

Our Lady Secretly Watched Over Me



**Spiritual Plays
in Carmel**



The earliest memory I have is being in the arms of my father after an incident in which I almost died. I was just learning to walk, and nobody noticed me as I found a large double-pointed u-shaped nail which was used to lock one of the windows. I swallowed the nail and it was stuck in my throat. Within moments I turned blue and was running out of breath. Everybody panicked! With much courage my father cleared the table, laid me there and took the nail from my throat using his fingers. Blood was coming out of my mouth, nose and ears.

All my life I wondered why God did not take me then, when, as a little child the surety of Heaven already belonged to me. This is selfishness, I know, to think only of my own soul, for God created me not just to save my own but to bring as many souls as I could into the Father's eternal bosom.

My siblings and I were born and raised in a very small, remote, undeveloped area in the Northern part of the Philippines. All six children were born in a big old house inherited by my father from his ancestors. One of my sisters remembered my mother's big smile when she held her youngest close to her heart.

My parents were Catholic but they never really practiced. There is no recollection in my mind of our ever praying as a family. We did not go to Mass regularly, even though the little church was just a block away from our home. As a little girl I would peep through the window to watch people walking towards the little church for Mass. Oh, how I wished my family would do the same! I remember running to my sisters' room where a picture of the Blessed Virgin hung on the wall. I would cry to Her every time I was hurt. In my little mind, somehow, I understood that it is important to go to Mass.

I never really asked my parents why we did not practice the Faith. It must have been ignorance on their part. There were no catechism classes there. For them, being a good person meant being with the family. My father felt safe if the family just stayed home.

The first time I saw a Religious Sister was when I was about six or seven years old. While the family was visiting my oldest sister, Emmaline, who was in college, I saw a Sister from a distance with a group of little children following her. Though I could not remember what the Sister looked like, she deeply touched my heart and inspired in me the desire to be like her when I grew up.

Emmaline married a Filipino-American citizen when I was in the 5th grade. She was the first one to move to the United States. When she herself became a citizen, she helped my parents get their immigrant visas while the rest of the children were left in the Philippines.

Being the youngest, I was my mother's shadow. It was very painful for me to be away from her especially during my teenage years. But this was also that period when I strongly felt Our Lady's presence in my life, as she was secretly watching over me and leading me gently to the Heart of Her Son.

One night I had a dream. I found myself in a dark room. My hands were covering my face as I was crying and weeping. Then, I felt a gentle presence beside me. I heard the sweetest voice of a lady whispered in my ear: "You are not alone. I am here." After that dream there was peace, remembering that Our Lady was always by my side. I also understood that my parents had to leave to give us a better future, that it was part of God's loving plan...

It was in college when I first heard about Cloistered Nuns. One of my classmates told me that no one ever saw them and they never left the monastery. "What a mysterious life," I thought to myself. "Why would anyone want to be in prison like that?"

After I finished college, my parents sent me to live in an all-girl Catholic boarding house while attending a Review School to prepare for the Certified Public Accountant Exams. Daily Mass, rosary, Bible study were just steps away, but I was only a Sunday catholic and did not take advantage of those opportunities. My mind was so caught up with studies and plans of immigrating to America. Because the Faith was not practiced at home the seed planted was not watered. The little poor plant grew very, very slowly...

Of my parents, my mother was the stronger one. Both came to the United States, but my father got home sick and ended up returning to the Philippines. He was so worried about leaving his three youngest daughters... His third oldest eloped right after college and got married without his full blessing. He did not want that to happen to the younger ones. My parents were determined to take us to the United States.

My mother stayed with my sister Emmaline. She very humbly accepted a cleaning job at McDonalds despite being an Elementary School teacher in the Philippines. My mother never learned how to drive so, Emmaline drove her to work and then she walked about three miles back to the house. There was a big High School known for gangs that she passed by everyday. One day, a group of these wild boys riding in a car grabbed her purse. The handle of the purse was wrapped around her arm. Some High School girls saw my mother being dragged by the car and they called the police right away. While being dragged my mother thought she was going to die. But she survived. Thanks be to God! And she continued on to build a life here in America.

That incident happened when I was still at the Immaculate Conception boarding house. I felt so sorry for my mother who worked so hard to pay for such an expensive place for me to stay. Unfortunately, I did not pass the CPA Exams. However, this time was what I would consider the beginning of my "gradual conversion". My mother's sacrifices were not thus in vain...

One day after class, a young lady who was also studying at the Review School approached me kindly. She introduced herself and invited me to make a little pilgrimage walk towards the school chapel. I really did not want to go because I needed to study but there was something about this girl that one could not refuse. It was twelve o'clock and so, she said: "Would you like to pray the Angelus?" I nodded. Then, there was silence. She was waiting for me to lead it but she sensed that I did not know how. She asked, "Would you like me to lead it?" I nodded again. Deep within I was so embarrassed. I was twenty and did not know my prayers.

That experience enabled me to realize that the seed of Faith planted in my heart would only grow if I watered it with prayers and sacrifices. Our Lord had been giving me all the opportunities to grow in love for Him and there I was... engrossed with **my** studies and **my** plans... I began to make little visits to the chapel and joined the Sisters and the girls in praying the rosary.

The exams were fast approaching. After classes, I would look around hoping to find that kind young lady who helped to revive my drooping prayer life...but I never saw her again.

In my heart, there was always this strong urge to move on. Leaving my own country was not difficult for me because of my desire to find what I was searching for. The thought of becoming a Sister was always there at the back of my mind but I always set it aside.

The much awaited immigration papers were finally approved. In America, I had all the things I needed and wanted. But deep within there was still emptiness.

My sisters and I joined the Parish choir. Being a Cantor helped me to go to Mass more often. We were surrounded by devout families who inspired me to deepen my Faith. Instead of watching TV during leisure time at night, I read Sacred Scriptures and prayed in the solitude of my room. The thought of becoming a Sister was becoming stronger but I did not say anything to anyone...

In the Parish bulletin there was an advertisement about a Silent Retreat. The word "silent" caught my eye. Though I did not know what it was, it sounded very appealing. The Retreat was sponsored by an Active Carmelite Community. It was during that weekend retreat before the Blessed Sacrament that the Lord made known to me for what my heart was longing: I longed for Him. I was looking afar but He was within. It was there that my love for the Blessed Virgin Mary as a little girl was reawakened. With all my heart I loved Her and desired to be like Her!

Growing up in a family where we did not practice the Catholic Faith concerned me greatly. There was this feeling of unworthiness for such a sublime "Call." How can I be married to Jesus? How can I impart the Catholic Faith to others if I myself was just beginning to practice? The Sisters at the Retreat explained about the nine years of formation as being in the womb of Holy Mother Church where I would receive nourishment to grow into a good Catholic Christian. It would also be a time of preparation for religious consecration... to be a *Bride of Christ* in the Order of Our Lady...CARMEL.

On February 11, 1997 the Active Carmelite Sisters lovingly received me as a Postulant. I closed my eyes and jumped, trusting that the Lord Jesus would be there to catch me. He asked for my heart. Empty and cold as it was, I gave it to Him. I was not sure how my parents would take this surprising news. But my father told everyone that he was so proud of his youngest daughter --- that I was his gift to God and the Church!

During my years of initial formation, I learned more about the cloistered life, that mysterious thought which I pondered within my heart while in college. Contemplative life in the heart of the Church --- belonging entirely to God in silence, solitude, hidden penance and prayer attracted me. It would be difficult to be far from my family and the Sisters but there would only be peace if I did the will of God. So I followed my heart and searched for a Cloistered Carmelite Community.

One day, as I was passing by a greenhouse, some movement there caught my eye. A poor little bird was trapped inside. I went in to try to help it find the door where it could fly away. But the poor bird was so scared and just kept flapping its wings to go through the glass. The only way I could help it was to try to catch it. But the closer I walked, the faster it flapped its wings. Finally, it no longer had the strength to move, so it let itself be captured...

It is only when we allow ourselves to be captured by the Divine Hands that we can truly be free to sing the most beautiful hymns to win hearts for Jesus. This is the vocation of a cloistered Carmelite. She allows herself to be captured. The soul is set apart from the world to be with the Beloved. To human eyes she is a prisoner. But in reality she is more free than anyone else...freely loving the Lord and above all letting herself be loved by Him. As she silently journeys towards heaven, she lovingly embraces the world and pleads to God for mercy. Her life is like that of the Blessed Virgin... hidden, simple and poor. She possesses Him who is the Eternal All.

By Our Lady's gentle guidance, I have been a cloistered solemnly Professed Nun at the Carmel of the Holy Cross, Iron Mountain, Michigan since October 1, 2010.

... And whatever happened to the little bird? When it let itself be captured, its heart was beating so violently out of fear. I held it in my hands until it calmed down. I kissed its little forehead and let it free. It again found some strength to fly away to rest on a tree. There, on top of the highest branch it sang the sweetest hymn of thanksgiving...