after placing 3 bypasses on the coronaries through extracorporeal circulation, Paolo opens the heart to replace the calcified aortic valve.

My mother's open heart fills me with amazement and admiration. I feel unconditioned admiration for Paolo's work: such a delicate and important work, unknown to most because it is carefully hidden in the inaccessible sanctuary of the operating theatre. The most beautiful, greatest things happen in silence and seclusion, they don't like "publicity". This happens in a life of faith, too, in my mother's life, so small and humble but so great in God's eyes.

Life dwells in the heart

Years before, I had seen a surgery on the brain; the seat of intelligence and will, and I had compared the frailty of the sick with the power of the neurosurgeon. In comparison the operation performed by Paolo on my mother's sick heart was helped and treated by the generous and motivated heart surgeon who, together with the anaesthesiologist, was putting all his knowledge and competence to cure my mother's heart. Mastery and skill are nothing if they are not animated by a great generosity whose seat is in the heart.

The generosity of these people struck me very much and the realization that generosity combined with competence made me feel confident and certain that they were doing everything they could to help my Mother. I had entered the operating theatre full of doubts and fears but now I was about to leave it full of hope and peace. I thought I was close to my mother in that difficult time, whereas She was close to me that afternoon in such a deep, intimate way I never would have thought possible. I felt her heart close to mine in the same way when she closed her letters with the sentence that revealed her mother's heart, a sentence I found in an old letter and that still touches me after so many years: " I clutch you to my bosom and plant a big kiss on your cheek, Your mom" (Bergamo, May 7th 1983).

I thought I was close to those professionals, but that afternoon those same professionals taught me that through humility and seclusion they could be close to a priest who had entered the operating theatre in search of the Key of Life. Michael Ende, in a novel called *Momo* said that "life dwells in the heart": that afternoon I was mysteriously allowed to see the source of my life, my Mum's heart and understand how each important act has its deepest motivations in the heart.

The operation was successful but, a few days later, a heart failure brought my mother back into intensive care, implies till this very day. I didn't know what the outcome of this illness would be. I prayed to God to preserve my mother for many more years to come and I hoped I would be able to read these few lines with her. These same lines I entrusted to my friends, certain that they will help others, as well, to find that key of life which gives meaning to each of our acts and that is called heart! (Monday, August 1st 2005).

“The Church sees in all Christ’s suffering brothers and sisters as it were a multiple subject of his supernatural power. How often is it precisely to them that the pastors of the Church appeal, and precisely from them that they seek help and support! The Gospel of suffering is being written unceasingly, and it speaks unceasingly with the words of this strange paradox: the springs of divine power gush forth precisely in the midst of human weakness.

Salvifici Doloris n. 30

**JOHN PAUL II'S CARESS
ON MOM'S LACERATED HEART**
Rome – Bergamo August 2nd 2005

Going into those days' events *as if on tiptoe*

More than one year has passed since August 2nd 2005, one year and five months to be precise. What happened that day but even if I was determined to “leave a trace” of everything, related to the terrible but at the same time wonderful adventure of mom’s illness, I have often wanted to write down about this fact. The story I am about to tell must be read in a proper light, it must not be read as a miracle, in order to be able to give a correct, balanced interpretation to the facts, without risking spoiling what happened with far-fetched meanings. We should go into those days’ events “as if on tiptoe” in order to see God’s goodness, mom’s great suffering, the prayer of lots of enclosed nuns, the generosity of gifted doctors and ...John Paul II’s shadow, his stroke. John Paul II wrote: “Of course there are invisible hands and they hold us up while we are taking our boat along the course the events plot, despite a lot of sandbanks”. (Karol Wojtyła, *The Sources and the Hands* from *Complete Literary Works*).

In mom’s experience his invisible hands held us up in our attempt to go through difficult moments which were like many sandbanks. Whereas it is easier to speak about all the other facts because they are apparent, it gets more difficult to talk about the discreet presence of John Paul II in mom’s illness, a presence we can hardly see and document. I like the idea of the good shadow of the late Pontiff, of his stroke soothing her acute pain.

Mom had always spoken of Pope Wojtyla with great reverence

Santina had the chance to meet John Paul II, the Holy Father, a few times, twice at least: once at Castle Gandolfo, when I was an educator at grammar school in Bergamo Seminary, in August 1987, and later in his apartment in the Apostolic Palace in 1995, after the presentation of one of my books. Two photographs, which are still displayed at home, attest both meetings: the second meeting in a silver frame. Mom had always spoken of Pope Wojtyla with great reverence and had always asked me to obey him, as the letter of October 21st 1982 shows: “undertake to obey, respect and love the Holy Father more and more.” Santina was very moved by his death and watched his funeral with great pain and participation, considering Him a saint.

If the heart doesn't beat regularly within 48 hours, we must be prepared for the worst!

But where can we see the shadow of the Servant of God in the sad events of my mother's illness? In order to understand what happened it is important to give a short account of those days at the hospital. Santina underwent heart surgery on Monday July 18th 2005. The operation was successful but during the night between July 22nd and 23rd 2005 she suffered a terrible heart failure, probably owing to a thyroid complication. Thus our Calvary was started. The violent cardiac massage made her heart beat again but lacerated the walls of her heart, which were weak after undergoing a serious operation a few days earlier. During the week between July 23rd and 30th mom's conditions got worse. Her heart was trapped by a devastating blood clot, a Tran oesophageal scan revealed the

presence of clotted blood that had to be urgently removed. In the night of July 30th Paolo Ferrazzi hurried back to Bergamo and took mom back to the operating theatre in the attempt to remove the blood clot threatening to kill her heart. The Chief of Heart Surgery called me at 2 a.m. on Sunday, July 31st: “Father Gigi, the operation was successful, the surgery was performed to perfection, the heart can now start beating regularly again. I checked the three bypasses too; they are beating very well and have taken root correctly”. A few days later, theatre nurse Anna Urtis told me that Paolo had done his best that night and it was he who had put the last stitches on her skin. The doctors had really put all their generosity and competence into the operation! But...the situation was not rosy!

The rest of that phone call in the middle of the night of July 31st was not reassuring at all. Paolo went on: “Father Gigi, I did everything I could. The operation was successful; but...” That “but” froze my heart. Ferrazzi continued: “Your mother’s heart is old, it has undergone one surgery, it has suffered a heart failure and undergone another surgery, a tamponage surgery...I can’t promise you anything. Now her heartbeat isn’t regular and it is with arterial fibrillation. This is quite normal after such a week. But, if the heart doesn’t beat regularly within 48 hours, we must be prepared for the worst! We must hope, after all you are a man of faith...”

Paolo and Luca phoned me to say the situation had not improved

Since 2 a.m. of Sunday, July 31st I had entered a confused state I was hardly able to conceal from the others, my friends and relatives, and I had been feeling very strong inner tensions!

The August heat combined with the general disquiet, I couldn’t

sleep at all that night, and I alternated prayer, deep sighs thoughts fears...

Then I was in the courtyard with keys in my hand, ready to leave for Bergamo. Suddenly I stopped. The Chief had told me leaving in the middle of the night was stupid...Morning came I spent the day behaving like a robot; I was apathetic and frenzied at the same time: alternating moods, frantic phone calls to doctors, nurses, friends ...and long silences. On Sunday evening Paolo and Luca phoned me to say the situation had not improved and...twenty-four hours had already passed. Another sleepless, anxious night awaited me: I visited the chapel, I phoned intensive care a few times...then it was dawn again: I had to go to the office. I went to work but my mind was far away. I felt the need to go back to Bergamo but the doctors kept stopping me: "Father Gigi, let's wait, should she recover, she will need you very much". Evening came. It was a very hot August 1st. Paolo and Luca's third phone call was not reassuring..."Father Gigi, Santina is still with arterial fibrillation". But the watch of my conscience counted another 24 hours; the decisive 48 hours had passed.

My mom is in peril of her life in intensive care, I ask John Paul II for a miracle, that he may grant her recovery

I was very agitated, what was going to happen? Would she recover? The third night was a long ordeal! I couldn't stand it any longer...Dawn came, I got dressed in a hurry, then I walked to St. Peter's... and I went down to the Popes' tombs. I walked as far as John Paul II's tomb and, with tears in my eyes I fell to my knees on his tomb: "You listen to me carefully!!! I spent nine years of my life here in your service. I pray that you may grant my mom 9 more

years”. It was a simple, direct prayer. This was all I could say, I was upset and I could barely hide the tears staining my face. While I was praying I saw a priest in a cassock coming towards me, I was confused, I looked again...It was Father Stanislaw, Pope Wojtyla’s former secretary. “Father Gigi, what are you doing here?” he asked me.

“Father Stanislaw, my mom is in peril of her life in intensive care, I asked John Paul II for a miracle, that he may grant her recovery”.

“Don’t you know what date it is today?”

“Yes, I do, it’s August 2nd 2005!”

“Sure! But today, it is four months since John Paul II died, it’s his anniversary... I’m about to celebrate the Mass”. “May I con-celebrate, your Excellency?”

“Of course you can! ”. We went into the sacristy and we prepared, Mass started at 7.30. During communion I prayed the Lord with great intensity: *“Oh Jesus, here in St. Peter’s, in front of John Paul II’s tomb, by his intercession, I ask you that my mom may live the number of years I spent at the Secretariat of State during John Paul II’s pontificate”*. When the mass was over we went up to the tomb and prayed silently in front of it. I was very moved. The Mass was over, I said goodbye to Father Stanislaw in the sacristy, I put on my jacket and, with slow steps, I went up to my office.

I have good news. Since this morning your mom’s heart has started beating regularly; it isn’t with arterial fibrillation any longer. It beats with a sinus rhythm again

The meeting with Father Stanislaw, the mass, the prayer gave me peace and quiet. I got out of the elevator on the third floor, I switched on my computer, I got ready to work. It was another working day. The phone rang, it was the first call of the day...four rings,

and then I answered. “Hallo, is that Monsignor Ginami? Dr. Ferrazzi’s secretary speaking. I’ll put you through to the Chief, who wants to talk to you”. “Hallo Gigi, this is Paolo! I have good news, since this morning your mom’s heart has started beating regularly: it isn’t with arterial fibrillation any longer. It beats with a sinus rhythm again. You see, we were right not to give up hope, your prayers have been answered!” He was probably not aware of the impact of what he was saying...I was hardly able to control my joy and I sealed what I had lived that morning on John Paul II’s tomb in my heart.

“Thank you, Paolo! Thank you for everything you do for my mom...see you soon in Bergamo”. I hung up, I held my heavy head in my hands and I burst into tears of relief...plenty of tears were running down my cheeks but they were so different from the ones I had shed before. I cried, I said thank you and then I cried again...I was full of joy and I was afraid of defining what had happened as a miracle. I promised myself I wouldn’t tell anyone for the time being. I phoned Carolina and, recovering my composure, I told her: “Carolina, the doctor has given me very good news. Today mom’s heart has started beating regularly again. Mom will make it!”

John Paul II’s caress did us good; his shadow protected and encouraged us

The following months were not easy and in October, mom risked dying again owing to a sepsis...109 days in the hell of intensive care, pain after pain...so many physical problems and now mom is not the woman she used to be, even if we see her as an angel, thanks to the good she does and has done with her suffering and her smile. This was a hard trial but John Paul II’s caress did us good, his shadow protected and encouraged us. We experienced a hard trial with

the help of a person we felt by our side in this time of trouble.

During the following months I tried to tell a few selected friends about John Paul II's caress. I have never wanted to define this as a miracle, maybe because this way what happened remains enveloped in the Mystery of God. All the friends I told were amazed! Why have I decided to write about it now? Because with time I realised I wanted to see my mom's medical records of those days. Last Christmas, I met Paolo and asked him for mom's medical records of August 1st, 2nd and 3rd. Here is what I found!

The intensive care records

Dr Franco Ferri, the head of Intensive Care in Heart Surgery, always signs the synthesis of the daily medical record. The short, spare lines are a bit difficult as they are very technical and specialised. They show how, after the two operations, Dr Ferrazzi's attention was focused on cardiac rhythm. I choose to use the bold type to underline the data concerning mom's heart in the medical records, as they are the most important in her case history of those days.

August 1st 2005

The situation the medical report describes is very serious and leaves no doubt as to the deterioration of the vital functions. After a short anamnesis summing up mom's case history, the report goes on to underline that Santina **alternates between sinus rhythm and atrial fibrillation**. The case history is very bad: S/P ACC in operata SVAO+bpacX3. Haemodynamic stabilization. Paroxysmal AF. Fluctuating consciousness. Negative Tc encephalon. Reopening for tamponage on 07/30. Today: haemodynamic stabilization after volemic filling and rapid decrease in dopamine. **Alternates,**

between sinus rhythm and AF. Always a uric in CVVHDF. A pyretic. Minimal, constant sedation e.v. Seemingly awake, but not contactable. Does not following commands. Resumes minimal enteral nutrition.

August 2nd 2005

This is the day of my prayer on Pope John II's tomb. I remember that the Mass I concelebrated on Karol Wojtyla's tomb started at 7.30 a.m. The medical report reveals that the vital functions are seriously damaged, but the following short lines introduce a positive element: Mom's heart beats with a sinus rhythm again: **Stable haemodynamics in sinus rhythm.** Besides, SVO2 oxygenation is good and dialysis, is suspended, to be resumed the following day. Let us read the daily medical report: S/P ACC in operata Svao+bpacX3. Haemodynamic stabilization. Paroxysmal AF. Fluctuating consciousness. Negative Tc encephalon. Reopening for tamponage on 07/30. Today: awake but not contactable. Agitated at times. Well adjusted to SIMV. Stable haemodynamics in sinus rhythm. AAI 90bpm. Good SvO2. CVVH suspended this morning. Started laxys in infusion. Acceptable alveolar exchanges with PH in axys. X-ray of the thorax: basal opacity on the right.

August 3rd 2005

Since August 2nd the condition of Mum's heart has been positive and with sinus rhythm, the alveolar exchanges have been getting better. Even if Santina resumes dialysis, oedemas are decreasing and drainages removed. S/P ACC in operata Svao+bpacX3. **Stable haemodynamics in sinus rhythm.** AAI 90bpm. SvO2 68%. Always anuric. CVVHDF continues. Decreasing oedemas. Better alveolar exchanges. PH in axys. X-ray of the thorax: modest bilateral pleural outpouring. No more leaks from drainages, which are removed.

I do not think we can define this as a miracle, nor do I want to describe it as such, as I explained above. However, I still feel wonder at the clear improvement of Santina's heart condition on August 2nd 2005, on the day of the anniversary of John Paul II's death, on the day when I concelebrated the Mass and I prayed the Servant of God for mom's health. John Paul II answered my prayers caressing Santina's lacerated heart...and that was what we needed!

“Those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their own sufferings a very special particle of the infinite treasure of the world’s Redemption, and can share this treasure with others. The more a person is threatened by sin, the heavier the structures of sin which today’s world brings with it, the greater is the eloquence which human suffering possesses in itself. And the more the Church feels the need to have recourse to the value of human sufferings for the salvation of the world”.

Salvifici Doloris n. 30

**THE JOY OF THE LORD
IS OUR STRENGTH**

Letter to mom on occasion of my First Mass,
Bergamo, June 21st 1986

A Cold New Year's Eve Morning in Beijing

The sky is cloudy over Beijing and it seems it is going to snow in a few moments. Mom is staring at the swarms of bikes moving along the streets and stopping at the traffic lights. The smog caused by the coal heating houses and buildings lends the winter scenery a greyer colour. It is December 31st 1998. This morning we want to visit one of the oldest temples of the wonderful imperial town of Beijing, the capital of a very old kingdom, full of history and wisdom. It is very cold, with frost in the fountains and at the street corners. We are going to visit the Temple of Heaven. Large steps lead up to that typical Chinese temple; the Emperor used to visit and meditate there.

Our Chinese guide points to a monument with a large round stone in the middle: "Please, the two of you stand on the stone and express a wish. It will come true!". I take mom Santina by the hand and we stand on the stone together. I am very curious, I cannot restrain myself any longer and ask my mother: "Come on, mom, tell me what wish you are making!" Mom is silent, but I insist: "Can you tell me, please?" She gets serious and, looking in my eyes as she often does, says: " I don't believe in these things, you know. However I think that you can ask God for something good everywhere you are, so I formulated this prayer: " Oh Jesus, may my Father Gigi always be a good priest! This doesn't depend on a stupid stone but on God and you! Always remember this: have you got it, Luigi?"

We get down from the stone and this sentence sticks in my mind all day. In the evening, while we are looking out of our hotel window at the poor huts and at the thick coal smoke swirling from the chimneys, I kiss Mum and say "Thank you for today's prayer. I

promise I will do everything I can to always be a good priest!” She answers pointing to the poor Beijing houses “Do it for them, the poor, the last. Happy New Year, Father Gigi”. And after kissing good night, we go to bed.

Do not place anything, not even your father and mother, ahead of the Lord

“While the fire was raging, parents and children ran outside. Suddenly they realized, terrified, that the youngest, a five-year-old boy was missing. But above them the attic window opened and the boy screamed at the top of his lungs: “Dad! Dad! ”.

The dad shouted, “Jump!” The boy could only see fire and dark smoke below him but he heard the voice and answered: “I can’t see you, Dad...”

“I can see you and that’s enough. Jump!” shouted the man. The child jumped and landed safely and sound in his dad’s strong arms, which caught him in full flight. You cannot see God, but He can see you. Take the plunge!” (Bruno Ferrero, *Why are you afraid? in Is There Anyone Up There? LDC*).

The Gospel radically asks us to lose our life and not to place anything, not even our father and mother, ahead of the Lord. It suggests a radical faith, like the faith that guided Abraham in his willingness to give up his son to the Lord. We must love God without measure, as the Lord did when He gave His life for us; we must choose Him not because He gives us something in return but because He is the Lord. He is above time and space, above everything. The disciple sent by Jesus makes Him present. And who ever welcomes Him, welcomes Jesus, the Messiah and the Saviour. If the Gospel is demanding and asks us to place God ahead of everything

else, we must develop a Christian attitude allowing this to happen. In my personal experience, I chose not to place anything ahead of Christ on June 21st 1986. On that day I was ordained and I consider that date the most important in my whole life, more important than the date of my birth, whose end was my Ordination!

Who took me by the hand up to that glorious, wonderful day is my mother. I owe her all that I am, I owe her faith and shining example, as Rula Jebreal wrote in her Introduction to this book: She is “A frail mother who reminds us that God is everywhere and His charity is with us every moment of our life”, even if, like the child in the story, we cannot see it.

I have written this booklet in her honour, starting from the letter that I prepared for Her and that I read in front of everybody on Sunday, June 22nd 1986, on occasion of my first Mass. It is a thank-you letter and a programmatic letter at the same time, which still mirrors the spirit of my priesthood and my feelings towards my mother. She has taught me surrender and trust in God.

For example, on Sunday, September 25th 2005, in one of our first spiritual conversations after her surgery, while she was still in intensive care, mom was my spiritual master once again. “Father Gigi, I must get dressed because I must go to Mass! ”.

“It’s not possible, mom, why don’t we say Vespers? You know them by heart!”

“Ok! ”. After our prayer she wanted to pray for my uncle, Father Luigi, and for me, then she asked me: “Do you love me?”. In reply I smothered her with kisses. “Father Gigi, stay with God and be a good priest”. This short spiritual speech showed me how mom is my spiritual master! For her Eucharist is life. On that very day she did not want to eat because she had to receive the Holy Communion, only after urging her several times and explaining that she could not go to Mass, did she give up and eat.

This attitude of surrender and trust in God is one of the greatest attitudes that have inspired Christian spirituality. This is the sense of our short but meaningful story. The little boy is each one of us, living in a constant state of frailty and precariousness. Therefore ours is a dangerous situation, like the house on fire with the child inside. Life is so uncertain and unsure that each one of us cannot take tomorrow for granted, no matter what we do. In this precarious state we are surrounded by smoke, a thick black smoke preventing us from seeing our father. Therefore, since we cannot see God in our daily life, we think He does not exist or He has forgotten about us. What we think does not matter, what God thinks about our life is important. Enough with stupid fears! That God we cannot see keeps on worrying about us, keeps on watching us.

His clear voice tells us to jump down from the window of our house on fire; if we stay there, death is certain. If we jump, His arms are ready to catch us. This is the only problem: believing that God's arms will catch us when we decide to jump. Do not be afraid. God loves you with great tenderness and affection, His arms are strong and vigorous: you won't get hurt. He does not want you to hurt, He wishes all the best for you, only be brave enough to leave your poor house in flames, to abandon your life full of the smoke of intoxicating, lethal realities. Nobody else, only, He is the Lord of Life.

Who can understand what I am feeling these Days?

*Letter to Mom on the day of my Ordination
(Bergamo, June 21st and 22nd 1986)*

Dearest mom,

Who can understand what I am feeling these days? Feelings, emo-

tions, images, fantasy fill my mind and my brain with so much joy: I cannot even express what I feel! I think that, among so many dear people surrounding me, you are close to me in a special way; you are close to me with your prayer, with your amazement, with wonder and with the great joy that manifests itself in silence because it is too great to be expressed. Today, as Pietro Scuri says in his beautiful poem, “A dream has awoken”, a dream that has seen us face joys as well as sorrows. But whom will this dream wake? It will wake two people: a priest and a priest’s mom! These days my life has changed completely thanks to the gift of priesthood. The bread on the altar becomes the Body of Christ, despite keeping its outward appearance. Yesterday I became a priest, yet, judging by appearances, I am the same man, with all my faults and shortcomings.

Yesterday, you stopped being a seminarians mom to become a priest’s mom! These days the two of us may be tempted to say: “It was high time. After all I did, I deserve it”. That is not true at all, being a priest and a priest’s mom overcomes all the efforts and hard work we have done. The Lord takes all the credit; we are just “useless servants”. Why am I a priest today? Because God wanted it, that’s all. If I do not know “why” I am a priest today, I know the way God used to make a priest out of me. That way is you, dear mom! Many years ago I lost my dad, you lost your husband; you did not marry again. Faith was your only support and with that deep strong Faith you brought up Carolina and me with all we needed.

I can now trace the origin of my vocation to that Faith, born of deep suffering. Losing Dad, you said that your only strength was the Lord, the Lord who overcomes anguish and despair and who rose from the dead after 3 long days in the tomb! What is the sense

of all that suffering? Why does the Lord allow a very young woman with two little children to face a poor, hard life by herself? Because, the Lord has a broader vision. He already knew June 21st 1986.

I have always breathed in your faith and your prayer at home: Mass, rosary, ejaculatory prayers... so much faith. How can I forget the most beautiful picture of Faith in our small family? How can I forget those two little children in their pyjamas saying their evening prayers in a room lit up by the small light in front of the picture of the Virgin, kneeling with their mom next to the big double bed, where the three of them sleep? I could remember so many other scenes but you know them all, so there is no point in remembering them...

Today is not a time for remembering; it is a time for looking ahead! My life as a priest? Augusto, a seminarian from Rome, told me it is full of joys but deep sorrows as well! The life of a "priest's mom": great joys but great worries, too. Please help me. Suffering often scares me, whereas you are an expert at it. Always stand by me, never get tired, always give me a hand and never think you have done enough. Always be patiently and discreetly by my side with your prayer and remember that *the joy of the Lord is our strength*.

A big kiss,
Father Luigi

The parable of the Good Samaritan, which—as we have said—belongs to the Gospel of suffering, goes hand in hand with this Gospel through the history of the Church and Christianity, through the history of man and humanity. This parable witnesses to the fact that Christ’s revelation of the salvific meaning of suffering is in no way identified with an attitude of passivity. Completely the reverse is true. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering”.

Salvifici Doloris, n.30



PART TWO
DEAR FATHER LUIGI

“Suffering is present in the world in order to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbour, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a “civilization of love”. In this love the salvific meaning of suffering is completely accomplished and reaches its definitive dimension. Christ’s words about the Final Judgment enable us to understand this in all the simplicity and clarity of the Gospel”.
Salvifici Doloris, n. 30

I AM SO FULL OF JOY FOR YOUR VOCATION

A collection of mom Santina’s writings
During my time at the Seminary Romano

An evening with mom in St. Petersburg.

A few days after the attack to the Twin Towers in September 2001, I went on a trip to Russia with my Mother and we visited the wonderful town of St. Petersburg with its splendid world-famous Hermitage Museum. Together we visited the palace there which was full of treasures of arts and I was filled with admiration for the masterpieces it contained: Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci...We saw so many works of art in the short space of an afternoon.

At the end of our visit I saw Mum was a bit tired and I asked her: "Did you like this important museum?" Her answer struck me: "I liked it very much. Just imagine I said a short prayer in front of each picture representing the Virgin, Christ or the Saints: it was an unforgettable afternoon!"

Mom's answer is still deep in my memory, even after several years. I was taking care to understand the meaning of these works: who is the author, what it represents, when it was painted, what feelings the artist conveys...Instead my mother was not trying to answer these questions, she was turning these works of art into opportunities to pray and meet God. Spent her energy on prayer. Here is a woman who can see God in her life. This is the look of faith with which she has always judged her life, constantly basing it on the faith.

It is in the light of faith that, the collection of letters I include report below. This is the must be judicable faith with which mom gave me a great lesson that evening in St. Petersburg.

God calls each one of us

I am going to open this collection with a very important piece of writing of my mother's, the most beautiful and the most precious to me because it contains the secret of my vocation. This note is pasted in my Bible and is of great value to me. In a sort of personal diary, mom reveals how she felt about her first pregnancy, her spiritual attitude towards the prodigy of Life growing inside her thanks to the gift of motherhood. The note is not dated, but we can consider it the source, the origin of all her other pieces of writing, both the thirty one letters she sent me while I was at the Seminary Romano and the fifty-three sentences she wrote in my Greek New Testament. It is a piece of writing inspiring meditation and prayer because it shows how a woman, a true woman of faith, lives the all-important moment of motherhood.

“In the year 1958 I married Egidio, about one and a half year later, Blessed Gregorio Barbarigo was canonized in Rome. My husband exhorted me to attend the Canonization and I was very happy to go. During that beautiful ceremony I asked this saint that I be granted the joy of giving birth to a child, as almost two years had gone by and I still had no children. ...When I got home and went to clean the offices I found a very big wonderful picture of Saint Gregorio Barbarigo on the wall, so I made this resolution: if I had a son I would offer him to the Lord as a priest. Every morning I prayed that this saint might hear my prayer. My prayer was answered and, to our great joy, we had a son who was ordained in 1986. Now, full of joy, I say an our father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be every night, praying my son may become a saint priest under the protection of Saint Gregorio Barbarigo”.

Mom wrote this on torn notebook paper. Now it is a bit yellow with age, but I cannot express my astonishment and wonder when I found it at home. This piece of paper contains the story of my vocation well before I was able to say yes, well before I came into the world. I put that piece of paper into my Bible, as if to say that this is the Word of God, too.

The vocational theme is boldly presented in the Holy Scripture. For example Isaiah talks about his calling and remembers exactly when it happened: in the year of King Uzziah's death. On that occasion he "saw" the Lord, or better his throne, the train of his robe, the sanctuary of the liturgy of adoration; his voice and the smoke that dwells in the temple that hides and reveals God. In front of God, who is three times holy, as all Christian churches declare in the Divine Liturgy, the prophet sees his sin laid bare. He feels "lost", too, threatened by God's holiness. It is the live coal of the Word of God from the altar that purifies his whole being and gives him the courage to carry out his mission.

This courage cannot come from us. The origin of this all is a story of love and faith in which each one of us is involved as Jeremiah had felt involved "from his mother's womb". The lines my mother wrote on that piece of yellow paper are like a fire that purifies me every time I read and repeat them. They are important, demanding words. They seem to tell me: "Remember I have been calling you from time immemorial, remember my holiness did not envelop you on the day of your Ordination, but my holiness has always been with you. What about you? What have you done with all the grace I gave you? I am convinced that for each of us there is a piece of yellow paper in a hidden corner of our house. God's love for us is written on that piece of paper, no matter if we are married

or consecrated to the Lord! That piece of yellow paper represents the love and care through which God has given us a life, a family, the opportunity to have a wife and children, to build something beautiful and important.

If we become aware of all the love and affection God has for us, if we find that piece of yellow paper reporting a few lines written by God's benevolence, we may feel uneasy. This uneasiness comes from sin, from our being unfaithful to His love. We behave like Peter when his first feeling at the revelation of God's love in Jesus, the Master, was his awareness of being a sinner: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5, 8). Anyway, like Simon Peter, we are invited to do an act of faith: we will have God's strength by our side, therefore we have no choice but to take our boats back to the shore, leave everything and follow Him on a new fishing trip.

The whole collection of letters I am about to present is dependent on that piece of yellow paper from an old diary of my mother's.

The characteristics of this collection

Some features of the texts

In this chapter I report a collection of thirty-one texts written by mom Santina. They refer to the years 1981-1987, when I was a student at Pontificio Seminario Romano. To them I have added a short note dated 1991 and another one dated December 13th 1974. Most of them are letters my mother sent me when I was a seminarian and I lived 680 km from Bergamo (cf. Letter n.4, Bergamo, October, 21st 1982). I was a student in Rome, where I had won a

scholarship awarded by Collegio Cerasoli; even in those days I used to talk to mom and Carolina on the phone twice a week, on Wednesday and Sunday evenings at 8.45 (Letter n.6, Bergamo, April 22nd 1983). However, mom sometimes wrote to send me a few personal belongings, some presents: a coat, a sweater, some cakes...On those occasions she gave me advice or revealed her heart to me: they are beautiful, though simple, letters from a mom to her distant son (at the time it took 8 hours to go from Bergamo to Rome by train). Those writings I include below in chronological order. For each year I have chosen a meaningful sentence. You can find a short chronology of my mother's writings in the table below. Actually mom's writings include twenty-four letters and seven postcards and notes, one of which is dated 1991. Eight of these texts were written between September 18th 1986 (Letter n.19) and January 13th 1991 (Note n.21): mom sent them to me when I was a priest already. Four of the thirty texts are not dated, so I added them at the bottom, without classifying them in a chronological order: they are writings n.27 to 30.

Chronology of mom's writings

TOPIC	NUMBER OF WRITINGS	YEAR
When your mind is at peace, your heart is at peace, too	Three	1974-1981
Do not worry, I know God will help us	Three	1982
Please pray and study very hard	Four	1983
I pray God may keep you good and faithful to your Holy Vocation	Three	1984
Do not be afraid: He will always help you	Three	1985
Please pray a lot and well: you must prepare for your Ordination	Four	1986
Come on, Luigi: always behave as He wishes	Six	1987
With all my love for you	One	1991

- In the letters we can find a few references to our *domestic economy*: over the years mom sent me a total of 60,000 liras, (about 40 \$) for my mid-morning cappuccino at the bar of the Pontificia Università Gregoriana. Sometimes there is a reference to our phone conversations: over the years mom sent me 20,000 liras (about 15 \$) to buy telephone counters. A total of 480,000 liras (about 320 \$) included the money for gifts on occasion of Ordinations, return journeys to Bergamo and the cost of a moped (I bought it in the month of April 1983 to go to university in Piazza della Pelotta (300,000 liras, about 200 \$)).

- Mom's writings also reveal *her daily life devoted to work, home and church* (Letter n.7, May 7th 1983). She writes about the delicious dinners she prepares for family and friends (she is a very good cook), like the one she organised about a month after my departure for Rome on October 10th 1981 (Letter n.2, October, 11th 1981). In this letter mom reveals how much we both miss each other. In another letter she informs me about the works that are going on in our house just before my Ordination in order to turn it into the beautiful top-floor flat where we still live (Letter n.19, May 15th 1986).

- In her letters mom also mentions *several people who were part of her daily life*, seventeen references altogether. My sister Carolina is present in each letter with a few sentences, proper letters or simply with her signature. Then there is my uncle Father Luigi, a Saverian missionary who lived with us for several years and other relatives such as Uncle Ceco or my cousin Angelina. Mom also mentions priests like the bursar of the Diocese, Monsignor Aldo Nicoli, a dear family friend, or Father Enzo Pisanello, a very young priest from Apulia. There are references to the seminarian working in the parish and sister Armida, the nun who embroidered my Ordination alb. There are sick people like Mrs Bagattini and lay people, like

Miss Virginia Zanini, who read one of the Prayers of the Faithful on the occasion of a ceremony during which I received a ministry. Finally mom mentions a few catechists who willingly went on a long trip to Rome to attend some important ceremony leading up to my Ordination.

Let us pray together and be ready to accept God's will

- She closing almost two thirds of her writings with the expression a big kiss right before her signature Mom or Your Mom characterizes mom's style. The word *your* corresponds here to the adjective *my* in relation to her son. Mom likes calling me Luigi or *my Luigi*. In the first letter she wrote after my Diaconal Ordination (n. 16, November 1st 1985), she calls me *Father* for the first time, underlining the word *Father*, as if to tell me her joy at my consecration. If her letters close with the expression *a big kiss*, they all open in the same way: *Dearest Luigi*, where as only a couple start with *Dear Luigi*. Almost all her writings are characterized by a warm invitation *to prayer*, by her exhortation *to study* (four times), by her veiled, *serene wish to see me soon* (six times). Everything she writes is imbued with a *simple indestructible Christian faith* and a strong belief in the value of Catholic priesthood, which justifies all sorts of sacrifice, as this is "the most beautiful vocation".

-*The fiery letter*. Mom's letters are always very serene and optimistic except the one I call *the fiery letter*. It is Letter n.5 and it is dated October 21st 1982. In October 1982 John Paul II issued a regulation inviting all seminarian of the Roman seminaries to wear the clergyman's suit. We seminarian did not like that decision very much, so I had the unfortunate idea of talking to mom about it on the phone. A few days later I got a letter wrapped in a piece of white

paper for more privacy. Mum strongly condemned my attitude... and invited my friends and me to see the error in our ways: “You and your group change your mind and together undertake to obey, respect and love the Holy Father more and more. She wrote this letter the morning after our Wednesday phone call, on Thursday, October 21st 1982. This is the only letter Mum takes care to date with the day of the week, as well.

Always be strong in your choice

In this chapter, I am going to sum up the most significant passages in order to give a portrait of my mother. It is a mother’s portrait as many episodes reveal. For example, when on September 2005 she was barely able to speak, she asked me with an uncertain voice: “Have you drunk a fruit juice? Where, are you going to eat, when you get to Rome?” just as a good mom would. I also want to report Santina’s pieces of spiritual advice, as they transpire from this collection.

- *My mother’s portrait.* I have chosen to dwell on three passages in which “my mother acts like a mom” and uses expressions all the moms in the world use, like when she asks me *to eat more*. This request is contained in Letter n. 18, which is dated May 3rd 1986, shortly before my Ordination. Let us read it together: “I’m a bit worried about you because you look thinner and thinner. Please Luigi, try and eat a bit more. The coffee, tea and camomile in your cupboard are almost untouched, why don’t you take two minutes off to prepare yourself something to drink every now and then? Even a single lump of sugar in a drink can give you strength. You need it more than ever to face all your commitments with serenity. Please Luigi, try and overcome your laziness in this, too. Health is

important!”.

In other letters mom Santina asks me *to dress properly* against the cold and use newspaper pages when I ride my moped. This she writes in Letter n.6, which is dated April, 22nd 1983: “I am sending you the money for the moped, 300,000 liras; please ride it *carefully* so as to avoid any accidents, and put a newspaper under your shirt. It will protect your stomach: since you go out shortly after eating, breakfast and the cold air? could stop your digestion. Read this note from time to time and please obey, a big kiss, your mom. Carolina sends her love to you, too. I will phone you next Sunday evening at 8.45. Kisses”.

Finally, even if she is supported by a great faith, her first letter, which she wrote as soon as I got in Rome for my studies, reveals *how much she misses her distant son*: “This is my sorrow: not having my Luigi here with us; this sorrow I often offer the Lord for the good of your vocation. Dear Luigi, I think you feel the same when you talk to us on the phone; well I invite you to offer your sorrow to God, too, so that you become strong. Besides, dear Luigi, when I think that you are in Rome, that you have been chosen, I feel a touch of pride inside and I rejoice with you who are in the Holy City, near the Holy Father” (Letter n.1, Bergamo, October 11th 1981)

- **Mom Santina’s spiritual advice.** The whole collection of letters is characterized by constant exhortations. I am going to pick the most telling and put them together in a single hypothetical letter inspired by the most important passages in mom’s thirty writings. This is the result:

Dearest Luigi,

Be serene, calm, brave and full of joy at becoming a sacred Minister of God. God gives me so much joy for your vocation. Cheer up, dear Luigi, do not be afraid, God will always help you. I am very close to you and I bless you with all my heart (Bergamo, Thursday, October 21st 1982). Do not feel ashamed or afraid of wearing the clothes they propose to you: offer Jesus this big sacrifice for the Church, for the Pope, for such an evil world. You, seminarian, give us your good example! (Bergamo, Thursday, October 21st 1982). Prayer is the believer's only weapon, therefore, dearest Luigi, always be strong in your choice, always, be serene, obedient and quick in what you do (what I mean is do not waste any precious time). Besides, do not worry, I know God will help us. Let us pray together and be ready to accept God's will (Bergamo, September 27th 1982). I ask God to remember you when I receive Him in my heart and pray God may always give you the joy and the courage to continue this preparation to priesthood with serenity. I recommend you to pray a lot, do not be lazy (Bergamo, June 8th 1983). Remember, dearest Luigi, I love you so much and you are always by my side, especially when I receive God in my heart, I talk to Him about you and I ask Him to give you moral support so that you may face all the adversities you may find in your new environment with joy and courage. I ask Him to constantly strengthen your Vocation to the priesthood, to help you and give you the will *to pray* and study. If you do these things, do not worry; Jesus is inside you [...]. So, Luigi, be serene, rejoice, always do your duty and love your superiors. When your mind is at peace, your heart is at peace, too. (Bergamo, October 11th 1981)

A big kiss,
Your mom

Chronological collection of the letters

When your mind is at peace, your heart is at peace, too

Years 1974-1981: three writings

1. St. Lucy's Day, December 13th 1974

Dearest Luigino,

Here is the present you wanted so much! I'm giving it to you because I love you and because it can be of help for your studies. Promise you will always be good and study hard. No matter what path you take in your life, always be good, patient and obedient and pray, pray as much as you can. With your heart set on prayer you will put up with all discomfort with more serenity. Be generous and good to the people around you and to your schoolmates. Be obedient and respect your superiors, not only now at 13 years old but also when you are older. Remember your superiors must be respected: they need our affection, as well as our esteem and liking, so as to get on well. Have you understood, Luigino? Always listen to your mom and remember I'm giving you this present with all my heart because I love you so much. Your mom

2. Bergamo, October 11th 1981

Dearest Luigi,

I'm sending you the photo you asked me for, together with a few lines I wrote to tell you how much I love you. Remember, dearest Luigi, I love you very much and you are always by my side, especially when I receive God in my heart, I talk to Him about you and I ask Him to give you moral support so that you may face all the adversities you can find in your new environment with joy and

courage. I ask Him to constantly strengthen your Vocation to Priesthood, to help you and give you the will *to pray* and study. If you do both these things, don't worry, Jesus is inside you. Pray for Carolina as well, that she may remain good and that she may be able to make her choice. Remember me and all those who love you. Last night, as I told you on the phone, I invited our friends Volonterio, Marchesi, Bregoli and the seminarian G.B., Renzo, Mario Carminati and Silvano, the two seminarians who work at the Cathedral and at the Seminary. They are all very nice and good but believe me, I have one sorrow: not having my Luigi here with us; this sorrow I often offer the Lord for the good of your vocation. Dear Luigi, I think you feel the same when you talk to us on the phone, well I invite you to offer your sorrow to God, too, so as become strong. Besides, dear Luigi, when I think that you are in Rome, that you have been chosen, I feel a touch of pride inside and I rejoice with you that you are in the Holy City, near the Holy Father. So, Luigi, be serene, rejoice, always do your duty and love your superiors. When your mind is at peace, your heart is at peace, too. I enclose £ 10,000 so that you can buy a few counters. Lots of kisses, from your mom, who is always by your side and loves you so much.

See you soon

3.Bergamo, November 12th 1981

Dearest Luigi,

After our long phone call last night, I don't have anything new to tell you. Only, that I love you very much and that you are always by my side. Cheer up, dear Luigi, a small sacrifice leads us to salvation. Let us joyfully offer Jesus the distance between us. You sound

calm and serene on the phone. You also looked serene when I saw you and I'm very happy you are in such a peaceful place. Carolina sends you her love, too. A big kiss, mom. I enclose £ 50,000; I hope they are enough for your journey to Bergamo at Christmas.

Do not worry; I know God will help us

Year 1982: 3 writings

4. Bergamo, September 27th 1982

Dearest Luigi,

Together with this certificate we are sending you our love and a big huge ideal. You are very far from us but we feel you are by our side every moment of the day, especially in our prayers. We know it's the same for you. Let us remind each other that prayer is the believer's only weapon, therefore, dearest Luigi, always be strong in your choice, always be serene obedient and quick in what you do (what I mean is do not waste any precious time). Besides, do not worry, I know God will help us. Let us pray together and be ready to accept God's will. Life is back to normal here. Mrs Bagattini has died; remember her in your prayers. Uncle Ceco is still in hospital, remember him as well. I end this note with a big kiss, your mom who doesn't forget you. Carolina sends you her love. I enclose £ 10,000 for your cappuccinos at school. Love, kisses

5. The fiery letter (wrapped in a sheet of white paper, reporting the week day: Thursday)

Bergamo, Thursday October 21st 1982

Dearest Luigi,

Since our phone call last night I've been feeling very disappointed

by what you said. Only one year ago you had me rejoice for the enthusiasm and faith you showed on the occasion of your meetings with the Holy Father. You were able to convey your joy to me even at a distance of 680 km; now, with a short call you have let me down. Dearest Luigi, you know how much this holy man suffers for all the problems in the world. He is asking His priests and seminarians for a big sacrifice, I say “big” because I know wearing a uniform that sets you apart from the others is a big sacrifice for you and nearly everybody is against this regulation (including my Luigi from whom I expect so much joy). But isn’t a priest’s life full of sacrifice, obedience and meekness? Just imagine what pain you would cause the Holy Father should he come to know. And if a journalist were to find out, you would look very bad. Luigi, you must know that not everybody loves priests, but there are very many people who do. Do not feel ashamed or afraid of wearing the clothes they propose to you: offer Jesus this big sacrifice for the Church, for the Pope, for such an evil world. You, seminarian, give us your good example! After all, it’s not that tragic, is it, Luigi? You and your group change your mind and together undertake to obey, respect and love the Holy Father more and more. If we meet next Sunday, do not talk about this to your uncles. For my part, I assure you I offer lots of sacrifices, big and small, for the good of your vocation. I’m always by your side and I bless you and kiss you from the bottom of my heart.

See you soon

6. Bergamo, November 22nd 1982

Dearest Luigi,

Today, after the great day I spent with you yesterday, I would like to thank God with you for the wonderful gift of your vocation. Let us pray together that you may always be faithful to him. Cheer up,

dear Luigi, I am always by your side and I bless you with all my heart. A huge, and a big kiss, mom.

Please pray and study very hard

Year 1983: 4 writings

7. Bergamo, April 22nd 1983

Dearest Luigi,

I am sending you the money for the moped, 300,000 liras; please ride it *carefully* so as to avoid any accidents, and put a newspaper under your shirt. It will protect your stomach: since you go out shortly after eating breakfast, the cold air could stop your digestion. Read this note from time to time and please obey, a big kiss, your mom. Carolina sends her love to you, too. I'm phoning you next Sunday evening at 8.45. Kisses

8. Bergamo, May 7th 1983

Dearest Luigi,

I'm sending you Lucia's mom's address and I seize this opportunity to send you my love. I'm always by your side, especially when I pray and when I take the Holy Communion. Dear Luigi, please pray a lot for your vocation, for Carolina, and for me, as well. Everything is ok here: work, home and church, as usual, and you, dear Luigi, please pray and study very hard. Send my love to your friends, who are also ours. I clutch you to my bosom and plant a big kiss on your cheek.

Love mom.

9. Bergamo, June 8th 1983

Dearest Luigi,

Just a few lines to remind you, that we are by your side and we love

you very much. I ask God to remember you when I receive Him in my heart and pray God may always give you the joy and the courage to continue this preparation to priesthood with serenity. I advise you to pray a lot, do not be lazy. After our phone calls I don't have anything new to tell you. We are looking forward to the end of the month, when we can see you again. Meanwhile we wish you best of luck with your exams and your journeys. Speaking of journeys, I'm enclosing £10,000; give them to Father Adriano for a Holy Mass. Lots of love, a big kiss, and mom.

10. Bergamo, November 21st 1983

Dearest Luigi,

I'm writing to send you the two receipts from the pizza restaurant. First of all, thank you for the wonderful day we spent together. The group of catechists were enthusiastic and very happy when they got back from Rome, even if it was 7:30 p.m. and they were tired. Your uncle's group arrived at Alzano at 10:30 p.m. He said this deduction hadn't occurred to him, either. Let's hope we won't have any problems. Today, 21st, they called Angelina to remove those damned irons at the hospital: do pray, and let's hope for the best. I'm going to leave you now. Always go on like this, I'm so very close to you. Thank you again, a big kisses, your mom. Carolina sends you her love, too. We are counting down the days, looking forward to getting back together at Christmas. I recommend to you one thing: write all those people who have written or given presents to you. Virginia read the Prayer of the faithful during the Holy Mass. thank her, too, she will be very pleased. A big kiss, mom

I pray God may keep you good and faithful to your holy vocation
Year 1984: 3 writings

11. Bergamo, May 14th 1984

Dearest Luigi,

Here is a parcel containing a pair of trousers, a new sweater, a packet of cakes and a packet of mothballs. I also enclose £10,000 for your morning cappuccinos. I think they will do. How are you? I hope you are well, as we are. Dear Luigi, please do not waste your time, study. Your exams are near. I know I ask you for a big effort but remember you are going on holiday afterwards. You are always in my thoughts and I pray God may keep you good and faithful to your holy vocation. Cheer up, dear Luigi, I assure you, everything will be fine. A big kiss, mom.

12. Bergamo, June 10th 1984

Dearest Luigi,

I'm sending you the card for Father Enzo and I seize this opportunity to send you our love and wish you best of luck with your last exams. Cheer up, you have nearly finished, we are so very close to you. We are looking forward to spending some time with you; your holidays are near by now. I enclose £ 100,000: you'll need them for the present and for your journeys as well. A big kiss, mom.

13. Bergamo, December 7th 1984

Dearest Luigi,

I'm writing to tell you the numbers of the booklets you have to buy because I don't know whether you can understand them correctly on the phone (...) If you don't understand then, I'll explain on the phone. You are always in my thoughts and I always remember you in my prayers. By the way, get the university certificate; we need to take it to the National Institute of Social Insurance for our family allowances. Bring it with you at Christmas. I send you all my love, I love you very much. Always be good and obedient. Drive your moped carefully. Understood? A big kisses, mum. Here is £10,000

for your cappuccinos. Excuse my handwriting; I'm in a hurry.

Do not be afraid: He will always help you

Year 1985: 3 writings

14. Bergamo, April 11th 1985

Dearest Luigi,

Every day I invoke the Holy Ghost that He may descend on you and you may prepare well for your deaconate. Be serene, calm, brave and full of joy at becoming a sacred Minister of God. God gives me so much joy for your vocation. Cheer up, dear Luigi, do not be afraid, God will always help you. I am very close to you and I bless you with all my heart. A big kiss, your mom. Don't forget about me.

15. Bergamo, October 11th 1985

Dearest Luigi,

I'm sending you the full list of participants and seize this opportunity to wish that you might prepare well for your deaconate. You are always in my thoughts. I pray the Lord a lot and thank Him for the great gift He has given us. Cheer up; there are very few days to go. Be calm and serene: the Holy Ghost will take care of everything. See you soon, a big kiss, your mom. I enclose £ 10,000 for your cappuccinos.

16. Bergamo, November 1st 1985

Dearest Luigi,

After spending three days full of joy, excitement and enthusiasm for your Deaconate, let us continue to thank the Lord who loves us so much and let us pray Him that you may keep following His example in your love for your brothers, for old people and for those who

suffer, that you may bear witness to Christ Our Lord through your priesthood. I always mention you in my prayers. I'm always by your side with all my love. A big kiss, Always bless me, hugs, mom.

Please pray a lot and well: you must prepare for your ordination
Year 1986: 4 writings

17. Bergamo, January 15th 1986

Dearest Luigi,

As agreed, I'm sending you the forms you need to fill in. I have also enclosed the photocopy of last year's certificates, so you won't take long. I'm also enclosing the £ 50,000 your grandfather gave you. Please pray a lot and well: you must prepare for your ordination. As for me, I do my lot every day, too. Lots of love, a big kiss, mom.

18. Bergamo, March 3rd 1986

Dearest Luigi,

When I got back from Rome after spending a wonderful day together with you, I found a note from the city council asking us to collect your military leave. So I'm sending it to you at once I'm a bit worried about you because you look thinner and thinner. Please Luigi, try and eat a bit more. The coffee, tea and camomile in your cupboard are almost untouched, why don't you take two minutes off to prepare yourself something to drink every now and then? Even a single lump of sugar in a drink can give you strength. You need it more than ever to face all your commitments with serenity. Please Luigi, try and overcome your laziness in this, too. Health is important! Carolina sends you her love, too. A big kiss, mom
PS: Listen to me.

19. Bergamo, May 15th 1986

Dearest Father Luigi,

I think you'll appreciate my sending you £ 100,000 for the expenses you have. As soon as you know how much money you need for your trip to the Holy Land and for your computer, let me know, so that I can send you a bank draft. How are you? I guess you are very busy studying for your exams. Cheer up, a great joy is near, your Ordination; believe me, I'm so very close to you with my love and prayer. I always thank God for the great gift He has given me. Here at home the works are progressing quite well. We only need the painters now, weren't it for the lowering of the sitting room. Today I saw Monsignor Nicoli, who gave me good news: they aren't going to put a door where our entrance is, so we are going to keep our hall. Once the sitting room is lowered we won't need the bricklayers any more. We are very happy because our house has turned into a beautiful top-floor flat. During this month of May I'm going to Our Lady's church. I'm going there again tonight because I want to pray the Virgin Mary more than ever during this month. I'm sending you all my love, together with a big kiss, mom.

Let me know if you receive this letter.

20. Bergamo, September 18th 1986

Dearest Luigi, I think what I sent you will do.

A big kiss, mom.

Come on, Luigi: always behave as He wishes

Year 1987: six writings

21. Bergamo, January 13th 1987

Dearest Luigi,

I hope this coat fits you. It's our birthday present for you. We wish

you a happy birthday from the bottom of our hearts, a big kiss, mom.

22. Bergamo, February 3rd 1987

Dearest Father Luigi,

Just a few lines to tell you how much I love you! The other night I was disappointed when you told me I wasn't interested in what happened at the hospital whereas you were very pleased with it! Believe me, dearest Luigi, every day I invoke the Holy Ghost, that He may descend on you and you may spread His word every moment of your life as a priest, especially in the most difficult cases. And this was a difficult case, indeed, and you managed to solve it! Well done! I'm very happy; this encourages me to pray more and more. Come on Luigi, always behave as He wishes. A huge and a big kiss, Your mom.

23. Bergamo, March 2nd 1987

Dearest Luigi,

I'm sending you the three names so that you can have the parchment prepared, with the Holy Father's blessing for the First Communion. If there are any problems, tell me on the phone. Everything is ok here. We send you all our love. A big kiss, mom

24. Bergamo, May 14th 1987

Dearest Father Luigi,

We are sending you confirmation of the trip to the Holy Land. We have deposited £ 1,000,000 on your account for the booking and we are going to deposit the rest when you tell us. We are well and we are looking forward to June 20th. I enclose £ 10,000 for your cappuccinos. Kisses, Mom

25. Bergamo, May 14th 1987

Let us place our trust in the Virgin Mary. A big kiss, mom
(Postcard, from the Sanctuary of Our lady of the Chestnut in
Fontana, Bergamo).

26. Bergamo, June 23rd 1987

Dearest Father Luigi,

I'm sending you the names and the address for Sister Armida's
parchment. I hope you will find who can make it. How are you?
After our last meeting I hope you are going to take more care of
yourself. Health is important and once you neglect it it's difficult
to recover. I recommend you not to neglect your prayer, either, as it is
very important, too. I always remember you with all my love. A big
kiss, mom

With All My Love for You

Year 1991: a note

27. Bergamo, January 13th 1991

With all my love for you, mom.

Happy birthday!

You are always in my thoughts; I hug you and give you a big kiss

Four undated writings

28. Bergamo, no date

Dearest Luigi,

When you get this note you will have already finished your exams.
I just wanted to tell you that I'm by your side and wish you best of
luck. I'm sure you'll get good marks. Come on, dear Luigi, the goal
isn't far. I have enclosed £ 10,000 for the counters you continue to

buy in order to feel you close to me. I thank you so much and enclose £10,000 for your morning cappuccinos, as well. You are always on my mind. A huge and a big kiss, your mom.

29. Bergamo, no date

Dear Luigi, with all this fog, wouldn't it be best to catch the train?
mom

30. Bergamo, no date

I hope everything is ok. You are always in my thoughts. A big kiss,
mom

31. Bergamo, no date

Dear Father Luigi,
Carolina needs your windscreen to put on her moped. Where can I find it? Thank you, mom

The gospel paradox of weakness and strength often speaks to us from the pages of the Letters of Saint Paul; a paradox, particularly experienced by the Apostle himself, and together with him is experienced by all who share Christ's sufferings. Paul writes in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me". In the Second Letter to Timothy we read: "And therefore I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed. And in the Letter to the Philippians he will even say: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me".

Salvifici Doloris, n. 22

INTENSIVE PRAYER IS A PRIEST'S SECRET WEAPON

A collection of the sentences mom Santina wrote in my
Bible

The warm sun of an Indian summer in St. Peter's Square

The warm sun of Indian summer lights St Peter's Square; it is the morning of November 11th 1996. It is my first workday at the Secretariat of State and mom wants to be by my side. That is why she has come to Rome. We wake up early in the morning and, after picking her and my uncle Father Luigi up at the Saverian Missionaries' General House in Viale Vaticano, we go to St Peter's Tomb, where we celebrate the Holy Mass together. After Mass we have breakfast at the Bar San Pietro in Via della Conciliazione.

I am very tense and excited; the new environment makes me stand in awe, especially this first time. My dark clergyman suit is in perfect order; I am holding hold my dark brown briefcase in my hands. Mom notices how worried I am. We walk slowly as far as the fountain on the right of the large square. Then we stop and look at the offices of the Secretariat of State, near the Apostolic Palace. Mom asks me which window the Pope appears at for the Sunday Angelus prayer. I lift my arm and point it out. The water gurgling in the beautiful fountain forces us to speak louder.

Together we admire the wonderful square: the colonnade, the façade, . . . and the dome. Mom shows us the place where she had sat down to write her postcards on her first visit to Rome, during her honeymoon, right under St. Peter's statue. We reach the colonnade, where the Bronze Door is.

Mom invites me to go up the steps but before parting, she tells me: "Father Gigi, do not worry about your job! I'll spend all the morning in St. Peter's and I'll pray for you from nine to half past

one. I can't go into the office with you but remember, from this day on I will pray God that He may protect you in your job and I will always be by your side with my prayer, even when I am in Bergamo.

I give her two kisses, then I slowly go up the stairs: when I get to the Bronze Door, the Swiss Guard greets me with the customary military salute they use as a sign of respect towards the clergy. I turn around and mom's proud smile is following me...I take a deep breath, I wave at her one more time, then I start up the staircase leading up to the place where the Lord asks me to serve Him. Mom spends all the morning in the Basilica: with her constant prayer she is by my side at such an important moment in my life. This I will never forget.

Mom gives me a very special Bible as a present

My Greek New Testament is a present from Mum dating back to October 16th 1982. Twenty-five years ago I was a student at the Pontificia Università Gregoriana, where with Mum's money I bought this copy of the New Testament in Greek for my studies of the Holy Scripture. With time, this book has become a sort of relic containing hundreds of sentences written by important people such as the Holy Father John Paul II, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, other cardinals, bishops, the Custodian of the Holy Land, P. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, priests, journalists, politicians and businessmen. But this book also contains sentences by dear friends, benefactors, confidants, relatives, men and women, monks and nuns, people I got to know at the spiritual centre...my nephews and nieces, a few children: somehow all of them have had my Bible in their hands and have left a piece of advice, a wish or an exhortation in it.

There are sentences commenting on the Holy Scripture or simple wishes. In future I would like to collect and catalogue all these thoughts because they outline my life in the past twenty-three years and my life as a priest. Besides my friends' notes, you can find remarks and sentences I have written to comment on meaningful episodes that have occurred to me. They are cryptically sentences but to me – and only to me – they reveal details of my story or special intuitions. Therefore, throughout the text of the Bible, near this old Scripture, there is a galaxy of sentences that reconstruct my very life, especially my life of faith. This Bible is worn with age and with the circumstances it has found itself in but it has also become a special book, which, besides telling the Divine Revelation also, reveals my own life and the meaning of Life to me.

A sort of relic with hundreds of quotations

During mom's illness I tried to make a collection of the sentences she wrote in my Bible over the years. After careful analysis I found and catalogued fifty-three sentences written by her. I think it is the biggest corpus of phrases after those I wrote. I have collected them according to the progressive order of the pages of the Bible where I found them. They are sometimes accompanied by a date and place, other times they are simple, undated exhortations. One of them has become illegible as the page, has been discoloured by water (sentence n. 43, January 13th 2003, p. 783).

The oldest sentence in this collection, sentence n. 2, dates back to Christmas 1986, whereas the most recent is dated May 14th 2006. Thus Mum's constant, simple teaching is present throughout my life as a priest. The fifty-three sentences were written in many parts of the world, in places I visited with mom: from Athens in

Greece, from Beijing in Xian, China or during our train journey from St Petersburg to Moscow in Russia...and how can I forget our several pilgrimages to the Holy Land and the two trips to Jerusalem for the Holy Easter Triduum in 1996 and the recent Easter of 2005 we celebrated with Cardinal Martini? Bergamo is the place from which she wrote most of the sentences, but some of them were written from Rome or from seaside resorts like Massa Marittima or Cala Gonone in Sardinia, too.

The sentences were written on different occasions, all of which are meaningful: birthdays, saint's days, the anniversary of my Ordination, but also the day I started work at the Secretariat of State and at the Italian Episcopal Centre. There are also references to important feasts in the liturgical year like Christmas and Easter or Marian feasts like Annunciation Day or saints' feasts like St. Joseph's Day. Among these fifty-three sentences we can also find two weekly collections. During two holidays we spent together at Massa Marittima (only the second week, June 11th – 17th 2001 is known whereas the first week has no date), Mum wanted to mark each day with a special wish: these sentences are reported in two collections entitled *The First Week* and *The Second Week*. Among these fifty-three sentences there is also a note that hasn't really been written in the Bible. It is n. 9 and is referred to as "Note inside the Bible".

Mom's fifty-three sentences

Now, after examining the context of mom Santina's fifty-three quotations, let us try to sum up the teachings they convey. It is the teaching of a strong woman from Bergamo, a woman permeated with prayer, genuine realism and a strong bent for manual

work. A woman whose inner life is deeply rooted in the Christian values that have permeated generations of believers, a true witness to faith in our time and age! In the year 1966 she taught me a poem. It was the first poem I had learnt by heart when I was nearly 4 years old. This short poem ended with the sentence mom used to repeat dozens of times: “And Jesus in haven smiling, your goodness is entering”. Our God is a God who expects us to behave well. This was my mother’s first teaching during those years. This teaching you can find in the collection of sentences I report. I have tried to analyse the fifty-three sentences as a whole and to underline the most frequent words. Here is the result of my work:

- *Prayer*: It is the most frequent word: it occurs *eighteen times*. It is apparent from this collection that prayer is the first piece of advice mom gives in order to feed, to strengthen my priesthood. Her advice is an example, first of all: her daily life is made up of four rosaries, Mass, about two hours’ prayer a day, the breviary with lauds, midday prayer, vespers and comp line. Mom knows all the Sunday Liturgy of the Hours of the First Week of the Psalter by heart. It is with those very words that we prayed together in intensive care, when mom still had tracheotomy and it is with that prayer that mom’s memory reawakens. Thus Santina is a woman of prayer.

- *Humility*. After prayer mom suggests the virtue of humility, which, together with the word “humble” occurs *nine times*. Indeed, her austere life can be described as a humble, simple life. My mother always invites me to be humble in my job, with the people I meet in my pastoral activity, with relatives and friends.

- *Patience*. Besides humility, mom exhorts me to the human and Christian virtue of patience, a word that occurs *eight times*, togeth-

er with its equivalent *patient*. How much patience mom must have had with her children, when she was left a widow, when she lost her dear ones in 1963, when both her husband and mother died and my sister Carolina was born. Patience is the virtue of those who are strong and Santina has proved to be a strong woman, as her recent decision to undergo heart surgery also reveals.

- *Work*. The word *work* and its equivalents *toil* or *study* appear *six times* altogether. Bergamo is famous for its inhabitants' indefatigable devotion to hard work. Mom wore herself out with work indeed, especially in past years, when, in order to bring up Carolina and me, she washed dirty clothes for the families in the Old Town, she worked as a maid and she cleaned the offices of the Banca Cooperativa Diocesana, which offered us accommodation in exchange for her work. Mom and I still live in that wonderful small flat so full of memories and wish to live there many years to come. Over the years mom has never got tired of inviting me to work with devotion wherever the Lord wanted me to, in the seminary in Bergamo, at the General Secretariat of the Italian Episcopal Centre in Rome and finally at the Secretariat of State. She was very proud of my job and she was afraid I did not apply myself enough in the eyes of my superiors, hence her kind invitation to hard work.

- *The Virgin Mary*. In her fifty-three sentences mom refers to the Virgin Mary *four times*. My vocation was born at the Sanctuary of the Virgin of the Wretch, which is also known as *Our Lady of the Sacred Heart* and which we call Sanctuary of Our Lady for short. As a child (from 5 to 11) I used to attend the short evening Marian service including the Rosary, Litanies and Eucharistic Benediction. The Virgin has been a constant inspiration to mom's life. Indeed, on August 21st the first words she whispered with her lips only, as she was still intubated and on artificial respiration, was the Hail Mary

she said together with me. A rosary was hanging from her bed. Thus the Virgin Mary inspired my life as a priest by means of mom's prayers.

- *Obedience*. The last facet of mom's spiritual portrait is that of an obedient woman. Obedient to the Gospel, obedient to the harsh reality a widow has to face every day. Three out of fifty-three sentences invite me to obey my superiors and to go along with what God asks me to do as a priest, even if it is difficult, as she did in her hard life.

Mom's spiritual portrait

In conclusion, this collection of fifty-three sentences shows a woman animated by intense prayer, humility and patience: with them she overcomes life's troubles. Hard work is a constituent of life through which we have to aim at our own sanctification and which we cannot shirk. For Santina work in its harsh reality meant striving towards sanctification, even when cleaning floors or washing dirty linen. The strength to face troubles comes from placing our trust in the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. Only with Her by our side is it possible to obey God and the reality surrounding us.

A collection of her sentences

1. Dearest Father Luigi, Being a priest means serving the Lord with plenty of joy and accepting the adversities you may meet every day with serenity. Loving God more than anything else and the people He has entrusted you with. Cheer up; your mom is always by your side, especially with her prayer. I love you very much (The

Meteors, Greece, June 24th 1991).

2. Dearest Luigi, Priesthood is giving up all of yourself to God. Live it with intense prayer, which is a priest's secret weapon. Love Him in the sick and the old; help the young so that they get to know Him. Remember to study and don't waste your time. (Don't say I'm tired. If you are tired, you will sleep well). Your mom, who loves you (Holy Christmas 1986).

3. May you remember this Holy Easter, the resolutions you made and the beautiful days you spent with your mum, who thanks you with all her love. mom Santina (Flight Tel Aviv-Rome, March 28th 2005, 4.30 p.m.).

4. I'm so proud I have a priest son. I thank the Lord and I pray He may keep him good and make him a holy priest, who will be able to spread His Word. Lots of love, your mom.

5. Dearest Father Gigi, Today you are going to start a new task Jesus has given you. Accept it with joy and obedience, always put prayer first, and be very humble and patient with your superiors. Your mum is always by your side, especially with her prayer. A big kiss, your mom (Rome, November 11th 1996), p. 37).

6. On occasion of your spiritual exercises in this time of Lent, promise Jesus you will always be a holy priest. I'm always by your side with my prayer (February, 27th 2005, p. 56).

7. Dear Father Gigi, Thank you so much for taking me to the Holy Land with you and spending Easter with me in these holy places. May Jesus accept the promises we made at the Calvary (Jerusalem, Holy Easter, April, 7th 1996, p. 76) .

8. Always remember to pray to Jesus before any other commitment you may have. mom (p. 83).

9. Happy saint's day. Kisses from your mom who loves you so much (Note inside the Bible).

10. Always be humble and patient in everything you do. Lots of love mom.

11. Dear Father Luigi, May you overcome hard times with the help of humility and patience. Jesus is always with you; always keep Him in your heart. May your heavenly mother teach you what you must do to be with the Lord, to choose the best portion, without neglecting the humble, hard toil of work (August 19th 1995, p. 180).

12. Dearest Father Luigi, May Jesus be always in your heart and may He suggest you the right words so as to guide lots of souls towards Him (p.190).

13. May Jesus make you better and better (p. 236).

14. I'm so happy! It's Easter and we're in Jerusalem! Thank you! mom (Jerusalem, April 7th 1996, p. 273).

15. Dear Father Luigi, may Jesus be with you in times of trouble and may you face everything with serenity and care (p. 286)

16. Your mom prays every day that you may be a holy priest overflowing with humility and patience. A big kiss, mom (July 1st 2000, p. 389) .

17. Today, March 19th, St Joseph's Day, you are here at home with all of us. Mom and family (March 19th 1999, Mont Blanc fountain pen as a present, p. 434)

The first week: one sentence a day

18. Sunday: we spent a wonderful Sunday, first because of our mass and prayer, then because of the wonderful trip. Thank you, mom (p. 452).

19. Monday: May Jesus give you the patience and joy to help your Mum when she makes mistakes. Sorry, mom (p. 453).

20. Tuesday: I'm always by your side with my love and prayer, mom (p. 454).

21. Wednesday: Jesus and the Virgin Mary are always by your side. Turn to them whenever you are in trouble, mom (p. 454).

22. Thursday: Be good and patient with the people you work with every day, mom (p. 455).

23. Friday: Love the sick, the old and those who need words of sympathy more than anybody else, mom (p. 456)

24. Saturday: Jesus wanted you to be a priest, be proud and always be faithful to this great gift, the greatest of all, mom (p. 458).

25. Dearest Father Gigi, Another serene year has passed in the name of the Lord. Now I wish you may spend another serene year in communion with Him. Your mom (January 3rd 2005, 3.40 p.m., p.

469).

26. May the New Year is full of serenity and joy in Christ, Our Lord, who is always by your side (Bergamo, January, 1st 1998, p. 489).

27. Dear Father Gigi, be very humble and obedient (Bergamo, September 21st 1997, p. 519).

28. Happy Birthday! It's the year 2001 and you are 40! You are mature enough to be a holy priest (p. 523).

29. Dear Father Gigi, This is the last day of our holiday together. Let us thank Jesus for this happy time, as well as the people who have cared for us. Your mom. (On the train St Petersburg – Moscow, September 19th 2001, p. 538).

30. In Jesus' Land, where He was born, healed lots of people, bore His cross and gave His life, do pray Him for all of us, as well. Your Mom (p. 589).

31. May the Lord grants you the soul of an apostle who takes care to save his brothers: pray! Do pray! A lot! A big kiss, mom (p. 594).

32. May the Virgin Mary teach you to be with God and choose the best portion, without neglecting the humble toil of daily work, mom (August 19th, p. 633).

33. Be good as He was (St Gregorio Barbarigo). A big kiss, your mom (August, 31st 1997, p. 645).

34. A very merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, full of blessings by Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Your mom, who always remembers

you (p. 696).

35. Dear Father Gigi, thank you for the week we spent together. Your mom prays the Lord you may be a holy Priest. A big kisses, mom (September 19th 2001, p.711).

The second week: one sentence a day

36. Monday: Dear Father Luigi, Always be obedient and full of joy in Christ, our Lord (Monday, June 11th 2001, p. 731).

37. Tuesday: Dear Father Luigi, God always asks you for sacrifices and obedience. Always be with Him and love Him (June, 12th 2001, p. 732).

38. Wednesday: I'm happy I'm at the seaside with you. Your mom (June 13th 2001, p. 734).

39. Thursday: Dear Father Gigi, your mom prays every day that you may be a holy Priest (June 14th 2001, p. 734).

40. Friday: Dear Father Gigi, your mom remembers you with all her love (June 15th 2001, p.735).

41. Saturday: Dear Father Gigi, Even if you are leaving for eleven days, your mom will always be by your side. A big kiss. Have a safe journey (June 16th 2001, p. 737).

42. Sunday: Dear Father Gigi, The 21st is your saint's day and the anniversary of your Ordination. Best wishes! I'll remember you in my prayers more than ever, mom (June 17th 2001, p. 738).

43. Dearest Father Gigi, Annunciation Day is near. May the Virgin

Mary hold you by the hand and take you up in her arms in times of trouble. This way your journey will be safer and less tiring, mom (p. 751).

44. Always be patient in everything you do.

(January 13th 2003, corrupt, illegible sentence because discoloured, p. 783)

45. We are in the year 2002. By now you are a mature priest. Therefore always be good, humble and patient with everybody. This is what I always pray for. Your mom who loves you so much (January 1st 2002, 4.10 p.m, p. 800).

46. Dearest Father Gigi, Let us always thank the Lord who wanted you to be a priest. May He enlighten you with His light, help you with His grace and support you with His strength. Your mom who is always by your side (p. 803).

47. Dearest Father Luigi, I'm always by your side: you are always in my thoughts and especially in my prayers. May the Lord bless and protect us always. Your mom (June 26th 2005, p. 815).

48. May the Lord always be with you and give you peace and patience. Your mom who is always by your side with her prayer (p. 818).

49. Jesus is with us every moment of our life. Listen to His advice and thank Him for the great gift of your priesthood. May he protect you from all kind of sins? I'm always by your side with my prayer. Your mom. (St. James Apostle, July 25th 2004, 11.45 a.m., p. 834)

50. Dear Father Gigi, Thank you for the wonderful week we spent together in Jesus' land. May He always stand by you and help you to guide souls. I love you very much, mom (Trip to Jerusalem, August 6th 1998, p. 865).

51. Dearest Father Gigi, I spent a wonderful week full of prayer and other beautiful things together with you, but deep in my heart I feel sorry for these people who don't know the Creator. Thank you with all my heart, I hope I didn't disturb you. Your mom, who's always by your side (Beijing, December 30th 1998 – January 6th 1999, p. 887).

52. May the Lord guide every moment of your ministry, so that, even if your soul gets in touch with evil, it may remain fresh and pure as on the day of your Ordination. Lots of love, your mom (p. 885)

53. I love you, mom Santina.
(May 14th 2006, Mother's Day, p. 592)

Ever the course of centuries, this activity assumes organized institutional forms and constitutes a field of work in the respective professions. How much there is of “the Good Samaritan” in the profession of the doctor, or the nurse, or others like them!

Considering its “evangelical” content, we are inclined to think here of a vocation rather than simply a profession. And the institutions, which from generation to generation have performed “Good Samaritan” service, have developed and specialized even further in our times. This undoubtedly proves that people today pay ever greater and closer attention to the sufferings of their neighbour, seek to understand those sufferings and deal with them with ever-greater skill. They also have an ever-greater capacity and specialization in this area. In view of all this, we can say that the parable of the Samaritan of the Gospel has become one of the essential elements of moral culture and universally human civilization. And thinking of all those who by their knowledge and ability provide many kinds of service to their suffering neighbour, we cannot but offer them words of thanks and gratitude”.

Salvifici Doloris, n. 29

THE MEANING OF ALL THAT SUFFERING?

Mom’s Illness in Intensive Care

Hands wet with tears and ...blood

“I’m finishing my round in the Urology ward. Another room to go and the afternoon is over, I knock gently and I go in. The room has three beds but there is only one young lady. Her forehead is burning with fever; her hair is damp with sweat, her face is red and her eyes are bright with tears. Silence and solitude reign in this room. I try to talk to her, but she does not answer...she stares at me with her dark eyes: she does not say a single word; she is withdrawn in her pain. I start asking banal questions, which she answers with few words...

At last I understand, I sit down on her bed, I stutter a few sentences I feel coming from my heart: “ I’m here to listen to your silence, madam! Don’t say anything; I just want to spend a few moments with you!” The dark eyes fill with tears and stain her face. I wipe them away with my hands; I smile at her and she smiles back. Her smile, worn with pain, costs her some effort and reveals suffering.

Moved, I leave her room, I am in the corridor and my hands are still wet with those tears. Instinctively I am about to dry them but...no, I’ll wait! My hands have never felt so holy; they are hands wet with suffering, with pain. I can’t dry them! A priest cannot wash his hands of suffering, a priest cannot shun his brothers’ sorrow but he needs preparation. That is why I chose to come to the hospital on Saturdays and Sundays, a year before my Ordination.

A few months ago I received the pyx of the Eucharist from the Bishop, from this woman I receive the unction of suffering. Now these hands of mine are worthier of Him who suffered for us. “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have

seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life” (1, John 1, 1). In immersing myself in human suffering I become aware of all my dullness, my hypocrisies, my self-sufficiency and I learn the humility of true, important things.

You may fear the contact with pain but, once the ice is broken, you start feeling a joy, an enthusiasm that urge you to tell the others about your wonderful discovery. I will never forget that evening, that face, those tears on my hands” (Rome, February 14th 1985).

Twenty years ago the Lord had already prepared me for the experience I went through with Mom in the Bergamo hospital. He had already prepared me for the heart surgery ward, for the operating theatre and for intensive care. I have found an old article dated February 14th 1985, when I was carrying out my ministry in the Ospedale del San Giovanni. I would never have thought that twenty years later my hands, consecrated with the Holy Chrism, would be wet with my mother’s blood! Here is what happened to me!

On Sunday evening, August 21st 2005, at about 7 o’clock, I went into the intensive care of the heart surgery ward of Bergamo Ospedale Maggiore. The doctors and nurses were very kind and mom was still in a state of semi-consciousness, I did not know whether she could understand who I was. A terrible tiredness seemed to win her every effort to stay awake and she sank into her armchair. Machinery surrounded and protected her. The electrocardiogram flowed continuous on the monitor, another complex machine administered oxygen, several medications kept her alive. She was covered with marks caused by injections; on her left heel a decubitus ulcer was bandaged, her feet were swollen because of the long hours she had to spend in the armchair. “How are you,

mom? I've come to visit." I repeated the same sentence in a louder voice, then again "Open your eyes, mom! Answer!" I knew the poor woman could not speak because she had the tracheotomy tube...in her throat. Once again, like twenty years earlier, I was forced to listen to a deafening silence that entered my heart and caused deep emotion. Mom opened her eyes with difficulty, she recognized me...she opened her sweet eyes wide! And...with a great effort she managed a weak smile. She tried to speak but she coughed...and the tracheotomy tube filled with blood. A trickle left the tube and dropped on the gauze, red drops trickled on her skin. I looked around and found sterile gauzes, I took one and started wiping that bloods away...a nurse arrived and helped me. I looked at that blood and I looked at mom...I started praying with the nurse. Then Dr Maria Vittoria Lagrotta arrived and reassured me with a serene look: "Father Gigi, don't worry, there aren't any problems. Now we'll change the dressing and clean...everything is ok, calm down! Your mom is recovering..." Those words restored peace to my troubled heart. While I was talking to them with tears in my eyes, I mechanically put gauze soaked with blood into my pocket. I said goodbye to mom with a big kiss on her forehead. While I was leaving the ward I realized my hand was stained with blood and while washing I remembered what had happened twenty years earlier. When I got home I took that gauze soaked with blood, put it into a small metal case and tied it to my neck with a piece of string. Now that blood is close to my heart and my constant prayer for mom allows me to spiritually cover a distance of 680 km and get closer to Her.

On the day of my first Mass, June 21st 1986, I celebrated the Eucharist with the new chalice that still contains mom's and Dad's wedding rings. Now, as I drink Jesus' blood in the Eucharist every morning, I feel less unworthy of that chalice thanks to mom's blood close to my heart. I think the blood mom shed in intensive

care resembles the Eucharistic blood, because it bears witness to the entire life of an old woman who has lived in the name of the Lord. It is an extraordinary inducement to do the same, a radical example of generosity and helpfulness. That small case is very demanding: it asks me to give myself up to the others, to give my life for them. It forces me to help those who suffer, those who . . . shed blood. That small case with a piece of cloth soaked with blood around my neck may seem exaggerated to some, others may laugh at it. . . . My decision to write about it in this book, my choice to open my heart may be considered stupid. I don't care! I hope someone may understand that the reason for this is my wish to be close to my mother and above all to learn from her example! How prophetic that sentence from my old article sounds today: "A priest cannot wash his hands of suffering, a priest cannot shun his brothers' sorrow but he needs preparation". At the time I could not understand how much that experience I had had as a young seminarian would be of help during mom's illness!

At the age of twenty-four the experience of pain had already upset me and asked for an explanation. But seeing suffering in the eyes of the person I love most in the world, my mother, was quite different! I decided to write this book in the attempt to make the best of the intellectual and spiritual predicament I experienced during my mother's hospital stay. A text message I have found in my mobile phone describes what I was feeling those days very well: "You don't know what it means to be thinking night and day that your mom is lying in a pitiable state in a hospital bed, amidst so much pain and suffering. Fears, nightmares, hopes, delusions and above all waiting for an unlikely improvement. The anguish caused by a night call informing you of a heart failure. The distance and the silence! A frightened sister! (...) I'm scared and I feel tears in my eyes like that morning in intensive care when my disfigured moth-

er gave me a crooked smile” (July 28th 2005, 10.14 p.m.).

My intent is to get over this disconcerting situation, to find the sense, the meaning of it, to put the few thoughts in my head in order...Pain lacerates reason, urges you to ask yourself: why me? What have I done to deserve this? Above all it questions the meaning of the world. Things are engulfed and the mystery of evil appears in all its atrocity. Yes, when you are face to face with suffering you look for words enabling you to attach a meaning to what does not make sense. And, somehow, you manage to find them.

We start suffering the moment we start living. Human beings are born in scenarios whose sense precedes them and which give them the language, the words enabling them to express their suffering. Human beings are able to share their common suffering: this is what happened to my sister and me when we met many new generous people who shared our worries. However no one can replace you in your sorrow. Each one of us has to play their part: manage to carry out one’s life in spite of suffering. Nothing reveals the fragility and unrepeatability uniqueness of each individual more than suffering. It shows our common exposure to the imponderable.

In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ

According to a Christian outlook suffering has a sanctifying power: to be more precise, not suffering alone, which, as such, is not good, but suffering combined with offering, as in Santina’s case. A sick person has three options: enduring suffering, integrating it in a broader outlook on life, getting rid of it by fighting and trying to remove its causes. My mother has found yet another way: deep rooted in her heart she has found the notion of the solidarity of

the cross, through which God reveals Himself as the one who suffered for love, partaking in human destiny and sharing it like with great courage man. Thus for my mom suffering has meant elevating pain by sharing it with God, rather than demeaning it into the false notion of a cross we have to bear as Christians. She managed to take an active attitude in her very long hospital stay in the intensive care of Bergamo hospital because trust in Providence cannot lead to fatalism or passive resignation. On the contrary, it must spur to action. For mom Santina trusting the Divine Providence meant and still means continuing to find a meaning and a purpose to her life, despite suffering. If we open the New Testament we can find a confirmation of this. In his letter James says: “Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials” (*James* 1, 2). Thus suffering is a source of joy. Mom smiled all through those days. Even if she could not speak because of the tracheotomy tube, she always smiled at everybody: she smiled at Carolina, she smiled at me, and she smiled at Dr Lorini and Dr Ferrazzi! “Father Gigi, your mom gave me a big smile!” Lorini would often tell me in our evening call at 7 o’clock. Even if she was pierced by drips and full of wires, mom smiled at everybody, Marcella, Cristina, Maria, Anna Maria, Rachele, Sonia, Angela, Dr Busi and Dr Ferri, all the doctors and nurses passing by, other patients and their relatives! Santina smiled at everybody showing them what she had taught me many years before, in 1966, with that sentence taken from the first poem I had learnt by heart: “And Jesus in heaven smiling, your goodness is entering”.

Mom had learned to capture God’s smile and offer it to the others. Doesn’t Jesus say: “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (*Matthew* 10,39) after inviting us to take up our cross and follow Him? During her long hospital stay, pain became for my

mother a hope for salvation on the basis of the promises contained in the Gospel. Mom succeeded in putting into practice St Paul's words, according to which suffering is nothing short of a boast, the only boast: "But may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Galatians* 6, 14). Yes, suffering is a great thing, indeed, for those who consider it from a Christian point of view: it is the chance to complete the passion of Christ in ourselves for our purification and the redemption of many. This is not about learning to accept any cross but our own cross, without a chance of escape, unfortunately. It is easy to love when we are healthy: it is easy to love God and our brothers then. When we are ill love is harder. Only those who understand that the cross is essential to Christian life and therefore love it are able to love. And Mum Santina has understood this perfectly! We can recognize and love God from this very condition of absolute poverty.

When we have known suffering in all its most atrocious shades, in all its anguish, when we have stretched out your hands to God in mute excruciating supplications, in subdued cries for help, when we have drunk the bottom of the chalice and for days and days – months in intensive care - we have offered God our cross which becomes blurred with His that sets it off divinely, then God has mercy on us and welcomes us in His embrace. This is the moment when, after experiencing the unique value of suffering, after believing in the supreme good of the cross and seeing its beneficial effects, God reveals something that, in its higher, newer form is worth more than suffering. It is love for the others in the form of mercy that makes us stretch out our arms and open our heart to the wretch, to beggars; to those life has torn apart.

Mercy is the ultimate expression of love, what allows it.

While mom was in intensive care the hurricane Katrina caused disasters in the United States. I showed her the newspaper page and in her paradoxical, painful state she found words of sympathy: “Poor them! How bad they must be!” What she said moved me deeply and filled my eyes with tears. Thus Love overcomes our own suffering. For sweet Mom Santina the time of her illness turned into the time of a closer relationship with God, the time of surrender, of freedom, of acceptance of what is final, even if in a painful process with lots of “ifs” and lots of “buts” that make hers a difficult journey. Her example has also struck our Muslim friend Rula, who writes in her Introduction: “It is in this sense that in spirit I feel close to Santina and her great lesson. Santina is always in communion with her God, He dwells in her heart in such a pure, ethereal relationship that she does not need any time or space reference, as many humans do, thus showing their weakness”. A journey which may be long and uncertain, in which the very sick have to face a hard trial, leave everything they love and work through their detachment. The sick have to deal with the most difficult questions at the time their intellectual and spiritual make-up may be failing. The solidarity Paul expresses when he states: “in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church,” (*Colossians* 1, 24) tells us how we should tackle our human pilgrimage into suffering: pain is a chance for love and donation! For joy even! Paul adds: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake”.

My good mom has always shown this solidarity, which comes from prayer. The prayer of the Lauds and Vespers we said together for the first time in intensive care on September 4th 2005 or the Rosary she said looking at the image of the Virgin opposite her bed. Prayer has succeeded in making up for mom Santina’s loneliness by offering her intimacy with God. Moreover, prayer has

helped her overcome that feeling of human impotence during times of sickness. Prayer has managed to give Her hope and allow her to understand that God is approachable and at hand, it has managed to inspire the hope of a new world in which God “will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain” (*Revelation*, 21, 4). The prayer of those who are sick may express fear, anger, a request for recovery but also for the chance of being less fearful, of being able to cope with suffering and adversities, of having the courage, the strength and the ability to face their condition. Thus for Santina, who was very weak those days, prayer became a solace, a cry for help. Such intense prayer can relieve physical pain and restore peace after a time of great distress. Prayer can give hope for both the present and future, helping us to find an inner strength beyond that we were aware of possessing, in order to start a new. Presenting our human condition to God is a prayer, as well. Thus “Thy Kingdom come” is not just an invocation but also the acceptance of a mystery that transcends us and materializes even if in a human, partial way, in our daily life.

The meaning of all that suffering ?

The experience I went through with mom in the summer of 2005 takes on a new meaning in the light of the old letter I have already included in this book.

So we need to go back to the day of my first solemn Mass in the Bergamo Cathedral. At the end of the Mass I took out a piece of paper and started reading a letter I had written to Mom. That piece of paper contained a very important passage, which explained both my vocation and my mother’s life: “Many years ago I lost my dad, you lost your husband; you did not marry again. Faith was your

only support and with that deep strong faith you brought up Carolina and me with all we needed. I can now trace the origin of my vocation to that Faith, born of deep suffering. Losing Dad, you said that your only strength was the Lord, the Lord who overcomes anguish and despair and who rose from the dead after three long days! *What is the meaning of all that suffering?* Why does the Lord allow a very young woman with two little children to face a poor, hard life by her? Because, the Lord has a broader vision. He already knew June 21st 1986”. In other words, in the letter I wrote to mom showed how my vocation had originated from her grief and her faith on the occasion of my father’s death: “Losing Dad, you said that your only strength was the Lord, the Lord who overcomes anguish and despair and who rose from the dead after three long days in the tomb! (...) He already knew June, 21st 1986”

Through faith mom gets over a deep inner pain

For my Mum the year 1963 was characterized by great moral suffering. During that year she was left a widow and that deep sorrow was made even greater by the presence of two small children. I was not yet three and my sister was only six months old! My dear sister was born in a time of sorrow and she was my Mom’s only hope and joy during that sad, tearful year. But Santina did not lose heart and resolved to live a solitary life, without marrying again, and to work hard for her children. That year my Mom placed her trust in faith, a deep faith which my sister and I were able to absorb: this was the ground in which my vocation, which my Mom had implored for even before I was born, took root. Thus she faced a deep inner pain through the power of faith and her life was filled with meaning and serenity.

Through hope Mom stubbornly keeps on living her simple, austere life

The years between 1963 and 2004 were full of sacrifices. Mom Santina led a simple, peaceful life in dignified poverty. She has always chosen what is essential: thus she has chosen a sort of religious life in which she has in essence accepted the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience through her everyday gestures, which show the extent of her great goodness and wisdom. If we can call 1963 the year of faith, the following forty-one years are all characterized by a fervent hope.

Mom's greatest hope came true in the year 1986, when I was ordained. I have never seen Mum so happy as on that day full of tears of joy. I still remember her face stained with tears when I gave her the letter I mentioned previously. I remember the great joy in her eyes, I remember her peaceful, satisfied smile.

In the year 1991 Mum Santina's second hope came true: Maria Carolina married Manuel. Mum was very happy her daughter was getting married. Soon the void Maria Carolina left at home was filled by Martina's birth in the year 1993 and Mum Santina became Grandma. That was the beginning of a wonderful time, gladdened by three small grandchildren. For my mother these were probably the most beautiful years in her life: she fondled Martina, she was proud to take her for a walk...she was her first granddaughter. Hope came true again in the year 1996, when my sister gave birth to another baby girl, Daniela! Joy entered our small top-floor flat in the Old Town once again. Our house filled with young lives: the baby's cries, and Martina's babble. Grandma Santina was full of health; she helped Maria Carolina and cared for the children when she went to work! Experienced Grandma Santina used to take the two little girls to church, teach them prayers, play with them, make cakes and give them candies.

Hope turned into joy again in the year 1999, when Paolo, her first grandson, was born: Grandma Santina fell in love with him at first sight! She had a soft spot for him, she doted on him and Paolo was a great consolation to her. To this regard one of the most beautiful days among the terrible ones she spent in intensive care was September 25th, when she received the visit of her three grandchildren. I had got permission to take Mum to the corridor outside her ward for about an hour. Grandma Santina met her grandchildren near the window lit by the warm September sun. Paolo, who was going to be six in December, was holding a small yellow flower he had picked up for his grandma. He did not speak much as he was very moved at seeing his dear Granny again after such a long time. In silence he gave her the flower and then, with some effort, his little head moved closer to hers and he smothered her with kisses. What a wonderful moment! The dull, suffering eyes of the old woman recovered their strength and Grandma kissed her grandson back.

This touching scene has remained impressed in my heart ever since! For the occasion the three children had written a short simple poem: “Dear Grandma / you are a wonderful woman / sweet as cream / and before bedtime you tell us beautiful stories / of elves and fairies living in flowers. / You are very good at making lots of pancakes, chips and ice-creams I eat in a flash / You make scarves, sweaters and hats that I wear because they are nice and warm / Some of them you give to charity to which you devote a lot of time / You always go to mass and pray well / and when I’m with you I forget my sorrow / because you are very good at everything you do / you know you’ll recover soon / I have made a basket of flowers for you / I wish it may be your favourite / it’s made of paper but it’s as beautiful as one of your sweaters / On the back of a fast unicorn we will go to the Holy Land and we will visit it at leisure / When you have recovered we will invite everybody and we will eat the

delicacies you have joyfully prepared / I will get rid of all diseases which are like chains to you because I love you very much” (Martina). I will never forget that heavenly scene full of joy and affection. Some things you simply cannot forget! Santina likes using the possessive adjective in relation to her grandchildren: *my* Martina, *my* Daniela, *my* Paolo, as well as for her children: *my* Carolina and *my* Luigi! Always full of life, she used to welcome us home one Sunday a month, when we had lunch all together. That is what we did on June 26th 2005, before Mum went into hospital for her heart surgery.

Dear Grandma,
You are wonderful woman
Sweet as cream
You tell beautiful stories
Of elves and fairies living in flowers
Before we sleep into our dreams.
You make lots of gummy pancakes, chips and ice cream
I eat them in flash
You make scarves, sweaters and hats
That keeps worm and me nice
You give some of these to charity
Among, your many kind acts.
You always go to Mass and pray with your heart
When I am with you I forget my sorrow
Because you are loving in all that you do
We know you'll be better one of these tomorrow
I made a flower bouquet for you
May it be your favourite?
Although it's made of paper
It's like one of your sweaters, exquisite

On the back of a swift unicorn
We will go to the Holy Land
To visit, at our leisure.
When you recover
We will invite everybody
To eat the goodies
You have prepared with pleasure
I will get rid of all the sickness
That chains you
Because I love you (as my treasure)

Martina

Through Love Mom suffers and offers her physical pain

“Oh Lord, I’m going back to Rome, where you have placed me at this difficult moment. I’m thinking about the Way of the Cross-my mom has been experiencing in intensive care for more than 50 days. In the evening silence the plane is flying fast, taking me far away from my mother but deep in my heart I can find her wonderful smile. Two infinitely sweet eyes as big as the pain they have been endured, her intense look pierces my heart! Her smile is good, beyond description and causes me to wonder: how can you smile in a place where there are usually tears? How can you stubbornly smile at everybody when your flesh is covered in sores, pierced and skinned? Ribs, arms, and feet: every part of her body is lacerated. Mom smiles, mom stubbornly smiles and pours all her goodness on you! How sweet and transfigured her soul is, how pure her thoughts are! Her extraordinary goodness, her passion for life is impressed on my mind. In those eyes sparkling like two diamonds washed with suffering the Light of God shines intense and pure and in her look you can see God’s smile! Thank you, Mom, keep on smiling

for many years to come: I need it! As the plane is landing in Rome, the Holy City you love so much, I'm sending you a big kiss. Cheer up; soon we will go to Jerusalem to thank the risen Christ for the Holy Way of the Cross-, which has taught us what is essential in life. Please Jesus, stay with us! In you we trust never to be confused! (Flight Bergamo-Rome, Sunday, September 18th 2005, 7.30 p.m. Two months after, mom's surgery).

The year 2005 was a singular year: Providence granted me the great gift of seeing my mother's heart. It was a great gift but it came with lots of pain and suffering. On July 18th 2005 the long months of Calvary in intensive care were started. "When I am weak, then I am strong" (*2 Corinthians*, 12, 10). This sentence, taken from St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians seems to apply to Santina those days. And at last I understood the mystery of a sentence I found so difficult! Mom's was a proper Way of the Cross with all its stations: a heart failure on July 22nd, another surgery in the night between July 29th and 30th, then tracheotomy, PEG feeding, dialysis, infection, regurgitation with lungs complication, rectal leak and another serious infection on October 2nd. During all the stations of mom's Way of the Cross pain and suffering seemed to get over her old but strong body. Mom was losing weight, she was full of wires and drips, she was on artificial respiration and she seemed not to regain consciousness. Dr Lorini skilfully took care of the neurological complications.

Little by little mom seemed to get better and the consciousness she regained caused her an urgent need for prayer. This need she expressed on September 6th when she said two rosaries, despite being still in intensive care. This was not the year 1963, when suffering was moral and spiritual. Now hers was an acute physical pain.... This was the moment of greatest physical pain in mom's

seventy-nine years of age! Whereas all the other years had been marked by faith and hope, in particular, this terrible experience was characterized by love. I would say St. Paul's wonderful hymn to love became alive thanks to mom. Let us read it again: "I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, love is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing. For we know partially and we prophesy partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known. So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (*1 Corinthians*, 13,1-13).

During her time of sorrow mom sang the words of this hymn with her life: "Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, love is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, and it does not brood over injury. It does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth." How much patience she must have had to endure her Calvary! All this pain she suffered with a smile, with plenty of kind-

ness. Mom Santana never got angry, she did not complain about the pain she was suffering. On the contrary my sweet mother “bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things, endured all things”. And how much pain she had to suffer! Didn’t Santana rewrite this wonderful hymn to love with her life during that time? A love you could see in her complete willingness to accept God’s will! Without fear and without changes of mind she accepted the doctors’ suggestion she should undergo a difficult operation.

As soon as she regained consciousness mom Santana had a good, indiscriminate smile for everybody. Her beautiful eyes expressed love both when she managed to give me a crooked smile forty-eight hours after her heart failure and when she recommended me to go to bed early the evening after her surgery of July 18th. Throughout her suffering mom chose love and offering as her guides for orientation and safety. With generosity and without changing her mind she offered God all her sufferings and at the age of seventy-nine she succeeded in passing on one of the most beautiful teachings of her entire life, that life should be relished and lived with love. A suffering old woman got on her high horse from her bed in intensive care and taught us the meaning of life, which is love, after all. On the December 29th year Mom Santana, actually Grandma Santana, was eighty years old. This period millstone tells us that mom has had a complete life, that she has lived her life to the full! I hope and pray that my mother may live a few more years because she can now say she has really completed her studies on life and, after this experience, she will be able to teach me everything about the wonderful and the same time terrible adventures of life.

One year after her hard trial mom was back home, where she was cared for by the excellent Dr. Attilio Jacovoni with Dr.

Claudio Cornicelli and by the physiotherapist Laura Blini and where our dear Olinda looked her after. I want thank in this book Dr Attilio Jacovini for his great professional competence. Who is Dr. Jacovini? Just serf in the Internet and you will find all the informations you want except for their extraordinary generosity.

With difficulty mom started speaking again and her first rare words expressed love: the period on the evening of June 8th she shouted on the phone: “I love everybody! ”. On another occasion she wrote in my Bible. “I love you, mom Santina” (May 14th 2006, Mother’s Day) with an uncertain handwriting. Now mom has the secret formula of life and I am looking forward to learning it myself. I am going to spend all the time the Lord will grant me with my Mother in the attempt to learn from her and to imitate her secret formula which consists of three words: faith, hope and love.

Some masters have helped me get over this time of suffering

The Lord had such a difficult but at the same time meaningful experience in store for me in order for me to develop a mature inner life and understand life better. I would never have made it on my own! But by my side I have found people who have enlightened my life in an unexpected way. First of all I have felt the closeness of ten enclosed convents: over the last few months I have metaphorically knocked on their door and asked them persistently for the gift of their prayer. It is for them, for these two hundred and thirty-seven nuns that I prepared several meditations and prayer aids which have come together in this book. Their valuable support created a genuine context of prayer and faith, which helped me, get through this difficult experience.

A time of deep human and spiritual purification

Over the last few months I have been reading *Job*, a wonderful novel by Joseph Roth. I think that these pages reflect the experience I had and my need to go through this moment with faith and great hope. Mendel Singer, a simple, pious Russian Jew is the main character in Roth's novel. He leads a peaceful life together with his family in Russian Volina. He has three children and they are all healthy. Nothing seems to trouble the quiet life of this typical family of farmers. Time passes unvaryingly with a slow, monotonous rhythm until, all of a sudden, the birth of Menuchim, the fourth child, changes everything. The child is handicapped and seems to be under a curse preventing him from growing up and learning.

Everything seems to be useless. The family places their faint hopes of a miraculous recovery in God and in the local rabbi's enigmatic prediction: "Munichim, Mendel's son, will recover. There are a lot of people like him in Israel. Suffering will make him wise, deformity will make him good and illness will make him strong..." These words contain and anticipate the message of this book. Like Job in the Bible, Mendel Singer is dogged by misfortune: with the outbreak of the war one of the two sons fights at the front, the other goes abroad in order to dodge service in the army. The progressive but inexorable deterioration of Mendel's relation with his wife Deborah and their daughter's relationship with a Cossack convince the couple to leave their handicapped son Menuchim with acquaintances and emigrate to America, where their deserter son is waiting for them. Mendel's decision is taken notwithstanding growing contrasts with his wife, who is constantly waiting for the rabbi's prophecy to come true. Besides, it causes Mendel increasing inner contradictions that make him feel angry

and guilty at the same time, gradually fostering a strong desire for rebellion inside of him. America, the country where the wait for Menuchim's recovery was supposed to turn into pious hope, where the meeting with his deserter son was supposed to consolidate family bonds, where Miriam's lavish femininity was not supposed to be wasted and violated in the arms of an unfaithful Cossack, falls short of his expectations and proves to be a totally alien world to Mendel. Here the reality he had been surrounded by in his homeland takes unexpected, hostile turns.

In America Mendel meets his beloved son but does not really find him. His change of name – Sam – is emblematic: besides changing his name America has transformed his soul. He is not a meek, pious, Russian Jew any more, but a busy rich man who is taken up with his business activities rather than with a search for God. Everything has changed: "...America was falling upon him...America was wrecking him, America was annihilating him..." Mendel does not adjust. His abandonment of Menuchim, who has miraculously recovered in the meantime, lies heavy on his troubled conscience.

Meanwhile Sam, his "American" son, joins the American army and dies in war. His is a strange fate: he is a deserter in his homeland but he is a hero in America...but America gives you everything and takes everything from you. Unlike Russia, America is a homeland to him. Mendel's other son is missing on the European front; this, together with his wife Deborah's death and his daughter Miriam's lunacy further prostrate Mendel's already broken heart and mortify the few hopes he has left. If you kill hope, you kill man, so much so that Mendel decides to rebel and "burn" God. "I want to burn more than a simple house and more than a simple man. You'll be surprised if I tell you what I really meant to burn. You'll be surprised and say: "Mendel is insane, just like his

daughter. But I assure you I'm not insane. I was insane for more than sixty years but today I'm not...It's God I want to burn...". Like Job in the Bible Mendel Singer does not feel guilty. "What is he punishing us for now? Have we done any evil? Why is he cruel?" Unlike the Job of the Bible he blasphemes his God: "...God is cruel and the more we obey him the more he treats us strictly. He is more powerful than the powerful, with a nail of his finger he can give them the final blow but he doesn't. Only the weak does he like crushing".

"A man's weakness arouses his strength and his obedience his wrath...I'm not afraid of Hell...I've already suffered all the pains of Hell. The devil is more clement than God. Since he isn't so powerful, he isn't so cruel. I'm not afraid, my friends..." Like Job in the Bible Mendel Singer is blessed by his God. "Menuchim is alive..." Mendel's laugh then turns into sobs and tears fill his old cloudy eyes...I'm Menuchim...Stand up Dad...Now Mendel sits on his son's knees, looks at him and smiles at everybody. He whispers: "suffering will make him wise, deformity will make him good and illness will make him strong". Menuchim is a great man, a musician endowed with a wise sensitivity he has acquired through the illness he has now got ten over. This is the end of Roth's novel. Mendel seems to rebel and refuse God but, despite this, he obtains God's blessing, which brings him back to God and Faith. I like to think that, with this wonderful epilogue, Roth wanted to give man back his dignity, even before an impenetrable and, in some respects, cruel God (at least according to our standards). He did this by having the main character convey a message of infinite hope. Hope is another keyword. Hope does not let you down.

Roth's novel seems to be an apology of hope, which, even when mortified, does not leave the hearts of those who suffer, and has a comforting power. Going back to my personal experience in

the attempt to interpret it on the basis of this wonderful novel, I have to admit that, in order better to understand the value of those who have shared this painful experience with me, I must start off with saying that experiences of this kind entail a deep purification, not only spiritual but also human. In other words, they make us understand the value of the human relationships each of us has. Everybody escapes in times of need! For my job I have established relationships with thousands of people, with people of some worth, as well...but during my Mom's illness what I experienced at first was a terrible loneliness.

This is what I wrote in a text message I copy from my mobile phone: "My heart is full of anxiety and worries, I'm looking for certainties and comfort and I feel lonely again! I try to delve into this loneliness and I find incomprehension. Only if you surrender to God can you find peace in your heart" (July 24th 2005, 0.01 a.m.). The loneliness I experienced did not refer to formal relations with acquaintances or relatives or people with whom I was on friendly terms. They were all justified because I didn't consider them people who were close to me, or friends I could turn to in times of need. They couldn't escape because they had never been there! You experience loneliness when you look about you in search of a friend that you can trust and that can comfort you... and what you get are recommendations like: "call me if you need me! Or: I'll mention you in my prayers or...I'm so sorry! How many sentences of this kind I heard! All of them were empty and stupid because those who said them gave you to understand that they did not mean what they were saying. But you feel a deeper emptiness when you turn to those who you think are close to you and with whom you are sure you shared important moments. You have not been dreaming: those events really happened! A spiritual journey, sad and happy moments, a few

trips...whether they are priests, men or women, professionals or not, does not matter. When you think of them you tell yourself: of course I can count on them!” Of course they’ll be by my side, of course they’ll try to understand what I’m going through. Of this you are convinced, you would swear by them, you cannot be wrong about them. They assured you, they even wrote it in your Bible.

They told you that they were your family; they assured you that they would be there in your time of need. Theirs were benevolent words. You shared successful experiences such as the presentation of one of your books or the success of a gratifying activity. They were always ready to toast with a bottle of champagne and congratulate on you when everybody else did. Of course you can count on them. You have this unflinching certainty, they will not escape; they will stand by you, they will help you find *the answer* to such a painful situation that you feel you are not able to face by yourself”. “Luckily there is this priest”, “thank goodness there is this girl”, “I’m sure I can count on this family with five children”...”don’t worry there’s also this family with two!” “Don’t worry, everything is going badly, but with your supposed generosity, with your prestige, you can count on plenty of loyal friends”. But the phone does not ring, the doors of their houses are closed because they are on holiday; you manage to find someone but their answer is evasive: “I’m leaving”. You think of course they will show up again but this does not happen! “It’s not possible, they have just come back, I will hear from them soon, I’m sure”. Two or three days go by, days become weeks, weeks become months! “No, there’s nobody!”

You can hardly believe it, you don’t expect this from your friends: the priest, the family with five children, your dearest friend have disappeared, leaving you to tackle deep, lacerating questions: what about all the time we spent together? What about the difficulties we have overcome together? What about the familiarity they

granted me and I am now crying out for? But that is not all. You think they have only forgotten about you but unfortunately this is not even true. Not only aren't they standing by you, someone is against you and is hurting you! You have to seek the help of a lawyer to solve a situation their word would have cleared up in no time. That is something you really cannot bear, something you have to swallow with a lot of bitterness, as if it were the seasoning of that disgusting food which is the pain your mom is suffering. And you ask yourself: isn't the fact that I have to swallow my mom's suffering bad enough? Why does the seasoning of this bitter food have to be the meanness and the incomprehension of someone who had written in my Bible claiming they were my friends? This is the dark horizon the Lord presents you with in order for you to realize the beauty of the wonderful people He places by your side, people you do not choose, to get you through this time of sorrow.

One of them is *Clorinda*...a wise mum of four daughters. She understood my predicament, lent me her car because mine had broken down and called me in the morning and in the evening. She welcomed me to her house, invited me to a party, gave me a new suit and sewed a hem on the trousers I needed for a reception. She devoted her time to me in the attempt to understand the suffering that was destroying me inside and invited me to spend a few days of relax and respite in Sardinia. She scolded, encouraged and incited me never to give up, to keep on living my life. I will always remember the very important conversation we had on August 17th 2005! In August 2003, in Sardinia, Clorinda wrote in my Bible: "God loves me for true! He wanted me to trust Him in my life, in the others, always, and especially now that this faith is fading away and He forces me to admit that He exists, that you can count on the others, your real friends, and that life is beautiful, since you are there and you care for me". (Porto Rotondo, August 24th 2003).

Doesn't this sentence apply to my current situation in a way? That's Clorinda! And I thank God for putting Clorinda in my way at this time.

And then there is *Roberto*... Roberto is present in my Bible with a sentence that goes: "Forever bound by a human and spiritual friendship beyond life. Roberto." (August 18th 1993). This sentence was written twelve years ago and seemed to predict what he would do for me over the last few months. It was he who had Mum hospitalized at Palazzolo Clinic in Bergamo on Saturday June 4th after her ischemia at the seaside. It was him who decided to come to the hospital and spend the afternoon with my sister and me on the day of my mother's surgery. It was Roberto who picked me up at the airport, who asked his wife to go and see Mum so as to help Carolina. It was him who met the doctors with me, who invited me to dinner or to smoke a cigar. It was him who took cakes to the doctors whenever I asked him from afar. Above all, it was him who hurried to the hospital to stand by my sister, who was overwhelmed with grief and fear, and took her back home to her husband and children the night of Mum's heart failure. That is Roberto! And I thank God for putting Roberto in my way at this difficult time.

The horizon gets less gloomy and thanks to the light offered by the closeness of these two people I start to realize that God has chosen the main characters of this story for my mother and me. He has chosen Rula, the young Muslim who tries to decipher the code of my mother's suffering with me. It is the Lord who selects people with care and places them by your side. And they are people who seem to embody my Mother's golden rule according to which *life should be based on faith, hope and love*. In short, I understand that this mysterious situation that my mother's illness and suffering must be tackled with the rule she herself dictated.

It is Cardinal Martini who has taught me that life should be lived with *faith*; it is my sister Maria Carolina who has taught me that life should be lived with *hope*; it is Luca and Paolo, or better the Chief of Anesthesia, Dr Luca Lorini, and the Chief of Heart Surgery, Dr Paolo Ferrazzi, who have taught me that life should be lived with *love*.

Cardinal Martini has taught me that life should be lived with faith

Over the last year my relation with Cardinal Martini has been really unique. It started with the course of spiritual exercises he taught me personally in Jerusalem during Lent. On that occasion the Cardinal wrote in my Bible: “seek first the kingdom of God (*Matthew* 6, 33).” It was March 13th 2005. How prophetic that sentence would prove to be over the following two months. I had decided to experience the Easter Triduum in Jerusalem together with mom, so mom and the Cardinal had the chance to meet for lunch in Jerusalem on Good Saturday and then we lived the solemn Easter Vigil with him. When the Pope died, Martini asked me to assist him during the time of Vacant Papal See and the Conclave; as a consequence, we spent the days from April 2nd to April 24th together. It was a wonderful experience that will be imprinted on my memory forever! On May 5th he came to Bergamo with me to give a lecture at the School of the Word. Then he was hospitalized at the Gemelli Hospital because of a heart problem; he stayed there for more than a week for a small operation. During that time I visited him and kept him company. All these events prepared me for my present situation. Cardinal Martini showed fatherly love for me during all this time.

As soon as he heard about mom’s serious illness, even if he was in Jerusalem and he was in poor health himself, the old

Cardinal hurried to hear from us, sent me encouraging e-mails and called me every week. He talked to me and wanted to talk to the two Chiefs caring for mom; he thanked Paolo and Luca for what they did for Santina, he thanked Clorinda for putting me up in Sardinia. He took part in Mum's Calvary, too, just like a good Cyrenean. He had words of sympathy throughout her illness. Soon after her first operation he wrote this e-mail to me: "Dearest Father Gigi, I'm very close to you at such a difficult time. I was touched when I read what you wrote about the operation (I would not have had the heart to witness it). I am praying for your mum, that she may get over this difficult moment and for you. I hope I will talk to you soon. Yours in deep communion, Carlo Maria Martini S. I." (Tuesday, August 2nd 2005, 10.52 a.m.). Mom suffered a heart failure, another operation, and all the other sad stations of her Way of the Cross and Cardinal Martini was always there, asking me to live through those difficult moments with faith. He was a guide for me in a time of disorientation and I want to repay his kindness with the promise that I will always be there for him whatever he needs.

I sent the Cardinal the collection of sentences mom wrote in my Bible and he answered me with another e-mail: "Dearest Father Gigi, thank you for your e-mail and mom Santina's sentences. They are *very beautiful and full of faith*. I am praying for Her, as you and many others are doing. Cheer up, trust God. He is near you, your Carlo Maria Cardinal Martini, S. I. (Wednesday August 24th 2005, 7.29 p.m.) Once again the cardinal interpreted my personal experience in the light of faith and described mom's sentences as very beautiful and, above all, *full of faith*. Meanwhile he kept talking to Luca and Paolo on the phone...

The Cardinal came back to Italy in the month of September.

He wanted to see me in Galloro, so on September 2nd we met and spent the day together. I managed to open my heart to him as he listened to me kindly and patiently. He seemed to be very

interested in what I told him about mom. At the end of our conversation he suggested that I should read the evangelic account of Jesus calming the storm (Marcus, 4,35-41) and that I should have faith in Jesus.

The following evening I was at Luca Lorini's house in Bergamo, we called the Cardinal and, after exchanging a few friendly words with the Chief of Intensive Care, the Cardinal told me he wanted to give me a chalice. I was surprised by his gesture, a generous gesture; I appreciated very much as it was a sign of fatherly love and great attention at such a difficult time for me.

When I got home I found another e-mail in which the Cardinal told me: "Dearest Father Gigi, I wanted to tell you *I can see how great your mom's hope and faith are and how the Lord is granting you the same faith* that He has given her in this trial, as well. I know you will stand by her as long as she needs you and you will be of great comfort to her (...) What matters is living through each moment *with faith, hope and love*. Tell your mom I always mention her in my prayers and I bless her, may she pray for all of us. Thank you again for your visit. I had prepared a chalice I wanted to give you as a present but I was so moved I forgot about it. I will give it to you next time. Yours in Jesus, Carlo Maria Cardinal Martini S. I. (Saturday, September 3rd 2005, 5.01 p.m.). I must really thank God for this great man who has invited me to live through this difficult moment with faith.

My sister Maria Carolina has taught me that life should be lived with hope

"Of one thing I'm sure: I will always care for you! With love! Your little sister Carolina. PS: You can count on me! Whenever you wish. Carolina". (July 24th 1990) My sister wrote

this sentence in my Bible fifteen years ago and on another page of my New Testament I can find a similar sentence: “With lots of love and a big kiss. I love you, your sister Carolina”.

Besides her reference to mom Santina’s typical sentence “a big kiss” my sister shows how close she is to me. Indeed, with her love and affection she has been particularly close to me over this last period. Maria Carolina has become a true witness to hope. She took it upon herself to look after mom during her stay in intensive care: this woman went to hospital twice a day, at two in the afternoon and at seven in the evening. All this while she had to look after her small children and run her house. Of course, with his discreet behaviour, Manuel, my brother in law, played an important part in helping my sister nurse my mom: I thank him very much. Whereas I had the chance to see mom’s heart, Maria Carolina underwent the terrible experience of seeing death in my mom’s eyes in the night between July 22nd and 23rd 2005, when Dr Moreno Favarato gave mom back her life with his cardiac massage. We will be forever grateful to him for what he did with so much competence.

While they were helping me to understand what was going on in the operating theatre, Maria Carolina was by herself...she was experiencing deep solitude as well as anguish and fear in the sad corridor of intensive care. She was all-alone at such a devastating moment. My telephone rang in the middle of the night, I could hear her terrified voice, and I would have liked to be there, I would have liked to take her place but a distance of 680kms cannot be wiped out! The previous afternoon my dearest friend Domenico- I owe this man so much - had placed every means at my disposal to enable me to fly to mom and I thank him very much for this. Unfortunately I had to go back to Rome, so I left at 10.15 p.m. and my sister had to face the unpredictable situation that was to take place a couple of hours later all by herself.

On that occasion Carolina reacted with incredible strength and proved to be a daughter full of love and affection as well as a wonderful sister. When it was almost daylight, Roberto reached her and took her back home. She was exhausted. She recovered from her fright; and supported by unprecedented strength, she re-entered intensive care, a place she was afraid of entering before. She talked to the nurses, and to the doctors on duty. She compared what they said and what she saw on mom's face with what Luca Lorini told me about mom in his evening call. Untiringly, she visited mom twice a day and had a smile for everyone: relatives, friends, and acquaintances. It was a smile she took from mom's suffering face and she passed on to the others. She encouraged everybody: our uncle Father Luigi, her own children, our uncles, our friends and me. In the evening she called our dear aunt Cristina, who informed our other relatives and kindly offered to help my sister.

Carolina never ceased to hope and believe that mom could make it, that mom could go back to being the woman she used to be, that Mom would wake up! And mom Santina did wake up! "Father Gigi, mom woke up today!" she told me, all excited, in the evening of August 16th while I was in Sardinia. I was so happy I hurried to tell Clorinda. Maria Carolina made good friends with Cristina, the ward sister of the operating theatre, with Maria, Anna Maria and all the other hard-working nurses. They talked on the phone, and compared notes. With her great strength she continued to look after mom, she did everything she could in order for her to recovery: she got her children to make colourful drawings which she hung near her bed, she recorded cassettes with her children's songs and our voices, she took her the local paper, L'Eco di Bergamo! She pushed her wheelchair along the ward when the doctors in intensive care gave her permission. Our dearest cousin Angelina, who was always very helpful in her generosity, helped her.

Besides that, Carolina received our relatives at the hospital, comforted them and informed them of mom's prodigious improvements. In a word, Maria Carolina proved to be a real woman of faith, a woman endowed with a strong, unshakeable faith. On that occasion she was allowed to prove her courage, her strength, her determination to Mom, to me and to everybody. "That which does not kill you makes you stronger": this is a sentence that Luca Lorini told that and me I copied in my Bible.

How true it is! Maria Carolina drew strength and courage from that paradoxical situation and became a source of hope for me. It was her who informed me of mom's state of health several times a day and gave me so much hope, it was her who never got tired of inviting me to hope...and hope came true with mom's Santina slow but constant recovery. I thank God for my sister Maria Carolina, who has taught me that life should be lived with hope at such difficult time in my life.

Luca and Paolo have taught me that life should be lived with love

What astonishes me more than anything else is being on first-name terms with them: "Father Gigi, sit down, you can take off your coat if like...Dr Lorini told me the first time we met. The fact that they put you at ease surprises you when you are used to cold formalities. The priest of my parish in the Old Town, Monsignor Arrigo Arrigoni, who had undergone a heart transplant, introduced them to me. I will always thank him for this and for being constantly close to me.

Luca and Paolo know how to put me at ease, they do not boast of their great professional competence, they do not like show-

ing off...yet they are the Chief of Anaesthesia, Dr Luca Lorini and the Chief of Heart Surgery, Dr Paolo Ferrazzi! You expect two chiefs of international renown to be out of reach, you think you have to queue and pay exorbitant fees in order to meet them...whereas you can find them in Byelorussia or in the harrowed region of the Gaza Strip, where they operate on poor people. But who are those two people? Just surf the Internet and you will find all the information you want, except for their extraordinary generosity, which you can fully understand only when you are in the operating theatre with them or near the beds of intensive care.

Experts told us that mom's treatments cost the Italian state a lot of money, about 100,000 euros in a single month, but we cannot quantify what these two chiefs did for mom and for us! What is amazing is their combining a surprising skill, a very sophisticated technique with a great generosity that I would define as love. I cannot help recognizing in them some of the traits St Paul Apostle mentions in his hymn to love: "Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, love is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things".

Luca and Paolo's great professional competence seems to possess the beautiful traits of the hymn to Love! And Paolo and Luca write and sing this hymn together both in the operating theatre and in intensive care. I have talked about their operation on mom's heart in the operating theatre.... but their work in intensive care should not be forgotten. It is true that Santina remained in the operating theatre for 5.40 hours but we must remember she stayed in intensive care for weeks! This place scares every one, probably even more than the operating theatre.

Before they even get in, everyone tries to pluck up their courage by picturing scenes of people in deep distress, scenes of dying, disfigured people and what have you. That is not the way it is: intensive care is the place where you can really meet man, it is the place where extraordinary people work: doctors, nurses, assistants who perform their duties with great competence but always with a smile on their face. How strange those smiles seem to be a leitmotiv of these pages. From mom's smiles, to my sister's, from the two Chiefs' smiles, to those of all the people who work in such an important, but at the same time little known place. Smiles are an important part of their job.

Theirs are smiles that bespeak attention, professionalism, confident competence, and smiles relatives as well as patients need. But building a smile on the face of a person in intensive care requires hard work and great care. Their smiles are real conquests and depend on great competence and experience. They are not idiotic, stupid smiles at all; they do not reveal superficiality or carelessness. Those smiles are *a way of life* born from hours and hours of work with fragile, complicated heart patients; their smiles are a bet that their skill and professional competence will be all used in the struggle for survival each patient has to fight in there. They can't improvise those smiles, which are the result of tears, defeats and great care!

Above all, the smiles of those chiefs, doctors, nurses and assistants have a secret: the generosity of each of them. It is generosity that makes you go to your parish to hand out a hot dish for the patron festival after work. It is generosity that urges you to go to church before going to work in order to recommend a child who is in peril of his life to God. It is generosity that takes you all over the world to help the very poor, the outcasts, instead of enjoying your holidays. In this ward you can find this kind of generosity.

All of these people should receive the same amount of

admiration because they all do their job with generosity and great care. I admire these people! I want to imitate them! Whether their names are Paolo, Luca, Franco, Moreno, Maria Vittoria, Sergio, Giovanni, Chiara or Ilaria is not important. All the people who work in intensive care seem to bring Paul's hymn of Love to life. And then nobody remembers them because nobody sees what happens in the operating theatre, in the same way as nobody remembers what happens in intensive care! And these people whose sophisticated scrupulous cares have saved your life remain anonymous. This does not matter because what is essential is always invisible to the eye. However, these pages are an attempt to say thank you on behalf of mom Santina and my sister Maria Carolina, as well. This thank you comes with a promise: we will never forget you and what you did for us. And, dear Luca, we will remember your sentence: "We are instruments in God's hands. May this meeting be a sign of strength and comfort to our neighbour" (Luca Lorini, Bergamo, September 3rd 2005, 11:15 p.m...).

**An awakening, a smile, a squeeze of the hand, a tear is a garden flower
That springs up again after winter!**

Beside a great man "there is always the silent presence of a great woman". And your mom proves this sentence to be true. Thank you Monsignor Luigi, thank you for sharing these deep words with me. They have become a source of intense meditation for me and I admit I have read them several times. And several times my eyes filled with tears and my heart with deep emotion when thinking about and picturing your mom's suffering.

Your words are a source of further meditation for me. During my day I often wonder what is the meaning of this all, why a person, a helpless fragile child has to suffer all this pain. What infinite designs are behind this? Why continue to fight if you have a relapse later? We can find an answer in the Gospel or in this letter St Paul wrote to the Romans: “Tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us”.

Another answer is represented by Santina’s life, which is permeated by faith. Santina embodies Jesus’ words when He explained what one has to do in order to follow him: “ If any person wants to follow me, he must say “No” to the things he wants. That person must accept the cross (suffering) that is given to him every day, and he must follow me. The person that wants to save his life will lose it, and every person that gives his life for me will save it”. Here is the meaning of that suffering, of accepting God’s will despite all the fear a human being may express. In the Gethsemane Jesus shouted out the weakness of the flesh, as well as man’s, but He did not falter! He implored His father to remove that chalice of pain from him. He placed His trust in Him, accepting His will! The meaning of that suffering, the suffering of so many people therefore lies in the plan God has for each one of us. A plan in which God has given us the freedom to develop every day through our daily deeds, through the way we lead our life and bear witness to His love, by giving thanks even when we are in pain, through a loving smile, a sweet look, a squeeze of the hand, such as those Santina offers us every day.

The opportunity I have been given, thanks to my job, opens

plenty of horizons. I find my job very interesting as it requires great technical, medical and nursing knowledge but this alone would not be enough if Man did not come first! I have been given a great gift that challenges me professionally but also morally. Dealing with people is not easy at all, especially if they are ill and you try to build an empathetic relationship. Inevitably you feel involved because you are a fragile being yourself and you find it difficult to be detached, you simply cannot! So you start internalising the cases that strike you the most and suffering touches your heart. You often feel very impotent. You don't know what to do and what to say, so a respectful silence, which is not commiseration, becomes the only means of communication.

All this cannot leave you cold and every relapse as well as reawakening, a smile, a squeeze of the hand, a tear is a garden flower that springs up again after winter! Your mom was able to communicate strong emotions to me and the joy she expressed when I greeted her calling her by name often made my heart beat faster. One day, while we were looking at her grandchildren's colourful drawings, we stopped to look at a photo of you. Her eyes were shining with emotion and admiration. I told her she must be very proud to have a son and a daughter like you. She did a very good job! She could not speak but her look; her entire being expressed more than one thousand thoughts. On that occasion I understood her love for you like never before. She moved me deeply and gave me a moment of happiness.

How many times we forget the meaning of our small gestures and our routine slips towards patients and relatives take on different meanings and huge proportions whereas we may be tempted to overlook them with superficiality! Your words have struck and

touched me deeply...not because you are a priest but especially because you are a *son* who has received plenty of faith from a perseverant, trusting *mother*, a son who can see *Christ's* suffering in his *mother*. I was there on the Sunday when Santina had problems in her trachea - I am sorry if I didn't manage to understand her anguish and her tears – and I wasn't able to grasp the great mystery that was taking place! Only by thinking your book, have I realized the great witness to faith your mother bore on that occasion.

I thank you for being allowed to share such an intense moment with you! I will always remember it, as I will always remember the other intense moments I shared with Santina and with you! Yours is a very deep gesture that only deserves respect and prayer. I know I am becoming too prolix but what I wrote comes from the bottom of my heart and I thank you for giving me this opportunity. Your dear mom, your sister and you have taught me a great lesson. Let us place our trust in Providence and in God, Our Father, who sees and provides.



*The strength of her silence
The light in her eyes
The peacefulness of her goodness
Are the traits that describe
Mom's incredible, stubborn,
Deliberate smile.
This very beautiful smile
Made of silence, light and peacefulness
Shows me a sublime fragility,
The fragility of a cross
That she has been bearing for a long time
And that has sealed her life.
A life my mother continues to live
In seclusion
Thus fulfilling the sentence from the psalm that says:
"The LORD chastised me harshly, but did not hand me over to
death.
I shall not die but live and declare the deeds of the Lord".
Because, "God is the rock of my heart".
Mom: thank you for continuing to live!*

CONCLUSIONS

GOD IS THE ROCK OF MY HEART

These conclusions were written in Jerusalem from March 9th to

11th 2006. They provide a re-reading of Psalm n.73, Asaph's psalm, from which this book takes its title. I imagined the Levite Asaf, Berekiah's son, was writing Psalm n.73 about five hundred years before Jesus's birth, drawing inspiration from his old mother, who had been through a terrible illness.

ASAPH'S PSALM

Jerusalem, Adar 9th, Year 5766

Jerusalem is hit by a violent storm, icy winds raise the fine sand of the nearby desert of Judas; the houses and Temple where I am serving as a priest of Abiah, the priestly order I belong to, are bolted. My name is Asaph, Berekiah's son, I am a Levite and I am a chorister at the Tabernacle by order of David. Jewish people consider me a Seer. I have written a few psalms, which make up a short collection of poems. I am writing a new hymn for the Liturgy from my dwelling on the Mount of Olives. Deep in my heart I have an important idea I wish to express: God is the rock of my heart, which, in my language, would be

“צוֹר-לְבָבִי וְחֶלְקִי אֵל־הַיָּם לְעוֹלָם”

I found this sentence on a sacred silver bracelet I wear on my right wrist. It is a present from a friend and a craftsman chiselled it from the Old Town who learnt his craft in Thebes, in far Egypt. My mom put this bracelet around my wrist in a serene moment of prayer after her illness, when she put an important metal

case around my neck. *God Is the Rock of My Heart* is a hymn I am writing in honour of my old mother Santina, an eighty-year-old woman who underwent a terrible trial and who is still alive even if impaired by illness. Still her eyes are full of life, they alone can give you strength and courage. Today her rare words are prophetic like those of our revered Prophets; Her Word burns, cuts, hurts but soothes and comforts at the same time. “Be with the Lord, the Highest”, “Pray a lot”, “Obey”. My psalm, which the High Priest is going to proclaim in the Temple on Easter Day for the first time, originates from this painful experience. We are about five hundred years before the birth of the Messiah, He who will change the story of my people, this I know for sure: the Anointed by the Lord who will show us through His own life how we can live with God as the rock of our hearts. My mother’s life has always been spent at the Temple and now overflows with serenity and joy. Her life is full of meaning; it is an encouragement to live my total service to the Highest with coherence and enthusiasm. My mother is my source of inspiration and quiet during these peaceful days in Jerusalem. Round my neck I wear a metal case with a piece of cloth soaked with the blood she shed during the illness that affected her heart and my heart. I came back to Jerusalem to look for peace after this terrible experience that deprives of strength and creates anguish. Jerusalem is the city of peace because God dwells in its heart, in its sanctuary! I must go there and pray in order to understand life. In the streets of the Old City of David the smell of hot bread fills the first hours of the morning. The crowd of people and pilgrims animates this Citadel of Prayer placed on Mount Zion.

In this Temple, which is the site of immortality, prayer soothes the anguish for my distant mother. My pain abates in the conviction that my mother has received a great miracle. So after a few days of peace and quiet at my scribe’s desk with my sacred scrolls for company I start writing my hymn: “*Though I tried to*

understand all this, it was too difficult for me, Till I entered the sanctuary of God and came to understand their end” (l.16) In order to understand life you must enter the Sanctuary, as my mother did for eighty years and as she wanted to do when she awoke from her serious illness.

Mom’s Life seems to foreshadow the life of the Prophetess Anna, who spent all of her life in the Sanctuary of God in Zion announcing the arrival of the Messiah. Here in Jerusalem I meditate and I ask myself whether my life enters the Temple of God or whether I lead a lay life. “What do I have to do to be a good priest?” “Pray a lot!” she answered a few weeks ago with a look full of wonder as she was looking at the fire. I must enter the Sanctuary of God to understand life, to live my vocation with enthusiasm every day. Our people have great respect for the Temple, as is testified by the old words describing the faith of our fathers in my scrolls.

These words go back to times immemorial but they are still of great value: “Jerusalem is in the centre of the land of Israel and the sanctuary in the centre of Jerusalem, and the holy place in the centre of the sanctuary, and the ark in the centre of the holy place”. The place I have to enter is thus very holy and terrible because it is where God dwells among human beings. While I am writing the first lines of my prayer I stop and think. I am in Jerusalem, in this wonderful Holy City and I ask myself again: “Am I truly with God? I start writing again: “*Since my heart was embittered and my soul deeply wounded, I was stupid and could not understand; I was like a brute beast in your presence” (l. 21-22)*. Plenty of fears, envies, and stupid jealousies fill the few days in our lives and deprive us of knowledge, making us similar to beasts. Worries about work, about money, about amusements are utterly useless. Like the envy of the mighty: they make me a beast! The fear of loneliness destroys all my plans without God and gives me the clear certainty that He takes my life in hand.

The evening quiet sets on Jerusalem and it is time for my evening prayer at the Temple; the parchment on which I write slowly fills with new words and stanzas, like the following: *Yet I am always with you; you take hold of my right hand. With your counsel you guide me, and at the end receive me with honour (1.23-24)*. My right hand is the one with which I write and do everything; my sacred silver bracelet is on that wrist. It seems to remind me that God must guide each one of my actions. An old sage, who was once a high priest at the Temple, gives me some pieces of advice in these days of peace and quiet in the Lord. God's counsel must guide my life in the certainty that the Lord is always with me and that I cannot confuse the Lord with any heartily affection. Night is falling over Jerusalem, in the light of the seven candles of the Menorah I continue to write the lines of my poem: "*Whom else have I in the heavens? None beside you delights me on earth. Though my flesh and my heart fail, God is the rock of my heart, my portion forever*" (1.25-26). My life as a priest is a radical choice that does not permit marriage: I do not have a wife, I do not have any children, I lost friends and acquaintances during the painful experience I went through and I am losing the last ones these days. I have no one but you and you ask me to be a rock for the others, as you will ask Peter in times to come.

Here in Jerusalem, while I am walking slowly down the old streets, while I am treading on the old faced stones, when I stop to pray on the steps of the Temple or in some charming unknown corner of the City, I feel safe and I have the courage to search my heart and find that it is full of interests, affections and worries. I look at my silver bracelet- *God is the rock of my heart!* And I continue my prayer: "Oh Lord, may I long for nothing but you here on the Earth. "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me".

Oh Lord, do not desert me if I still cannot give all of myself up to you. And help me not to mistake the signs of your presence, that is to say good friends and advisers, for your own presence. It is late at night now, the torches lighting the Temple are burning around the thick walls and the sound of the *shophar* announces the start of the nocturne liturgy in the Sanctuary. In the quiet of night I finish my work for today. Tomorrow we will continue our prayer in this surprising land.

Jerusalem, Adar 10th Year 5766

Watching Jerusalem after a peaceful evening, after a good dinner offered by friends and a long invigorating rest restores wonder at the gift of life. I went out early and the streets lit by the morning sun reminded me of last year, when I took my mother to Jerusalem to celebrate Easter. Another line of my hymn forms in my heart: “*But those who are far from you perish; you destroy those unfaithful to you*” (l. 27.). Every time you lose sight of the Highest, you are bound for nonsense and self-destruction. I see how unfaithful I am when I am not able to put the Lord first, when the rock of my heart is my career, my friends, and my affections. I feel lost. ...I am overwhelmed by strong, disorienting emotions that come and go in a short time! I must come to my senses, I must go to the Temple again and say *God is the rock of my heart*. “Stay with God”. My mother does not tell me to stay with my sister, my friends, my acquaintances but to learn and experience the art of staying with the Lord in prayer and in meditation as I am doing in Jerusalem these days.

Jerusalem, Adar 11th Year 5766

Today the sun is high in the sky. Last night there was a full moon, the same moon that will be there for the Easter Seder. I meditated a lot with the old Priest and a dear friend. The expression *God is the rock of my heart* is unique in the sacred books and he asked me what it meant to me! A lot of people stood by me during my mother's suffering and to them I turned for confirmations and affection. Now that I am back in Jerusalem my heart searches its affections and examines them. My heart dictates the feelings dominating the new stanza of the psalm I dedicate to my mother: *As for me, to be near God is my good, to make the Lord God my refuge. I shall declare all your works in the gates of daughter Zion. (1.28)* "Stay with the Lord" are my old mother's prophetic words. "Find shelter in Him, thank Him for the gift of friends and relatives but remember the Lord must be your only choice: *God is the rock of my heart.*

In my life as a priest I have to pray a lot to become a rock and a guide for the others in their journey towards God. It is just after midday and this morning I have come to the wonderful small valley of Tiropeyon to pray. My mind repeats the eighteen blessings of the Shabbat prayer and the faithful believers go to the Temple to pray the Highest on this sacred day of rest; spring is near, its warmth fills the air; the little birds are enjoying the cool in a small pool of water. Finding shelter in the Lord is very easy here by the doors of the Fortress of Zion in a week of peace, prayer and meditation, but how will all this be possible at home? I think back on my mother's smiles and my parchment fills with lines that come straight from my heart: *How good God is to the upright, the Lord, to those who are clean of heart!* How good God was to me last year, in 5775! The first sign of His goodness is that He performed a miracle on my mother!! I remember another psalm I wrote during

my Mum's very painful illness: "The Lord chastised me harshly, but did not hand me over to death". My good mother can benefit by excellent cares and soon she will be back home for Easter. She talks to me and teaches me: I wrote her precious teachings in a parchment I dedicated to Her. God has been good to me: during this hard time he has given me few, good friends. These are all signs of his Goodness. My psalm is almost completed, I look at the Sanctuary of God, I have entered his Temple and I have found His smile: my God is a God who smiles at me! He is a good God! Only now, here at the Temple of Jerusalem do I understand that over the last few months His smile has constantly accompanied me through my Mother's eyes and through her kind smile, a smile that comes from a wonderful heart, a heart that is able to exclaim: *God is the rock of my heart!*

I look at my bracelet and I am ready to leave Jerusalem. I have finished my service at the Temple and, like Zachary; I have become dumb in my amazement at a God who has created the masterpiece of life. I go back to my dwelling with the longing to spend more time with the Lord in prayer; I go back to my dwelling with a smile on my face because:

God is the rock of my heart!

צור-לִבִּי וְחֻקֵי אֱלֹהִים לְעוֹלָם



APPENDIX I

TEN QUESTIONS TO MOM SANTINA.

Winter holidays in Rome: December 3rd -12th year 2006

Sunday, December 3rd 2006

**“What is the most important thing in life?” A loud answer:
“Prayer!”**

At the end of a long day of travel, mom does not waver. It is the start of a wonderful holiday with Santina in Rome but today is also the start of the Advent. Going through this important time with Santina is going to be great, it will be like going back to what is essential; it will raise important, vital questions. Her eyes and her silences question my life.

Tonight her beautiful eyes revealed right and sorrow for the death of a sister nun. With her hands she peeled a tangerine for me, she tried to make a proper speech, unaware of the fact that her lips were emitting a mass of inarticulate sounds. One cannot but appreciate her attempt to make her understood and its result, her smile, warm and dazzling like the sun. This is going to be an intense time in which I cannot save my strength, a new time of conversion to what is essential in life, a time presenting me with the great values of life. Mom taught me so much when I was a child but now that I am an adult her teaching is even more penetrating, a teaching of very high spiritual values. The Lord has given me the gift of being able to perceive eternity through my Mother’s kindness.

If my mother is so kind, how much kinder the Creator must be!!! We celebrated the mass together, taking our time, at the Hotel Kaire. It was the first mass of the Advent and the Eucharist took on a particularly important meaning. Every night I sit at the computer and I open my heart, which is full of emotions, deep thoughts and prayer. This Advent will be demanding but it will give me the gift of a flower: all the days with my Mother. See you tomorrow, I am really exhausted. Thank you, Jesus!

Monday, December 4th 2006

“What is the worst thing I can do in my life?” “Forget prayer!”

Mom is stubborn and monotonous. There are few ideas in her head but they are unshakeable. She always brings me back to what is essential and reminds me of a saying she used to repeat: “Who prays is safe, who doesn’t is doomed!” This is mom’s answer to the second question I asked her. Her answer was firm and inexorable. If I cannot understand the value of prayer after all these constant recommendations, I don’t know if I ever will!!! The second day of Advent was wonderful. After work we visited St. Peter’s together, we started from the square: the two fountains, the centre of the colonnade, the obelisk. We stopped in front of St. Peter’s statue, where she had sat down to write her postcards on her honeymoon. Then we went into the Cathedral. I was very moved when we prayed on John Paul II’s tomb. The guards removed the cordon and we were allowed to pray right in front of the tomb. Thank you Lord for this gift! After John Paul II’s sepulchre, we celebrated the Sacrament of Confession in front of the Altar of the Holy Sacrament and we said the prayers those who visit Peter’s Tomb say in order to obtain plenary indulgence. After such a beautiful and precious moment we went as far as the Pieta where we said a decade of the Rosary. We went up on the roof of the Cathedral, and then we went to John XXIII’s altar where we prayed to this Blessed Pope from our hometown of Bergamo. After that, we went up to the Altar of Confession and stopped in front of St. Longino’s statue to pray for the heart surgeon Paolo Farrazzi and heart anaesthesiologist Luca Lorini. At last, after admiring Bernini’s Glory, we went back home.

My mom was here today! She came into my room, she was in my house, my heart filled with emotion for her incredible goodness.

Today her eyes were shining as they always do and Rosa here at Casa Assistenti exclaimed: “What eyes!”. Everybody says: “What eyes! She speaks with her eyes!” today, Rosa and Loredana, on different occasions, Father Carlo and many others. Her two eyes are the most beautiful pictures of all my life; I do not have a more beautiful greater picture. I have never been able to understand the mystery of those eyes full of heaven! I asked: “Mom, how do you manage to have so much light in your eyes?”. She raised her eyes to Heaven. That light in her eyes comes from Heaven and I long for it like the air that I breathe.

I would be willing to give my life for those bright eyes! Because that would mean I have reached sanctity. In the evening, after celebrating mass, the Bishop Monsignor Amadei called us to send his love and give us his blessing. Mom was happy and after making the sign of the cross said a clear “thank you” with her voice. Her rare voice always expresses strength and gratitude. I end this other day of paradise with a great joy in my heart, even if I am a bit sad, as my mom threw up again. But let us not worry, my mom’s good strength will be able to get over these humiliating episodes as it often does. In her humiliation she never loses her heart, she finds indomitable courage. Jesus, I thank you for this wonderful Advent that fills my heart with so much joy as it is an Advent I live with my Mother. Help me to prepare well for Christmas. Now, after saying the Vesper and Compile with Mom, I go to bed. I am so exhausted. *Mater mea fiducia mea!*

Tuesday, December 5th 2006

“What do I have to do to be a good priest? Obey!”

Her answer to my third question is foregone as it is well known but she must make me understand that being a good priest means taking a path that is not mine, as mom has done over the last two years. Her life has been marked by a total obedience to the others in a state of complete dependence. But, since she decided to be totally dependent on the others, mom managed to live and live well in a situation of total discomfort. Today her kindness spurred me to change my hostile attitude towards a person; so I thank her very much. Today was an intense day. We went to the beautiful basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, where Jesus' cradle is and there we said the rosary in preparation for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, which will be in a few days. After visiting the church, and saying the rosary for our benefactors with Olinda, we went to a nearby café, where we had cappuccino and cake. Mom was happy about this novelty as well. Then we went to the centre, Via Veneto and St. Peter's again, in order to see the square when lit. We went up to the Vatican gardens and we stopped at the Lourdes grotto, where we prayed in front of the Virgin. After admiring the Dome from the gardens we drove through Rome's chaotic traffic and reached Primavalle, where the nuns of the order of Mother Theresa take in single mothers.

I think I saw one of the most touching and meaningful scenes in mom's illness today! I took a little black boy of about two up to her. The old woman was moved, she took him in her arms, and her old hands patted the hands of the child who was crying his eyes out. Her lips kissed him and a wonderful smile lit up her face. Tonight that unique scene allowed me to contemplate human existence, to see the great dignity and the need for transcendence

beyond the old woman and the small child. I contemplated human life in its pride and contrasting complementary attitudes. I contemplated life from its dawn to its sunset, the tears of the child and the smile full of light of the old woman! Tears and smiles mark all of human life. This is a trait that makes us men, as beasts do not laugh or cry. But in order for you to laugh or smile you need to be either an old person or a child. Old people and children share a radical simplicity without trappings or hidden purposes. Tears and smiles met tonight, showing both sides of the coin of existence. Tonight, with his presence and his tears, that little boy helped my Mother recover and gave her a great incitement to live. He infected her with his exuberant vitality, with his huge vital energy. That meeting changed my mother; the little boy gave her the strength to live. But I think my Mother did him good as well! Her wonderful smile cured his tears and was a reminder that life is worth living to the fullest, with all your energies, that life is like a smile full of light and strength. This scene was simply fantastic. The little boy and the old woman managed to heal my heart and make it better. Lord, the Merciful has given me a slice of paradise, which I have eaten eagerly and to which I cling in hard times. This I must never forget.

Wednesday, December 6th 2006

“Among all the popes you have seen: Pope John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, which one do you like best?” “All the popes are equal to me”.

This is an answer Pope Ratzinger would probably like very much. What the character of the Pontiff is like, what gifts he has or whether he is a saint or not is not very important. What matters is that he is Successor of Peter; as a consequence he must be honoured with utmost respect. This is the deep theology underlying the sen-

tence mom said at dinner, after having the chance to meet Pope Ratzinger. A dream had come true for me as well, so I offered the Lord a thanksgiving Mass. During mom's painful suffering in intensive care I had put a photo of the new pope greeting me near her bed and I wondered whether mom would have the chance to meet the new Pontiff one day. From that moment I started to pray that this might happen and today it did.

Mom's difficult life needs important, meaningful moments. We have planned and achieved a lot so far: she went home for her birthday last year, she spent a few hours at home during her stay at the Gleno nursing home, I took her to several sanctuaries; but the moment we shared today was just wonderful.

"His Holiness, this is my mom, she is ill, please bless her..." , "Ah, it is the your mother! I bless you with all my heart. Madam, cheer up!", "Holy Father, we would like to give you this booklet which tells about her suffering". "Thank you very much. Here is a rosary for you, Madam". These are just bits of the conversation we had with Pope Benedict XVI. The rest is lost in the confusion generated by emotion, where seeing has the better of speaking, where being there has the better of reasoning. For a few minutes you enter a different dimension that comes from contemplating the Successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ on Earth, with the eyes of faith. Santana is well aware of this and she relishes each moment with the Pope: Her hands held those of the Pontiff, they exchanged looks and words that lent this meeting a great symbolic power.

Today a great dream has come true. I am full of gratitude for a kind God who grants my miserable life images of great value, images I will never forget. This is probably the most beautiful meeting with a Pope in my life, the meeting between the Holy Father and my Mother. The great prestige and authority of the Pontiff met the

pain of a good, simple woman who offered Him her suffering. Today I told mom: “you have suffered more than Jesus on the cross” and she answered: “No, his hands were pierced by nails. Mine weren’t”. “But you had a bedsore on your foot”. Oh Lord, thank you for everything, and thank you for the prophetic days you are granting me in this wonderful Advent 2006. Will I be able to take advantage of it? Help me to be up to the signs of your goodness you give me every day. Thank you Jesus!

Thursday, December 7th 2006

“What is the most beautiful litany to the Virgin?”

“Queen of peace!”

What a strange and beautiful answer. Queen of Peace pray for us!! But a woman whose eyes and heart overflow with peace, who never gets angry, who cares for everybody could only choose this beautiful ejaculatory prayer. And once again Santina makes me think and reconsider: she is a great woman of peace, whereas I am a man of war! Today we spent about three hours in the car but it was worth it. In the quiet of the afternoon and of the following evening of St. Ambros Day we went to the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, where we said the rosary together with Olinda. It was wonderful. The beautiful jigsaws were lit and the choir, where the Benedictine monks sing the Vespers in their Gregorian style, created a magical atmosphere. The jigsaw of Pope Benedict was lit, too and mom was gratified to see it. The days I am spending with her are days of utter bliss, of great purity. She is an angel who stands by me to show me which path to take in my life. And I can also see Olinda in all her kindness. I ask Jesus one thing only: that my mom may be by my side a few more years and that I may invest a lot in her, so that the quality of my life may be totally transformed in return.

During the afternoon we looked at lots of photographs we took with the Holy Father, twenty-one to be precise. Our hearts were still filled with emotion. How wonderful, how happy I was! Dinner at the Hotel Kaire was very peaceful. Mom can now govern her gestures better, so she ate by herself. Who knows, maybe the Virgin will grant my mom complete recovery, so as to reward her painful but deserving experience.

At 10:45 I had the chance to talk at the microphones of Radio Maria and tell a wide audience about my book *God is the Rock of my Heart!* Thank you Jesus for giving me the chance to better understand how great, how mighty you are. Now I will go to bed exhausted but happy! It is 0.24 of December 8th. I am tired but very, very happy! Jesus, please help me to be always a happy and faithful priest. I love you.

Friday, December 8th 2006. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception

**“Tell me, mom, who shall I love the most, you or Jesus?”
“Jesus!”.**

Today was another day in paradise. We left for the convent of Manziana, where we celebrated the mass of the Immaculate Conception. At 12:00 mom looked a bit tired, but she recovered during the mass. During the homily I read the page about blood again and after the homily mom put the small metal case around my neck. It was a wonderful moment!!! At the end of the mass a 96-year-old nun went up to mom and told her: “Cheer up, we must prepare to meet the Lord”. “After the mass Mom and I posed for a photograph with the nuns in front of the statue of the Virgin. The nuns made us a delicious Christmas lunch with beautiful flowers and candles. Mom rested for a couple of hours and then, at 4.45, the

nuns sang wonderful Christmas carols with the harp, the guitar and the triangle. Mom even sang parts of “Silent Night”.

The solemn vesper and the Eucharistic blessing ended our beautiful day. During the solemn vesper of 5.30 I placed the keys of the Jerusalem flat on the altar, entrusting the Virgin with the whole venture. If it comes from God, it will go on; otherwise it will come to nothing. Last year I asked Sister Serena to paint an icon for the house in Jerusalem. The house could be called Queen of Peace, as suggested by mom. I thought it right to ask the Virgin to protect this beautiful venture.

Last year I celebrated a more modest mass in Gussago and then I showed mom the book *God Is the Rock of My Heart* in its first edition. Today I feel a strong need to thank God for the great gift of spending these days with mom. May the lord gives her all the health and peace she deserves. As the days go by I feel more tired but my heart overflows with joy: this is the most beautiful Advent of my life. I thank you with all my heart, Jesus!

Saturday, December 9th 2006

“Tell me, Mom, what is the most beautiful day in your life?” “The day of your Ordination”.

Her answer moves me. I can understand that June 21st 1986 is the most important date in my life, what I cannot understand is that this is the most important date for my mom, as well. It seems the Lord has chosen this wonderful date as a reason of life for both of us. I thank God in my heart for her concise answer, which still amazes me and makes me happy. For my mother June 21st 1986 represents her greatest reason in life: having a priest Son. She had asked St. Gregorio Barbarigo and he had answered her prayer. In the afternoon we celebrated the mass at the convent where the nuns

of the order of mother Theresa take in single mothers. It was an unforgettable moment, the most beautiful moment in our pilgrimage after our meeting with the Pope. We took the nuns six panettones (typical Italian Christmas cakes) and four bottles of bubbly wine and during the mass we gave them 5 euros in a white envelope. Mom was really happy and I was even happier. You can see our joy in our beautiful photos. This is the most beautiful Advent in my life and I want to relish each moment.

At the end of the mass, my mom and the children posed for an unforgettable group photo. We got back home and, while I was working, I received an envelope containing the blessing of the Holy Father. I promised Father George I would celebrate a mass for him the following morning. So the Sunday Mass I am celebrating tomorrow is dedicated to those who care for us and have stood by us, as were the masses we celebrated on Wednesday and Friday. Meeting those children was pure bliss; it has given us strength and encouraged us to lead a good, if not a beautiful life. Tonight not only did mom peel a tangerine for me, she also managed to peel a fourth of an apple with a knife. It was a hard-won conquest but her smile meant she had achieved her goal, a simple, seemingly easy goal that cost the poor woman a lot of effort. I smothered her with kisses, as usual. My mother is a wonderful gift, she is an angel, she is starlight, her look is a glimpse of paradise. Oh Lord, please grant her health, may she be by my side for many years to come. Amen.

Sunday December 10th 2006

“ Tell me Mom, among the Evangelical Counsels of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, which is the most important?” “Chastity! ”

I can not describe what feelings mom’s words arouse inside of me.

Together with suffering it seems God has given her the power to always see what is essential in life. Santina goes about her daily life in a state of constant silence. Is it a forced state or is it something she wants? I can't answer this question but I can say her words always grasp what is essential. Her constant silence lends power to each word she utters prophetically. She doesn't waste any words, or speak without thinking.

She just focuses on what is of real value. Her sobriety and silence lend a sort of solemnity to the words she rarely utters.

This is what happened today; in a place that is of great importance to me, in the place where I promised my Consecration to God when I became a Deacon on October 25th 1985. While visiting St. John Lateran mom wanted to tell me "Mind you, Luigi chastity is the most important among the Evangelical Counsels". "Blessed are the clean of heart: for they shall see God": this is the sentence from the Gospel that comes straight to my mind! If I want to see God in my daily life I must have a clean heart and in order to have a clean heart I must be chaste. "Oh mom, I have seen how good you are over the last few years only. Why didn't I understand it before?" Mom smiles to me, her wanderer's smile spreads peace. Maybe in her new condition she has become a humble and frail example of sanctity everybody honours, even the Pope with the blessing he wrote in his own hand!

I am so scared of losing her, possibly more than ever before, even if I have learned the terrible lesson-nobody has their life in their hands and no body can be sure of tomorrow. Thanks to the sanctity of their life, only frail, simple people are not afraid of facing the future and showing us their pure heart. I feel very far from this, very distant from these moral "giants". I feel sure and disoriented at the same time. So teaching in Rome's cathedral, on a wonderful after-

noon in Advent, in one of the most beautiful weeks in my life.

Today we visited the Altar of the homeland, the Trevi Fountain, Colonna Square, Barberini Square, the Imperial Forums, the Cloiseum and St. John Lateran by car: Te Deum!

Monday, December 11th 2006

“Tell me, mom, what do I have to do to be like you?”

“Imitate me!”

This is last of our wonderful days in Rome. I will always treasure the memory of these holydays. We went to the Divine Love exposure of the Blessed Sacrement Rosary and Eucharistic blessing. Mom is absorbed in prayer, she stares at the monstrance with her face full of serenity and peace. I admire her face and her faith. Even if she isn't self-sufficient and she is helpless frail woman, she maintains an intimate and sincere relationship with the Eucharist. I am so enraptured by these glimpse of haven, a frail weak body covered with clothes I didn't think she would wear again, reveals the sublimate of a whole life spent in the name the Lord. I am eager to try and understand, to imitate her. In her secret, is fully unveiled, but it is also inaccessible to my misery; it is too great for me. I don't give up hope. The good God who helped my mother will help me as well to grasp the deepest, the greatest meaning of life. Her simple gestures, her repeated attempts at expressing herself, her goodness, her helplessness reveal a meaning that transcends our present and hints at eternity. I still do not have the complete code of sanctity but, with her transcendence, a reminder I can't ignore. I embrace mom Santana and I embrace God, who was able to lend sublimate to my mother's tired old body. I pray to God that my mother may be by my side for many years to come so that I may try and understand the most secret, the most hidden meaning of life that

has one name only. Faith in God, the faith that allows us to shout God is the rock of my heart!

Tuesday, December 12th and Wednesday, December 13th 2006

“ Who would you like to pray for during this Mass, Mom?” “For all the families!”

This is the intention mom suggested on the occasion of the Mass that concluded the wonderful time we spent together. Today is St. Lucy and we are Bergamo, sister Alfonsa, the nun who takes mom the Holy Communion every day is with us.

Mom’s prayer intention is a very topical subject at a time when the family is under threat; recognition of unmarried couples and gay marriages, fertility treatment, experimentation with embryos. Mom’s prayer seems to be a real prophecy for our contemporary world. It is incredible how such a weekend woman is able to read the present situation clearly and understand what the modern needs really are. The Lord fills men and women with grace and makes them perfect witnesses! I must meditate on each one of the teachings she has passed on to me these days as they can’t be lost.

On Tuesday December 12th we left Rome very early, at 7 in the morning in order not to get stuck in the chaotic traffic, which was constant during our stay. We had a good journey, even if we had to queue for about an in Florence. At 2.45 we arrived at uncle Ceco’s farmhouse, where we had a lunch with him and with mom’s sisters, who had come for the occasion. We told them about our wonderful meeting with Pop Benedict XVI and showed them the parchment signed by the Pontiff. After resting for about two ours we celebrated the Mass as well Paolo’s birthday, which was seven years old on that day, the day of the Virgin of the Guadalupe. How strange that

our two return journeys from Rome coincided with Marian feast; the feast of the virgin of Carmel on July, 16th and the feast of the virgin of Guadalupe on December, 12th. During the Mass I thanked the Virgin for the wonderful days I spent in prayer, meditation and humble work at the service of the Lord in mom's serene company. As Cardinal Martini said in a Message he sent me for the presentation of the book *God Is the Rock of my Heart*, to me mom is a bright spark of light enlightening my life and filling it with meaning. She helps me understand that God only must be the Rock of my heart.

APPENDIX II

A FEW REMARKS ON “GOD IS THE ROCK OF MY HEART” BY LUIGI GINAMI

Dr. Giuseppe Fojeni, psychologist

“God Is the Rock of My Heart” was a Christmas present from a friend of mine, a present I appreciated very much. This book is enthralling and offers plenty of foods for thought to a psychoanalyst like me who has been dealing with the mystery of the human heart for years.

Father Luigi tells us a painful experience, which involved him deeply, and he does this in a simple way. He is not ashamed of telling us the emotions (both fears and joys) he felt in standing by his mother Santina during her difficult heart surgery and her following long stay in intensive care. I think Father Luigi’s “story” reveals some psychological dynamics, which make it even more precious:

- The presence of a symbolic language that manages to activate the unconscious;
- A correlation between inner and exterior events that cannot be explained according to causal relations (what Jung calls “synchronicity”);
- A constructive mother- son relationship;
- The effectiveness of blessing (“bene-dicere” in Latin = speak well of someone) on man considered in his totality from a corporeal, mental and spiritual point of view;
- The presence of a threefold dynamism through which the human being expresses himself;

The presence of a symbolic language that manages to activate the unconscious

Working with children and adults in psychotherapy I can appreciate the wealth of the symbolic language which, mediated by the mental faculty of imagination, can help people in distress regain their balance. “The forgotten language”, as E. From calls it, conveys the conscious and the unconscious important messages about the fundamental problems and conflicts of the human nature such as love, hate, the need for security, the meaning of life, of suffering and death. It is not enough to say that we live in a world of symbols: a world of symbols lives in us.

There are a lot of symbolic images in Father Luigi’s story. First of all there is **the image of the rock** which first appears in the title and is present throughout the book: the holy sites of Jerusalem, all of which are built on a rock, the circular stone in the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, the story (a symbolic working through?) of the birth of Asaph’s psalm, which the author questions in order to work out what the expression God is the rock of my heart means to him.

This image reaches its climax in Father Luigi’s wish to become a rock himself as well as a guide for the others in their journey towards God.

Another **image** fills the story, the image **of the heart**. While I was reading it, I felt I could hear a symphony of heartbeats: Mom Santina’s heart conducting the hearts of all those who are close to her: her children, grandchildren, friends, doctors, health workers, all the people who shared this painful experience with her.

The strongest image is that of mom Santina’s “open heart”, a heart she allows her son to see. While reading, you feel you are there and you are witnessing the sacredness of a liturgy that does not take place in a church but in an operating theatre.

Other images are only touched upon but they are full of meaning.

For example, the image of the **chalice forged with his parents' wedding rings** symbolizes the wish to contain, to “put together” different fragments of life in order to harmonize them and turn them into a new life, a life made of harmony and unity.

The very city of Jerusalem takes on a symbolic meaning: this is what Rula Jebreal reminds us in her introduction when she talks about the power her city has to convey the mystery of life and death to everybody, no matter their culture or religion. Those who had the chance to live there or simply walk down its streets are deeply aware of this.

Which image helps us understand the emotional journey of the main characters in the story better than **the crossing of the Red Sea**?

Even the copy of the **Greek New Testament**, where mom Santina and a few friends leave notes and messages, takes on a symbolic meaning. It symbolizes sharing, sharing thoughts and affections the Holy Scripture keeps together.

Thanks to these symbolic images Father Luigi involves us in his experience. G. Bachelor, a scholar who studied this kind of language, wrote: “A picture is worth a thousand words”; Jung said: “Each symbol stimulates and allows man’s development on the conscious level”. That is why the language in this text is so full of meaning and is so important for the reader’s growth.

A correlation between inner and exterior events that cannot be explained according to causal relations (what Jung calls “synchronicity”)

One of Jung’s great intuitions concerns the phenomenon of “synchronicity”. He described synchronicity as “a meaningful coincidence”, where coincidence stands for an unusual sequence of simultaneous events somehow related to each other, whereas meaningful

stands for something that is important because of some values of ours- something that is meaningful because it is precious to us - or something that has had a meaningful effect on us, that has a meaning because it has had a deep influence on our life

Jung says that this unusual coincidence of events he calls “synchronicity” nearly always possesses three distinct characteristics. Jungian scholars have added A fourth one:

- In the first place the events are related in an a causal way, not thanks to a sequence of causes and effects in which an individual may recognize the result of an intentional decision;
- In the second place their taking place is always accompanied by a deep emotional experience that coincides with the event;
- In the third place the content of the synchronically experience, what the event is, always has a symbolic nature (= it stands for something else...), which leads us to the fourth point;
- In the fourth place these coincidences take place when one is experiencing important life changes: a synchronically event often marks a turning point in our lives.

There are plenty of events of this kind in the “story”. Witnessing mom Santina’s heart surgery reminds Father Luigi of the operation on the brain he had witnessed years before, when he was a young seminarian in Rome. When relating his experience Father Luigi himself says “*The Lord had prepared me twenty years ago*” through an experience with a patient in that hospital that was similar to the one he would have with his mom.

The letter he wrote to his mom on the day of his ordination, where the mystery of suffering was almost revealed to him in advance and where Father Luigi asked his mother, who had always proved to be strong in tackling pain, to stand by him. The trips to Jerusalem and Beijing and the evening he spent with his mom in St. Petersburg are one with the note that Father Luigi found at home and that is now

pasted on the first page of his Bible.

I think that the intertwining of life experiences between Rome and Jerusalem are indicative of something synchronically: the presence of Cardinal Martini, the friendship with the Muslim journalist Rula Jebreal, the constant reference to dates and events are all part of a structured whole, a sort of experiential harmony between the events and our understanding of them that Jung calls Self and that is represented by the hand of Providence for the believer.

A constructive mother- son relationship

The story of each individual is born of a mother and behind disturbed personalities we may find an absent or inadequate mother. Mom Santina always shows a meiotic, generative attitude: besides giving birth to his son “in flesh”, she continues to give him birth from a psychological and spiritual point of view.

She is a mother who “lets her son go”, keeping a natural distance allowing him to carry out his vocation. At the same time she has always been there, her presence has been discreet and “stimulating” ever since he was at the Seminary. She is touching when she suggests her distant son *put a newspaper under his shirt to protect his stomach*. And how firm and straightforward she is when she reprimands him and asks him to respect the regulations concerning clerical clothes!

In her simplicity and dignity of widow who has chosen to stand by her children, to accompany them along their life’s journey, mom Santina manages to create serenity and harmony all around her. Her smile spreads throughout the “story”, it is always there despite the difficulties she has been through, thus generating warmth and positive emotions in those she meets as well as in the reader.

Hers is the image of a mother who is able to stand aside before her

son's life project, who reveals complete trust in God, to whom she surrenders feeling certain her hope will not be disappointed.

The effectiveness of blessing (“bene-dicere” in Latin = speak well of someone) on man considered in his totality from a corporeal, mental and spiritual point of view

The text is full of words of blessing. Psychology considers “blessing” an indispensable attitude, an attitude that is essential to the forming of a healthy personality.

In her writings F. Dolto, a French doctor and psychoanalyst, insists on inviting health and social workers, educators and parents to use words expressing life and joy with every child right from the moments following their birth. In her experience of paediatrician and developmental psychologist, she has noticed that what children are said, especially, if it is something negative, leaves a deep mark on them. That is why she is convinced that “for every human being a blessing is a warrant of a certain security in distress, of hope when you have to face difficult moments. Blessing deeply affects the symbolism of the human being, so it is something we cannot do without”.

Even if he is suffering, Father Luigi always thanks (blesses) those who are by his side: nurses, health workers, friends, relatives...He recognizes their competence and attentions.

There are a lot of words of blessings in mom Santina's writings. She blesses her son twice: “*I bless you with all my heart*”. Her smile, which is described as “stubborn”, “dazzling” and “sweet” is always there and becomes one with God's smile, the smile Father Luigi / Asaph discovers when he enters the Temple. “My God is a God who smiles at me! He is a good God!”

The “blessing” filling these pages is not something theoretical as it

is perceived by those who share the experience related in the book: this is what Dr P. Ferrazzi remarks in his Afterward, when he expresses his conviction that the leitmotif of this book is serenity.

The presence of a threefold dynamism through which the human being expresses himself

I think we can detect in this book the presence of that psychic mechanism through which each individual can make progress in the realization of his Self. This is what Cardinal Martini reminds Father Luigi in his letter of September 3rd 2005, when he writes: “*What matters is living through each moment with faith, hope and love*”.

Faith, hope and love are one with the images through which we can see this human dynamism Cardinal Martini himself has interiorized for years and which he described as experience of seeing, judging and acting in one of his first pastoral epistles at the Ambrosian Diocese: “*It is seeing, judging and acting our Conciliar Fathers taught us*” (Cardinal Martini, *The Tail of the Mantle*).

We can find the dynamism of seeing (sapient route) both in the wisdom of this mother who understands what is essential in life and manages to hand it on to her children, and in Father Luigi who questions all the events in the attempt to understand why they take place.

We can see the dynamism of judging (prophetic route) in the pain with which Father Luigi reacts to the detachment of those that he considered friends but that deserted him at such a difficult moment. We can also see it in all the events leading up to his painful experience: somehow they allow us to pass a judgement on what is happening.

Finally the dynamism of acting (celebrative route) can be seen throughout the story, which turns out to be a harmonious, constructive experience involving the reader in a liturgy of life, despite all

the pain and suffering.

For all these reasons I think that, even if the story is simple, the book succeeds in “putting together” many fragments of life reassembling them in an evaluative dynamic crescendo producing harmony and serenity.

Something similar happens in psychotherapy when one manages to reassemble the fragments of his life. That is why I think this book is therapeutically for the reader.

Before concluding, I would like to mention another meaningful passage, which recurs twice in the text: the metal case Father Luigi wears around his neck which contains “*a piece of cloth soaked with the blood she shed during the illness that affected her heart and my heart*”.

The psychologist W. Winnicott introduced the concept of transitional object into the psychological language. It indicates any material object, from the handkerchief to the puppet, every child wants to keep with him before falling asleep or when he has to go to a place he does not know. It is something reassuring that reminds him of his mother’s presence. It is a phenomenon that is part of the normal evaluative development of an individual.

A transitional object may reappear at particular moments of adult life. Anyway, “*it represents the most important experience of the child and its reappearing in adult life is the starting point of his subsequent imaginative life*” (F. Dolto).

In psychotherapeutic settings as well, patients often bring imaginary objects as a “memento” of the experience they went through. These objects represent energy-images that inspire strength and courage not only during psychotherapeutically settings but also in facing daily life.

Looking for a reassuring object, even if on an imaginative level, can help man in his psychological development.

Father Luigi creates this metal case of his own accord and - like a

proper transitional object - this case supports him at such an intense time, giving him courage and helping him to turn this experience of human suffering into an opportunity for psychological and spiritual growth.

Finally, I would like to remark how, by reporting events, thoughts and emotions, Father Luigi manages to become an educator for grown-ups and children alike. His experiences are like “memoirs” for the reader and the story creates the conditions for making the reader feel better thanks to the regenerating dynamisms it presents.

Good educator as he is, Father Luigi seems to remember the conviction Father Gnocchi expressed in his book *The Pedagogy of Innocent Pain* where he writes “*Christian pedagogy tends to teach that you must not keep pain to yourself, that you must offer it to the others and that pain has a great power on the heart of God, to which we must turn for the benefit of many.*”

It seems Father Luigi wanted to give us this present; he wanted us to get closer to the Heart of God, keeping in mind that “*every therapy is partial, the real cure is meeting God*” (A. Jodorowsky).

AFTERWORD

Doctor Paolo Ferrazzi

Father Luigi asked me to comment on his book, which shows his deep love for his mother in such a complex time of pain and suffering.

I confessed him my qualms about being able to turn my emotions of surgeon who lives amid illness and suffering not into gestures and therapies but into thoughts that are beyond the technicality of my profession.

While reading this book containing Father Luigi's thoughts, I read and "felt" his love towards her Mother, which is the most beautiful feeling you can express in such difficult disconsolate moments. It seemed to me that father Luigi's love for his mother was similar to the love I saw in the eyes of many mothers towards their sick children while working and operating all over the world.

A Mum cannot accept not being allowed to think about the future of her very sick child but she manages nevertheless to find the courage of a sudden and sweet peace of mind.

While reading this book and taking care of his Mother I saw in Father Luigi's eyes the same certainty that she would have a serene and sweet future as any mother wishes for her children.

Serenity is a recurring them in this book.

I was serene myself in having Father Luigi in the operating theatre. All my team was serene, not only during the most difficult surgical moments, but also in facing the moments of waiting with humanity, with hope in their heart.

Serene is also my relationship with Father Luigi and his wonderful sister Maria Carolina, with their sweet smiles that hide hope but also serenity in distress.

I love my job, despite the tough decisions I have to make every day about my patients' lives. I feel joy when I see the patients who get better after our therapies and being able to cure other sick people who will manage to feel even better is an incitement to my research.

From this book, from the relationship with Father Luigi and his family, in these difficult months of his Mother's treatment, I have received a feeling of serenity which I hope I will succeed in communicating to other patients and young surgeons.

Bergamo, October 23rd 2005

COVER PAGES ITALIAN EDITION

1. Inside *picture black and white* of the two doctors

Bergamo Ospedali Riuniti – on the right Dr Paolo Ferrazzi, Chief of Heart Surgery, together with Dr. Ferdinando Luca Lorini, Chief of Anesthesia and Intensive Care and President of the Association of Italian Heart –Anesthesiologists.

2. Cover page last page with a picture of Jerusalem and Santina

Symbols divide, prayer unites. It is in this sense that in spirit I feel close to Santina and her great lesson. Santina is always in communion with her God, He dwells in her heart in such a pure, ethereal relationship that she does not need any time or space reference as many humans do

Rula Jebreal

3. Cover page last page

LUIGI GINAMI

He is a priest of the Diocese of Bergamo, in Northern Italy. He is the author of *At the Heart of the Holy Scriptures, Commentary on Sunday Readings A-B-C*, 1998; *I Follow My King! A Rule of Life for*

Young People, 2001, Youngprayer.it: a Book and a Website for Learning How To Pray, 2003.

