



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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September 17, 2009  
Saint Hildegard

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“**W**HAT is the primary and ultimate need of our beloved and Holy Church?” asked Pope Paul VI. “It is the need for the Holy Spirit, Who gives life to and sanctifies the Church. ... The Church needs the Holy Spirit in each one of us” (November 29, 1972). The Holy Spirit is in fact our Master in the spiritual life. Sometimes He leaves us alone to act by ourselves—we are then like a small boat being rowed along. It is the Holy Spirit that moves us to act, but we remain in charge, directing our lives. At other times, He Himself drives us through inspirations corresponding to His “gifts.” We are then like a boat powered by its sails—when the wind blows, it moves faster with less fatigue. At these times, we need only give our consent for His work to be realized with little effort and more perfectly. The action of the Holy Spirit through His “gifts” is absolutely remarkable in the life of Blessed Ulrika Nisch, who was beatified by John Paul II on November 1, 1987.

Franzizka Nisch was born on September 18, 1882 in Oberdorf, a village in southwest Germany. She was conceived outside of wedlock, which upset her deeply Christian family. She was nevertheless welcomed, and was baptized the day after she was born. Her mother had met a groom she fell in love with at the inn where she worked. The two young people were extremely poor, and their parents refused to give their consent to the marriage they both wanted. So they thought having a child would get them the permission they hoped for. But it was another year after Franzizka’s birth before Ulrich and Clotilda Nisch could marry. They moved to Unterstadion, a little village near the Danube. They would have fourteen children, of whom only five would reach adulthood—Franzizka was the eldest. Shortly after her birth, she was placed in the care of her grandmother and her aunt Gertrude, her godmother, who lavished affection upon her and gave her a Christian upbringing. At the age of six, Franzizka returned to her parents’ home, but it was extremely difficult for her to adapt to her family environment. Mr. Nisch was very strict and sometimes acted harshly toward his eldest child. Nevertheless, Franzizka fulfilled her duties conscientiously and showed the greatest respect towards her parents, drawing her strength from prayer from this time on. She felt a special attraction to the tabernacle and the image of Our Lady in the nearby chapel.

Franzizka earned average grades at the school in Unterstadion, but she was a very assiduous catechism student. After school, she would return home to do whatever she could to help the family. “Franzizka was truly good,” one of her friends would later say. “She was calm and a little awkward... She didn’t think of herself, and did not draw attention to herself in any-

thing.” After five years of school, the girl returned to the home of her aunt Gertrude to help her in the kitchen of the inn she ran with her husband, and to look after her three boys.

### **Receivers**

On April 21, 1895, she made her first Holy Communion and, the same year, received Confirmation. From then on, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, already received at Baptism along with sanctifying grace and its related virtues, acted fully in her. These gifts are like receivers that enable us to capture the inspirations from the Holy Spirit, as sails make it possible to capture a gust of wind to propel the boat forward. In this manner, the soul is made capable of accomplishing the most perfect works of the Christian life, continuously and without effort, with a tranquil joy, in spite of the sacrifices they call for and the difficulties encountered. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are not extraordinary phenomena; they help us in the minutest details as well as in the most important actions of our lives.

In 1898, Franzizka moved into the home of an uncle who owned a grocery in Sauggart. Paid for her work, she was able to help her parents financially. However, the work exceeded her strength—she had to look after the business and the housework, and care for very young children, alongside her mentally ill aunt. Day after day, unjustified criticism and complaints rained down on her. At the end of a year, she left Sauggart and went to Biberach to work in a bakery. Then she learned that German servants were better paid in Switzerland than in their own country, so in October 1901, she entered into the service of the Morger family in Rorschach, Switzerland, where she took care of four children.

In 1904, Franzizka suffered a bout of facial erysipelas (an acute skin infection) so serious that her life was feared for. At the hospital, she made the acquaintance of the Sisters of the Holy Cross of Ingenbohl. In 1844, Father Theodosius Florentini, a Capuchin, founded in Switzerland the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, who would devote themselves to teaching and assisting the poor. In 1856, a new branch of the Congregation was established with Mother Theresa Scherer (beatified by Pope John Paul II on October 29, 1995) to care for the sick. It was these Sisters of Charity of the Holy Cross who established a motherhouse in Ingenbohl and soon branched out to other countries. These Sisters' spirit of sacrifice, prayer, and abandonment to God made such an impression on Franzizka that she decided to become a nun. On October 17, 1904, she entered the Sisters of the Holy Cross, in their convent in Hegne, a small German village on the shore of Lake Constance. She was assigned to help in the kitchen. The work was exhausting and required sacrifices, such as often having to go without Mass and Communion during the week, and missing common prayer and recreation. For the second part of her postulancy, she was sent to another house, in Zell-Weierbach. At this house, there were only three nuns and the Superior, who was elderly and suffering, and in need of an assistant. Franzizka replaced her in the kitchen, worked on the upkeep of the house, which soon gleamed with cleanliness, and cared for the sick. Rather than her piety suffering from this, it became even more intense.

### ***The Father's sweet name***

Franzizka was sustained by the gift of piety. This gift helps us to form in the depths of our souls the sweet name of the heavenly Father, with a bit of the accent JESUS used when He said it. This sense of the divine fatherhood first leads us to consider others as children of the same Father—in our relations with them, we have the same gentleness and tenderness as with the Father. Awareness of being a child of the Father removed Franzizka from all anxiety and lack of trust in God and His Providence. In addition, the Holy Spirit taught her to make her work a prayer. No violent effort or affected attitude is needed for us to want to think always of God, just a simple uninhibited awareness of the presence of God. Thanks to the gift of piety, Franzizka realized that Christ was her Spouse, and that she was very closely united to the Holy Spirit. She also had a great devotion to the Blessed Virgin, Saint Joseph, Saint Francis of Assisi, as well as her guardian angel. From childhood she had been blessed with the special privilege of being able to see her guardian angel. In her innocence, she thought that everyone was able to do so. When she realized her error, she was upset for days, fearing that this grace was only an illusion.

Called back to Hegne to begin her novitiate, she took the religious habit on April 24, 1905, with the name Sister Ulrika (after her father's first name, Ulrich—Saint Ulrich was the bishop of Augsburg). The next day, she returned to her work in the kitchen. This was not what she had longed for. The work was hard, but she was able to adapt to this situation. When asked, "How do you manage to bear the heat of the stove, endure the humiliations, and get so much work done?" she invariably replied, "Out of love for the Saviour. For the Saviour, one can do everything." Sister Ulrika was sometimes absent-minded and, now and again, a mishap occurred. One evening as she was preparing a refreshment for the sisters who would be toiling over the laundry until late into the night, she forgot to take it to them. Another time, having promised a novice to load the stove for her, she put the coal not on the fire but in the ash-pan. This earned her severe reprimands, but she maintained her calm. "One can at least make her some remarks," noted Sister Adama, the cook in charge; "she does not take offense at it in the least."

### ***Benefits of community life***

Sister Ulrika made her religious profession on April 24, 1907. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she continued simply and humbly to live community life, which is a protection against the dangers of false asceticism and false piety. This was an especially necessary safeguard for a soul like Sister Ulrika's, elevated to mystical life in which one runs the risk of losing the way in egocentricity. Community life lived seriously prevents self-absorption. From morning to night, obedience to the rule, renunciation of self and one's own desires, considerate attention for the opinions, desires, and interests of others—all these encourage Charity, which as the Apostle said is *patient and kind; it is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful* (1 Cor. 13:4-5). Always present at community prayer, meals, and recreation when her obligations did not keep her in the kitchen, Sister Ulrika was not sullen. She was able to laugh heartily with the others. However, she continued to be drawn to contemplation. "Yes," she wrote in her diary, "I even have trouble saying the Breviary. I always feel driven to repose in love." She allowed herself to be guided by the gift of wisdom that enlightened her soul and that led her to savor the things of God, Whose infinite perfections she tasted—life in the Trinity, mercy, justice, eternity, simplicity, etc.

The day after her profession, Sister Ulrika was sent to Bühl, Germany, where she oversaw the hospital kitchen. A stubborn and inflexible maidservant who also worked in the kitchen caused the nuns continual problems—it was true that she was overworked. Contrary to all expectations, Sister Ulrika managed to live in peace with her, knowing, according to the occasion, when to give in or

wisely prevent problems. It was truly a relief for the Superior. Sister Ulrika knew, with an amazing certainty, how to seize the opportune moment, find the right word, do what had to be done, thanks to the gift of counsel. This gift perfects the virtue of prudence, and makes the individual able to see rightly, to discern in specific instances what is best for oneself and for others, and urges him or her to do it immediately, even in the most ordinary actions in life.

One day when she was asked what she meditated on, Sister Ulrika replied, "On God's attributes. What I love most is to contemplate the divine simplicity." The gift of knowledge, which makes faith more perfect, enabled her to delve deeply into the mysteries of God and the hidden meaning of the words of Scripture. In particular, she perceived the profound meaning of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, which for her was "the greatest thanksgiving, the most elevated and most powerful sacrifice of supplication, the greatest joy and the greatest happiness." She "spoke of the divine attributes so sublimely," one of her sisters recounted, "that, with my weak human understanding, I didn't comprehend it, and I was astonished—where did this simple sister get such knowledge?"

### ***An amazing serenity***

In October 1908, Sister Ulrika was transferred to the Saint Vincent house in Baden-Baden, of which Sister Bonaventura would soon become Superior. Capable, energetic, meticulously exacting, this Superior gladly made her superiority known to others. As she came to know the young sister working in the kitchen, Sister Bonaventura became convinced of her rare virtue. Sister Ulrika worked under the direction of a sister who lacked self-control, often acted rudely toward others, and even tended toward alcoholism. Sister Ulrika's simplicity aggravated her, and she became jealous of the veneration the other kitchen workers had for her. One day, her irritation peaked, and led her to harshly humiliate her assistant. The young sister remained silent, but could not hold back her tears. Discreetly slipping away to take refuge in the chapel, she returned shortly thereafter, her cheeks still wet, but her face calm and smiling. One sister who witnessed the incident reported, "I would have really scolded Sister Ulrika for allowing herself to be treated like that without reacting. If it were me at that moment, I would have been capable of knocking that sister senseless." The Superior would later say, "If Sister Ulrika had not received remarkable graces, she would not have been capable of enduring her great trials with such serenity." We can see in Sister Ulrika the influence of the gift of fortitude. This gift helps us to perfectly accomplish works of the Christian life in spite of the numerous difficulties and obstacles we encounter. It protects the soul against disordered impulses, the passions, incon-

stancy and capriciousness, and provides it with self-control and perseverance in its steady direction toward good. Without it, one would not be up to the challenge of a difficult task, or a perfect Christian life. One would never master the art of willingly sacrificing one's own time, health, or life out of faithfulness to one's vocation, whatever it might be. At times, the gift of fortitude confers a vigor and tenacity that far surpass what is humanly possible, as in the case of the martyrs, for example.

Sister Ulrika suffered from severe headaches and a catarrh that developed into a suppurating maxillary sinusitis. She courageously endured the surgery that became necessary, then calmly took up her work again. She was convinced that if one trusted in God and in His help, one would not be abandoned. "No confidence in myself, but full confidence in God, that's the best," she said. In the light of contemplation, she grasped the value of humility and humiliation. She clearly understood that the most profound reason for the numerous occasions in which she was criticized or scolded was that God permitted it. They were, above all, means of becoming more closely united with JESUS, Who Himself had been scorned.

### ***Little kind gestures***

Peaceful and joyful, Sister Ulrika kept up everyone's spirits with amusing retorts. She taught beautiful hymns to the young women she supervised in the kitchen, and sometimes even danced with them. Her love for her neighbor was revealed in particular toward an unfortunate employee, Gusti. When she was quite young, she had been working in an inn where she met a seducer. Pregnant and abandoned, tortured by anguish and despair, she gave birth to a child that she threw in a ditch. Sentenced to three years in prison, she was soon paroled for good behavior. The Sisters of the Holy Cross had taken her in, but those around her kept an eye on her and distanced themselves from her. Informed of what had happened to this young woman, Sister Ulrika began to give her special attention. It was difficult, because the young woman had an implacable hatred for everyone. Sister Ulrika prayed and offered God her daily humiliations and sufferings for her protégée's conversion. Little by little, thanks to Sister Ulrika's little kind gestures, smiles, and words of comfort, Gusti's mood changed and she became sociable. "Sister Ulrika gave me a new soul," she would later affirm. Gusti eventually became happily married.

Sister Ulrika expressed one of her greatest sufferings in these words: "In spite of the numerous graces, still many flaws!" She was referring to lapses that escaped others' notice, errors of weakness, omission, and haste due to human weakness. She confessed to a priest: "Relations with my fellow sisters are becoming more

difficult by the day. I can't put up with much of anything, especially in the morning. If only nobody would say anything... because often I am so mad!" She commented again: "I am not happy with myself at all... how weak I am on this point (love of food)!" Nevertheless, she wrote to a Sister: "We can and we must weep for our sins, but we must not lose courage and become fearful. Every mistake must strengthen you in humility and be useful to you in making you realize your nothingness more and more." Sister Ulrika was imbued with the gift of fear of the Lord. This gift is a fear of displeasing God and losing His love. It is a keen awareness of God's holiness that penetrates the soul with all its faculties, and even the body with its senses, awakening in the individual an efficacious hatred for sin. Sister Ulrika begged for mercy for all sinners: "O gentle Heart of JESUS, save them! Cure Your people! If I could make them all know Love, and make them feel JESUS' blazing thirst!"

### **"We're going home"**

In 1912, Sister Ulrika became very weak and mustered all her strength to continue her work. A medical examination revealed that she had an advanced case of tuberculosis. The patient did not seem surprised. To her Superior, who reproached her for having kept quiet about her illness, she replied, "We're going home. Our homeland is in heaven and not here on earth. I am glad to be dying." This aspiring for the celestial homeland made her say: "We must have more concern for the future life that lasts forever, than for the earthly life that passes." Enlightened by the gift of knowledge, Sister Ulrika was aware of the brevity and insignificance of earthly things, of their inability to satisfy our hearts that are eager for true happiness. She understood the fleeting nature of all that typically arouses man's ambition: money, honors, knowledge, and even health. However,

this conviction, which frees us from the excessive influence of created things is, by the same gift of knowledge, combined with the capacity to see in created things the beauty, goodness, and value that God has placed in them. In fact, the gift of knowledge gives a greater purity to our perspective and shows in created things a reflection of the Creator's goodness, wisdom, beauty, and holiness. However insignificant in themselves, created things thus become a means of lifting oneself up to God. For Sister Bonaventura, Sister Ulrika's prayer was similar to that of Saint Francis, who saw God through everything in creation.

Hospitalized, Sister Ulrika received very attentive care. To those who expressed their sympathy to her, she replied, smiling: "When I am in heaven, I will pray for you." She even found a way to joke about her new condition: "Now I'm leading the good life, like the patients who take the cure here—eating well, going for walks, sleeping!" In September 1912, the doctors requested she be transferred to Hegne. There she did not receive spiritual direction, which was very painful for her. "I have no one with whom to speak about my interior life," she wrote to Sister Bonaventura. "Now I no longer have any consolations, neither divine or human, and sometimes it's very hard." Another suffering for her was the temptation to believe that everything she had experienced with the Lord was nothing but an illusion that had come from the enemy.

She spent her last days in uninterrupted prayer. Her rosary did not leave her hands. When her coughs shook her, she repeated, "Everything for my beloved Lord!" On the evening of May 8, 1913, a nurse came to her bed to see if she needed anything when, in the next room, another sick sister began a violent coughing fit. "Go first to that sister," murmured Sister Ulrika. When the nurse returned, Sister Ulrika had died.

Pope John Paul II said, "The doctrine on the gifts of the Holy Spirit remains a very useful teaching in the spiritual life, one which directs us to an ongoing dialogue with the Holy Spirit and trusting and loving abandonment to His direction... This is why it is fundamentally important that we remain in union with Him" (April 3, 1991). Let us ask Blessed Ulrika Nisch to obtain for us a great docility toward the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives. May MARY, the Queen of all the saints, Mother and Refuge of sinners, obtain this grace for us!

*Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.*

*P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it. – Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.*

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