

APRIL 6, 2014



Pope Francis appoints members to abuse commission

Pontiff includes American Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley and four laywomen among the chosen > [NEWS ANALYSIS, PAGE 5](#)

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Persecution fears arise in Ukraine

With a history of intolerance and Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests having already been kidnapped, Church leaders nervously wait and watch for the next move after Russian forces take over Crimean peninsula.

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One woman spreads the Faith



After moving to the United States at 18 years old, a Ukrainian immigrant converts to Catholicism and begins spreading hope and healing to her native country through the nonprofit Chalice of Mercy.

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AMEN!

Learn to say 'yes' to God, and meet many in religious life who already have.

Opening your heart to Christ's will through the discernment process — and participating in the sacraments — is key in deciding if life as a priest, deacon or religious is right for you.

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MISSION

One woman brings faith to the faithless

Ever since Ukrainian-born Valentyna Pavsyukova found the Faith, she has worked to bring it to others

By Christopher Ruff

In early March, something significant happened in Ukraine that did not make international news. A shipment that had been blocked by Ukrainian customs for more than a year was finally released, and a young woman by the name of Valentyna rejoiced.

The shipment included wheelchairs, crutches, cribs, mattresses, diapers and baby bottles — all and more of which had been collected in the United States and shipped to Ukraine to be used in several orphanages and a hospice. The organization coordinating the distribution was Chalice of Mercy, founded by Ukrainian-born Valentyna Pavsyukova and a friend in 2007.

A fresh start

The story behind Chalice of Mercy exemplifies how God uses the little and the humble to do his work. Pavsyukova left her homeland for Medford, Wis., in 2002, at the age of 18. Her name had been picked in the U.S. Government Green Card Lottery in which her mother had entered her the year before without telling her.

Arriving in Medford with a cosmetology license but almost no English skills, Pavsyukova stayed with a Ukrainian couple and found her first job at Black River Industries, which provides employment and training for people with disabilities. The work immediately affected her.

“In Ukraine you never see people with disabilities in public,” Pavsyukova told Our Sunday Visitor. “They are put out of sight in institutions; their families are ashamed of them and see them almost as a curse. This is part of their mentality. But here I was in Medford, working with people with sometimes severe disabilities, and they were the ones taking care of me, helping me when I couldn’t understand things in English. This was a great first conversion.”

A spiritual conversion would soon follow. Pavsyukova had grown into adolescence in her native city of Zaporozhye with very little exposure to faith, due to the lingering effects of reli-

gious suppression even after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. But she was deeply touched by the example of her grandmother. As a child, Pavsyukova was certain her grandmother was “the holiest person in the world.” She had enshrined an icon of Mary and Jesus in her bedroom, and one day she told Pavsyukova, “I must teach you Our Father prayer. When times are going to be hard for you, you must pray it.”

Times were indeed hard in Medford, a small town utterly foreign to a homesick girl an ocean away from her family, her friends and her city of more than a million inhabitants.

Things didn’t get much easier when Pavsyukova moved to the city of Marshfield in 2003 to take a job as a hairdresser. There were pockets of immigrants from Slavic countries in Marshfield, but the party life they favored was not what she wanted. An immigrant lady in Medford had given her a Russian Bible, and many evenings Pavsyukova found herself reading it. She recalled that “the Gospels were coming alive for me.” Each day she would drive past the Church of St. John the Baptist on her way to work. “I wanted so much to go inside, but I just didn’t have the courage,” she said.

A conversion

One morning Pavsyukova awoke with a great heaviness in her heart and prayed, “O God, help me, heal me, because I cannot do this on my own anymore.” That prayer, together with a passage she found in a book, would mark a turning point. The passage read, “If you want to love God, call him your Father and ask him to come into your heart.”

“The first prayer I had known was the Our Father, and now this prayer — ‘Father, come into my heart,’” she said. “It would make a tremendous difference in my life.”

Pavsyukova moved to Chipewewa Falls in 2004 and began to feel a fascination with Catholicism. A Catholic co-worker helped explain the Church’s practices and teach-

CONVERSION IN MEDJUGORJE



Valentyna Pavsyukova prepares to teach the Rosary to a group of doctors while on pilgrimage in Medjugorje. Photo courtesy Christopher Ruff

One important component of the work of Chalice of Mercy has been to take doctors, especially OB/GYNs, on pilgrimage to Medjugorje, the town in Bosnia-Herzegovina where it is claimed that the Blessed Virgin Mary began appearing to a group of six children in June 1981, calling for conversion, prayer and fasting. (A Vatican commission recently completed a comprehensive study of the visions and events associated with Medjugorje and turned over its findings to Pope Francis, who has not yet made any statements on the matter.)

Valentyna Pavsyukova was profoundly affected by a personal pilgrimage to Medjugorje in the spring of 2008 and began taking groups of Ukrainian youth and eventually members of the Ukrainian medical community that Chalice of Mercy was already working with. Forty-seven doctors attended the first doctors’ pilgrimage organized by Chalice of Mercy in the spring of 2011. Since then, there have been 21 such pilgrimages, with more than 700 doctors participating. The weeklong pilgrimages have three main components: prayer, conferences and visits to charitable enterprises in Medjugorje. Most of the doctors who participate are Orthodox by baptism, but non-practicing. Very few are Catholic. In Medjugorje they learn to pray the Rosary for the first time and attend outdoor evening programs that include Mass and Eucharistic adoration.

“Our mission is not to make them Catholic after a week, but to help them feel at home in our hearts and to unwrap them from the cocoon they are in, but gently,” Pavsyukova said. “And when they hear that to be a doctor is not just a profession, but a beautiful vocation in which they touch the living bodies of the children of God, they are inspired and gain a totally new perspective on life.”

One doctor who oversees all OB/GYNs in a large region of Ukraine attended a pilgrimage in the spring of 2012 and had an experience while climbing a rocky hillside to pray the Rosary.

“When we started to climb I could no longer see stones in front of me, because I saw them all turned to bones and skulls — a mountain of bones and skulls,” she told her fellow doctors the next day. “And I could see clearly what I had done. I had destroyed a city with my own hands. Then in my heart I felt that God could forgive me, and that I could change my life.”

Pages could be filled with stories of conversion that are less spectacular but just as deep. In Pavsyukova’s words: “I would not need to see another miracle in my life — the miracle of these doctors is enough.”

ings to Pavsyukova and one day brought her to Mass.

“At the moment of consecration I thought to myself — I don’t know anything, but I know that this is true,” she said. “Right there in front of me on the altar is the Body of Christ.”

With the support of a growing circle of devoted Catholic friends, she was received into the Catholic Church in 2007.

On fire with her newfound faith, Pavsyukova wanted to

give herself completely to God, but didn’t know how.

“Suddenly I thought of my own people in Ukraine, who were hungry for faith,” she said. “How could I forget them?”

A mission begins

The seeds of what would become Chalice of Mercy began to germinate, and in Pavsyukova’s mind two priorities emerged: the mission would have a medical focus, because so many

hospitals and care facilities in Ukraine were run down and antiquated; and it would be dedicated to God the Father.

When Pavsyukova returned to Zaporozhye to visit her family in 2007, she rejoiced to learn that a Polish priest, Father Jan Sobilo, had come to minister to the small but growing Roman Catholic community. And her joy turned to astonishment

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when she visited the church he had built a year earlier — the Church of God the Merciful Father. Father Sobilo immediately resonated with the mission of Chalice of Mercy and became a spiritual father to Pavsyukova and her cause.

After returning to the United States, Pavsyukova worked with a friend from Chippewa Falls, Sharon Sliwka, to formally establish Chalice of Mercy as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. They partnered with the Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach of Springfield, Ill., to send a 40-foot sea container full of surplus medical equipment from hospitals and manufacturers to Ukraine in the fall of 2009. But just as she was adding hospital birthing beds to the shipment, Pavsyukova realized they could be used not only as beds of new life, but also beds of death through abortion, which is rampant in Ukraine.

“I understood in that moment that our mission must be clearly pro-life,” she said, and resolved that at the heart of Chalice of Mercy would be the promotion of the dignity of all human life. She included in the shipment hundreds of 12-week fetal models, along with pro-life videos and TV monitors to show the development of life in the womb.

In 2009, Chalice of Mercy began organizing pro-life medical conferences in Ukraine that address the sanctity of human life, natural family planning, the beauty of the doctor’s vocation and related topics at hospitals, medical universities, clinics and churches. It also has touched the lives of more than 700 physicians, mostly OB-GYNs, through 21 doctors’ pilgrimages to Medjugorje, with incredible results.

Care for the least

In December 2010, Father Sobilo was ordained an auxiliary bishop. In regular communication with Pavsyukova, he drew her attention to two care facilities in his diocese that needed help. One was the Hospice of St. Michael the Archangel in Zaporozhye, which was run down and unsanitary, and the other was the Orphanage of Kalinovka two hours away, which housed 125 youths, many of them bedridden or otherwise disabled, and which badly needed supplies.

Back in Chippewa Falls, Pavsyukova gave a presentation



Msgr. Roger Scheckel, pastor of St. James Church in La Crosse, Wis., ministers to an orphan in Kalinovka, Ukraine. Courtesy photo

on Chalice of Mercy and spoke of her desire to help the hospice and orphanage. Msgr. Roger Scheckel, pastor of St. James Church in La Crosse, Wis., was in attendance.

“When I heard her speak I was incredibly impressed and I thought to myself, this is the real thing, I’ve got to do something to help,” Msgr. Scheckel said. A no-nonsense priest with a reputation for getting things done, Msgr. Scheckel quickly thought of eight parishioners with the handyman skills to tackle the project. They landed in Kiev on June 6, 2011, and made their way by bus to Zaporozhye.

Assisted by a local man, the team dug into the work at the Hospice of St. Michael the Archangel. They built a brick handicap entrance, refinished peeling plaster walls, replaced barred old windows with new ones allowing ventilation, and gutted bathroom, sanitation and kitchen areas in preparation for new walls, floors and appliances that would be installed. The missionary team then visited the orphanage in Kalinovka and its 125 residents. They brought diapers and new pillowcases and handed out fruit and candy. Most importantly, they spent time with these children who, in the

words of the director, “nobody wants anymore.”

Looking forward

Today, Chalice of Mercy continues in its mission to the hospice and to this and other orphanages. Future plans, as funds allow, include the building of a pregnancy care center in Zaporozhye, which would also house a pro-life clinic — the first of its kind in Ukraine — and a therapy center for children with special needs. There are also tentative plans to build a home for women in crisis in a nearby village.

Surveying the profound fruits and future goals of Chalice of Mercy, one might ask how all this has been possible under the leadership of a young woman who came to the United States as an 18-year-old hairdresser who could barely speak a word of English. Not surprisingly, she refers all the credit to God, through the hands and heart of the Blessed Mother.

“God is the one who gives the providence, and he opens the hearts,” she said. “When we say ‘yes’ to God, he does the rest.”

For more information go to chaliceofmercy.org.

Christopher Ruff writes from Minnesota.

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