

# FAITHFUL TO THE SPIRIT

Blessed Maria Helena  
1852-1900



by  
Anselm Gruen, OSB

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Translated by  
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Divine Word Missionaries • Techny, Illinois  
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## FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

High up on a mountain slope, it can happen that the hidden beauty of a mountain flower suddenly takes us by surprise. Or maybe we have the good fortune to see the wondrous construction of a snowflake under a microscope, and we catch our breath as the beauty of the Supreme Artist unfolds before us. Something similar could happen while reading the pages that follow, as they bring us closer to the life and spirituality of Helena Stollenwerk, cofoundress of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters.

It gives us great pleasure to introduce Anselm Gruen's study of Helena Stollenwerk to English-speaking readers. The author, a Benedictine monk, is one of the most widely read spiritual writers in German-speaking areas today. Many of his books, several of which have been translated into English, deal with spirituality, psychology, and related topics.

His unique talent and gentle empathy have enabled him to sketch a portrait of Helena Stollenwerk that highlights surprising new traits, even for those who are familiar with her history and spirituality. Yet, at the same time, we recognize her as the one we have known for a long time. We feel, "Yes! That is Helena!"

In the first chapter, relying on Sr. Ortrud Stegmaier's studies of the sources, the author depicts Helena Stollenwerk's life. We can already feel here how deeply Anselm Gruen has comprehended the soul of this

unpretentious, yet great woman. With a few masterly strokes, he sketches the contours of the image of Helena Stollenwerk that he wishes to highlight in the second part of the book.

It seems that Helena Stollenwerk was not called to creatively develop her own spirituality. Rather, from among the devotions and spiritual trends of her times, she chose those that corresponded to her personal vocation, disregarding others. She interiorized what she chose, to the extent that she was able to express her deepest personal spirituality through them. It is pointed out that from this we can learn from her to take a discriminating look at our own contemporary trends and challenges and to choose what provides a response to the needs of our times and the call of today's people for salvation, happiness, and fulfillment.

Anselm Gruen also shows us which of Helena's attitudes are significant for us today in order to live her charism and spirituality creatively in our day and age. As she journeyed toward God, she learned to listen to him and to discern his voice in her feelings and dreams and in the words of others. Fidelity to the Spirit and to the word God spoken within her, ultimately led her to the goal of her desires, although in the end it turned out rather differently from what she had imagined and so much desired.

With great sensitivity the author pays tribute to Helena's love for eucharistic adoration, a love that permeated her entire life and reached its climax in her

transfer to the Adoration Sisters. “She felt at home before the tabernacle. There she found her heart’s desire.”

Anselm Gruen then points out three main features that characterize Helena’s spirituality: veneration of the Sacred Heart, veneration of the Holy Spirit, and veneration of Jesus’ infancy. He describes the challenge that these forms of devotion pose for us today and how they can help us to allow the founding charism to bear fruit in our times and in our own lives.

Finally, the author portrays Helena Stollenwerk as a missionary woman who had the courage to trust the voice of God in her own heart and thereby developed the ability to overcome all resistance and the narrow bounds that confined women in the Church of her day.

Her trust in the God of tenderness and consolation, whom she experienced in the depths of her own heart, enabled her to follow her own personal path, as well as to make new ways of working in the missions possible. In this she proved herself a pioneer and a foundress who made her own gifts fruitful for others. May this book help its readers make their own gifts of grace and their own charisms fruitful in a new and deeper way.

*Sr. Agada Brand, SSpS  
Superior General, Rome*



## INTRODUCTION TO THE GERMAN EDITION

With the beatification on May 7, 1995, of Helena Stollenwerk, the cofoundress of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, comes a message from the Church that has meaning for all of us. From the small, unimportant village of Rollesbroich and with a nineteenth-century spirituality, Helena Stollenwerk can still share with us a viewpoint of God and human existence today. In many ways, the study of her life and spirituality touched me deeply. After I worked my way through the initially strange language and uncovered the fascinating personality of this woman, I could not get her out of my mind. I perceived in this woman from the narrow world of a small village, a broadness of heart and a warmth of love that far surpassed the moralizing spirituality of the last century. I was struck by the way that this unlearned woman trusted her perceptions, in opposition to the priests who tried to dissuade her from her path. How faithfully she followed her path. In her fidelity to it, how movingly she experienced both a broadness of heart and the unmeasurable depth of the love of God!

Her life history is not a success story. She was nineteen years of age when she first went to her village pastor for help in pursuing a missionary vocation, and she had to wait another twenty years for its realization. First she had to stay with her parents for ten years until she could make her way to Steyl, Holland. Then she had to work in Steyl as a maid for another ten years until her wish to enter the novitiate could be fulfilled. In spite of all her internal and external crises, she remained true to her vocation. She held fast to her desire to serve God as a missionary and discovered the mystery of God's life in

her fidelity to the unique role that God wanted her to fulfill. She lived only nine years as a Holy Spirit Missionary Sister, seven of them as a superior. Then she entered the novitiate of the community of the Holy Spirit Adoration Sisters. The cofoundress of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters started all over again and died a year later as a novice in the community of Adoration Sisters. That was not a path that led upward, but one that ended hidden in the cloister, with some uncertainty of how both the missionary and the cloistered orders would continue.

Beneath this simple story and this modest woman from a small village hides a saint in whose countenance the merciful love of God was reflected. In the simple words that she addressed to the sisters in Argentina, we find a woman who was totally possessed by a love that could change the world. These letters reveal a woman who makes Christ visible to the world in her own way. The message of Christ reveals itself in her person in a simple and striking way that fascinates the reader. In this book we would like to depict a woman who has been sent from God. We would like to trace the outline of her life in order to understand God's way with her, and to uncover the basic attitudes that characterized her life. Her simple fidelity to the path of God and the trust that God would lead her to a broad world vision are her chief characteristics. We would like to understand her spirituality as one that, looking behind the climate of her time, can show us even today a way to understand the workings of the Holy Spirit and help us to be formed in the same way. Then it will become clear how this simple woman from Rollesbroich in the district of Eifel can share with us a message transcending the narrow scope of her

own horizon. She will show us how to discover fidelity to our own vocation, how to make it fruitful for the world of today, and how God can lead us to the depth of his love.

Someone might ask why a Benedictine monk should write about the cofoundress of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. Well, I was asked, and I gladly undertook the work. An aunt of mine is a Holy Spirit Sister and my uncle is a Divine Word Missionary priest. My mother came from the village of Dahlem, which has a strong relationship with Steyl. Besides her brother and sister, many others from the village entered the missionary communities at Steyl. In a way, then, the study of Blessed Helena was also a tracing of my own roots. Another connection to Steyl came from my membership in the Benedictine Congregation of St. Ottilien. The founder of St. Ottilien, Andreas Amrhein, was in Steyl for some time and consulted with Blessed Arnold about his vocation. For me, then, to read about the cofoundress of the Missionary Sisters, to delve deeper into her life and write about her, has touched and enriched me greatly.

I would like to thank Sister Mechtild Berger who dealt with the cofoundress for many years and was able to answer many of my questions. She also provided me with the sources that Sister Ortrud Stegmaier, SSpS, had compiled and published. I relied heavily upon these sources for the following pages. My work on Blessed Helena has strengthened in me an inner conviction to trust in God, who broadens my heart in his love. God will change me, more and more, to conform to the image of his beloved Son.

*Anselm Gruen, OSB*

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DEDICATION

*To all the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters  
who have ministered in North America*



## PART ONE

### I

Helena was born on November 28, 1852, in Rollesbroich, Germany, a small village in the parish of Simmerath in the Eifel Mountains. Her father was Johann Peter Stollenwerk of Witzerath. He was born on December 19, 1785, and first earned his living as a wagoner. The Eifel district was very poor at that time and could not support its population, so that three percent of the people migrated to the Americas during the nineteenth century. During the Prussian period, the Eifel became known as the poor house of Prussia. The only industry was a spinning factory in Monschau that employed 6,000 men. While the ordinary inhabitants of Eifel did not travel much, the wagoners were well-informed men who brought back much up-to-date news from their travels. Johann Peter Stollenwerk married Anna Katharina, the daughter of another wagoner. According to Napoleonic law he was still a minor at 22 years of age, so he needed the approval of his relatives. After the marriage, he moved to the neighboring village of Rollesbroich, which was in the same county and parish. Nine children were born of this first marriage, three of whom were mute and deaf.

From 1816 on, Johann Peter Stollenwerk registered himself as a "farmer." It seems that he was a very skillful farmer so that he continually increased his property. He bought additional fields and built houses for his children. At a time when many in the Eifel district were leaving for North or South America in search of a better life, Johann Peter Stollenwerk chose to struggle at home, and his efforts bore fruit. He brought his family to moderate prosperity. Prosperity was only relative, however, because the land around Simmerath was barren and the climate was severe. Nevertheless, Helena claimed in her application forms that she came from a financially prosperous family. If she had married, she would have taken along a good piece of fortune in land for her new family. For her, however, there was no need to escape from a desperate life because she was possessed by a different desire.

The first wife of Johann Peter Stollenwerk died in 1833. On August 18, 1836, he married Anna Barbara Stollenwerk, to whom he was related in the third degree of consanguinity. She had been married previously and was widowed since 1835, without children.

Anna Barbara died in 1851 and Johann Peter mar-

ried for the third time on January 22, 1852, to a woman named Anna Maria Bongard. On November 28, 1852, she gave birth to Anna Helena, whom they usually called only "Helena." Helena's father was then 67 and her mother was 27. That Helena was a reticent child is understandable if we consider her family situation. Her half brothers and sisters were much older and could have been her parents. Her father looked more like a grandfather. His distance from his daughter was too great for Helena to become close to him. Also, he was busy away from home so much of the time that Helena hardly knew him, for he was active in both the political and religious life of the community. In 1825 he was appointed deputy mayor of Simmerath by the authorities in Aachen. He also held various offices in the Church, and was the driving force behind a movement to build a church in Rollesbroich, where the community wanted its own church.

In 1855 Helena had a new sister, named Carolina, who died in 1859, three months after the death of her father. Helena was seven years old when her father died on May 27, 1859. She certainly learned from him a sense of responsibility, a readiness to stand up for others, and a tenacity to a chosen course of action, although, as stated, she had never



experienced a close relationship with him. The sudden death of her father and her only fully consanguineal sister had a deep influence upon her. She began to think about the lot of the outcast children in China. Her special interest in a distant land, such as China, dates from this time. After the death of her father, her mother had to think about her own future and that of her only daughter. After some consideration, Anna Maria decided to contract another marriage. On November 24, 1860, she married a widower, Johann Peter Breuer (1814-1894), who had three daughters from a previous marriage. These daughters were closer to Helena than her half brothers and sisters from the first marriage of her father. She had a good relationship with them and felt that they were real sisters and brothers. From the letters that she wrote from Steyl to her parents, one perceives a love for her mother as well as for her step-father who always answered her letters. His concern for the welfare of his family was rooted in a deep and healthy spirituality. He loved Helena as if she were his own daughter.

Admittedly, Helena grew up in a complicated family situation. She knew her real father for only seven years. Her half brothers and sisters were too old for her to build any kind of close relationship

with them. The girls who were closest to her were born of a different marriage. As a result, the family in which Helena grew up had some uncertain conditions. From early childhood she was forced to deal with different groups and reconcile diverse interests. Three impaired children were left from her father's first marriage, one of whom, a mute and deaf sister, remained at home even after the death of her parents, and Helena had to assist in caring for her. Her mother gave birth to another daughter in her second marriage. Her name was Maria (1863-1933). Helena had a cordial relationship with the daughter of her mother.

## II

Helena's parental home was thoroughly Christian. The Church was flourishing during the second half of the nineteenth century. While new parishes were established, an intensive Christian and liturgical life could be observed in all of them. Helena grew up in a living community. She took part in the Sunday Mass and afternoon catechism lessons. What stirred her interest most was the Holy Childhood Association founded in 1843 by the bishop of Nancy and Toul. Its purpose was to awaken the interest of children in the

unfortunate lot of children in mission lands. During the first years, the Holy Childhood Association supported the Chinese missions, but after 1849, the African missions as well. Four times a year, the association published a bulletin in which missionaries told of their experiences. Helena read the bulletins zealously, for they connected her with a wider world at a time when the local school furnished a very narrow outlook on the world. At that time the Prussian King, William IV, reduced the school lessons to three elementary skills: reading, writing, and a small amount of arithmetic. Neither geography nor history were on the curriculum, but there was a daily religion class. The king did not want to have an erudite population for he was convinced that the revolution of 1848 was caused by the liberal formation offered by the schools. He believed that uneducated citizens would not busy themselves with social and political activities. Helen suffered all her life from this lack of basic education and feared that it would stand in the way of learning a foreign language and so prevent her from going to the missions.

The Holy Childhood Association bulletin was a door to the wider world. The Church, with her message from distant foreign missions, brought breadth and freedom when the state education program was so limited. In the bulletins of the Holy Childhood Asso-

ciation, Helena read with interest how poor children in China were left abandoned in marshes. In this way she interrupted her monotonous rural weekday routine and discovered a form of self-education. At a time when there was very little reading material in the countryside, Helena eagerly consumed the publications of the Holy Childhood Association.

The Church of the nineteenth century was alive and in its associations provided protection from the liberalism of the State by offering a point of view that challenged its authoritarian structure. The Holy Childhood Association had the additional task of making clear to the children how thankful they should be for their membership in the Church. The association wished to build up a sense of solidarity among children of the whole world. It conveyed the message that children were not only subjects of the State, but were to be in solidarity with people in other lands who were in much greater need. It also stressed the important responsibility of bringing the message of Christ to people without faith.

In her writings Helena spoke very little of the liturgical life of her parish. Spiritual life for her was bound up with the Holy Childhood Association. It was there that she discovered her own religious charism. She was so impressed by what she read in the bulletins that it

began to have an effect on her aspirations. The Feast of the Holy Innocents, December 28, was the Association's most important annual celebration. She was so impressed by it that she retained her childhood memories for a long time. The Association even composed songs that expressed the sentiments of children with some of them included in the hymn book, as for example, "O Loving Christ Child." Today they seem somewhat sentimental, but this was not the case at that time. Another practice was a drawing held at the time of the devotions. The winner became the godmother or godfather of an unbaptized child, who would be baptized with the winner's name. When Helena was seven years old, her mother did not allow her to go out on the main road to Simmerath to attend devotions because the snow was too deep. She felt very hurt, but one day "when older members were returning from the celebration of the Association, they told me that I would be the godmother of a pagan child, and I rejoiced and felt that my heart was healed" (*Mother Maria's Vocation [Hereafter, Vocation]*, 5).

### III

Helena became responsible for the collection of donations for the Holy Childhood Association when

she was ten years old. She held this position for twenty years, until she entered Steyl on December 30, 1882. She writes about her deep feeling when she read the bulletins of the Association: "It seemed as if I were abroad and news and letters were received from home" (*Vocation*, 6). One must imagine that this young woman did not feel at home in the small village of the Eifel district. Her homeland was the whole world. What moved her most was the lot of the children described in the writings of the Association, especially the unfortunate lot of the Chinese children, about whom the majority of the reports were written. "I often felt deep sympathy, especially for the abandoned pagan children. Then a great longing to be there arose in me, a longing to search out the abandoned children in the swamps, fields, and woods, to bring them to the priests and sisters for baptism in order to have them brought up Catholic. Sometimes I even dreamt that I was there and saved the abandoned children from the swamps" (*Vocation*, 6). In this passage, it is interesting how this child could project herself into the lot of other children to do something for them. The world of the Eifel village was too narrow for her. She wanted to escape and offer herself for the service of others. It is interesting to read how she was confirmed in her desires through her dreams. Many saints found direction on their way through dreams. In a sense,

the road Blessed Helena walked began with a dream. God gave this child a wide horizon and moved her to have a desire to care for children in far-away China.

All Helena's desires were centered on China. She did not learn where China was through geography classes. As a matter of fact, in the beginning she mixed it up with Africa. All of her fascination was centered on China. However, she had some doubts as to whether, as a woman, she would ever get the chance to travel so far and learn the Chinese language. "It often troubled me that I was a girl and I thought that if I were a boy, I had no doubt that I would want to study, become a missionary, and work among the heathens" (*Vocation, 6*). At that time it was much easier for men to become missionaries than for women. Helena did not deny her femininity; she merely complained that, as a woman, she did not have the opportunity to develop as she wished. It was a very bitter pill for her to swallow that she, as a woman, could not pursue the vocation that she so desired, but she did not harbor resentment. She took up her life and followed it with strong self-confidence. She broke through all the cliches connected with a country girl of her time. She read the bulletins again and again, so that her sister once remarked: "I really admire you, if you were a boy, you could go to study!" (*Vocation, 6*). Helena was apparently not satisfied with the narrow-

ness of her education. She saw her role as a woman differently from her friends. She would gladly have studied as a woman in order to help the people in the missions. But at that time it was impossible. Instead of giving in to discouragement, she found inspiration in the examples of the saints, who also broke out of the narrow limits of their surroundings. She wrote: "With the help of God, I can accomplish what the saints did" (*Stegmaier 1994, 61*). And so she could not easily be discouraged. She trusted her dreams and she trusted the voice of God that she heard in her heart.

In the beginning hers was just a general enthusiasm for the mission. She wanted to work among the heathen, but she did not think of a religious order. "I believe that I didn't even know a thing about it" (*Vocation, 6*). Obviously, news of religious orders of sisters for the missions had not reached the small village in the Eifel. She read about them in issues of the bulletin. Once she read that Father Horner was instructing three Italian and French sisters in the Chinese language. "For me that was an eye opener. I felt that if they could do it, so could I! From that moment on I felt the courage to hope for myself also. I do not remember clearly, but I must have been fifteen or sixteen, perhaps even seventeen at the time" (*Vocation, 11*). When she read about the voyage of the sisters



to China in later issues of the bulletin, it made a deep impression on her and increased her desire to go to China.

Up to 1871 she did not speak to anyone about her desire to go to China. She kept most of what she was thinking to herself. Apparently she thought that no one in her surroundings would even understand her plans. One could imagine that outwardly Helena went about her daily duties, but within her heart pulsed the desire to learn about her vocation and to find ways to follow it to its fulfillment. Helena had to walk her way alone and hope that God would speak to her in her thoughts and ideas. She first dared to speak to her confessor, Fr. Leonard Juelich, in 1871, when she realized that she could only fulfill her vocation by entering a missionary society. But the priest, the local vicar, reacted negatively. After the First Vatican Council had defined the infallibility of the pope, Bismark began the Kulturkampf in Germany. He would not tolerate the existence of a Church that lay claim to the truth, the only truth. The Jesuits were expelled in 1871, and most of the other religious orders of men and women in the following year. In the priest's view, it was no time for Helena to think of entering a religious order. But Helena could not wait. Again and again she appealed to the priest, so

he sent her to the dean, Fr. Goller. The dean was one of the strongest active opponents of the Kulturkampf at that time. As a result, he was politically well informed. He advised her to wait for two years. She was still too young, anyway. He would then help her, if the times became better. She returned home encouraged. But her sorrow increased, to the extent that she wondered whether she could ever fulfill her vocation. She felt that "if I had to wait longer, I would be too old to be sent to China" (*Vocation*, 8).

In 1872 her parents allowed her to make a pilgrimage to Aachen together with her sister, Anna Helene, and a friend, Anna Margaretha. On this occasion she went to the Sisters of the Poor Child Jesus and spoke with Sister Francisca. Helena wanted to know if the sisters had any houses in China. The sister replied in the negative; they only had foundations in America. Sister Francesca advised Helena that if she wanted to serve people, she could do so anywhere. But, Helena was not satisfied, so she made further inquiries. Sister Aloisia Vossen, who also made collections for the Holy Childhood Association, directed her to the Madams of the Sacred Heart, an order that had been founded in France. At that time they had a foundation at Vaals, a village in the neighborhood of Aachen. But there Helena became upset at almost everything. First of

all, she felt that the sisters should not be called "Madams of the Sacred Heart," and secondly she felt that the property was too big for them. The sisters were living in a castle, and the place did not reflect the poverty that should be mirrored in a religious community. She was also surprised that she was not allowed to visit the chapel.

In 1871 Helena told her mother of her wish to go to the missions. "Mother saw only problems and could not agree with me" (*Vocation*, 8). But Helena did not let the opposition of her mother deter her. Again and again she went to her confessor to be allowed to enter a convent in order to be a missionary. He gradually became impatient with her and forbade her to speak about it or to read the publications of the Holy Childhood Association for two years. He even forbade her to think about it. She obeyed for a year and a half, but then it became too difficult to bear. As she writes, she was often overcome by a deep sadness at this time. It was clearly not a case of an infantile wish to go to the missions, but a struggle for personal integrity. She felt that being a missionary was her vocation in life and she could not ignore it, but at the same time she could not find any means to follow her vocation. At that time there were no missionary religious orders for women that she could enter.

As a result, she did not understand what God was asking of her. She knew that her talk about the China mission was getting on the nerves of her confessor. She felt very lonely and did not know why God, who spoke so clearly to her heart, would give no concrete external indication of a way to fulfill her inner call. She often felt abandoned by God and the saints. She even had the impression that the prayers of all the others were being heard, while God made an exception in her case. But neither her confessor's prohibition nor her inner sorrow took her courage away, and she persisted in the trust that God would lead her further on her way.

Johann Wilden von Heimbach became the pastor of Rollesbroich in 1873. Helena started going to him for confession and revealed to him her wish to go to the missions. Again and again he kept her waiting. She became impatient and said that she had already waited for six years. "I thought that if I had to wait any longer, there would be no hope for me" (*Vocation, 10*). Johann Wilden died during his Mass on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, June 29, 1878. Helen again went to the new vicar, Fr. Juelich of Simmerath, for confession. He refused to help her any further for fear of breaking the seal of confession if he would approach a religious community with Helena's message. So he

sent her again, to Dean Goller. This time the dean advised her to join the Franciscans with whom he had a special relationship. Helena did not become discouraged with the priests, who were not very helpful, nor with those who pressed her to take a direction different from what her inner voice was urging her to take. The influence of the priests shows how dependent lay people were on the clergy at that time. In spite of it all, Helena remained true to her calling. She did not want to fulfill the will of a priest, but the will of God. And God did not lead her to the Franciscans, but to the establishment of a new community.

In 1881 Helena received the address of a young missionary community in Steyl, Holland, from a person named Hubert Cremer, who had previously worked for the Holy Childhood Association. In 1875 Fr. Arnold Janssen had established a house in Steyl, Holland, for training German missionaries. He could not found his community in Germany because of the political situation brought about by the Kulturkampf. Vicar Juelich wrote a letter to Arnold Janssen about the vocation of Helena. Father Janssen gave Helena some hope and encouraged her to send her personal history, "adding that he was hoping that he could do something for me later" (*Vocation*, 13). On October 24, 1881, she wrote her first letter of application to

Steyl (*Vocation, 21-23*) and on March 18 and 19, 1882 she made her first visit there. She had hoped that Arnold Janssen would help her by referring her to some missionary community which she could enter. At that time she had no idea of founding a religious community herself. She only desired to enter an already established order. But such a missionary community did not exist, and so it was that she was to become the foundress of a religious missionary order.

Helena had been totally dissatisfied with what she had experienced at Vaals, but here in Steyl her heart expanded and was full of joy. For her this was a sign that God was calling her to this place. On the Feast of Saint Joseph, March 19, she opened her heart to Father Arnold Janssen. "Gradually it became lighter and brighter in my soul. I began to hope to embrace the purpose of the mission house in Steyl. Even more, I hoped to be able to join as the reverend superior explained that a Vicar Apostolic from China had advised him to found a religious order for missionary sisters" (*Vocation, 14-15*). She felt very happy at Steyl. She felt that this was the place where she could fulfill her vocation. The other religious houses that others had proposed never appealed to her. This she took as a sign that she was not called to join any of the established religious institutions. "I always had

the impression that it was not the holy will of God and I came to believe that I should not enter another religious order. I had been in two different religious houses, at two different times, in order to learn something about the missions, or if perhaps they had establishments in mission countries. Each time I felt disturbed and discovered no inclination to enter the convent that I was visiting" (*Vocation, 15*). It is surprising to see how much she trusted her own feelings. She would not allow herself to be pressed into a different direction even by priests. She trusted her own inclinations. At that time such inner inclinations were suspect by authorities in spirituality. For them it was more important that the will of God be obeyed as authentically expressed by the Church. And yet Helena believed that God spoke to her through her inner feelings. She could offer no rational explanations, but for her they were a sign of what God really wanted of her.

On March 19, 1882, Helena returned overjoyed to Rollesbroich. Her short stay in Steyl, her conversation with Arnold Janssen, and the remark of the superior that there already was a maid in the kitchen and that she could possibly enter the mission house as a second kitchen maid struck her very forcibly. "I felt a strong urge to enter as a

kitchen worker as soon as possible, to leave behind the things of the world, and in this way to be able to join a holy religious order” (*Vocation, 16*). At that time the Sisters of Divine Providence worked in the kitchen. Nine sisters did the cooking and laundry for all the members of the house. When she told her confessor that she wanted to enter as a kitchen worker, however, she ran into further opposition. He did not want her to end up as a kitchen worker; if she wanted to enter, then she should be accepted not as a kitchen worker but as a novice in some religious order. But Helena did not allow herself to be discouraged by this new opposition of the vicar.

On the Feast of the Assumption she made a second trip to Steyl. This time she combined her trip with a pilgrimage to Kevelaer. The trip took eight days. On the way there she had an entirely different feeling. Instead of joy and confidence, she experienced a sense of great fear. “I felt almost no desire or zeal. I was overcome by a great fear over whether or not it was the holy will of God because I now felt the same way as I did when I had visited the other convents or when I had asked there for detailed information” (*Vocation, 22*). The darkness that clouded her heart on the way to Steyl was a very great challenge for her. She arrived at Steyl torn



by doubts and in a confused frame of mind. She was in doubt about whether or not Steyl was the place where God wanted her. But as soon as she crossed the threshold, her fear began to decrease. Arnold Janssen gave her the impression during their conversation that her situation as a kitchen worker would surely last only a few months. Her understanding was that in just a few months an association of missionary sisters would be established. But this proved to be a misunderstanding that would go on to involve Helena in many conflicts and challenges. At the same time a feeling of trust grew within her that the association of sisters would be founded in the near future.

“I received my letter of acceptance on the Feast of Saints Simon and Jude, October 28, 1882. But because of the words ‘first as kitchen worker,’ my confessor strongly refused me permission. He urged me to write to the reverend superior that I would not enter as a kitchen worker because I wanted to enter as a member of a religious order and not as a kitchen worker” (*Vocation*, 22). She argued with her confessor that he should give her permission to enter Steyl, but he refused. Apparently Helena had made her decision conditional — if her confessor agreed. But she did not allow herself to be defeated so easily. It seems she noticed that she had too quickly

identified the will of her confessor with that of the will of God. So she explained to her confessor that it was impossible for her to write Fr. Janssen what he had ordered her to write. She could not write anything except what she felt inwardly. So she asked him "to write what he felt was just. He promised to write and I prayed that God's holy will be done" (*Vocation, 17*). There remained nothing else to do but to pray that a way would be opened in spite of the opposition of her confessor. Her prayer was answered fourteen days later. Her confessor told her that an answer had arrived from Arnold Janssen. The answer apparently brought about a quick change in his thinking: "Now I give you my approval; previously I was opposed, but now I am in favor. I don't want to be guilty of making you lose your vocation. You can do as you like; you have full freedom" (*Vocation, 17*). This was an entirely different attitude from a confessor who had previously been extremely cautious.

Now that she had the permission of her confessor, she had to face difficulties at home with her parents. "I had to endure many conflicts in order to convince my parents. My parents took my departure so badly; my mother claimed that she could not survive my departure" (*Vocation, 17*). One wonders why her parents were so fond of Helena. The family was so

big that a single daughter could easily be allowed to leave. Some of the other children had left the house to marry, without any trouble. Why did her parents so resist the entry of this particular daughter into the mission house? Did they feel that it was Helena who held the whole family together and that without her it would fall apart?

Helena did not have to deal only with the opposition of her parents; new personal conflicts began to surface as she prepared to leave for Steyl. She could not resign herself to causing her parents grief because of her departure. "Especially in the final weeks, when I had the permission of my confessor, the acceptance of my application, and the day set for my entry, I still had to undergo serious inner struggles. It came to me, again and again, that if my course of action was not the will of God, I was making my parents sick with grief all for nothing" (*Vocation*, 17). Helena had long kept secret her intention to become a missionary. But when she informed her mother in 1871, at the age of nineteen, she immediately met with misunderstanding and refusal. Now that her entry was near, the conflicts and inner temptations became ever more difficult. She was worried about causing sorrow to her parents. Yet, she had an even stronger inner conviction that this was the way she had to

go, even if her parents and relatives did not understand. The worst doubt to plague her was whether or not it was the will of God that she become a missionary sister. It might be only her own wish, and not the will of God.

There was nothing more for her to do except to take refuge in prayer. She prayed earnestly to God that his holy will be done. Gradually, her inner peace returned. She saw this again as a sign that God would take her under his care. "Thanks and praise be to God because he has fought for me and won the victory" (*Vocation, 18*). She went to confession in Simmerath on December 29, 1882, and remained long on her knees in the church, praying for her relatives and friends. Then she took leave of her many relatives. "Between twelve and one o'clock at night, I said goodby to my sisters and relatives. It was a painful departure" (*Vocation, 18*). She left for Steyl that morning accompanied by her parents. They arrived at Steyl shortly after noon of December 30. The last hours with her parents were not easy. She was sorry because of their grief. "My parents were so deeply distraught with grief that I even had the feeling that they were convinced that I would return home with them" (*Vocation, 18*). The superior of the house received them kindly and tried to have her parents trust in

the future, especially in the reward they would receive if they gave their daughter as a sacrifice to God. "After that my parents began to feel relieved and more prepared for the sacrifice. On my part, I was overjoyed finally to have said farewell to the world and to settle down in the holy rooms of a religious house where I could live under the same roof as the Holy Savior" (*Vocation, 19*). Although Helena could never feel happy knowing that her parents were troubled, now she was "almost without feeling," as she wrote (*Vocation, 19*). This numbness, perhaps, served to protect her from being overwhelmed by the pain of her parents and the temptation to change her mind and become unfaithful to her vocation.

#### IV

Helena was now at Steyl and on the path to her dream. But she had not yet finally entered a religious order. She was only a worker in the kitchen of the mission house. By this time she had turned thirty. She had waited ten years until she could take this first step toward the missions, and she would have to wait almost another ten years before she would be allowed to serve the Lord as a mis-

sionary sister. For the time being she had to work very hard in the kitchen. There was not much time for prayer. Theresa Sicke, who had come to Steyl earlier as a kitchen worker, became attached to Helena and was inspired by her into thinking of becoming a missionary sister. Shortly after Helena's arrival, Theresa Volpert arrived, and a year later Hendrina Stenmanns, who was to become the cofoundress with Helena of the new missionary community of sisters. The four formed a small community. Their work was hard because numbers were continually growing at Steyl and retreats were being held for people from outside. The four had to share a single room which served as both sleeping and living quarters.

At first Helena felt very much at peace. But soon she felt an inner restlessness. She had hoped to enter a religious congregation at Steyl. Time passed, but there was nothing in the offing. The mission house for the formation of future male missionaries — priests and brothers — grew larger and larger. As a result, the idea of starting a missionary order for sisters receded further and further into the background. But the community of four kitchen workers was a silent reminder to Arnold Janssen not to forget the sisters. He hesitated, however, uncertain as to what to do. Not

having a clear idea of what he wanted, he was rather unsure and wavering in his conduct of affairs. The four women had to suffer very much from the uncertainty of Arnold Janssen. Probably, Father Janssen had no clear idea how to deal correctly with the "kitchen community." He was a person of his time and did not exactly feel a sense of solidarity with their cause. The four had to wait a long time before he would finally come to a decision. The superior made them practice humility, patience, and peaceful forbearance. But Helena did not break down with discouragement. She fought on. She remained true to her vocation even when Arnold Janssen, who should have opened the way for her to become a missionary, disappointed her.

Helena placed great hope in the first General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word in which the capitulars adopted a resolution to found a congregation of missionary sisters. But apparently the participants had little hope that the resolution would be carried out quickly. The rector of the house, on his side, kept silence on this point. Theresa Volpert became impatient with the long wait. No longer able to put up with vague promises, she left Steyl and joined another congregation to fulfill her vocation. Helena had to stand by helplessly as one of the first of their small group

departed. That made her unsure, even though Gertrud Hegemann soon took over the place vacated by Theresa. In ill health, Gertrud Hegemann was scarcely prepared for the demands of the hard work expected of her. The result would be the first difficulties and conflicts to arise within the small group of women.

Helena faced a crisis. Up till then she had overcome every obstacle standing in her path to become a missionary sister. Now, all of a sudden, she could do nothing more. She was dependent upon the will of the founder, Arnold Janssen, and his confreres. On top of this, she felt that the "kitchen community" was now in danger. All four were both physically and psychologically extremely strained. The joy and inner peace that she felt during her first year at Steyl began to diminish. She faced a flood of questions: "Had she made the wrong decision? Did her stay in Steyl prove to be a dead end? Were she and her companions to toil in the kitchen without achieving their goals?" (*Stegmaier 1994, 25*). She was no longer sure that she could fulfill her calling at Steyl. The vocation that she had waited ten years to pursue could not end with her being a kitchen worker.

Helena began to rethink her whole past during this



crisis. She looked back over the wounds of her past history. She realized that her childhood was not as ideal as it had appeared to her previously. She had doubts about herself. She was no longer the child who felt so full of self-confidence that she could bear the same burdens as the missionaries that she read about in the magazines. She remembered the nervous sickness that she once had as a young child at the beginning of her school days when she was unable to memorize things. "Above all, she had trouble remembering her catechism taught by Vicar Busch, a learned man, but, despite his good intentions, a poor teacher. He exposed her ignorance in front of the other children" (*Stegmaier 1994, 25ff*). This experience left her unsure of herself. It left the basic foundation of her life unsteady. She did not even have to tell her parents about these negative school experiences. It was other school children who made her parents aware of how deeply Helena was troubled. Her parents spoke with the vicar and succeeded in making him change his way of teaching. But the uncertainty remained with Helena. She tried hard, but she could not fulfill the expectations of the teacher. "She came to feel that she might try as much as possible, but not succeed" (*Stegmaier 1987b, 26*). Now at Steyl she was again confronted with the same feeling that, try as she might, she could not succeed in achieving her goal. She had

invested all she had in one decision. She had overcome every obstacle, but now she felt that her efforts were not bearing fruit. All this affected her sense of self-worth and her trust in the inner guidance of God. Still, she did not let these negative thoughts deter her. She sought to lay bare her insecurity before God and, accepting her utter inability to do anything, developed a fresh trust in the God who had called her.

How this crisis tossed her back and forth we can gather from a letter from her former confessor, Vicar Juelich. She had written to him in her time of need. Although her letter is no longer extant, from his reply we can see what kind of doubts were troubling her: "If you are faced with so many conflicts, questions, and doubts, you must be assured, first of all, that it is not a bad sign, but that it is even a good sign. The wonderful grace of being called must be duly appreciated so as to be ready for generous sacrifices. This purification takes place like in a melting pot: 'O how it glows, hisses, bubbles, and shines'" (*Stegmaier 1987b, 160*). The doubts that pressed on Helena at this time focused, first, on the question of whether God had really called her; second, on the question of whether Steyl was the right place; and finally, on the question of whether she should have studied in

order to be better at school. But Fr. Juelich told her that these doubts were just “the whispering call of the devil” (*Stegmaier 1987b, 162*). He also advised her to leave behind external events, looking for a way to an inner life with God, to “a care for God, and the love of God that are the only purpose of religious life” (*Stegmaier 1987b, 162*). He cited the example of Saint Paul, certainly the greatest missionary, who withdrew into the desert. Finally he made it clear that he was convinced that she was called and he described her as a woman to whom God had given a “heart full of sympathy and love for souls, frankness, with a resolute will, and holy cheerfulness” (*Stegmaier 1987b, 163*). It was because he had seen these qualities in her that he had encouraged her to enter the religious life. Her danger was in becoming too emotional, too reliant on human approval and consolation, and on a human vivacity that disturbs and deprives a person of peace of soul. Apparently the letter of her confessor led the downcast Helena to find new hope. She could now approach her life in Steyl somewhat more realistically, and not be so critical of the superior who, for example, did not allow her to receive holy communion as often as she so desired.

Although Helena was only 36 years old, she seems to have suffered what today would be called a typ-

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ical midlife crisis. In midlife we are confronted by our own reality. We have to ask ourselves if how we have been living is all that life has to offer. The wounds of our past life touch us and we must face them. The self-assuredness that we have laboriously built up suddenly breaks down and we must search for a new foundation for our life. In her midlife crisis, Helena once more confronted the limitations of her childhood background. It was painful for her to experience again how much she was hurt during her school days. The restricted schooling, the deficient education, all laid a heavy burden on Helena, and it appears to have depressed her. She realized, painfully, what was done to her by being refused a good education and, as a result, how her mind was restricted and she was cut off from many opportunities to develop as a human being. She was afraid that her poor education would prevent her from becoming a missionary in China. Whenever education was brought up in discussions, the wound in Helena's heart would be torn open anew. She reacted sensitively and suffered from the fact that she was brought up in such a small village and had such a poor education. She had tried to overcome this personal deficiency through reading the publications of the Holy Childhood Association, but she realized that this was also too little. She asked her-

self, again and again, if she should not start to look for more schooling.

“Helena stood at a turning point and had to work out a new ideology for her vocation. For years she had committed herself to the single purpose of going to China as a missionary and had tried to reach that goal by her own will” (*Stegmaier 1994, 27*). She had overcome all opposition in her path through prayer and divine assistance. Now she had the impression that God himself was resisting her. She had to learn the lesson of approaching God himself to discern what he really had in mind for her. Her inner voice had until now been the criterion for her. She had trusted that God was speaking to her through the voice of her inner calm and peace, as well as through her dreams. Now she was confronted with the realization that God also spoke to her through external events, especially through those that were opposed to her own wishes. Now she had to ask God in prayer what he was communicating to her by the fact that her own plans were not working and the foundation of a religious missionary community was nowhere in sight. Painfully, it became more and more clear to her that she would never be able to go to China. She slowly and painfully had to discover what new paths her

vocation was taking. She felt that it was not really important whether or not she could go to China. It became even clearer that she had to place herself at the unconditional disposal of God in order to fulfill the role he had decided for her and to go where he wanted her to go. This crisis, therefore, forced her to find a new foundation for her vocation. It was no longer to work abroad; instead it became the relationship of love that she had for God and that God had for her. This was the foundation on which she had to build so that her life would bear fruit for humanity.

During the inner crisis over her disappointment about the outcome of her plans, Helena chanced upon the books of the French mystic Jean Bernieres-Louvigni. He had “renounced a good career to follow the rejected Christ” (*Stegmaier 1994, 27*). In his books he spoke about the following of the humble Christ and how Christ’s followers had to follow in his footsteps. Helena was moved deeply by these writings and copied many pages herself; this shows that she felt she had found a wise path for herself. One receives the impression that during her stint as a kitchen worker Helena discovered a new way to experience the will of God. In the writings of Bernieres-Louvigni she found the words: “It is best to leave

everything to God and choose nothing by yourself. What do you prefer more than God himself? Isn't he enough for you? You also must not cling to the means that lead you to God" (*Stegmaier 1987a, 100*). In her uncertainty about her external way of life, she had to clarify for herself the unique meaning of her life. And she learned that she had to seek and love God with her whole heart and leave herself totally at the disposal of God. Walking along this path included the experience of darkness. This is why she copied the following: "Rejoice in the presence of your God, even when darkness and distractions hide him from you" (*Stegmaier 1987b, 101*). She had to realize that all depended upon God and not upon her own imaginings of how to serve God.

As Helena turned more and more to God in her uncertainty about her vocation and as she looked for guidance from many saints, she became more at peace with her situation. She was able to give up her deepest wish, namely, to go to China and help the abandoned children there. In her struggle she learned: "If you wish to find a permanent residence in God, you should have nothing that you can have peace in or rely on other than God alone" (*Stegmaier 1987b, 105*). She realized that missionary activity needs a deep spiritual foundation.

It is interesting that she begins with readings that appeal to the will, bear a somewhat pessimistic view of the world, and have overly strict ascetical demands. But gradually she is attracted by more mystical readings where the theme is walking in the presence of God and the experience of inner peace, as being the environment in which God himself dwells. She cites an unknown author: "So hide yourself in your center, in God who resides in the depths of your soul. There, apart from the noise of all creatures, he will nourish you with himself.... When you pray, go into the innermost part of your soul. God is there to be known and loved.... O, the wonderful, bright, shining indwelling of God" (*Stegmaier 1987a, 115ff*). No longer did Helena worry about whether she would go to China or do some other task that God wanted. Rather, she was more concerned about how she could live in and out of God, how she could be more transformed by the Holy Spirit in order to become a better abode for God. Her initial purpose was to work for God and the salvation of others, but now she put her whole effort into seeking and discovering God. "From now on I want to know nothing else except how to live united with God" (*Stegmaier 1987a, 117*). Helena knew that her missionary activity would be fruitful only to the extent that it was founded on God, and that its



only purpose was to be one with God and open to his love and mercy. Through this crisis, Helena became a woman with a deep inner life, a woman who understood that God himself resided in her to form her according to his image.

As Helena meditated more and more on the will of God and surrendered herself more and more, there suddenly appeared a glimmer of hope from the outside. On June 14, 1884, the Sunday after Corpus Christi, Arnold Janssen announced to the women that he hoped he could do something for them in Austria. The four elected Helena the leader of the small group. The Sisters of Divine Providence left Steyl in 1887, as there were enough brothers to take over the kitchen. Now the women were given the task of doing the laundry for the many residents of the mission house. This provided a welcome relief from their labors. Their daily routine became more orderly. They had work, but they could also have more time for prayer and community conversation. When the last of the Sisters of Divine Providence departed, Fr. Janssen bought two small houses for the four women. On July 14, 1888, the four moved into the small Convent of the Three Lindens, as it was called. That was the beginning of a convent community life for the four women. They called their

time there a Nazareth. They lived an intense community life and prayed together in order to practice the structured life of a community of sisters.

One year later the monastery of the Capuchins became vacant. Arnold Janssen decided to use the building as a convent for the women. Up till then the leadership position in the convent was changed every month, but on February 12, 1889, Arnold Janssen appointed Hendrina as superior with Helena as her assistant. When the first community moved into the house of the Capuchins on December 7, 1889, the women had the feeling that a definite break had been made. They decided to celebrate the first day in this convent, December 8, 1889, as the foundation date of the congregation. Now they could accept postulants. A year later, they had to move again, this time into a convent formerly belonging to the Notre Dame Sisters. At last they had a convent suited to a religious order of women.

Now Arnold Janssen had to think about drawing up a rule for the congregation of sisters. For this purpose he adopted as a model the Constitutions of the Little Sisters of the Child Jesus. He even asked the Little Sisters to provide a mistress of novices, but while she was preparing to come to Steyl she died very suddenly. Father Janssen took this as a sign that he himself should direct the

novices and introduce them into mission spirituality. Helena worked very closely with him. A number of women were eager to begin their novitiate, but Father Janssen postponed their investiture again and again. This was painful for them. Apparently the superior had little idea of the expectations of the women. The investiture was deferred three times before the first 16 postulants were invested on January 17, 1892. Six months earlier Father Janssen had appointed Helena the superior and later novice director. Obviously, he considered her the most trustworthy person to guide the young community. At her investiture, Helena chose the name Sister Maria.

The Constitutions for the sisters had been finished in 1891, but they had to be reworked. A true novitiate in the canonical sense could finally begin on January 15, 1893, when each sister received a printed copy of the Constitutions. One year later, on March 12, 1894, Helena made her first profession with eleven other novices. Now Helena became Sister Maria, in line with her desire. It was then that she realized that her long wait was worth while and that God had led her through all the obstacles. Other young women began to enter the young community very quickly. The first missionary sisters were ready to be sent to Argentina as early as 1895.

## V

As superior of the first small community, Helena grew into her role of cofoundress. In her motherly way, she made the many new young members feel at home. She cared for each individual. She understood what each one needed. She was concerned above all that the spirit of love ruled in the community. She herself was unassuming. But the sisters perceived that a strong force went out from this simple woman who managed to unify the many sisters into a loving community. As a result their numbers quickly increased. Under Helena's direction the spirituality of the community was formed both in its search for God and in sisterly love.

The first sisters were sent to Argentina on September 11, 1895, and to Togo on November 1, 1896. Helena kept contact with her missionary sisters. She wrote many letters and always gave the sisters good advice. She promised them her prayers and those of the community. At first Helena was totally dependent on Arnold Janssen, who had conceived the overall project of a missionary community of sisters and had arranged their form of life. She had to refer all important questions to him. This was not easy for her, because Arnold Janssen often acted like a meticulous school teacher, who stressed little problems

too much. But her loyalty to him and her sincere manner made a trustworthy partnership possible. Arnold Janssen was away from Steyl very often, and even when he was at home he was often unavailable to her, so she had to write him many letters putting all her problems before him. The exchange of letters showed a deep mutual trust, respect, and reverence. But Helena's high regard for Fr. Janssen did not prevent her from questioning some of the provisions of the Constitutions. Not simply accepting the provisions as laid down, she repeatedly had the courage to address the critical issues. On January 18, 1893, three days after the sisters had received their copies of the Constitutions, she expressed her first reservations about some of the rules. She advised the sisters in Argentina to read these provisions broadmindedly and to trust their own judgment. One perceives that in her twenty-year wait for the fulfillment of her vocation, Helena had developed an ability to make her own decisions. Now she was confident enough to express her viewpoint and to criticize when she felt that the life of her community was in danger or menaced by narrow rules and regulations.

Nevertheless, she had a deep spiritual bond with Father Arnold Janssen. She felt that her spirituality was closely bound up with his. He had woven together two spiritual movements: a devotion to the

Holy Spirit and a devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus which was very widespread during the second half of the nineteenth century. Many congregations adopted the name of the Sacred Heart of Jesus or were somehow connected with the devotion. Helena had come into contact with the Sacred Heart devotion during her childhood and at that time expressed a desire to enter a religious order dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The connection between the Sacred Heart and devotion to the Holy Spirit was made for her at Steyl. She was fascinated by this combination and quickly incorporated this spirituality into her religious practice. But in doing so she developed her own personal vision with feminine features and gave her own personal stamp to the spirituality that she had received.

Helena did not develop an entirely new spirituality. She took over what she could accept from the spiritualities in vogue in her day. The Church of her time was characterized by an overall moralistic view of Christian life. The age of the enlightenment had devalued all mystical movements and grudgingly granted the Church only the function of an institution of moral reform. The Church adopted this position too much and saw as its first task the improvement of morals, especially sexual morality. The greatness of Helena becomes clear in her ability to

free herself from this moralistic approach that considered sex as evil, to choose a spiritual path that stressed a relationship with God and an experience of God dwelling in her own heart. By doing so, she gave her spirituality her own individual stamp. Her spirituality did not come from her head, but from her heart, and this gave her feelings and insights a chance to develop. As a result Helena's spirituality was shaped by a wide-open heart filled with warmth and love in the experience of God dwelling in the depths of her soul.

It was important for Helena that in the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus the love of God be the center, not God's justice or punishment. The image of God that she addressed in the Sacred Heart devotion was a loving and human God, a God who has shown his human heart in Christ. Here is a God who has become human in his Son, who approaches, who is understandable and visible. He is a God who even accepts being wounded by humankind. The love of God is no longer unattainable; it shows its human face in the pierced heart of the Savior. Jesus let his heart be wounded. His heart was pierced on the cross so that his love could be poured out on all. Real love always includes suffering. There is no real love without pain.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was certainly a reaction to the overemphasis on the intellectual approach at the time of the enlightenment. The person who lived only with a rational mind was felt more and more to be a monster, a human lacking feelings. The veneration of the heart of Jesus allowed for human feeling. In fact, it put feeling at the center. Even if contemporary Christians are disgusted when they read the outpouring of feelings and emotions in the prayers and hymns of the last century, they cannot help but be struck by the fact that a totally holistic spirituality was propagated at that time. It was a spirituality that was centered not only in the understanding but also in the feelings. It was a spirituality that took the body into serious account. The heart became the symbol for the love between God and the human person. Thus, Helena could express her feelings immediately to the pierced heart of the Savior — feelings of motherly love that were all too often wounded and disappointed, feelings full of desire for love that forgets and surrenders itself totally. Hence she experienced a tender, loving, and merciful God who was nearby.

During the enlightenment persons did not want to show their feelings or weaknesses. They tried to get a grip on life from the viewpoint of the intel-



lect. They became brains only, and as a result, in the last analysis, inhuman. Such an intellectualized person is incapable of love. Romanticism in literature was a reaction to this intellectualization. The Sacred Heart devotion was a reaction, in the area of spirituality, to a purely rational understanding of Christianity. The point of the Sacred Heart devotion is not the person, protected by a coat of armor so as not to express any feelings, but the vulnerable person. The vulnerable one does not turn away from human need. He or she is open to others and is responsive to their pains and needs. A purely rational understanding of Christianity led to a moralistic religion. The spirituality of the Sacred Heart devotion turned people's attention from a moralistic approach to life to the very center of the faith, Jesus Christ, who loved us so much that he allowed himself to be wounded on the cross.

Helena lived this kind of spirituality totally. Even though influenced by her time, she shows a correct understanding of spirituality that thinks rightly of God relating to all aspects of humans, that does not make law the center, that preaches a gospel that gives a message of love, not of anxiety. Through the Sacred Heart devotion, she had already opened her heart to the children of China

early in her life. When moralizing Christendom showed no strength to engage itself with the outer world because it was too busy within itself, only fulfilling obligations and obsessed by the fear that they may not have been perfectly fulfilled, the Sacred Heart devotion was preparing people to feel responsible for this world, to have concern for the poor, and to accept wholeheartedly personal responsibility wherever it was necessary.

Helena's devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was connected with the Holy Eucharist from the beginning. In the consecrated host, one can meet the same Christ who let himself be pierced and who gives himself to all out of love. Helena's spirituality, permeated through and through by the Eucharist, shows itself in her deep veneration for the Eucharist. At that time it was up to the judgment of the priest whether to allow a person to receive Holy Communion on days other than Sundays. This practice, observed more conservatively in Steyl than elsewhere, caused Helena continual pain. When she wrote to her former confessor during her crisis, she was upset because she was allowed to receive the Eucharist so infrequently. She had the idea that reception of the Eucharist was an intrinsic part of the eucharistic meal. She soon received the nickname "Beggar for the

Eucharist” because she pleaded so often to be allowed to receive Holy Communion more frequently, and she argued again and again that the sisters be allowed to have eucharistic exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

Her attitude toward eucharistic adoration appears in a letter to her parents in Rollesbroich: “We have benediction with exposure of the Blessed Sacrament on Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. At these times we can gather as a community at the feet of Jesus in the most holy sacrament, we live under the same roof with Jesus, we work in his home, near him and for him. Oh, how beautiful, oh, how true, a heaven on earth!” (*Stegmaier 1988, 24*). The sisters had a difficult time understanding the points of meditation that Fr. Arnold Janssen presented. They preferred, instead, just to kneel before the tabernacle in order to be with Christ. Helena, for one, could pour out her heart to Christ and receive peace in return. She loved to receive his gaze. That was enough for her, as she wrote to the sisters in Argentina: “How happy you are to have the Savior dwell in the same convent. Saint Theresa felt that from the day the Savior took up residence in their house, the foundation of their monasteries was completed. Certainly, dear sisters, if you are in difficulty, as soon as possible

seek a time to go before the tabernacle and there pour out your suffering heart" (*Stegmaier 1987, Letter 5*). For Helena it was a good custom to open her thoughts before the tabernacle in the morning, and lay the events of the day back on the altar in the evening. Whatever happened during the day could be changed by God, just as the bread was changed into the eucharistic body of Christ. One's whole life should be permeated, just as the bread was, with the body of Christ. All that one does should become the body of Christ. All that one does should be open to the love and mercy of Christ. We can interpret Helena's love for adoration as a mystic sign that shows her unity and oneness with God. Helena's deepest desire was to be one with Christ, to live in Christ, and to find in Christ a source of love for the whole world.

A real accomplishment for Arnold Janssen was the connection between the Sacred Heart devotion and devotion to the Holy Spirit. The way to this understanding was paved by Matthias Scheeben, of Cologne, who wrote in 1865 that "devotion to the Sacred Heart leads to devotion to the Holy Spirit" (*Stegmaier 1994, 20*). At the time, Scheeben was one of the most modern of theologians, one who brought theology out of narrow scholasticism, into the wide area of the Church Fathers. He even

built bridges to the teaching of Luther, e.g., on how to achieve salvation, as well as to orthodox theology. Arnold Janssen made a wise choice in his selection of this theologian. However, the connection between devotion to the Sacred Heart and the Holy Spirit is much older than Scheeben. It can be traced back to the Gospel of Saint John who understood the death of Jesus as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. For John the blood and water which flowed out of the pierced heart of Christ were symbols of the Holy Spirit. All of the events of the Gospel of Saint John are focused on the time when the heart of Jesus was pierced and his Holy Spirit was poured out upon the world. Christ's love flowed out of his heart and transformed shallow life into precious wine. The seventh wine vat was opened at the marriage feast of Cana and the wine that God had made was poured out. From the heart of Jesus on the cross flowed the water, promised to the woman at the well, that slaked humankind's deepest thirst. From the pierced heart of Christ was fulfilled the promise: "Rivers of living water will flow from within him. He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified" (*John 7, 38ff*). During his lifetime Jesus could only impart the Spirit to his immedi-

ate followers. But through the death of Christ, the activity of the Spirit was unlimited; and afterward the Spirit was poured out upon the world, so that all may participate in the Holy Spirit through the love of God poured into the human heart.

In her letters Helena always tried to pass on to her sisters these two pillars of her spirituality. What she wrote in her letters to sisters overseas were the ideas that she shared with her sisters at home in Steyl during conversations and conferences. She wrote of the Holy Spirit as our Father. In her first letter to her sisters who were on their way to Argentina she wrote: "God the Holy Spirit is our good Father and the Father of love. Our first purpose is to honor him and pray and work for his glorification" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 1*). Her second letter begins with the following: "God the Holy Spirit, everything out of love for You" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 2*). Her fourth letter ends as follows: "I wish each of you the love of the Holy Spirit and I place you in the loving care of the hearts of Jesus and Mary" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 4*). Helena wrote about what she herself was feeling enthusiastically in her heart and what she herself lived. For her the Holy Spirit was not only the good Father or the Father of Love. The Holy Spirit, her inner strength, gave her the love and motivation by

which she strove to grow beyond herself and to assist the young religious order to become strong. Her exhortations to sisterly love were based on the conviction that the sisters should not sadden the Holy Spirit, the source of love. Her veneration of the Holy Spirit was like a prayer of love and hope that the God of love, through the Holy Spirit, would permeate and transform her life even deeper.

There is one more form of devotion that was very important to Helena: her devotion to the Child Jesus. Her work with the Holy Childhood Association certainly brought the Child Jesus, in his poverty and need, to the center of her spirituality. Love for the infant Jesus in the crib brought Helena to celebrate Christmas in the community of sisters in a very special way. Full of enthusiasm, she wrote to the sisters in Argentina about the celebration of Christmas. The sisters began the celebration with a procession on Christmas with Helena herself carrying the image of the Child Jesus. On Christmas afternoon, the sisters sang as they moved in "procession to all the cribs and images of the Christ Child in the whole convent" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 4*). Helena sent a special statue of the Infant Jesus of Prague to the sisters in Argentina. "Devotion to the Infant Jesus of Prague is increasing in our time. The small King is so gen-

erous in favors, graces, and blessings, especially to religious communities. It has been a long time since we have received such a beautiful statue. After a long time and many requests, we have finally received permission to honor it and place it in a beautiful place" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 35*). What she admired most about the Infant of Prague is that he inspires trust so easily.

Nowadays it would be very difficult to see devotion to the Infant Christ at the center of Christian spirituality. What Helena meant by her devotion is the important point. By her love for Jesus in the crib, she wished to express her love for and trust in a God who was tender and near. For her the Divine Child was an expression of a God who loves so unconditionally that he came as a small and helpless child. She could trust this approachable and tender God encountered as a child. In this child God becomes trustworthy. God becomes human so that men and women could find the courage to become human in the way that God created them. In her devotion to the Child in the crib, Helena felt a sense of love and security enter her difficult everyday life. It was like a light in her heart. She did not feel comfortable in the confines of the district of Eifel, but she found an expression of her desire for her true home in the devotion to the Christ Child. She perceived that the Divine Child always gave



promise of a new beginning. One is not tied down by the past. God can cause things to start afresh and so bring his work of art to its perfection. In her devotion to the Christ Child, Helena could express her tender attraction to God and her faith in God who lit a lamp for the world of non-believers in her small and insignificant community.

Helena did not consciously set out to create a new spirituality; instead, she lived out her vocation in an authentic way by selecting those expressions of spirituality that already existed and that appealed to her heart. She developed a sensitive awareness of a path to the goal that God had planned for her, and of how she should be open to the operation of the Holy Spirit. She welded three devotions — that of Sacred Heart connected with the veneration of the Holy Eucharist, that of the Holy Spirit, and that of the Divine Child — into such a close unity that she could live them as a single charism. Instead of piling these forms of spirituality superficially upon herself, she assimilated them in such a way that they finally became her unique personal spirituality.

## VI

Helena was not a loner. She had grown up within a family community made up of several genera-

tions and she was able to accommodate herself there. So it was no problem for her to relate to the community, formed by herself and her three companions, that finally developed into an ever-growing congregation of missionary sisters. The sisters experienced her as a woman who could weave persons of different character into a single community. Even when she did not act herself, she quickly became the center of the community, like yeast permeating the whole dough. Not a strong and assertive superior, she kept everyone together because she was loved by all the members. Her vision of an ideal community and the task of leaders to bring it about, in the midst of every-day realities, became clear in her letters to the sisters in Argentina.

She repeated the value of sisterly love very often. If the sisters practiced mutual love, the work on the outside would proceed smoothly. If the community was in harmony, the missionary work would be fruitful. If only the work became important, interpersonal rivalry among the sisters would finally make it worthless and fruitless. She wrote to the sisters in Argentina: "We sisters should love each other with a true and genuine love, those of us who have been called by God to live in the same house in order to serve him and work together for

the salvation of many immortal souls. If true charity reigns among us, prayer flows more easily, sorrows and difficulties are borne more easily" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 1*). She exhorts her sisters, again and again, not to let anything harm their mutual love. Of course, she was realistic enough to realize that in spite of all her efforts, misunderstandings and hurt feelings would arise. But even then the sisters should take care to see that the hurt feelings be healed.

One is struck by the fact that in the letters of Helena there is no moralizing or finger pointing. She understood how difficult it is to live and love in community. But at the same time she believed in the good heart of each member and that Christ resided in each sister. With this attitude, she was able to resolve difficulties and misunderstandings. Differences of opinion and conflicts easily arise. To deny that would be unrealistic. Whoever clings to an overly idealistic picture of community life will react with pain to the friction of daily interaction. Helena shows understanding and kindness in her letters. In spite of all their devotedness, the sisters remain human and can hurt one another because they are wounded children. But it is important that they trust in the good heart of each other. If one believes that goodness is in others, then one

can trust the good in oneself, believe in it, and begin to see it in others. When one sister hurts another, "we must not be offended, since we can be certain that it was not done out of bad will but was only a mistake. I have almost always found, after investigating an incident, that both sides were of good intent" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 1*). As she says, she made investigations into how hurt feelings and conflicts arose, what the reasons were, who was responsible for what, and how the conflicts got worse. She understood that, in most cases, both sides meant well and that much was due to misunderstanding. It was very important to search into the causes and to discover a way to act fairly toward each party. It is surprising how much understanding of human nature was exercised by this simple woman from a small village in the Eifel district.

Sisterly love is presumed for fruitful work in the service of the kingdom of God. We can not proclaim the mercy of the Lord, if we are not merciful to each other. "In order to enkindle the flame of God's love in the hearts of children, it is first necessary to have neighborly love among the sisters and for the children" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 5*). Those to whom the joyful news of the love of God is brought, watch carefully to see if the messen-

gers are living in that love. Helena knew well that aggression can often hide behind a superficial facade. Whoever observes the sisters closely will see from the way they speak to each other and how they speak of each other, from their glances and gestures, whether or not the love of God rules among them. Some sisters told her in confidence that when they visited another convent, “they could tell from their conversation and glances that sisterly love did not rule there” (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 5*).

Helena did not just urge love, she was careful to see that the entire life of the sisters was going well. She was concerned about their health and tried to make the sisters happy with little joys. One can see that this woman had experience in caring for others. She had a natural instinct for things that make others happy. She did not hesitate to ask the sisters in Argentina what they needed, whether the dried fruits tasted good or not, and what else the sisters would like. She busied herself to make sure that all the things necessary to keep the sisters healthy were sent quickly to Argentina so that the sisters could work well. She felt and identified with the needs of her sisters. She carried on a continual “battle” with the mission procurator in Steyl to make sure that things that would make them

happy in their difficult work would be sent to the sisters in Argentina and Togo. Helena was not an austere person; she had a fine sense of the good things of everyday life. For this reason, she felt free to bypass petty and pedantic rules. She was concerned about whether the sisters had enough to eat and were not overburdened. She was like a mother who cared for her children, not from above, but out of a very genuine love. One notices that her love extended to each individual sister as she tried to find out what each needed so that she would be well and feel comfortable in the community. For Helena it was a precondition that each one should joyfully enter the spiritual life and do apostolic labor for others.

## VII

In the testimony of the sisters, Helena carried the burden of leadership as a woman who listened carefully to each sister and took each one seriously. In place of judging what each sister said, she tried to understand her. Still, she did not exercise a passive style of leadership. When misunderstandings arose, she pursued them to find out what really happened and where the cause lay. She listened

to both sides, trying to understand both viewpoints. Often, when she had listened to the view of each individual, she invited all the parties involved into a conversation in order to clarify the misunderstanding. In this she was very consistent. She was not satisfied when the sisters proposed superficial solutions. She did not stop until all who were involved in the conflict were reconciled. She did not go about arranging a quick harmony but investigated the basic causes of a problem. She did not place blame anywhere. She did not judge but only tried to listen to what each one said, and did not stop until each side was ready to accept the other side and let bygones be bygones.

How she led her community appears mostly in the letters that she wrote personally to Sister Andrea, Gertrud Hegemann, who entered Steyl in 1886. She had been one of the original group of four who awaited the foundation of their community. She felt close to Helena, although at age 37 she was sent to Argentina as the superior of the small community there. Unfortunately, Helena received many complaints from Sister Andrea's coworkers that her severity was the reason for many of the problems that arose in their community. With good will, Helena made many suggestions and proposals to the superior in Argentina on how to deal

with her small community. There were only four sisters in the beginning, but each had her own problem; the worst being Sister Agatha, who was frequently ill. Apparently no one knew exactly what the sickness was and it complicated the more common difficulties within the community.

The most important leadership task for Helena was care for harmony and sisterly love in the community. When conflicts arose, she had to take the responsibility upon herself and try to resolve them among the sisters. This can be seen in a letter she wrote to Sister Andrea: "Dear Sister Andrea, I suppose you earnestly take special care that true sisterly love is practiced in a correct way. When harmony is in danger, try to reestablish it again. Show yourself motherly when you hear about something that disturbs love and harmony among the sisters. Usually it is only a misunderstanding on the part of both sides. As much as possible take care to protect love and harmony among the sisters. When something does arise, take all possible steps to see that mutual love and unity are reestablished" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 6*).

Helena knew that the superior has a special responsibility to preserve peace in the community. She must become active as soon as she perceives



that something is wrong. But she should not be too quick to place the blame on anyone. On the contrary, she must remain objective. She must not be suspicious but must trust the sisters. Misunderstandings do not usually arise from bad will but mostly from error and deception. When one interprets another's actions incorrectly, she makes a mistake in her judgment. Thus one can explain the situation without attributing bad will to any one person, in such a way that no person need feel guilty. Leadership is clarification, reclarification, unraveling, and resolving misunderstandings. Helena also understood that not everything can be clarified. There are some difficult personalities whom no superior can ever satisfy. Apparently she had her own experiences with some sisters who tested her patience to its limits. And Sister Andrea had the most trouble with Sister Agatha. Helena trusted Sister Andrea and understood how heavy a cross she had to carry: "Dear Sister Andrea, please do not fear that I might think you have bad will toward Sister Agatha. This is a very heavy cross and I sympathize with you. We should pray and abide in patience; but then we have to exhort in love and call to mind everyone's responsibilities, be it in general, for example, during the chapter of faults, or at table, or in very special cases. I am well aware that such persons are difficult to guide and

satisfy” (Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 25). Helena was aware that a superior cannot be held responsible for every situation. The superior also has her limitations of character and simply cannot relate to everybody. That must be accepted in all humility and it helps the superior to carry on with her responsibility.

When Sister Andrea complained to her how difficult it was to be a superior, she replied: “Dear Sister Andrea, I understand fully that to be a superior in the missions is a very difficult task, but still, believe me, it is also difficult here. There are now ninety-two sisters here and there is much, much work. Even with the best of intentions, I cannot sufficiently please all the sisters in charge of our different sections. But I am not complaining. The sisters are all good; God be praised, and deal very patiently with me” (Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 25). Obviously, Helena did not have an easy time directing the sisters. Sometimes she complained that in receiving candidates the people responsible were not careful enough and some difficult persons were allowed into the community. She suffered much from this, but she always took her difficulties to prayer before the Lord in the tabernacle, who also had to deal with contentions among his disciples. In spite of many deceptions, she still

clung to her trust in the good will of others. It was really an act of faith for her, in spite of negative experiences with some sisters, to see Christ in them and to have faith in him.

A few times Helena explained her basic principle of leadership, which at first seems a little strange to us. She wrote again to Sr. Andrea: "Dear Sister Andrea, let us hold to our basic principle: To God the honor, to my neighbor the benefit, to myself the burden. If we understand this principle correctly, we will not easily be discouraged" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 25*). To let others use us and to bear the entire burden ourselves seems at first to be masochistic. But that certainly is not what Helena meant. It is clear from what Helena wrote later that she found solace in that principle. She understood well that the office of superior is a service and not a privilege. Saint Benedict had a similar view of the role of an abbot who should always consider "how difficult and serious is the task he has undertaken; to guide souls and to serve many different characters, to serve one with friendly words, another with censure, and another with good advice." Leadership is service to men and women, but it can also be a burden. However, the one who accepts the burden can taste the sweetness, just as in the case of the yoke that Jesus spoke about. The one who perceives this is able to extend his or

her service to the lives of others. Helena understood the meaning of her office: to serve as many different characters as possible in order to draw out their goodness, and to stand in service of the life that should flourish among the sisters.

Helena describes how each sister must be handled with care, how a superior must place herself in the position of the person she is dealing with, in order to draw out of them life and love and not to hurt them. She writes to Sister Andrea: "One must be very careful with threats and punishments. When you realize that you are somewhat excited, then try to act more calmly. Give no reprimand at that time, but be in close contact with yourself. Pray earnestly to God the Holy Spirit, the most humble and gentle Virgin Mother of God, and to Saint Francis de Sales. After you have calmed down, you will be able to give advice with indulgence. If you must reprimand, you must also indicate that you are acting in this or that way out of love, out of responsibility, and never dismiss a sister without a clear assurance of your motherly concern. Try to console wherever and however you can" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 6*). The superior must look into herself and not let her uncontrolled emotions disturb the community and so make the problem more complex. She must retain some dis-

tance in order to help each sister. If she herself is hurt by the fault of one sister, then she cannot do justice to her properly. The most difficult task is to confront a sister. But this, too, is important for the welfare of the community; otherwise the problem will spread and affect the whole community. The standards of the community would inevitably deteriorate. The superior should never assign blame out of revenge or anger, but always out of love, always with the knowledge that the sister understands that she is trusted, and that the superior is trying to elicit in her a decision for the good. It is important that the sister receiving an admonition not be humiliated, but encouraged; that she not feel rejected, but accepted. "If you have reprimanded or corrected a sister, do not let her go away before expressing to her your full forgiveness and your full benevolence. After that you should never refer to the incident again without a very serious reason" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 37*).

Sister Andrea was a serious, rigid woman from the district of Muenster; and, as already noted, the other sisters suffered from this aspect of her character. Helena understood that one cannot change one's character easily. Yet one can take care not to offend others: "Dear Sister Andrea, by nature you have a serious appearance and voice. O please

make special efforts to express yourself with full good will toward the sisters. When another gets on our nerves, we must pay little attention, easily overlook, and be forgiving" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 37*). Helena told her she knew that she meant well toward the sisters, but that the sisters nevertheless had a hard time because "you are so serious and reproach them often for a mistake" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 37*). But she trusted that Sister Andrea would work on this tendency of hers, to make herself a little more gentle. Personal character is not set, it can be worked on and behavior can be altered.

It is really amazing how mature Helena became as a superior. Apparently she was able to observe and value others and herself as well. She could separate personalities from issues. She perceived that sisters who clashed with her nearly always did not mean to offend her personally; rather, she had become the object of their projections. If a sister was not satisfied with herself, the simplest way was to lay the blame on someone else; the superior seemed to be the most appropriate object. Helena obviously realized this and could overlook personal insults because she knew they were not meant personally, but were simply projected onto her. She often repeats the observation that the superior must be

motherly. By “motherly” she did not mean acting in a matriarchal fashion, for that would only be a misuse of power. “Motherly” for her meant caring for each individual, showing good will, taking each person seriously, trying to understand, to strengthen, to encourage, and to be humble. To be “motherly” toward the sisters did not mean keeping them small; no, it meant believing in the good will and appreciating the individuality of each sister, inspiring them to trust themselves to become in reality what God had planned for them. Motherly guidance meant showing the sisters their possibilities and capabilities to grow into the image that God had planned for them. Leadership for Helena included looking far into the future and seeking a way to lead the community there.

## VIII

“From the very beginning, Arnold Janssen thought of founding two religious orders for women, one active for the missions and one adoration” (*Stegmaier 1994, 37*). Already on January 8, 1893, one year after the start of her novitiate, Father Janssen asked Helena whether she felt a vocation for the missions or for the contemplative

life. At that time Helena answered in writing: "I have no will of my own. I submit myself unconditionally to what you tell me. I am totally satisfied with everything" (*Vocation*, 37). Fr. Janssen then made a note on the margin of her letter, "Cloistered Sister." But for the time being, only the missionary sisters existed. When the contemplative order was founded on December 8, 1896, Father Janssen did not return to his original choice of Helena for the community. Instead, he chose Sister Aufrida, then still a novice, to be the first superior of the Missionary Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. The appointment of the problematic Sister Aufrida as head of the Adoration Sisters caused Helena much pain. She herself wrote in 1896 that since she herself wanted to be a cloistered sister, she had to make a sacrifice of her desire. But she said her "yes" and gladly remained with the missionary sisters.

The story of Sister Aufrida is a painful chapter in the history of the foundation of the Adoration Sisters. Sister Aufrida had earlier been with the Benedictines of Tegelen, but she had been dismissed because of poor health. In December, 1890, she pleaded repeatedly with Arnold Janssen to admit her into his community of sisters, and nothing could turn her away. At first, Father Janssen



wavered and was of a mind to refuse her. He advised her in 1893 to apply elsewhere. But her persistence won out in the end and on July 7, 1894, he granted her admission. It was not easy for Helena to fit this complicated woman into the community. She was the only one who had to have a special diet, and she had a whole list of personal demands. In a community of young sisters who were more or less of the same age, Sister Aufrida, as she was now called, was something of an exception. Helena asked Father Janssen how she should be treated. It soon became apparent that Sister Aufrida was somewhat neurotic. But because Father Janssen supported Sister Aufrida, Helena did not take her own feelings too seriously at first.

Shortly after her entry Sister Aufrida fell sick, and from the Feast of All Saints in 1895 she was bedridden. Helena wrote in a charitable tone how bad it was with Sister Aufrida and how much she had to suffer. All of a sudden, on April 8, 1896, she became healthy. This sudden cure was unexplainable to the sisters. They looked upon it as a miracle, confirmed by the extraordinary piety that Sister Aufrida showed. In several earlier conversations with her, when she was still a postulant, Helena had the impression that she was of limited intellectual capability, self-conceited and very narrow in her thinking. During one private con-

versation, the postulant let it be known that she was concerned that a good spirit be instilled in the cloistered division and that she could imagine herself as the superior of the cloistered sisters. Helena was suspicious of such sentiments in a postulant. Yet, influenced by her apparent holiness and certain visions that seem to have occurred, Helena thought that Sister Aufrida had perhaps shown some signs of "higher enlightenment." After her cure and because of her extraordinary experiences in prayer, Sister Aufrida let it be known, over and over again in the community, that she saw herself predestined to be the superior of the new cloistered community. Helena reported to Father Janssen what was being spread around the community by Sister Aufrida and what she had already said when she was still a postulant. Fr. Janssen called Sister Aufrida in for a private interview and she denied that she had said any such things. Helena wondered how the two things could be reconciled: on the one hand a downright lie, and on the other, extraordinary spiritual experiences, intimacy with the Holy Spirit, visions, and even prophecies. But since the community was carried away by the extraordinary piety of Sister Aufrida, Helena did not trust her own feelings or draw any conclusions.

When the community of cloistered adoration sisters division was founded on December 8, 1896, Sister

Aufrida was among those chosen for it by Father Janssen. Two weeks earlier, on November 20, she had received the unanimous nomination of the sisters as the first superior of the cloistered sisters. Apparently Sister Aufrida had influenced the election to her advantage by relating her visions and extraordinary graces. She made sure a condition was agreed upon that "older sisters" should not be accepted into the cloistered community, thus blocking the transfer of Helena. Father Janssen appointed her superior of the new division on November 22, 1896. Everything appeared to go well for a while. Father Janssen wrote in a letter to his brother John that he was satisfied with the new superior. For one thing, she encouraged devotion to the Holy Spirit. Apparently she also impressed John Janssen who was highly esteemed by the sisters as their spiritual director and author of religious books. At the pleading of Sister Aufrida, John petitioned Rome that the Holy Spirit be allowed to be pictured in human form. A clear refusal came back from Rome, and from then on John gradually became more skeptical of Sister Aufrida.

The spiritual euphoria in the cloistered convent did not last long. Sister Aufrida became more difficult and displayed pathological symptoms. Many sisters brought their difficulties to Helena.

Some of the missionary sisters complained that Sister Aufrida wanted them to be mere workers for the cloistered sisters and that she treated them haughtily. While the missionary sisters were not allowed to enter the halls of the cloister, Sister Aufrida often entered the quarters of the missionary sisters, broke the silence, and boasted openly of her visions. She took the applicants into the cloistered division, so that in 1897 there were almost no entrants into the missionary division. Obviously Helena was placed in a very difficult position. She had known that, even as a postulant, Sister Aufrida had a split personality. And yet she had become a superior. Helena had written only good things about Sister Aufrida to the sisters in Argentina: "Dear sisters, you have certainly been exceedingly surprised that Sister Aufrida has become a superior, even over us. But now she is very different from before. With her improved health, her spirit has changed completely and, in the course of time, it has become even better" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 29*). Sister Aufrida, the difficult one who always demanded exceptions, was promoted and put in charge of Helena, who was the first to enter Steyl. In reaction to this humbling situation, Helena only wrote: "As long as we are here, our lot is to burn with the love of God, to remain in prayer, and to

live a simple and despised life" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 24*). She did not react with bitterness but devoted herself even more to the love of God.

In time, Helena felt that Sister Aufrida would cause harm to the cloistered and missionary sisters, and that they would become polarized. But she had to restrain herself. She had overcome the pain of being unable to join the cloistered branch and now she was content as a missionary sister. In time the complaints of the sisters and some of the fathers who had to deal with the situation came to the attention of Father Arnold Janssen. Finally, in January of 1897, he became convinced that Sister Aufrida was psychologically ill and had become unbearable as superior. But the bishop who had overall jurisdiction advised him to wait to see how things would develop. Since the situation did not improve, Father Janssen finally proposed to the General Council on September 29, 1897, that the cloistered sisters had to have a new superior. On December 8, 1897, the General Council appointed Sister Michaele to replace Sr. Aufrida.

Arnold Janssen communicated this decision to the cloistered sisters on the very same day the action was taken. Sister Aufrida was given the chance to remain in the cloister as an ordinary sister. Since

she personally appealed to the bishop twice and continued to cause trouble, Arnold Janssen dismissed her on April 29, 1898. Some of the cloistered sisters did not understand the decision because they still looked on her as a holy person and even a saint. They had little experience with pseudomystics and had no criterion by which to discern the nature of the visions and conduct of Sister Aufrida.

After the dismissal of Sister Aufrida, Arnold Janssen returned to his original idea of appointing Helena the superior of both branches, including therefore, the cloistered branch. He asked her in June, 1898, whether or not she still had an inclination towards a life of contemplation. Helena answered that she would rather remain with the missionary sisters, but if he so desired, she would be prepared to transfer to the cloister community. Fr. Janssen asked her the same question on two other occasions and she answered both times that she would be prepared, but that she preferred to remain with the missionary sisters. She took the opportunity to discuss the matter with her confessor, Father Steger. He was of the opinion that it seemed to be the will of God that she transfer to the cloistered branch. The decision was not easy for Helena, but she had the faith to realize it was

the will of God that by her transfer both community of sisters would unite in an association of sisterly love. The founder notified Helena of her entry into the cloistered branch on November 21, 1898, the Feast of the Presentation of Mary. She felt that she did not have the strength to tell the sisters of her transfer. So during his sermon on November 27, 1898, Fr. Janssen announced that Helena would transfer into the cloistered branch. The sisters reacted with shock. Everybody began to weep aloud. Helena also burst into tears. It was a heart-rending moment. Helena's heart felt heavy at the idea of departing from the missionary sisters with whom she had shared so many sorrows and joys from the beginning. Once more she spoke with each sister individually. Each one had the feeling that they were losing their mother. But the trust that this was the will of God kept Helena firm. She was received as a novice into the cloistered community on December 8, 1899, with the name Sister Maria Virgo. Helena, cofoundress and superior who had taken care of everything for the missionary sisters and who had accomplished so many things, now withdrew from all her activities and buried herself in the cloister, to devote herself more to prayer for all the sisters. She wished to continue supporting the mission cause no longer through organization and concrete direction but

simply through prayer. One can only imagine the inner transformation that occurred in the heart of Helena.

But the transformation did not come easy for her. It cost her much inner struggle. How difficult it was to take her departure from the missionary sisters is clear from her November 22, 1898, letter to the sisters in Argentina: "Today, dear sisters, I must beg of you some fervent prayers. Yesterday, on the Feast of the Presentation of Mary, our Reverend Father Superior gave me my appointment to the cloistered community. No one knows about this yet, except for Sister Josepha. It is very difficult for me to communicate this to the sisters; the step is extremely difficult for me to take. We have lived together in holy love. All the sisters here and in the missions are very dear to my heart, and I have many clear intimations that I am much loved by the sisters in both places. Still, the conviction that this is the will of God supplies me with the necessary strength and stamina. I rejoice, of course, at the idea of living a life of prayer in the future" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 57*).

Once more Helena became a novice and had to ask permission for every little thing. "I do not know what will happen with my letter writing because a



little novice must be very humble and obedient” (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 57*). The superior, Sister Michaela, was a capable teacher and good organizer, but she was an entirely different type in her person and thinking from Helena. Yet, Helena fit well into the novitiate under the guidance of this superior. She devoted her life to prayer for the missions and was very happy: “Now I can finally say: I am happy and satisfied in the cloister among the dear sisters; I am filled with hope, and convinced that this was the holy will of God” (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 58*). Thanks to her experience as superior of the missionary sisters, she now was fully aware how much she had to pray for the intentions of the missionary sisters: “The sisters in the cloister are especially called to stand by the missionaries and missionary sisters with their prayers. So I feel, from the experience of my previous position, bound to pray in a more intensive way for you, and I know it is my special vocation now to lift my mouth and mind to heaven to plead for a rich measure of grace for you, your mission, and all the missions” (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 59*). Helena practiced in her life what Arnold Janssen had proposed as an ideal for the missionary sisters, and what he later tried to establish in two branches: the active sister engaged in both prayer and missionary work, and the contempla-

tive sister working for people only through prayer and perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

Even in the cloister Helena followed the development of the missions with burning interest. One perceives in her last letters that she always had to justify her step. She had only made it because it was the will of God. She refers to this as basic in all her letters. After much soul searching, she entered the cloister because she felt that it was God's will. But even after her entry all was not easy. The sisters observed that, often during the day, her tears still flowed. Hardly a year after she had said her "Yes," signs of an encephalitic infection began to appear. Now began a new step in her life. She not only prayed for the missionary sisters but, from the bottom of her heart, she accepted her sickness and prayed that God might accept this sickness as an offering for the missions. On November 3, 1899, she still writes: "I am happy and peaceful. The loving God has helped me very much and, as I firmly believe, this was the result of all of you, my sisters. For quite some time my health has not been good, but I think it will improve. And it is healthy for one to suffer sometimes" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 61*). At that point she made light of her illness, but it soon became clear that the illness was terminal.

Helena had hoped to be allowed to make her profession after one year, although the normal novitiate for the Adoration Sisters lasted three years. The first profession of temporary vows took place in 1899, but Father Janssen had ordered her to wait for three years, like everyone else. That caused her pain because she had been at Steyl the longest, before all the others. This suffering made her health deteriorate even more. From now on she could do no more than accept her illness. What she had written to sisters who were ill, she now had to practice: "Dear Sisters, please do not be sorrowful because you can do so much for the glory of God and for the welfare of the community. As Father Superior says, you can certainly gain more in one week of suffering than by a whole year of work. You have to be very careful not to lose a moment of this precious time of suffering. You should gladly offer your pains and discomfort as a sacrifice for the missionary fathers and sisters who are traveling over the oceans" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 62*).

The idea that one should offer suffering for others rings somewhat strange today. But in the language of the time, Helena often said that God's ways are not our ways. Our task is to say "Yes" to what God communicates to us, to say "Yes" to the tasks, to the strength, to our charisms, but also "Yes" to our

sufferings when we encounter them. Helena was reconciled to her illness. She was not bitter that her sickness followed so quickly after her transfer into the cloister, and that she, a cofoundress, had to die as a novice. She perceived that it was from the Spirit of God and his grace. Through organization and indefatigable labor we cannot bring about the success of a mission; God alone can do it. The idea of helping the missions through her sufferings helped Helena to see a reason for her sickness. Looking at things superficially, can we say that her transfer into the cloister was a failure because she became sick so soon afterward? Yet Helena felt that God did not want her work any longer, but her heart. What was asked of her now was that she surrender totally to God, to entrust everything to him in order to give glory to God alone.

Helena was anointed on January 27, 1900. So near death, she was given permission to take first vows as an Adoration Sister, valid for the length of her novitiate. She passed away on February 3, 1900. The last words on her dying lips that the sisters could understand were: "Jesus, I die for you!" The sisters saw that she died of a broken heart. The woman who revered the pierced heart of Christ was herself pierced through the heart.

And from her pierced heart there flowed a love purer than any love she had ever given in her life.

God had accepted her surrender. The congregation of the missionary sisters and the cloistered sisters grew by leaps and bounds afterward. They undertook missionary activities on all five continents and worked for the welfare of countless peoples. The history of the foundation itself was not a success story for Helena. It ended all too quickly for the cofoundress to see its growth. But her attitude of accepting the will of God made Helena a sign of blessing for her community, a blessing that even today does not cease to flow to countless peoples. The sisters felt immediately that a holy woman had passed away, and the desire increased very quickly to lift her up as an “example on a candle stand” (*Stegmaier 1994, 43*).

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## PART TWO

From the personal holiness of Helena Stollenwerk, the key ideas of her spirituality, and her ardent love for the missions, we can gain some encouraging insight for ourselves today. Though Helena was a woman of the nineteenth century, her path is not limited to being a way of the past; it can also give direction today on the way to go and the kind of life to lead. By beatifying her, the Church indicates that Helena Stollenwerk can be a sign for us today if we understand her message correctly. Helena, the simple woman from a small village in the Eifel Mountains, the woman of simple education, the woman who had seen almost nothing of the outside world, has, through her unconditional love and fidelity to her way of life, left us a message that can inspire us on our spiritual journey even today.

Every religious community has to reflect upon the charism of its founder. To the extent that it can trace its spirituality to its roots, to that extent it can discover the sources for spiritual renewal. The congregations of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters and the Holy Spirit Adoration Sisters renew themselves by reflecting upon the charism of Blessed Helena Stollenwerk in order to prepare themselves for the missionary tasks of today. Such

a review would not mean that they need copy the spirituality of the cofoundress. In dealing with her spirituality, they can discover what is necessary today, where they can find the strength to face the questions of today and, perhaps, even to obtain the correct answers. By listening to the voice of God in the movements of her heart that were nourished from the sources of the Holy Spirit, Helena laid down a foundation that benefits not only the members of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters but also all of those who become acquainted with this fascinating woman. In the following pages I would like to describe some ways in which Helena Stollenwerk might give us encouragement today.

## IX

The path of Helena was no railroad to God; it made its way over hilly paths, through paths cloaked in darkness, through snowy and wild ways, up dead ends, and down roundabout ways that led over crossroads. But Helena stuck to her path to God. She did not deviate, even when it led up mountains, where it seemed at times to disappear. It is fascinating to see the persistence that Helena

showed in her journey, even when there appeared nowhere to go, when God himself seemed to have abandoned her. The darkness, the darkness of God, stands as a challenge on our journey today. We are skeptical of spiritual ways that all too quickly and all too simply promise an experience of God. The desire for God is, even for us, a sustaining strength that keeps us going. But in our desires we are often challenged by God, who hides himself from us, who often falls silent even when we cry out to him. The three approaches that characterize the path of Helena to God can also serve us as good companions on our way: Listening to God, Praying to God, and Wrestling with God.

Even as a child Helena had an idea of what God wanted of her. She trusted that God was not distant, but a God who speaks to us. God did not speak to Helena in extraordinary visual and auditory experiences, but through her feelings. Helena felt an attraction to the Holy Childhood Association from her early childhood, and responded to what she read in the stories in the bulletins of the association. She felt God at work, sparking her interest in the China mission and so calling her to be a missionary. Especially when she read about the children in China, the articles made a deep impression that roused her desire to be a mission-



ary. In these feelings of fascination, desire, being touched and summoned by the children of China, Helena heard the voice of Christ speaking to her: "Come and follow me!" She trusted that these feelings were not simply imagination, but that God was working in her. When she visited a few convents on the advice of her spiritual directors, she listened to her feelings about whether or not she belonged there. She did not consider any rational reasons for or against entry, but she trusted her own intuition. This showed not only an intimacy with God, but also a strong confidence in herself, a trust in her own feelings and the movements of her soul, an awareness of reality in her own existence, and of the reality of God.

And yet, in her inner listening for God, she was often frustrated. She frequently had to deal with deep sorrow during the long process of discerning and responding to her vocation. She had to ask herself at such times whether her vocation might not exist only in her imagination. At times all of her trust in the inner voice of God seemed to break down. She felt herself abandoned and did not know where the road was leading. She herself once said that God listened to the prayers of others while she herself was left with her petitions. But just in the middle of her sorrow, God would always send her

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an inner certainty that she should keep pursuing her goal. The periods of uncertainty, complicated by feelings of sorrow and frustration, challenged Helena to listen more closely to what God was asking of her, and they made her more sensitive to understanding what was her real vocation.

When we are fascinated by something, we are always in danger of projecting our own wishes on God. Fascination can support us upon our path, but sometimes it wears thin. It can also desert us. Then we have to ask where the road really leads, how we should go, and whether the way we want to go is really what God is asking of us. Our listening to God always includes the danger that we are only listening to ourselves. The crisis that Helena underwent during her first year in Steyl showed her that she had to ask what God really had in mind for her. She allowed herself to be taught again by God in his school of listening, until she understood what God was really asking of her: that he did not want her work, but her heart.

Helena knew that God did not speak to her only through her feelings. Another important support were her dreams, for God also speaks through dreams. From dreams we can be sure that we do not project our wishes on God. Dreams cannot be manipulated and God

can send them to us. For Helena her dreams of Chinese children out in the swamps, waiting for someone to save them, were a strong incentive to trust her feelings and her fascination with reports about China.

In dreams God overcomes the unconscious opposition that we often have to God's call. Then it becomes clear to us, deep in our hearts, that this is the way for us. Without the gut feelings, it is possible to forge an ideal for ourselves, by will power that has all the appearances of a reasonable guide. However, the "reasonable" guide operates to hinder us from achieving our real capacity because it is not the call of God. It amounts to an abstract ideal that we, like Procrustes, try to set up for ourselves. In conversations with young people who feel called to the religious life, I often find that some want to enter the religious life because it seems to be a better way, a way of perfection. However, it is not because the religious life is a life of perfection that one is called. It is not an ideal that calls, but God. He can call us even through our feelings and dreams. When God calls we do not need to look for an ideal; instead, we have to discover what we really are, and where and how we can be a blessing for others.

A third important place where Helena could hear

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the voice of God was in consultations. When she was nineteen she confided to the vicar of Simmerath, and later to Dean Goller, her inner thoughts and feelings which drew her to become a missionary. When the vicar advised her against entering the convent because the times were not right, she trusted this advice and tried to understand what God was saying to her. But very soon she again had the feeling that, in spite of everything, she had to follow her calling. Now began a struggle between listening to the advice of the priest and the voice of her own feelings. In the healthy tension between these two voices, she found it possible to hear the clear call of God.

We must always discuss with others the voice of God speaking in our hearts. The point is not that we immediately take the advice of others as the will of God. Rather, the consultation forces us to listen more intently for the voice of God, so that we can distinguish between the voice of God and a mere vague wish. It is surprising how Helena, a young woman with little education, was moved to oppose the advice of the priests. Just as the widow in the Gospel of St. Luke (*18, 1-8*) pestered the unjust judge to grant her petition, so Helena spoke to her confessors, again and again, until the will of God was clear to her; in this way she found a way

to fulfill the will of God in concrete stages. Helena listened to God first, before she listened to others. She respected the vicar and Father Janssen and listened to what they had to say, but then she always took up the subject with God in prayer, in order to hear from God what he wanted of her. Such a mature and emancipated obedience could not be taken for granted in her age, and such a spirit is not so common even today. Many gladly make themselves dependent upon authorities, instead of paying attention to what God is saying to them in their hearts. Helena inspires us to be open both in our consultations and in our hearts to the voice of God who calls us to the image that matches us most.

Already in her youth Helena showed a love for prayer. She walked the long distance to the church in Simmerath for daily Mass. "More than once the custodian found her kneeling on the steps outside the door because the church was not yet opened. When a church was built at Rollesbroich, she cleaned and decorated the house of God and prayed there many hours by herself even if she was sometimes overcome by sleep" (*Stegmaier 1994, 40*). In her letters one realizes how much Helena was a great praying woman. She did not understand prayer as running through points of medita-

tion. Discursive prayer was not for her. Her form of prayer was adoration. In adoration we fall down before God because he is God. We do not pray for ourselves or our cares, but we try to forget ourselves in order to be totally together with the Lord.

For Helena, adoration always meant eucharistic adoration. She could kneel before the tabernacle for hours on end and be engrossed in the presence of the Lord, to feel his holy presence and to be lovingly and tenderly seen by him. She found peace before the tabernacle because she perceived how Christ's love flowed to her and hers to him. A great desire arose in her heart to be united with the Christ who offered himself on the cross. There she was at home. She could only feel at home where the Mystery dwelt. She felt at home before the tabernacle. This experience permeated her whole life. It was wonderful for her to live under the same roof as Jesus. The loving attraction to Christ that she experienced in adoration influenced her life and her presence among the sisters. To be before Christ, to be sheltered with him, to feel at home with him, was the form of both her prayer and her life.

While theology today seldom deals with eucharistic adoration, adoration chapels are usually filled to overflowing. Apparently, the people of today

long for adoration, for a prayer form in which they can forget themselves, in which they can surrender to the presence of a loving and saving God. Helena can perhaps lead others to this form of prayer that so many desire and yet feel so isolated from. Religious men and women should be able to help people who are seeking simply to be silent in the presence of God and so be reborn in God. But religious can only be companions to their prayer if, as Helena was, they are persons of prayer, only if they leave their whole lives open to God and find their homeland in God.

Besides her peaceful prayer and contemplation, Helena was aware of another kind of prayer: intercessory prayer. Her entry into the adoration sisters laid a new foundation for her life as an intercessor for her sisters in the missions: "Because I have now become a contemplative sister, I feel it a very special duty for me to pray for the dear missionary sisters, both for those in the missions and for those at home. I gladly accept this duty as my privilege to place all of your intentions right before God the Holy Spirit and to entrust them to the Sacred Heart of Jesus" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 58*). In her intercessions, Helena felt herself at one with all the sisters in the missions and with people all over the world. She felt that prayer uni-

fied and believed that prayer had an influence on the whole world. When she was taken up with prayer for others, the love that she engendered through prayer spread its rays throughout the entire world. God himself was then at work among people of different nations.

We cannot gain power over God through prayer. But intercessory prayer still has a holy and beneficial effect on the world. All religions are convinced of this. Starets Siluan on Mount Athos believed that the only reason the world was not reduced to ashes and rubble was that, always and everywhere in the world, prayer was being offered. One cannot prove this effect of prayer, but Helena believed in it mightily. Prayer changed her and created a healing atmosphere around her. It reached the sisters in the missions and gave them something of the love of God.

Helena fulfilled the mission ideal that Arnold Janssen had proposed. She joined action and contemplation together. She could work so hard because she came into peaceful contact with the source in the Holy Spirit, who inflamed her and nourished her.

Today we also might enter the school of Helena



to learn how to unite prayer and work (*ora et labora*). Today we are apt to try to control everything by our own efforts and to look upon prayer as an escape from responsibilities that we should be doing by ourselves. Helena showed how prayer and action can be united. Prayer for her sisters inspired her to new action. Our activities become hit and miss unless they flow from prayer. We often give in to disappointment when we cease to pray. Helena found in prayer the strength to preserve her hope in the face of disappointment, and to accomplish all that was necessary within her power. What she lived would today be called "fight and contemplation" (Taize), "mysticism and politics" (Zulehner), "opposition and surrender" (Bonhoeffer), "ora et labora" (Benedict). We are convinced that the healthy tension between these two poles is the only way the world can be helped today. Members of religious orders must especially stress the role of prayer and must intercede for others who have no time to pray or who can no longer pray because they feel themselves helpless before God. No one should consider this an unattractive task for religious life. A community that embraces the whole world within its hours of prayer to God will also accentuate its activities in ways that are healing for the world. Intense

prayers for the world will blossom into actions that bring blessings to the world.

Helena Stollenwerk had to struggle laboriously on her way to God. It was a long road, overcast with clouds of darkness and disappointment; it also led through challenges and crises. She had to fight continually with the sorrow that sometimes enveloped her and made the way dark. At times, she became entirely unsure of what God really wanted of her. She also had the impression that God was not listening at all and her prayers were for nothing. Then she had to wrestle in prayer until God showed her some signpost beside the road that could lead her on. She had to wait twenty years before she could enter a novitiate and her vocation could become a reality. At first the priests of her home town tried to dissuade her from doing anything towards finding her way to a religious community. Then Arnold Janssen left her uncertain whether he was ready to found a congregation of missionary sisters or not. She went to Steyl full of joy, but there she had to toil as a worker in the kitchen. And even there it remained unclear to the four young women who served in the kitchen whether or not they would become a religious congregation of sisters or end their days as kitchen servants.

On this long path of struggle with God, Helena remained faithful to her way. She did not let the difficulties placed in her path by others deter her from it. She did not let her own uncertainty and lack of clarity frighten her away. As a child she felt her vocation was to care for the children in China as a missionary. She remained faithful to this calling even when it changed externally. To be true for twenty years without any support from others is a sign of very deep faith. Helena believed that God would not fail her, that God would remain true to her. With her trust in God she could remain ever true to herself. Her fidelity was an expression of her relationship to God. Helena was not true to some abstract principles but to a relationship to God that she had felt from her childhood. She was faithful to God because she believed in his fidelity to her.

Nowadays we have precious little understanding of such fidelity. When married couples encounter their first conflicts, the partners rarely rely on the fidelity that they have pledged to each other. Or when a religious man or woman falls in love, they scarcely bother to ask whether or not they should remain faithful to their religious pathway. Instead they first ask whether they can live well and “authentically” right here and now. And yet fide-

ty is very basic to human fulfillment. Fidelity gives rise to the desire that one's life become whole, transcending the flightiness of the present time and its many discrete experiences, so that something beyond time finds rebirth in one. Friedrich Bollnow says that a person finds his or her genuine self through the time-bridging action of fidelity. Without fidelity persons fall victim to the complexity of their emotions and experiences. The ancient Greeks already understood the longing of people for integral unity. In his high-priestly prayer, the Lord pleaded for unity among peoples, just as he and the Father were one. It was not just unity among different peoples and different Churches that was meant by Jesus, but also the integral unity of the inner man and woman. Fidelity is the path to this inner unity of self. But I can only be one with myself if I am also one with God, who heals the disunity of my heart and leads me to personal integral unity. Through fidelity to her pathway, Helena Stollenwerk discovered the unity of her life and being. She was not fragmented by the many different experiences of her life. No, through her fidelity to God who had called her, she uncovered the self image that God had intended, the original and genuine image that God had of her. Fidelity to a vocation could possibly set free unknown powers during time of doubt about

whether God had really called one or not. Linger-  
ing doubt cripples and prevents one from being  
free to accomplish numerous possibilities and  
untold capabilities.

## X

Three key ideas that run through Helena's spiritu-  
ality are not derived from her personally. She  
adopted them from the spirituality of her time.  
But she made the selection herself. She did not  
take everything that was in vogue at the time, but  
only three devotions: the devotion to the Sacred  
Heart of Jesus, which had a strong eucharistic  
bent; devotion to the Holy Spirit, which led to  
devotion to the Holy Trinity; and devotion to the  
Child Jesus. In all three of these devotions there  
lies a distinct image of God and the human person.  
In the Heart of Jesus lies a human God and a vul-  
nerable person. The devotion to the Holy Spirit  
focuses on a God nearby and a person filled with  
the Holy Spirit, the inspired person. The devotion  
to the Child Jesus gazes upon a tender God and a  
person in harmony with the image that God has of  
him or her. Let us take a look at these three forms  
of devotion, each with its understanding of God

and the human person, as well as the theology and anthropology behind each devotion that influenced Helena. They could also be of relevance to us today.

*Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus* When a form of devotion is practiced for a long time, this is always a sign that it addresses the heart of people at a deep level, at the level of the archetype, as Karl Jung would say. The spirituality of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is a concrete expression of belief in the Incarnation of God. God is not remote or distant but God made flesh. In Jesus Christ, God shows us a human heart. This heart is a heart full of love. The Heart of Jesus pierced with a lance reveals to us a God who can feel with us, who does not rule outside of history, but who enters history and allows himself to be pierced. God allows his love to flow into this world so that the world can be more and more changed. In the Heart of Jesus we can see "the heart of all things," as Graham Greene calls the mercy of God. The mercy of God is the foundation and center of the world. In the pierced Heart it is certain that the world is full of the love of God. Although much misery and godlessness is rampant in the world, the latter is still permeated with the incarnate love of God. The Heart of Jesus is pierced. Outwardly it looks

destroyed. In reality, however, the pierced love conquers all the hate in the world. This love will never cease to pour itself out on the world until the world is thoroughly permeated and changed, until the love of this Heart infuses love into the whole world and Christianizes it, or as Teilhard de Chardin has put it, until the love of God and the rays of Christ enlighten it.

Tradition has transmitted many deep insights concerning the Heart of Jesus. There is the phrase: *Cor patens quia patiens* (Because a heart suffers, it is open). The Sacred Heart is open because it suffers, it is prepared to let itself be pierced. That is true of the Heart of God. God allows himself to suffer the pains of the world in Jesus Christ. He suffers with us. In the pierced Heart of Christ is experienced what Dietrich Bonhoeffer realized in his prison cell: "God lets himself be expelled, ousted, displaced, rejected by the world and hung on the cross. God is powerless and weak in the world, and only in this way does he join our lives and helps us... only a God who suffers can help us." Obviously, Helena underwent the same experiences as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. That is why she loved the pierced Heart so very dearly. In the Sacred Heart she saw that this world cannot be changed by huge undertakings but only by a love that is prepared to

flow out upon people through weakness. She perceived that, with her poor education, she could not communicate profound theological thoughts, but in her love that said "Yes" to weakness, this world could be wrestled with and changed. The Heart of Jesus was always a sign of hope for her that a love that never retreats but goes to the last extreme will become "the Heart of all things," the heart of a community that could win the world over to life, to love, and to Christ.

*Cor patens quia patiens* is also true of us. Only a heart that is prepared to be wounded is open to God and to people. The love of God will wound us because there is no love without pain. Some of the attitudes and images that we have formed in life must first be destroyed before our hearts can be at peace and be permeated with God. We cannot love God from a safe distance, but only when we are prepared to let our shells be broken open. The process of being broken open for God sometimes feels like we are being taken to pieces. And only when we are prepared to be wounded are we really capable of loving people. When we begin to love, we become vulnerable, we give up the armor we have put on to keep others away. But when we let another come close to us, when we let the anxiety and needs of others enter, then we will become



wounded. But it is only in this intimate nearness, that comes through love, that people can become healthy and whole, that all things can bloom in them that otherwise stay hidden under the cover of anxiety. In this way we become wounded physicians, capable of healing others.

Helena learned in her veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that only a love that allowed itself to be wounded amounts to anything. It was not the ascetic who can bear renunciation and discipline, nor the hero who boldly leaps into a dangerous mission, nor a perfect or sinless person, but a wounded and loving person, who provided the image that inspired Helena. Helena has no great enterprises to show the world. But she loved her coworkers; she loved the peoples of the world with a love that was vulnerable. And so she became capable of healing the wounds of her sisters, and of having close to her those sisters who were avoided by others because they were very difficult. She made this love the cornerstone of a community that, in spite of all its human weaknesses, dares to change this world through love.

The pierced Heart of Christ showed Helena that the sufferings we encounter are meaningful and can be changed into a blessing for others. As a

superior, she bore the sufferings of her coworkers who were overstrained by difficult people around them. She carried her own burden of sorrow: the sorrow of disappointment, the sorrow of setback, and finally the sorrow of sickness, the pain of a broken heart of which she finally died. Through the Sacred Heart she understood that suffering, when it is accepted with the same love that burned in Jesus, can become a blessing for the whole world. Her sufferings were not meaningless. They were an expression of her love poured out on all the peoples of the world. To those of us living in a world that seeks every escape from suffering, Helena can reveal how to say "Yes" to the sufferings we encounter and so change them into a source of blessing.

Helena connected the pierced Heart of Jesus, from which flowed the love of God, with her adoration of the Holy Eucharist. The tabernacle was a place where she could plead that this love might be poured out upon all in order to sanctify the world and to bring about change in hard hearts. It is Christ in the Eucharist who is the Christ who died for us, who gives himself to us, who shows us his open heart, so that we can find a place to bury ourselves in his love. During eucharistic adoration Helena always placed herself in the love of

the pierced Heart of Christ in order to be able to say “Yes” to all that wounded her, made her ill, pierced and crucified. Surely it was not easy for her to bear the burdens of all those sufferings that the Church of the time, the priests, and Arnold Janssen laid upon her shoulders. But instead of breaking down under the burden, she allowed herself to be opened up to a love that heals and transforms.

*Devotion to the Holy Spirit* Helena inherited from Arnold Janssen the connection between the Sacred Heart devotion and devotion to the Holy Spirit. Her deep love and fidelity to the Holy Spirit have a message for us today because she touched the core of the spiritual life, the Holy Spirit. According to the scriptures, the Holy Spirit is God at his closest to us. God is so close that he sends us his Spirit. The Holy Spirit who has been poured out upon us is not only the gift of God but is God himself. Through the Holy Spirit we become participants in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The theology of the Holy Spirit, therefore, is always a mystical theology. It points to our highest dignity: entry into communion with the Triune God. God is no longer the distant and incomprehensible One before whom we fall down. No, he resides right within us. Through the Holy Spirit we are

immersed in the life and love of the Holy Trinity. Veneration of the Holy Spirit leads us to the Holy Trinity. When Helena speaks of the Holy Spirit, she means, first of all, the Father of Love. The Holy Spirit is the love of God poured into our hearts. The Holy Spirit is the one who leads us into the love of the Blessed Trinity, into the love between the Father and the Son. Therefore, devotion to the Holy Spirit is rooted in devotion to the Holy Trinity, which has permeated the two congregations of missionary sisters since their foundation. On every letter that the sisters write is the following: "May the Holy and Triune God live in our hearts and in the hearts of all." This motto directs all their thoughts and actions. The Holy and Triune God is a God who lives in community, who is himself love that radiates inwardly throughout God and outwardly within the universe. He is a God who adopts us into his loving community, a God who does not remain aloof in himself, but immerses us into the stream of love between the Father and Son. Devotion to the Holy and Triune God points to our human dignity. We are made worthy to participate in the Holy Trinity, elevated to a share in the innermost community of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the devotion to the Holy Trinity, we meditate on the words of Jesus: "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my

Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (*John 14, 23*).

Helena speaks of the Holy Spirit as "our Father." She refers to him as a concrete person. Today we might be inclined to speak of the Holy Spirit as our Mother. God is a Father to us, one who carries us, who challenges and encourages us to live our lives. God is a Son to us, who has become our brother, who goes on our way with us, who reminds us of our sonship and childhood. God is the Holy Spirit who comes to us, who lives in us, who renews us. Feminist theology rightly calls the Holy Spirit our Mother because the Holy Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation, who allowed creation to grow, is more a feminine than a masculine principle. The bible sees the Holy Spirit as the breath of God breathing forth in all creation, as a breeze that both touches us tenderly and shakes us up roughly.

According to the Gospel of Saint John, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, his personal radiation, his love, his strength. After his resurrection Jesus breathed on the disciples and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (*John 20, 22*). In the Holy Spirit, we participate in the love of Jesus, in his way of touching people, to comfort and heal them. We do not breathe just any kind of spirit into our hearts but

the Spirit of Jesus that leads us ever deeper into an understanding of Jesus, into whom we are gradually transformed. The Holy Spirit draws us to Jesus and through him to the Father. He shows us that Christian life is not just keeping the commandments of Jesus but rather establishing communion with Jesus and the Father and living in this communion.

For Saint Paul, the Holy Spirit is the love of God that has been poured out into our hearts (*See: Rom 5, 5*). The Holy Spirit permeates us and fills us with his love and freedom. According to Saint Paul, a Christian is not spiritless but a person full of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit urges us to change the world. He encourages us to involve ourselves in human activity. He is the love that becomes an unquenchable source for good within us. When we live in the Holy Spirit, we are free and the world has no power over us. For Saint Paul, to live in the Spirit means to live from our innermost being and not to be dependent upon the opinions of people or upon our desires. The Spirit that has been given shows us that we are not slaves, but sons and daughters of God. In the Holy Spirit we cry out "Abba Father" (*Rom 8, 15*). Persons full of the Holy Spirit proceed to change the world. They feel called to go out into the world to announce

the good news. On Pentecost it was the Holy Spirit who changed the anxious apostles into missionaries who preached the message of Jesus Christ to the whole world. They no longer feared how the world would react to their message. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of trust who frees us from our fear, who strengthens us to profess our faith before judges and kings.

The Holy Spirit is the Soul of the Church and leads all to the community of the Church. Veneration of the Holy Spirit is, therefore, essentially ecclesiastical spirituality, derived from the theology of the Church. Through her devotion to the Holy Spirit, Helena intimated that we can be Christians only if we are together, that being a Christian means we have to belong to a community. For the early Christians, the experience of community between Jews and Greeks, between masters and slaves, between men and women, was a proof that the kingdom of God had really come and that the formation of this kingdom was the work of the Holy Spirit. The Church is not so much an institution, creating a power structure, as a community of faithful people drawn together by the Holy Spirit into a community, to bear witness to the mercy of Jesus Christ. Devotion to the Holy Spirit will lead us to a spirituality of the

Church that experiences and shares God. Furthermore, devotion to the Holy Spirit will lead us to a mystical spirituality in which we experience the life of God in us, in which God permeates our hearts, in which we are baptized into the life of the Holy Trinity. Devotion to the Holy Spirit also allows us to believe in the dignity of every human person. It looks at the human person in the light of God. The human person is not totally corrupt but is capable of being filled with the Spirit of God, to become a person alive and full of the Spirit, open to the love and mercy of God. Our day needs people like Helena, who became filled with the spirit of Christ through the Holy Spirit, in order to protect us from the demons afflicting our generation. It takes people like Helena who, in spite of all the wounds that they might suffer from the Church, still believe that the Holy Spirit will awaken the Church from its inertia so that it will not remain wrapped up in itself but accept and live the mission of God as a healing and loving presence in the world.

*Devotion to the Child Jesus* When today we read what Helena wrote about the Child Jesus, we can be put off by her childlike language. We cannot express our spirituality in the same language. The point at issue is, however, whether or not her



devotion to the Child Jesus conveys a message to us today about a particular kind of experience of God. In her devotion to the Child Jesus, Helena reminds us that God came into the world as a child. That is the central message of faith that Christians celebrate at Christmas. God did not just become man, he became a child in order to free us from our great delusions about being faultless and perfect. God became human so as to free us from our basic sin, our wish to be gods. God became human so that each of us finds the courage to discover our own humanity. Our human becoming takes place just like that of Jesus, who came down from heaven to earth by descending into a manger, into our own darkness and our own shadows. Our becoming human demands that we repeatedly become children. This does not mean that we remain infantile, but that, as children do, we express new wonder at the mystery of life, and that we remain open to the operation of God in our lives. Human becoming means that we are always ready to start anew as a child. It means that we never stop, but remain ready to grow until we have reached our full stature in Christ, the image that God has in store for us.

The devotion to the Child Jesus shows us a tender God, a God who has made himself into a lit-

tle child. Such a child can only be handled with tender hands, the way Mary does in the many scenes of the Mother and Child which artists have portrayed. The Mary who holds her child in her arms tells of a maternal God who gives us tender love and who holds us in his arms as well. The child in the crib gives us an insight into a tender God. This was the experience of Helena. In her devotion to the Child Jesus, God became a nearby and intimate God to whom one could speak without reserve, to whom she could tell everything with simplicity, who had an eye for the small and concrete, just as she herself had in her care for her sisters. God in the image of the Divine Child is no longer a remote or fearful God, but a God who descends to our level, who became weak for us in order to win us through his powerless love.

When we dream, we encounter the genuine and the real that lurks inside ourselves, and we find that something new desires to grow inside us. The Child Jesus reminds us that we are not encased in our past but that God can always begin something new with us. The child in the crib gives us hope that our lives can become renewed, that we can grow into the genuine image that God has of each of us. Saint Thomas Aquinas says that each indi-

vidual is a unique expression of God. Each of us expresses a personal creation of God. The world would certainly be much poorer if each of us did not reflect the image of God in his or her own unique way. Romano Guardini once said that each person is a genuine word of God, a word that God speaks only in this particular person. Our only task in life, therefore, is to express to the world this genuine word that God speaks only in me. Devotion to the Child Jesus expresses our yearning to discover our genuine and undisturbed image of God and to live by it. When I gaze at the child in the crib, I receive some insight into the mystery of my own self. The glory of God shines through my face and I, too, am also called to express this glory in my own uniqueness as I live in the world.

The image that God has of me is my true being. The basic question that we all want to resolve is about our innermost self, our unique personage. Who am I? Am I the person whom people believe me to be? Do I know myself, who I am? Am I the one defined through my past, who is characterized by my gifts and looks? Or am I something entirely different? A glance at the crib reminds me that I am a mystery, that I am a unique image that God has made. He plants the yearning in me to come near to this genuine image of God in me. When I

approach this image, when I become totally myself and my life is in harmony with the image of God, then I am in harmony.

Devotion to the Child Jesus in one's spiritual life clarifies not only the question of who God is, but also the question of who I am. God is not the only unfathomable mystery; the human person is also. The spirituality that Helena practiced from her early childhood dealt not only with the mystery of the incarnation of God but with also the mystery of her own humanity. A glance at the Child Jesus in the crib will give us the courage to dream of a fuller and more harmonious life and, in spite of having gone through many disappointments, always to dream anew. It is never too late. We are only held prisoner by our past. God can always offer us a new beginning. Helena always believed this, even when everything inside her was dark and narrow, when there was no obvious hope in sight. God can always cause the birth of the divine child within our hearts. In the middle of our complex relationships, in the depths of our darkness, in the midst of our corruption (which neither looks nor is good), in the midst of what we pine for, in the restrictions of our backgrounds, God can always create a new beginning, he can bring us into contact with the

peaceful and genuine image that he has of us. Then our life will become genuine, integrated, and healed.

## XI

Helena's deepest longing from childhood on was to go to China as a missionary. She was fascinated by the idea of being a missionary. We do not know what she imagined when she was seven years old, but as she grew older her heart expanded when she thought about going to China to help children that nobody else seemed to care about. I will not discuss Helena's understanding of mission in a theological sense. I will just outline a few ideas about how she, who never got to China, the land of her desires (or for that matter, to any other mission), still considered herself a missionary.

As far back as she could remember, Helena felt herself called to be a missionary. But her understanding of mission changed several times during the course of her life. When Helena at the age of seven felt herself called to be a missionary, there were no religious communities for women missionaries in Germany. It was, therefore, an entire-

ly new idea that came to Helena, an idea that decidedly changed the role of woman in the Church at the end of the last century. The bulletins of the Holy Childhood Association described the mission work of men only. So sometimes it was difficult for Helena to accept the fact that because she was a girl she could not be a missionary. If she had been a boy she would have studied and gone to the missions without question or difficulty. Often when she dreamt that she was picking up the "outcast children on the banks of a river," she believed that "this would be impossible for women" (*Vocation*, 6). From this it is clear that Helena had to grapple with her destiny as a woman in the Church. At a time when there was no opportunity for a woman to be a missionary, she did not let herself be discouraged. Her wish to be a boy did not mean that she denied her femininity but that she was not satisfied with being a woman as defined by the time when she lived. Thus, already in her day the young girl was breaking down stereotypes that oppress women. The young lady had no models to rely on. She was not brought up in an age of any feminist movements from which she might receive her ideas. Instead, she trusted in her own inclinations and dreams. God himself broke down the limits of her narrow education through her dreams. As Saint Peter, in

one of his dreams, came to an insight that changed his narrow understanding of the Jewish law, and as Saint Paul dared to cross over to Europe on the basis of a dream, so God opened the horizon of Helena through a dream and strengthened her to go beyond the limits of the woman's role as it was dictated by that historical moment.

When she was fifteen she read about the three Italian and French sisters who were being taught the Chinese language by Father Horner. She thought: "If they can do it, so can I. I began to have the courage to hope from this time on" (*Vocation*, 6). She trusted that she could do what other women were doing. That shows a deep self-confidence. She obviously absorbed more from reading the bulletins than just the text. Father Horner worked in Zanzibar and had nothing to do with China. Her reading was probably just a trigger to strengthen resolves that she had already made. This shows that she broke open new paths as a woman, that she had some definite ideas of her own, ideas about what kind of enterprises women of her time should undertake. These ideas only needed an internal stimulus to break out. In reality, no woman in Europe had the opportunity to go to China at that time. But Helena could not be deterred from holding fast to her vocation. When she first expressed her wish, she met

with refusal. She could not provide external proof that her call was from God. She could only believe in her feelings, feelings that told her that she was called to a missionary vocation. It took courage for an uneducated girl to trust her intuitions, since educated men such as priests, who alone held authority in the Church at that time, had turned her wishes down and called her ideas into question.

In spite of her meager education and the limited background of her family, Helena broke out of the narrow restrictions placed on women in her times. She remains, therefore, an outstanding example for women to trust their own feelings and to move ahead. Even in our own times, with the feminist movements that have given women a sense of their own worth and have provided new possibilities for human development, there are still many women who all too quickly accept the plausible arguments of men, allow themselves to feel uncertain or lose their sense of self-worth in controversial discussions. Though in argumentation Helena was not on a level with the educated men of her day, she did not let herself become entangled and lost in ceaseless argumentation. She listened to the voice in her own heart. For this reason we should let Helena speak to us today, and we should believe that God speaks to each one of us. What



God says to us is stronger than what anyone tries to tell us. Because God speaks to each of us, we should not make our personal intuitions be dependent upon the loudest arguments. Through a discernment process, we discover our own worth, our divine worth within ourselves.

Helena allowed herself to be wakened to the needs of the children of China through the bulletins of the Holy Childhood Association. Instead of centering her thinking around her own ego, she identified with the children of China. When she read the bulletins, she came away with the feeling “that I was abroad and I received letters and information from home” (*Vocation*, 6). She felt as if she was not in a small village in the Eifel Mountains, but in the wide world. Her heart was in China. She felt that she had to break out of the narrow boundaries of her homeland in order to be at home in the world, in order to feel solidarity with all the peoples of the world. The problems that people at home talked about were unreal compared to the real problems of the wide world.

The experience of being in solidarity with all the children of the world influenced Helena’s later understanding of the missions. In her letters she did not conceive any grand mission strategy. Her

correspondence was filled with practical concern for the sisters in Argentina and for the children entrusted to them. She felt one with her sisters. She took up the burden of their problems, their conflicts, and their spiritual and bodily health. She was concerned for the children that came to the mission, eager that they feel accepted, that they perceived the love of the sisters, and that they might feel at home in such a climate of love. All of her letters speak of her deep solidarity with the sisters and with the people in the distant lands. In them one gets a better sense of how she understood the task of the missions as a woman. She did not suggest any plans for mission organization. She did not develop any kind of theology of mission but was always busy with concrete problems. In her heart she felt herself one with the men and women in the missions. She loved them as well as the people whom her sisters served. Love was her basic approach and her theme for dealing with the missions. Because she loved the people in the mission countries, she was concerned about them. That is why she wished that the good news of Jesus Christ be proclaimed to them. Conversion does not come first, she knew, but love for the people among whom one works. Because of that love one could not withhold the good news. Sometimes when

Helena speaks in her letters of the salvation of the children, she writes that the sisters should not be overly concerned that the children will be rejected by God because they have not been baptized. Instead, she stresses the idea that the missionaries are called to share the love of Christ with the children of distant lands, to feel with them, and to care for them. She understood her missionary task as a superior to love and feel a sense of solidarity with the missionary sisters and the children in their care.

The sisters become the clearest sign of Christ when they love the people among whom they work. Helena repeats this time and again in her letters to the sisters in Argentina. She speaks of the love of self-giving, a love that sacrifices for others: "Do not let it annoy you to recall very often the greatness of your holy vocation. Keep each other alert to the offering of love that moves you, to forget yourself and be everything to those entrusted to you. Do not forget our motto: To God the honor, to my neighbor the benefit, to myself the burden" (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 5*). The hearts of the people cannot be won through good preaching, but first of all through the sign of Christ-like love of neighbor. "In order to enkindle the love of God in the children, it is

first necessary for the sisters to exercise love for one another and for the children.”

Helena speaks often of the dignity of the missionary vocation. She praises her sisters in Argentina: “You have such a rich opportunity to work so directly for the glory of God and the salvation of souls” (*Stegmaier 1987a, Letter 3*). One feels that Helena would herself have liked to work in the missions, because she is convinced that it is a great task to work for the salvation of people. But she gives the sisters a maxim for mission that she herself believed in: “To God the honor, to my neighbor the benefit, to myself the burden.” Mission work is, first of all, for the glory of God. If the people in the mission lands see love among the sisters and feel their benevolence, then will God be honored. Helena thought that the love of the sisters for one another was the greatest glory to God. This way, she took over the basic principle of Saint Irenaeus and changed it into her mission principle. Irenaeus said: *Gloria Dei homo vivens* “The glory of God is the living person.” When the sisters are living through love and love streams out from them, then the majesty of God becomes clear and God is glorified in the testimony of the missionaries.

All that the sisters do in their mission should be for the benefit of others, to serve them and to help

them feel as children of God. For Helena, to be a missionary means to be present for others, to care for their welfare, and to support them. The sisters in the mission should not be surprised if their work becomes difficult. The burden is theirs. But they will gladly accept all their difficulties because they know that God is glorified in their hardships and in their service of his people. Helena's word about "the burden" will console the sisters when life grows difficult. They should not become disappointed, but realize that their calling is being fulfilled and that they are bearing the burdens of others, according to the words of Saint Paul: "One should carry the burdens of another so that the law of Christ will be fulfilled" (*Gal 6, 2*).

A simple theology of mission flows out of these few sentences of Helena. But they express the central idea of mission. Whoever becomes a sign of love among the peoples of the world upholds the witness of Christ. For this reason, the witness of a Christian community among the sisters is the strongest sign of love for people to see. From their common love, the rays of love will radiate from the sisters to the people among whom they work. Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs so that what they had to announce was visible in their behavior. Helena told her sisters that the way they practiced mutual love would be a sign of the love of

Christ for the people among whom they worked. Only a love that was prepared to sacrifice for others would win people for Jesus Christ.



## ENDWORD

In her own personal way, Helena fulfilled the law of Christ: "Bear one another's burdens" (*Gal 6, 2*). The basic principle of her life was as follows: "To God the honor, to my neighbor the benefit, to myself the burden." That is a simple saying, but it releases an immense power. It spurred her on to work unceasingly for the glory of God, to look to God in all that she did. God was the center of her life. Her basic principle did not leave her rest in her care for people. As superior, she understood very quickly how difficult it was to care for sisters who were physically exhausted, or for sisters who had difficult personalities that cut them off from others. In her care for her sisters, the last part of her motto was a consolation. Conciliation, which was the major part of her role as superior, she found burdensome. Still, she did not play the part of a victim lamb. One cannot live comfortably with a victim lamb. Helena did not let the sisters know that her office was sometimes burdensome. She radiated joy, satisfaction, encouragement, and gratitude for her vocation, and for a life with Christ.

Helena was characterized in a special way by her great love of God and people. She presented



much to the outside world. She had spent only seven years as superior before she entered the cloister of the Adoration Sisters and became a novice again, where she had to ask for permission for each little item. As a novice she lived under a superior who was an entirely different kind of person from herself. Despite being the first to enter Steyl, she who was called by Arnold Janssen "the first cofoundress of the communities of Servants of the Holy Spirit," died as a novice. Her death was accepted as a tragic event by the sisters who knew that it was solely through her love for God and her community, expressed until her dying moment, that the foundation was laid for both religious communities. Helena's love was deeply involved with the concrete. She perceived immediately what was good for the sisters. She could confront sisters who had conflicts until they were prepared to make a reconciliation. Her love possessed a capacity for bringing about unity among persons of different character. Helena was the center of her community. She was loved by everybody. All her sisters realized that Helena respected each one, that she possessed insight into what moved each one, that she could animate those who were depressed, console the sorrowful and show trust in those who were anxious.

Others could build on the foundation of this woman who was so faithful to her inner calling in spite of all the opposition from others, and who in her short life continually grew in a selfless and joyful love of self-surrender. This is why both congregations of sisters, the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters and the Holy Spirit Adoration Sisters, could grow very quickly and work in all parts of the world in the fruitful service of the missions.

Now that their cofoundress has been beatified by the Church, the sisters feel themselves obliged to trace back their roots and discover anew the sources that activated Helena. In spite of the changing conditions of time and language, the charisma of their cofoundress is even today the source upon which the community can draw in order to bear fruit to the world. Helena understood how to read the signs of her times and how to find the answers as to how the love of God could be made more visible in the world. Understanding her way of life will make the community sensitive to the problems of today. A religious congregation can give a feasible and viable reply only if its members continue to renew themselves in the sources that give them life. The main source upon which Helena drew was the love of God that the Holy Spirit poured out into her heart. Helena still chal-

lenges her sisters to grow in the love of Christ in order to achieve solidarity with all peoples, to love with a love that first brings about change to their own hearts, that comforts, that heals wounds, and that gives testimony to the holy and loving presence of God in the world.

Helena is a summons to all Christians to grow in love. She is not only an example of how the love of the Holy Spirit can bring about change, but also, as a Blessed of the Church, she acts like a mirror so that the love of God can spread its rays throughout the world. The Blessed and Saints of the Church are more than examples for us to imitate. In their lives, God reveals particular aspects of his love. He makes clear how his redeeming and liberating love recreates people. In Helena we see the tender and merciful love of God. In her face we see the motherly and the intimate God. Insofar as we meditate on the life of Helena, we encounter the Triune God who would like to invite us also to participate in divine love. In Helena we perceive the forms our love should take if our lives are fully permeated with the love of God. Helena stands as a prophetess with the message to each of us that God can break the confines and limits of our own hearts to lead us into a wider world, that the love of God can change us and, through us, make his

presence a more certain reality in the world. In Blessed Maria Helena Stollenwerk we discover a God who is faithful to us so that we may remain faithful to our path, so that we may come ever closer to what God has called us to be as the unparalleled and unique expression of God's love and majesty.

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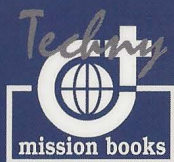
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## FAITHFUL TO THE SPIRIT

*is a biography of Blessed Maria Helena Stollenwerk, the cofounder of the international community of Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters.*

*On May 7, 1995, at the beatification of Blessed Maria Helena, Pope John Paul II stated: "If we think of Mother Maria Stollenwerk, we find ourselves before a great feminine personality and missionary pioneer, although she was not able to fulfill her greatest desire: to be sent on mission herself. In brief, we can state that her whole life was a sign of her being touched by God."*

*The life of Blessed Maria Helena was one of great struggle, ongoing discernment, mission commitment, and blessing. "Fidelity to the Spirit and to the word of God spoken within her, ultimately led her to the goal of her desires, although in the end it turned out rather differently from what she had imagined and so much desired."*

— Sr. Agada Brand, SSpS, Superior General

*Anselm Gruen, a German Benedictine monk, originally published this work in German as Treue auf dem Weg. Paul LaForge, SVD, who provided this English translation, teaches at Nanzan University, conducted by the Divine Word Missionaries, in Nagoya, Japan.*