

Madeleine Vaes

God's darling

"Immediately I understood then that I no longer needed an altar, priest or sacrifice of the Mass, but Jesus and Jesus alone!"

Heusden, Fall 2020

Dear Reader,

Most people call me Madeleine. Others say Irène, because I used to be called that in the convent. But I call myself a Sunday child, a lucky one. Do you know why? I have become "God's darling". How that came about, you can read in the brief testimony which follows.

I am glad that it has now come to give you a glimpse into my life. This has been on my mind for a long time, but it was not easy for me to put my experiences on paper. Then someone offered to help me and put my story into words. The result is now in your hands. I hope that you will enjoy reading it and that it will also have something to say to you.

A warm greeting!

Madeleine



My birth and my family

On January 19, 1934, I was born in Heusden, in the hamlet of Berkenbos in Belgium. I was the sixth child in a row of eleven. Today we rarely see such large families, but in those days it was common. My parents were simple people with a small farm. There was no question of luxury; you could even say that we suffered from a chronic lack of money. My mother was a woman with a clear mind and a broad interest. Unfortunately she never had the chance to continue her studies, as was often the case in those days, especially for girls.

My childhood and youth

As a child I loved being on the farm. From an early age I enjoyed helping on the farm. I loved riding my horse and cart. As I grew older, I was also able to use them myself. Autumn was

the season we enjoyed most, because the harvest was brought in then. Autumn still appeals to me, because I still carry those pleasant memories with me.

The hard life on the farm taught me to stand up for myself. I was strong and quick-witted and did not hesitate to teach even boys a lesson if necessary. They could, if they had to, get a beating from me, even if they were sometimes even older than I was.

There was also something in our family that I suffered from, namely my parents' marriage, which was not exactly harmonious. Apparently they were too different in nature and were each on a different wavelength. (Fortunately, their relationship improved later on.) The tensions I experienced at home made me think about my own future. I wondered whether I would later dare to be married. My final conclusion was a firm "no"! When I was fifteen years old I took the final decision never to marry. But staying at home for ever did not seem attractive to me either. Therefore I chose to enter the convent, as soon as I would get permission from my parents.



To the convent

In my case, as you will understand, going to the convent was more of an escape than a matter of vocation. Undoubtedly, there were girls in those days who entered out of an inner conviction, but there will also have been many who, like me, ended up there for other reasons.

My parents were not very enthusiastic about my plans to go to the convent, but they did not really oppose it either. (In a way it was an honor for parents if one of their children chose the monastic life). They did, however, set the condition that I would not enter before I was twenty-one years old. A month before I turned twenty-one, they finally let me go. It was December 8, 1954. I entered the Order of St. Philip Neri in St. Niklaas. That was quite a step.

A new world

As a farmer's daughter, I loved the outdoors, but now I was suddenly between high monastery walls in the city. I had to literally make an effort to see a piece of heaven. But in a monastery you are expected to discover something of a "different heaven". Doesn't such an existence lead you closer to God? Unfortunately, I saw very little of that heaven either.

I remember once being alone in the building with an elderly nun. We heard an ice-cream van approaching, ringing its bell loudly. It was unthinkable that we, as sisters, would approach it on our own initiative. We also lacked the means to afford such a refreshment. But this older sister, whom I looked up to with respect, said that she was in such a hurry for an ice cream. Then she secretly opened the kitchen nurse's cash box, took out some money and hurried to get the treat for herself and me. I remember now how I was deeply shocked. I could not

understand how this sister, who in my eyes was already so far advanced in her service to God, could act in such a way. The ice cream therefore tasted 'bittersweet'. No, I did not get a glimpse of heaven, but I did discover how insidious the heart of every human being is, even in the convent.

Besides the practical tasks that were assigned to us, such as ironing, which I learned very well there, we also had to keep to the strict daily order, of course. We got up at the crack of dawn to go to the chapel for prayer. That was always a difficult task for me. All my life I have been an evening person and I am never at my best early in the morning. So it happened repeatedly that I arrived late for these prayer times. Then I was stared at by the other sisters as a great sinner who was not serious about her duties.



A reason for gratitude

Even though I then discovered that monastic life was not a life in paradise, I was grateful to be able to study there. I was offered the possibility to follow a training for a teacher, which I completed with success. After that I was allowed to teach from the convent for a number of years, which I still regard as a great privilege. This would certainly not have happened if I had stayed at home with my parents.

Rivalry in the monastery

Later, within the monastery, I was entrusted with the task of a superior. I had never thought of it and certainly not aspired to it, but it was simply assigned to me. This was very much against the grain of another sister, who apparently coveted the post. It soon became clear that her jealousy had been aroused and that from then on I had fallen completely out of favor with her. After a certain time, she opened an offensive. She decided to keep an eye on me and to report to the head of the main convent whatever irregularity she thought to have seen in me. She accused me of the craziest things. It happened, for example, that I sometimes had to speak to male guests. Then she kept a record of how long such a contact lasted. Then she informed the Vicar about my 'inappropriate behavior'. The atmosphere finally became so oppressive that convent life had little to offer me in the long run. I experienced those last years as a real hell. But in the end the matter resolved itself ...

Escaped from the cage

By now it was 1983. So by then I had been in the monastery for twenty-nine years. I can say that during the first twenty-two years I did feel more or less in place. But those last seven years, as I said, were sometimes agonizing.

During that time I was part of a small "annexe" to the main monastery. The decision was taken from on high that this house should be closed. This meant that we, the residents, had to be housed elsewhere. But that was not as easy as we thought; finding a suitable solution for each of us was not possible. After some deliberation, I myself decided to leave the monastic life behind me. It was again December 8, the same date as my entry, but now

twenty-nine years later. This was another big step, perhaps just like before. But then I stepped into the cage, now I step out....

On suspension now?



I was no longer a nun now. But even though I was no longer 'active as a nun', I was not 'inactive' for that reason. I ended up in the care for the elderly and later also received a responsible task to which I gladly devoted myself. In a certain respect I experienced my work at that time as relaxing, compared to the way I used to perform my tasks. I no longer had to do my work in order to prove myself as a religious, but now I did it because I simply wanted to give the best to the people who were entrusted to my care.

Later my brother came to live in my home, because he became needy. (Still later he also became demented.) We both experienced this as a wonderful combination: I enjoyed his company and he received the care he needed.

What about my faith during this time?

Although leaving a monastery is a drastic event, it did not shake my conviction as a Catholic believer. I continued to attend Mass faithfully and believed in God. Although I had experienced much infidelity among people who claimed to be believers, I still held to the view that God Himself is faithful and will remain so. I even had a sticker on the back window of my car at that time that said, "God is faithful"!

But strangely enough, this God, whom I believed in all my life, always remained vague to me until that time. I believed He existed, but I had no real relationship with Him. But I didn't suffer for that, at least not consciously, because I hardly ever thought about whether this was possible at all. So I lived on, as a good Catholic, and the years passed.

A new horizon

When I was seventy-two years old, something special occurred. My sister-in-law, with whom I had a lot of contact, told me that her sister regularly had a Bible circle at home. She asked me to go with her to attend such an evening. My interest was piqued immediately. I did have a Bible, but I didn't really know how to use it. How should I read it? How should I understand it? In the monastery they sometimes made jokes about Biblical figures. For example, the Bible tells us that Paul, on his way to Damascus, met Jesus, which made him a Christian. We would then make a pun and say (in our dialect), "Paul was on his way to 'the masks'..."

Then one evening in 2006 I went with my sister-in-law to the Bible circle. This circle had been formed some time before around the sickbed of René, my sister-in-law's brother-in-law. René suffered from a serious muscle disease and would later die from it. At that time he had been bedridden for eight years and until recently had been very depressed because of his condition. But when someone had told him about Jesus from the Bible, a great change had come. Living with Jesus, he was told, is really living, without Him you are in a sense 'living dead'. When René heard this, the message appealed to him so much that he came to a sincere faith in Jesus with all his heart. The change that followed in his life was remarkable.

Photographs from before showed how gloomy he was and images from after showed a happy man. Yet nothing had changed in his physical condition. He still lay paralyzed on his bed. This experience led René and his wife to say, "A lot more people need to hear this." So they had opened their home for these evenings and invited other people to attend.

When I arrived there that first evening, there were about eight to ten people present. They were all sitting around René's bed. The change in his life had apparently made an impression on them, because all sorts of questions were raised and answered from the Bible. Sometimes René would also contribute, although his speech had almost completely disappeared. With the help of a letter board he was able to express himself and give expression to his faith. I found it all fascinating. But I wanted so much to learn to read the Bible myself, in such a way that I would actually understand its meaning. It turned out that it was also the intention to bring the visitors of this circle to this end. So I decided to attend again the next time; it was clear to me that I could learn something here. But that this Bible-reading, not very long afterwards, would change my life so profoundly, I had no idea at the time...

Enriching evenings, which also troubled me somewhat

So, as mentioned, I returned to learn more about the Bible. A new world opened up for me. My knowledge of the Bible was very limited. Even in the monastery I had been taught very little from it. What appealed to me was that the Bible is so practical in everyday life, even though it is a book from a distant past. But also the person of Jesus gradually became more and more a living reality for me.

Although I enjoyed these evenings, after a while a certain uneasiness arose in me. I wondered whether, because of the new insights I was receiving, I might come into conflict with my church, with which I had been familiar since childhood and which I also loved. I decided to raise this point with the man who spoke at these evenings. I told him that I liked coming to this circle, but that I could not and would not let go of my church. He assured me that this was not the purpose of these evenings either. The point, he said, was that people would come to understand the Bible better and they would come to know Jesus personally. That explanation reassured me at the time.

But after a while a bomb exploded....

Not very long after I told him I did not want to leave my church, another Bible night was arranged. The theme was, "Jesus cleanses the temple," from the Gospel of John. The significance of the temple in the time of Jesus was explained. That was the place where God dwelt, in the midst of his people Israel. There lambs and other animals were sacrificed on an altar, for the forgiveness of the sins of the people. Priests acted as mediators between God and people in this process, because people could not come directly to God because of their sins and failings.

On that evening, it was April 24, 2006, we were told that all this symbolism refers to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. When He died on the cross, He was "the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world". That was a statement I knew well from Mass, but had never understood. At His death, Jesus exclaimed: "It is finished!" The price for man's guilt was then paid by Him, "paid out". Jesus was literally "the scapegoat". Therefore, we were told, there is now no need for sacrifice ever again. So an altar is no longer needed, nor priests to mediate

between God and people, because Jesus is the Mediator. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Whoever now sincerely believes in Jesus, it was said at the time, receives forgiveness for everything he or she has ever done wrong. The resurrection of Jesus, which followed his death, confirmed the reliability of this gospel, of this "glad tidings".

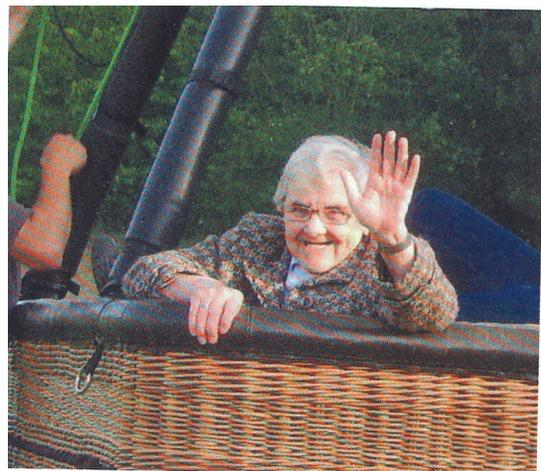
Hearing all this, a bomb exploded for me. At that moment I actually saw, in my mind, an altar exploding with great force. Immediately I understood then that I no longer needed an altar, priest or sacrifice, but Jesus and Jesus alone! The turnaround that this insight brought about for me was unprecedented; I felt "reborn" afterwards.

A completely new life

From that moment on I came to know Jesus as a living Lord, as my Savior and best Friend. I also opened my heart to Him and the joy that I received in my life is indescribable. Now I am 86 years old. Physically I have lost a lot of my strength, but I have never felt so happy as I do in this phase of my life. In fact, I'm only really living now. It is true what was said earlier, "Jesus is 'The Life'!" I no longer pray my breviary, but can speak freely, from my heart, to God. Mistakes, which unfortunately I still commit, I no longer have to go and tell a confessor, as I used to. Now I can go to Jesus for that. I no longer have to fear death, hell or purgatory, because Jesus has freed me from judgment; after all, He paid the penalty in my place. Jesus is my Good Shepherd, who leads me, assists me, comforts me and from whom I can still learn a lot. Even in this time of crisis because of the coronavirus which so many elderly people fear, I may experience His peace and tranquility. Even though, due to these circumstances, I have lived a more or less isolated life in my apartment for quite some time, He does not abandon me. How happy may I be. The Bible, God's word, is my guide. Yes, really: I am a "Sunday child"!

God's darling?

Am I now "God's darling"? In a certain sense, yes, but not in the sense that I have an advantage over others before God. Through faith in Jesus I have become His beloved child. But God is also looking for you in His love. And if you, through my testimony, would find that same peace that I found in Jesus, then I would find that wonderful. That is my heart's desire for you and everyone who reads this! Jesus Himself invites you, for He said: "Come to Me, you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. My yoke is soft and My burden is light." (Matthew 11,28+30)



He is the Good Shepherd! If you accept His invitation, you will become "God's darling" like me. I couldn't wish for anything better, could I? Would you like to think about these things? It is more than worth it!

You are welcome to respond

Maybe my story raises questions for you, as it did for me before. Then it is certainly possible to react. You can do that through the address of good friends of mine:

Luc and Lieve Swennen-Lenaerts
Lijsterbesstraat 10
B-3583 Paal-Berlingen
luc.swennen45@gmail.com
Tel. (0032)(0)477/31.32.11

(Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version))