

The Meyers of Crystal Creek

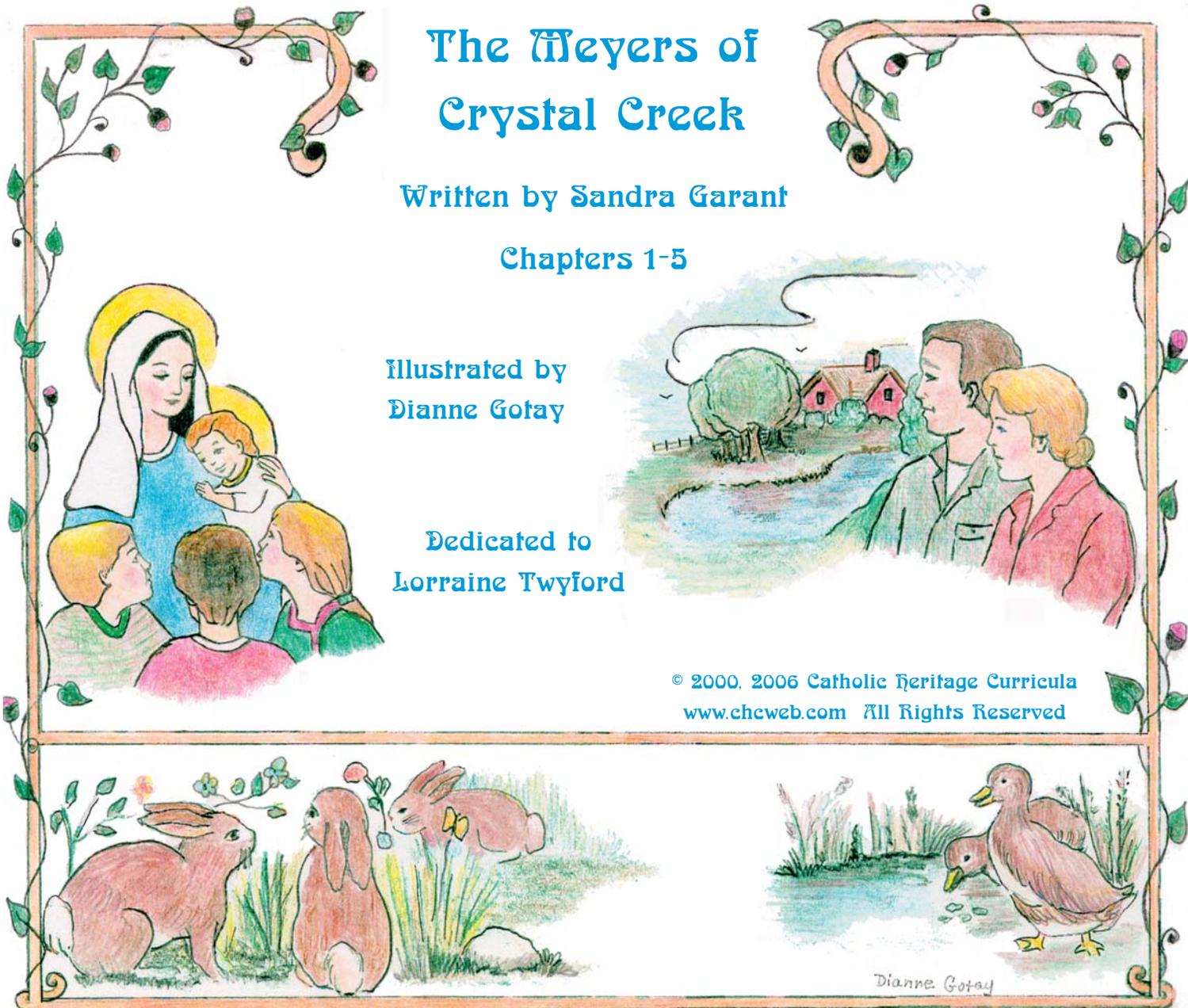
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Chapters 1-5

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Dedicated to
Lorraine Twyford

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The three Meyer children are loosely based on the author’s own three children. All other characters and events are purely fictional. Crystal Creek is a fictional place, although it is roughly located in the Pearland/Manvel area of Brazoria County, Texas.

Other Titles by the Author:

A Catholic Garden of Puzzles
Creative Communications

It’s a Mystery! Catholic Children’s Retreats: The Holy Trinity, The Perfect Personality, The Secret Garden, The Household of God

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Chapter One



Thorns and Rabbits

Lunch was over, and eight year old Victor Meyer didn't have dish duty. His older sister Irene was washing dishes today. He didn't have to sweep either. His younger sister Nicole was putting a load of laundry in. Mom was talking on the kitchen phone to Dad.

Victor reached for the doorknob with one hand and touched the brown Crucifix he had made last year with clothespins with the other hand. Then he slipped out the back door. He had about fifteen minutes before the kitchen would be clean enough to start lessons again.

The Texas sun was hot even though the calendar said it was still mid spring, but the back yard had patches of shade. The wind was making ripples on the fishpond. A frog plopped into the pond, and a startled blue jay flew into the little oak tree.

Everything was growing fast—the flowers, the vegetables, the trees, and the weeds. He pulled a few nutgrass weeds near the daylilies.

He had already fed and watered the rabbits this morning before breakfast, but he didn't want to leave the weeds in the flowerbed. He skirted around the back of the pond, trying to spot the turtle that had recently moved in. Brazil, the duck, quacked at him. He jumped. She had been resting beneath a silverberry bush. Portugal, her husband, followed her, and they slid into the water. Their webbed feet stirred up the pond. Portugal plunged his head beneath the surface. Brazil settled her brown feathers and floated.

Victor found a loose bamboo stake and lifted the zucchini leaves back. The baby green squashes were too small to pick. He pulled another weed for the rabbits.

The morning glory vines were about to bloom. They provided a thick shade for the rabbit hutches. Victor opened Bernard's door and fed him a weed. Bernard snatched it with his front teeth and chewed. Victor liked the feel of Bernard's reddish-brown fur. Bernard was a handsome rabbit. He had wiggly ears and bright eyes. He was clean because he spent a lot of time grooming his fur. Bernard even cleaned between his toes.

Peppy and Patty hopped up to their doors. They wanted some weeds too. Victor poked the weeds through their doors. Mom didn't want him to play with his sisters' rabbits. Each rabbit lived in its own wooden and wire room with a front door but no back door.

Victor looked back toward the house. Through the window he could see Mom hanging up the phone. She rapped on the window. "Please turn off the water hose, Victor," she said, pointing to the side yard. Then she closed the blind to keep the afternoon sun out.



“Yes, ma’am.” Victor headed out the gate. He still had the bamboo stick in his hand. Yesterday evening Mom finished reading aloud a story about Adam who lived in England a long time ago and had a big horse and could joust. Victor flicked the stick. He lived in Crystal Creek, didn’t have a horse, and couldn’t joust. Jousting must be fun.

He waved the bamboo stick back and forth. If he had lived a long time ago, he would have had a horse and a lance. And maybe armor.

“Take that!” He shouted at an imaginary enemy. He whipped the bamboo left and right and stabbed. He was gaining ground. His enemy couldn’t escape, except by running away.

No wonder he was called Victor. Victor the Victorious continued to battle his way forward along the flagstone path. He drove his enemy past the tomato plants, the marigolds, and the bush beans.

All of a sudden, the Katy Road Pink rosebush snagged his t-shirt. Another enemy! Victor spun and whack, whack, whack! Green leaves and pink petals came loose. They fell to Victor’s feet.

Oh no...His sword turned back into a bamboo stick. He thought. What he thought first was that something with thorns should have been a bit sturdier. He counted four rosebuds and three broken branches at his feet.

Miss Sophie, his next-door neighbor, came around the corner of her house to switch off her water sprinkler. “Hello, Victor.” She paused, noticing the little pile of greenery on the flagstone. “It’s early for pruning your mamma’s rosebush, isn’t it?”

Victor sighed and nodded. “Yes, Miss Sophie.” He gathered up the fallen pieces. “I’d better go in now.”

“Good luck, Victor.”

Victor remembered to turn the water off. It gave him more time to think. What he thought was that Katy Road Pink was Mom’s favorite rosebush because Bernard had accidentally gotten loose in the early spring and eaten the other rosebushes down to the ground almost. Roses were like dessert to Bernard.

Then he remembered the holy water font near the front door. When Bernard got loose, Irene told him holy water was useful when anyone had something to confess. She said it made her feel brave enough to tell the truth. Since Irene and Nicole said that they might possibly have been the ones to leave the hutch door open, they had all three gone to Mom to confess. Now he had to do it alone.

Victor made the sign of the cross and said, “Mom?”

“We’re in the kitchen. Are you ready for math?” She sounded cheerful, but he predicted that she wouldn’t stay cheerful.

“Not quite,” Victor said. Actually, working twenty-five math problems seemed easier than what he had to do now. He held up the rose leaves and buds.

“Victor Meyer, what happened?” Mom was frowning.





Victor scrunched his nose. He waited a second for the holy water to start working. “I was pretending to be Adam, and...”

“I don’t recall Adam beating up Eve’s rosebushes.”

Victor looked puzzled. “Oh, not that Adam. The other Adam. Adam of the Road. I thought it might be fun to joust, except that I don’t have a horse, so I was sword fighting. I’m sorry I beat up your roses.”

Mom paused and then nodded. “Well, Sir Victor, at least you are a contrite and honest fellow. Thank you. Put the rosebuds in a bowl of water. Maybe they will bloom after all. And feed the leaves to the rabbits. No sense in wasting them. Then you can boldly battle your math lesson.”

He brushed past her, and she pulled a rose leaf out of his dark blond hair. “You’re still my favorite eight year old,” she reminded him.

Irene and Nicole stopped holding their breath. He was their favorite eight year old too.

When all of them had settled down around the table, Mom had an announcement. “Your dad says we’re going fishing this Saturday in Galveston. And we’re taking a picnic lunch and swimsuits.”

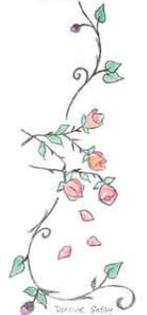
Nicole piped up, “Could we build a sandcastle? And remember that Maggie is coming to stay.” Maggie was Nicole’s best friend. She lived two blocks away.

Irene wanted to take stuffed eggs. Victor started thinking about catching a big fish, a fish as big as Brazil and Portugal put together. And maybe the girls would bury him in the sand. “Galveston, ohh-hh, Galveston, can’t remember the rest of the song, but I know we’ll have fun...” Everyone laughed. He smiled and dove into his math.

However, the trip to Galveston wasn’t going to turn out the way Victor planned.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. When in the story did “Victor the Victorious” show true courage?
2. Where did Victor turn for strength to tell the truth?



Chapter Two



Why They Didn't Go Swimming in Galveston

Before dawn, they picked up Maggie on the way to Galveston. Nicole and Maggie were both nine years old, and they both liked computers, math, and music.

The white sedan was “packed to the gills,” Dad said as they took off. They had fishing equipment, towels, garden trowels for digging in the sand, and lunch.

“What shall we play first?” said Irene. She sat in back with Maggie and Nicole, while Victor was sitting in front between Mom and Dad.

“Guess?” said Nicole.

“Guess what?” asked Victor, who didn't even have room to turn around to look at them.

“No, let's play Guess. I'll sing the notes to a song, and y'all guess what the song is.”

“What if we can't guess?” Victor wanted to know.

“Then I'll give you a clue, but you'll guess,” Nicole said. “I'll start with something easy.”

“Do mi fa so—, do mi fa so—; do mi fa so—mi—do—mi—re—”

“When the Saints Go Marching In!” they all shouted.

Mom and Dad reminded them that they didn't need to shout since everyone was so close together.

Maggie took her turn, and Victor guessed she was singing “Alouette.”

Victor sang “Do, a Deer,” which everyone guessed right away. Then Irene sang “Mi mi fa so so fa mi re do do re mi mi re re—”

Dad knew it was Beethoven's Ode to Joy. They wanted him to take a turn, but he said he couldn't



drive and think musically at the same time.

The sun was coming up now, and God was painting the clouds with its light. The highway was flat and straight, and they saw salt grass growing in clumps along the road. Victor wanted to tell them about Jean Lafitte, the notorious pirate, but Dad said there wasn't enough room in the car for Victor's re-enactment of pirates burying treasure on Galveston Island.

"Here's the bridge," announced Mom.

They stretched their necks to see the water. On their left was a railroad track on a separate bridge. The waves lifted small fishing boats up and down off to their right.

They drove past the bait shops and past the big glass pyramids of Moody Gardens. They passed the Bishop's Palace, where the Bishop didn't live anymore, and the beautiful white church of the Sacred Heart.

Finally, Dad drove up onto the seawall. The seawall protected people from hurricanes. It was built high and solid. He quickly pulled into a parking space, and everyone jumped out. The beach below was almost deserted.

They each grabbed something and headed down the nearest stairway to reach the beach. Dad liked to fish off the jetties, which were long piles of flat concrete and rocks that jutted out into the surf.

Maggie and Nicole carried the fishing rods and stepped onto the jetty. Nicole spotted old bricks that looked like part of a chimney. She shuddered. Maybe it was a chimney from a house that had been destroyed a hundred years ago in a big hurricane. She hurried on.

Dad came last because he stopped to catch bait. Victor watched as Dad held the rope and swung the small round cast net into the waves. Then Dad pulled in the net, and they untangled a few small mullet, which they threw into the bait bucket.

"Muddy mullet," Mom called them because they tasted terrible.

Maggie and Nicole fished side by side. Nicole didn't want to catch a big fish, and she didn't want to catch a little fish. She wanted a Nicole-sized fish. Let Dad and Victor catch all the big ones.

Victor caught a piece of trash first, and then Mom caught a sting ray, which Dad cut off the line and threw back into the water.

The black and white seagulls screeched overhead. They were catching little fish just under the surface of the waves.

Irene got her hook caught on the rocks, and Victor climbed slowly down to the water's edge to try to free it. The waves were crashing against the rocks and green slime made them slippery. Nicole and Maggie were watching him descend.

"Eeek!" Nicole squealed. Something bent her rod tip hard. Her foot slipped, and she sat down too quickly. The fishing line was ripping off her reel.



Victor looked up and lost his balance because Irene forgot she was holding her rod and had jerked it sharply. Victor's foot splashed into the water as he grabbed the edge of a big section of concrete.



Maggie and Nicole were both sitting down holding onto the rod and shouting incoherently. Maggie said later that she was praying to St. Therese, but no one could understand a word.



All Mom and Dad could see of Victor was one hand, so they ran to help him and knocked each other sideways. Dad caught Mom before she fell flat. They reached Victor and pulled him up.



By now Maggie and Nicole were standing again, and Nicole was reeling in her line. Whatever it was, it was getting tired, but so was Nicole. Maggie took the rod and kept winding up the line.



Mom wanted to put ice on Victor's foot, so she left Dad to supervise and went quickly back to the car to get ice out of the cooler. Irene took the rod next, but when she saw the fish was getting close, she gave it back to Nicole. Dad climbed down on the rocks with the net to scoop up the catch.



Nicole squealed again when she pulled in a twenty-inch sand shark.



"Wow!" said Victor. "No bones." He said that because sand sharks tasted much better than mullet, and they didn't have bones, only tough cartilage. The grayish white sand shark thrashed about angrily.



Mom returned with the ice, and Nicole let Dad handle the shark. He held it up so they could see its many little sharp teeth.



Mom decided that even though it was still early they should wrap up the fishing. She wanted Victor to sit still with the ice on his bruised foot. Victor hobbled off the jetty and onto the warm sand. They moved away from the dangerous rocks of the jetty.



Dad and Irene climbed the stairs and brought down the cooler. They washed their hands in seawater, and Mom gave them each a cup of water and a banana for a snack.



"Who's going swimming?" asked Dad after he stowed away the fishing gear.



Everyone's eyes got big, and no one volunteered to go swimming. Maybe that sand shark had a friend or two out in the water. Even Dad decided it would be better to build a sandcastle up on the shore.



They used the garden trowels and dug out a moat first. Then Irene supervised the building of the outer wall. Victor patted and smoothed the sand while balancing an icepack on his foot. Maggie and Mom found interesting shells to decorate the entrance to the castle. Dad and Nicole brought more sand and dumped it within Victor's reach.



They finished the outer wall and built a keep. Victor wanted stables and a sword-making shop along the walls, so he made little mounds. He put a bit of red seaweed near one mound and explained that that was the fire for the sword making. Nicole found a stick and a silvery gum wrapper for the castle flag. They rubbed the sand off their hands and sat down to admire it.



Then they decided to write their names in the sand. Mom and Dad sat still, and the children each chose a side and enclosed Mom and Dad with their writing. Irene drew pictures of flowers and birds



at each corner to fill in the spaces.

“We’ve got you fenced in,” Nicole said. “You can’t escape us.”

Dad laughed and said, “We don’t want to escape you.”

Victor said, “Isn’t it lunch time yet?”

Mom laughed and stepped out of the fence of names. “It’s barely ten-thirty, but we can eat now.” She pulled out peanut butter sandwiches, chicken salad sandwiches, stuffed eggs, pretzels, and apple pie.

“Mmmm, better than buried treasure,” said Victor. He did wish he had some treasure to bury and then dig up, but he was too hungry to wish for very long.

After they asked the blessing of the food, no one said anything for a long time. They were too busy eating, and then they were too full and sleepy to talk much. They lay back on the sand and watched the seagulls fighting and screaming at each other. A fiddler crab scrambled sideways across the sand. The waves rushed in and out.

A small flock of lovely brown pelicans flew along the shore. Nicole saw them first. She pointed and everyone looked up. The pelicans seemed solemn and dignified as if they were devout monks going to prayers. Their large wings carried them silently away.

It was time to go home. Victor was serving at an early Mass tomorrow. So they cleaned the picnic area and climbed the stairs up the seawall to the car. They didn’t realize that several small surprises were waiting for them at home.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Was Jean Lafitte a real person or someone that Victor made up?
2. Do you think Victor would be more interested in gold and silver coins or in digging up something hidden?
3. Why didn’t the Meyers go swimming in Galveston?

Chapter Three



Irene's Secret

They dropped Maggie off at her house and continued home. Everyone wanted a shower, and Irene let her brother and sister go ahead of her. She wandered into the kitchen and poured a glass of milk to drink while she waited her turn.

From the kitchen table, she looked out the window at the fishpond. Something looked different. Irene was so tired that she couldn't decide what was different at first. The pond looked strange. The afternoon sun caused the oak tree to make shadows on the water. Things were moving around on the surface.

Irene went to the backdoor and opened it. She hoped that Portugal and Brazil were okay.

The ducks were fine. In fact, all of the ducks looked fine. Portugal and Brazil were paddling around with brand new ducklings. The babies looked too tiny to be able to swim, but they kept close together and stayed afloat. They were little yellow and brown puffballs with miniature duck bills!

Irene rushed back inside to grab her sketchpad and a pencil. She sat on the patio swing and quickly drew the pretty ducklings and their proud parents. They wouldn't stay still, but she drew as fast as she could. Irene hoped she wasn't drawing the same baby over and over again. She looked at her drawing. She had ten ducklings, but she counted six on the water.

Then she sat back on the swing and watched them swimming to and fro. They popped in and out of the shadows. She didn't want to frighten them, so she sat still. Should she tell the rest of the family right away? Irene decided that they would enjoy discovering the new ducklings on their own. She would keep it a secret.

She surveyed the backyard. Irene thought they had the most unique yard in Crystal Creek. Most people had a tree and grass in their backyards, but her family's backyard was like a secret garden.

Different vines grew up trellises along the perimeter of the fence. She could hardly see the gray cedar boards. They had a persimmon tree, marsh mallow bushes, miniature apple and peach trees, and a fig tree, a lemon tree, and a pecan tree. They had black-eyed peas, spinach, cucumbers, basil, parsley, and many other vegetables growing. Almost every inch of space was covered with plants, except for the regular spacing of flagstones.

Irene was eleven years old, and she liked having a secret garden. She knew some of the Latin names of the plants. She and Nicole were making plant markers out of Popsicle sticks. Irene heard someone in the kitchen, so she slid off the bench and went over to look at the rabbits. She didn't want to spoil the surprise.





But she was surprised once again. Patty looked very thin. She opened Patty's door and found eight bunnies huddled together. They looked like little wet mice. Peppy and Bernard were watching the bunnies.

"Babies everywhere," whispered Dad, who had discovered the ducklings and now the rabbit kits. "Shall we leave them for the others to find?"

Irene nodded. Her stomach tingled with anticipation. This was like playing Sardines, in which one person hid and everyone who found the hider silently joined them until the last person discovered them packed into the hiding place like Sardines!

Victor found the babies next, and Mom heard him shout, so she came out to see what was happening. She smiled and agreed to keep the secret. They all waited outside for Nicole.

They heard her calling for Mom in the house, but no one moved. Victor counted to thirty, then to sixty. Would she ever come out? Finally, she stepped outside.

"Oooh!" she said. By now the ducks were lined up and having a parade through the garden. The children laughed. Mom and Dad gave Patty extra food and hay. Patty was a good mother and knew how to take care of her kits, so Dad told them to leave her in peace.

Mom went inside to prepare supper, but Irene, Nicole, and Victor sat on the swing and watched the ducklings. The ducklings looked tired so Irene and Nicole softly sang a lullaby. "Hush, the baby's sleeping. Hush, you're much too loud, Hush, we need the quiet, Hush, we need it now."

Victor waited until they finished. "Why do babies sleep so much?" Portugal and Brazil were leading their babies under the cover of the silverberry bush. They disappeared one by one. "They can't do much else," said Nicole.

Irene was old enough to baby-sit their neighbors' children. "All babies grow fast, so they need to sleep to conserve their energy for growing." She thought a bit longer. "I think God does it too so their moms can rest because it's exhausting to have a baby."

"Then why do they have babies?" Victor wanted to know.

"Because they don't mind the extra work, and babies are adorable, and because moms and dads are proud of them." Irene had another thought. "And then when we are in Heaven, God will have a lot more people to love."

"Tommy's mom is going to have a baby too," Victor said. Tommy lived on a farm several miles away. "But we don't have any people babies here."

Irene and Nicole laughed. "Yes, we do."

Victor looked puzzled.

Irene said, "Victor, you are Mom's baby."

Victor didn't like that very much. "I'm not a baby. I'm nearly as tall as you and Irene." He stood up.



“Let’s measure.”

Irene and Nicole stood up, and they were all very close to the same height. “No wonder people ask Mom if you are twins,” Irene said. “Victor, you are only an inch shorter than Nicole.”

Victor became happier at this news. “Well, it’s still too bad we don’t have a baby when everyone else does.” They sat on the swing again. The sun was sliding down behind the roofs of the nearby houses. Supper must be ready soon. Nicole’s stomach growled hungrily.

Irene’s face lit up. “Victor, you can have a baby brother right now if you want.”

Victor and Nicole were both interested.

“Irene, we can’t steal somebody’s baby,” Nicole said. “Even if you want a baby really bad.”

Irene shook her head. “We don’t have to steal anything. Don’t you remember what Dad read to us about Blessed Faustina? She saw the baby Jesus in the Holy Communion. We’re going to Mass tomorrow. We can have Jesus as our baby.”

Victor wasn’t sure. “But Jesus is a grown-up. He’s not a baby anymore.”

“He can be if He wants,” Irene insisted. “And He can go to sleep in our hearts if we are quiet and pray and go to Holy Communion. Mom says He doesn’t like our hearts to be noisy and crowded.”

Nicole looked worried. “Our backyard is really crowded. Maybe Jesus doesn’t like our backyard.”

Irene frowned. “No, I think Mom means crowded with sins, and we went to Confession last Saturday.”

“We can make a promise. Let’s promise to keep the baby Jesus in our hearts and let Him sleep quietly. When we pray, we can imagine Him waking up to listen to us. If we don’t complain and we do our lessons and chores well, then He will want to stay with us as our own baby brother.”

Nicole and Victor thought that was a good idea.

Nicole was still worried though. “What if all we can think about tomorrow at Mass are the ducklings and the bunnies? When I close my eyes, I can see the ducks swimming.” They all closed their eyes, and sure enough, they could see the ducklings swimming. Victor said he thought he saw the bunnies swimming too.

Irene had another solution. “Close your eyes.” They closed them. “When you’re at Mass and you see the ducklings or the bunnies, imagine the Blessed Virgin showing them to the baby Jesus.”

“Wow,” said Victor after a while. “He’s smiling at our baby ducklings.”

“He likes them!” said Nicole, popping her eyes open. She and Victor ran inside to tell Mom about the Blessed Virgin showing her Baby their new baby animals.

Irene stayed on the swing. She sang her lullaby to the baby Jesus. It had been a long but wonder-



ful day. Irene was sure that with Jesus in her heart, they would enjoy many more wonderful days together.



Now, Irene knew that when you have a baby to love, you always make sacrifices of love. Since it was still Lent, she wondered what sacrifices the baby Jesus would ask of them. She promised Him she would pay attention and try not to miss any.



Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What is Irene's secret?
2. How is Irene different than Victor and Nicole?



Chapter Four



Making Sandwiches and Sacrifices

The excitement of the baby animals began to wear away, Lent was almost over, and they had all of Holy Week to look forward to.

Irene, Nicole, and Victor buckled down to their lessons. Irene took longer because she was older and worked slowly and carefully through each assignment. Nicole was usually the first one finished for the day, even when Mom made her re-write a sloppy assignment. Victor still needed Mom's help, so she kept him working at a steady pace.

One afternoon during her art lesson, Irene was drawing a picture of herself as a nun and as a paramedic to see which looked more like her. She wanted to be so many different things when she got older that she wasn't sure what she should be.

She could be a sculptor or a computer graphics artist. The librarians wanted her to work with them, and she did like books as much as drawing. Or maybe she should be something she hadn't thought about yet.

She pulled a holy card of the Infant Jesus out of her pocket and asked, "What do You want me to be?" The Infant Jesus lay in the manger, holding his arms out to her and smiling, but He didn't answer.

The phone rang. It was Diana who must have just gotten off her school bus.

"Guess what? My cousin Sherry is coming over Friday afternoon, and Mamma says I can have a pool party on Saturday with you and Sherry, and we can go swimming, and I want you to bring one of the baby ducks to show just for a little bit, and we're going to order burgers for lunch, but we have to have the party before my brother's buddies show up at one o'clock."

Irene laughed. "O.K. Wait a moment?" It sounded like a lot of fun, but she had to ask Mom first. She covered the phone with her hand and explained Diana's invitation.

Mom didn't say anything. She walked over to the phone and looked at the calendar. Irene saw that the pool party would be the morning they had promised to make sandwiches at Dad's office. One Satur-



day every month, the employees and their families got together to make five hundred sandwiches for families who needed a helping hand.

“You’ll have to decide whether you can go or not,” Mom said.

Irene bit her lip. “You aren’t telling me that I can’t go to the pool party?”

She could miss the sandwich making just once, she thought quickly, but she felt uneasy. She had sent an email promising to be available to Miss Brenda who was in charge of signing up volunteers. She could send another email, saying that she had to cancel this Saturday for a very important reason. Really, no one would even miss her.

Irene sighed. Probably they could get along without her, but she had promised Miss Brenda she’d be there.

“Diana, I wish I could, but I already have plans for Saturday morning. I hope you and Sherry have a great time.”

“But Irene, you have to! You just have to! I promised Sherry you would bring one of the ducks. Can’t you get out of whatever it is? It won’t be as much fun as my pool party, I’m sure.”

“No, I signed up to make sandwiches . . .”

Diana cut in. “Those stupid sandwiches again! You’re always making sandwiches. You don’t even know those people, Irene! It’s too bad you care more about strangers than me!”

It didn’t matter that Irene didn’t know what to say next because Diana hung up. Mom was watching her face. Irene was determined not to cry. Diana was the only girl in the neighborhood close to her age. Mom let her struggle for a few moments and then hugged her. Irene hoped she was one of Jesus’ favorite eleven year olds.

Early Saturday morning, they all drove to Dad’s work. Along the highway were large ditches to hold rainwater, so the road wouldn’t flood. Sometimes they saw large white egrets wading in the ditches. And once they saw an alligator. Dad said the alligator was looking for snakes to eat. Dad didn’t like snakes.

Dad was the accountant for a computer consulting company called Matthews CompuSystems. Mr. Matthews knew a lot about computers. He could tell owners and managers what kind of computers would work best for their business. All the consultants worked up front, and Dad’s office was in the very back next to the advertising office.

Victor liked getting into the building because Dad had to use a key and a secret code. He said it was almost as good as having a secret passageway. He had once suggested that Mr. Matthews should build a secret passageway, but Mr. Matthews just laughed.

The Meyers went past the consulting offices into the conference room. Miss Brenda was there already, mixing up the mayonnaise and mustard for the bologna sandwiches.

She waved them toward the juice, do-nuts, and bagels for the volunteers. “Y’all got five minutes to



finish off those do-nuts, Victor, before I put y'all to work."

Victor grinned and didn't waste any time. He knew most of the employees who were gathered around the do-nut table and said "Good morning!" They made room for him.

Mr. Jevers was thin and tall with very white hair. He was old enough to retire, but Mr. Matthews said that he wouldn't be able to run the business without Mr. Jevers, so he worked half-days. Mr. Paul had just finished college, and Miss Brenda was teaching him about finding new customers. Miss Caroline was the receptionist.

Soon everyone was pulling on latex gloves, and Victor was setting the bread down on the table. Miss Brenda let Irene open the bologna packages with a pair of scissors. The bologna was slippery, and Irene had her hands full to keep it from shooting out of the plastic packaging onto the floor. Mr. Paul separated the slices and put them on the bread.

Dad and Mom put the finished sandwiches in plastic baggies after Victor had put the tops on. Nicole added cookies and sandwiches to brown lunch bags, and Mr. Jevers put the brown bags in a large container. When the container was full, Mr. Paul would help Dad load it into a van while everyone else cleaned the room of wrappings and crumbs.

"Howdy, this bread is fresh," Miss Brenda said. "I can tell the difference between Victor's thumbprints and yours, Caroline."

Victor looked. The sandwiches did have his thumbprints on the top.

"Nicole, you aren't sneaking a bite of those sandwiches, are you?" Mr. Matthews teased her.

She grinned. "No, sir. I like peanut butter better anyway."

"Then I guess we better cancel that order for a case of peanut butter next month," Mr. Matthews said loudly and winked.

Plop! Irene looked up guiltily. A whole package of bologna was on the floor. Miss Brenda scooped it up and dropped it in the garbage. "Don't worry about it, honey. You got the dirt job anyways. No one is going to complain because they know they couldn't do any better." Miss Brenda changed her gloves. Irene picked up another package determined not to drop it. Everyone moved very quickly, and the chatter went on. Miss Caroline came up to Nicole's area.

"Still singing, Nicole?"

Nicole nodded, but she kept her hands moving, picking up three cookies and a sandwich and putting them in the brown bags.

"One of these days, we'll hear you singing on TV," Miss Caroline predicted and floated off. Nicole sighed. She just sang at home. She was "too little to sing in the church choir." You had to be twelve at least, Miss Violet, the choir director, had told Mom and Dad. Mom said that her turn would come, but Nicole didn't want to wait three more years. She could sing well now. Everyone said so.

She stuffed another sandwich in, and then realized she had forgotten the cookies, so she opened the



bag and put them in. It wasn't fair. If a person could sing and wanted to sing in the church choir, the choir director should be happy to have that person.

Nicole forgot all about Jesus trying to rest in her heart, and she got very angry. Maybe she didn't want to sing at church anyway. She was tired of filling up bags. She wanted to go get another cup of orange juice.

Dad was suddenly beside her. "How are things going down here?"

He popped open a bag and slipped the food in. Nicole didn't want to answer him. She reached slowly for another bag and another sandwich. "Well, things are O.K., except for not getting to sing in the choir." She glanced up at him quickly. He was wearing a baseball cap, and his dark hair curled up around the edges. Mom had said that he needed a haircut that morning.

"That's pretty disappointing, isn't it?" he asked, pushing his cap off his forehead.

She nodded.

"Lucky for the people who will be eating these sandwiches today that you aren't too young to help out here."

Nicole nodded again. "It might be lucky for the choir if I . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Maybe," Dad agreed, "but I'm sure the souls in Purgatory would be glad to have you offer up your disappointment. We agreed to accept Miss Violet's decision, didn't we?"

"But I thought she was going to say yes!" Nicole burst out unhappily.

"So because you didn't get your way, you're going to short someone a bologna sandwich?" Dad said, popping a sandwich into the bag she was holding.

"Try offering it up, Nicole. It will help. And you might send up a request that we don't have bologna sandwiches for lunch," Dad suggested.

Nicole couldn't keep back a smile. "I'll try," she promised.

The Meyer family did not have bologna sandwiches for lunch that Saturday. Dad took them to Little Luigi's Italian Place for pizza. He said they needed to have a family conference since Easter was so close.

They smelled like bologna, but once they sat down at a table and sniffed the aroma of mushrooms and Little Luigi's special pizza sauce, their mouths watered.

Dad pulled a pad out of his pocket after they had ordered Luigi's large Primo Pizza. He sipped his iced tea. "We have some decisions to make," he announced formally, and the Meyer family Easter conference began.

The children recommended that school should be postponed during Holy Week. Dad agreed to that, and then naturally, he nominated Mom to be in charge of most of the cooking. "As usual we have a



limited budget, but that's no reason we can't each plan a surprise," Mom suggested.

The children nodded. Then they had to decide on the Easter meal. Everyone got to choose part of the menu. Irene wanted to know if she could sew new white napkins, and Mom said yes. The last item was to choose the Easter dessert. After a Lent of very few desserts, Victor wanted something extra special.

"Angel food cake with raspberries?"

"Chocolate chip cookies?"

"Ice cream sundaes?"

"What about a gingerbread house?"

"Or a gingerbread church!"

"Yes!"

The Easter conference was successfully concluded. Irene thought planning for Easter was almost as much fun as celebrating it. Dad told her that God wanted us to be trice blessed people. If you were trice blessed, you enjoyed planning what to do, enjoyed the actual event, and then enjoyed the happy memories.

"But what if things don't happen the way you plan?" asked Victor, who had had some experience with that situation.

"Then we rejoice that God cares enough to share His plan with us," Dad said.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What are some of the jobs Irene is thinking about? What do you think you might like to be when you grow up?
2. Why is Nicole unhappy?

Chapter Five



Easter at Last

On Palm Sunday, the Meyers dressed quickly. Dad wanted to go to the earliest Mass, so they skipped breakfast. It seemed to Victor and Nicole that Mom and Irene were taking a long time to get into the car.

“Dad, we’ll be late!” Victor protested.

“Patience is a virtue,” Dad said with a secret smile.

They were not late, and Victor ran to get palms for everyone. He liked the procession, which began in the Blessed Virgin’s Courtyard behind their little church of Notre Dame. To his great delight, he got a large splash of holy water. Fr. Michaels winked at him. The parishioners organized themselves around Miss Violet, and they began singing and walking toward the church. Victor saw smoke and smelled the incense ahead.

Next year, maybe he would suggest they have a donkey in the procession. He waved his palm boldly. The edges were fraying already. Palm Sunday Mass was long, but full of adventure in Victor’s mind.

He imagined they must have had two roasted lambs on the Last Supper table. And did they all fit around one table? He imagined a garden and saw people walking by the praying Jesus and ignoring Him, too busy to pay Him any attention. He wondered if the servant had yelled when his ear was cut off. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine a big crowd of angry people. He wondered if Mary was able to see Jesus through her tears.

In the sedan on the way home, Irene, Nicole, and Victor folded the palm leaves into crosses. They would put these on the prayer table until it was time to take them back to the church to burn them for the ashes for Ash Wednesday.

Mom and Irene jumped out of the car as soon as Dad parked, and Mom suddenly asked Dad to go check the mail as she was sure they hadn’t picked it up yesterday. Dad decided Nicole and Victor should go with him. He made them walk very slowly.



“Surprise!” shouted Irene as Victor came through the front door. “We have a surprise for you.”

“I smell sticky buns!” Victor and Nicole raced into the kitchen.

“You didn’t mention this at the Easter conference,” Nicole said. “But I don’t mind,” she added quickly.

Dad pulled a warm homemade sweet bun from the stack. The top was plain, but the bottom was syrupy and full of chopped pecans. Irene had made a fruit salad, and they had scrambled eggs with bits of ham, and several sticky buns each.

After their surprise brunch, Victor and Nicole fed the rabbits a bit of leftover fruit. The babies didn’t want any, but Bernard wanted every piece. He was not a sharing kind of rabbit.

On Monday, Mom and the children dropped Dad off at work and then went to the church to help clean. They dusted and vacuumed and swept the church. When they got home, they dusted and vacuumed and swept their own house.

Mom liked to clean house to music, so they listened to swing music. Victor played an imaginary trumpet, until Mom handed him a real dust cloth. The lively music got them moving. Nicole felt sorry for Dad who had to go to work. They would go to evening Mass together though. On Tuesday, they brought Easter lilies to the church. Dad had to work late, so they went to the evening Mass without him and then stayed up to pray a Rosary together. Mom let them light all the blessed candles in the house. The candles made their family room glow softly. They arranged three Easter lilies at the base of the prayer table. In the semi-darkness, the flowers looked courageously humble thought Irene, just like the Blessed Virgin.

On Wednesday, they dyed fifteen eggs in the morning—two for each person for Easter and one to give away to a friend. Victor made one for Tommy. Maggie would get Nicole’s extra egg, but Irene didn’t know to whom she could give her egg. Diana was not talking to her.

In the afternoon, they made the gingerbread church. Mom mixed the dark dough. It had spices, molasses, dark brown sugar, and whole wheat flour. The dough was hard to mix because it was so stiff. They rolled it out carefully and set the waxed paper patterns on top of the dough. Mom gave them the pizza cutter to trace around the patterns.

Irene cut the roof of the church. Nicole made a side and the back, and they let Victor cut the front and a side. It was slow work. Mom covered a breadboard with aluminum foil for the foundation of the church. They scarcely had time to bake each piece in the oven before rushing to pick up Dad from work.

They arrived at the church and slipped quietly into place for the evening Mass. After the Mass, they put together the gingerbread church with royal icing and prayer. Irene held the back wall as Dad piped icing on the bottom and one side. She set it carefully on the foil-covered base and held it steady, while Nicole eased in a side wall to form the first corner.

In a few minutes, they slowly let go, and the two walls remained upright. Whew! The other two walls went up, and then Dad let Victor set the two steeply sloping roof pieces on. Mom added the steps and a front door.





It was too late to decorate the church, so they left it, sitting very plain and lonely-looking on the kitchen table, covered with plastic wrap to keep off the dust.

On Thursday, they weeded the vegetable and flowerbeds and picked the ripe tomatoes, zucchini, and green beans. The rabbit kits were getting bigger each day. And soon Peppy would be having her babies, Mom said. The ducklings were losing their fluff.



Later, Victor worked in his room on his Easter surprise for the family. Nicole and Irene tried to look the other way when he carried in all sorts of odd things like pine needles. Nicole was working on her surprise, too, but she didn't need anything except for paper, scissors, and colored markers.

They took a nap in the afternoon, so they could stay up late for Adoration after the Holy Thursday Mass.



Irene liked singing the Latin hymn to welcome Jesus from the Tabernacle. "O salutaris hostia . . ." She sneezed at the incense.

On Good Friday, they all got up early. Dad always asked for Good Friday off from work, so they could be together. He turned off the telephone and unplugged the television, radio, and computer. The gingerbread church still sat plain and lonely on the table. The children had a light breakfast of toast.



On Good Friday, they prayed for the Holy Souls in Purgatory. This year they had decided to pray the Divine Mercy Novena. Dad read part of the diary of Sr. Faustina. She was Polish like Pope John Paul II.



Later they went to the Stations of the Cross. Miss Violet had organized the choir for an outdoor devotion. It was very hot that afternoon with little breeze, and Irene, Nicole, and Victor had to keep reminding themselves that Jesus suffered much more than the hot sun.

In the evening, Dad surprised them with an art book he had found at the library. It was filled with old paintings. The paintings showed various scenes from the life of Christ.

They looked for a long time at a picture of the Crucifixion. The Roman soldiers looked heavy and dark, while Christ looked very pale and fragile. The nails were much larger than any nails in the Meyer's toolbox. Some people were sad, but many didn't seem to care at all. Others looked confused or angry. It was a thoughtful picture.



On Holy Saturday, they prayed another Divine Mercy chaplet together and a Rosary "to make Mary feel better," said Victor.

Then Nicole brought out her Easter surprise. She had taken four pieces of paper, taped them together, and cut them into lacy patterns so they formed one large circle. The middle of the circle was left as a cross. On the white paper of the cross, Nicole had written down the prayers she had secretly prayed during Holy Week for each member of the family. The cross was filled with her prayers.



Everyone liked it and thanked her for her prayers. Dad taped it to the wall behind the prayer corner. Mom said it was very creative.





After lunch, they finally decorated the gingerbread church. Mom mixed up more royal icing in green and pink and yellow. Victor and Dad put pale candy coated almonds on the roof for shingles. Nicole made a little chocolate path to the front steps, and she spread the green icing around the base of the church for grass. She sprinkled coconut on the grass to represent the Easter lilies. Irene bordered the church with gumdrops. She gave it chocolate windows. By the time they finished, it looked too pretty to eat!

“Do you mean we aren’t going to eat it?” asked Victor with a look of dismay.



Dad and Mom laughed and reassured him that it would be tomorrow’s dessert.

In the evening, Mom asked Victor about his surprise. He had forgotten. He rushed to his room, but he came back with a long face. “It didn’t work,” he said, holding out his hands.



Victor had made an Easter wreath out of green pine needles, but they had turned brown. He had forgotten to soak them in water in his eagerness to keep it a surprise.

“Well, it’s easily fixed,” said Mom. She quickly took apart the sad brown wreath. Victor had attached an empty cross made of twigs and a cotton ball lamb and a little statue of Jesus to the needles. Mom set the decorations aside.

The children went out to collect new green pine needles, while Dad filled a large bowl with water.



Mom said, “The surprise will be that we all worked together on your surprise.”

“And you can hang it on the door first thing Easter morning,” said Irene.



Sunday came, and it was Easter “at last,” said Nicole, after Victor hung his beautiful wreath on the front door.

They were ready to celebrate Easter. Their little church of Notre Dame was beautiful. The morning sun filtered gently through the stained glass picture of Mary, so that she could be clearly seen, and she looked radiantly happy. The church was filled with white lilies and gold and silver banners. “And angels,” whispered Victor to his sisters after he had blessed himself with holy water.



Although they had been so quiet and sad only two days ago, the Meyers found their joyful voices now. They sang out “Alleluia!” Today was the very best day of the year. Victor was glad that he could join the family in receiving his second Easter Eucharist. He felt sorry for people who couldn’t receive the Sacred Body and Blood on Easter Sunday, but he didn’t think about that for long because he wanted to pay special attention. He said, “Amen!” loud and clear.



After Mass, Irene gave her Easter egg to Miss Violet. It was a violet colored egg, and she thought the choir director would like it. Father gave his egg to the man who was in charge of the Adoration Chapel. Mom had given hers to Miss Sophie yesterday.



Then they were home again, and Mom soon had the Easter meal on the table. Nicole cut pink roses for the table, and Irene folded her white napkins. Dad lit an Easter candle when everyone was ready. He had written a special Easter blessing, and Victor added the Alleluias at all the right times.



They filled their plates with honey roasted ham, mashed potatoes, sweet peas, carrot salad, and strawberries. Everything was delicious.

Then they took one last look at the gingerbread church and then ate it. First the roof and almonds disappeared, and then the walls slowly wore down.

Now that the telephone was plugged in again, they called the grandparents and took turns at the phone. Grandma wanted to know what they had for Easter dinner. Grandpa wanted to know if they had eaten the whole gingerbread church. They found out that both grandmas had received corsages to wear to church. And that one grandpa had worn a new hat, and the other had a new tie.

“The best things happen to us,” sighed Irene sleepily after they had taken an evening walk and finished another Divine Mercy Chaplet.

Nicole yawned. “And Easter isn’t even over yet. It’s just begun! I wonder what will happen tomorrow...”

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Mom and Irene take a long time to get in the car on Palm Sunday morning?
2. Do you think Victor’s idea of having a donkey in the procession is a good one? Why or why not?
3. How can a person be “courageously humble?”



The Meyers of Crystal Creek

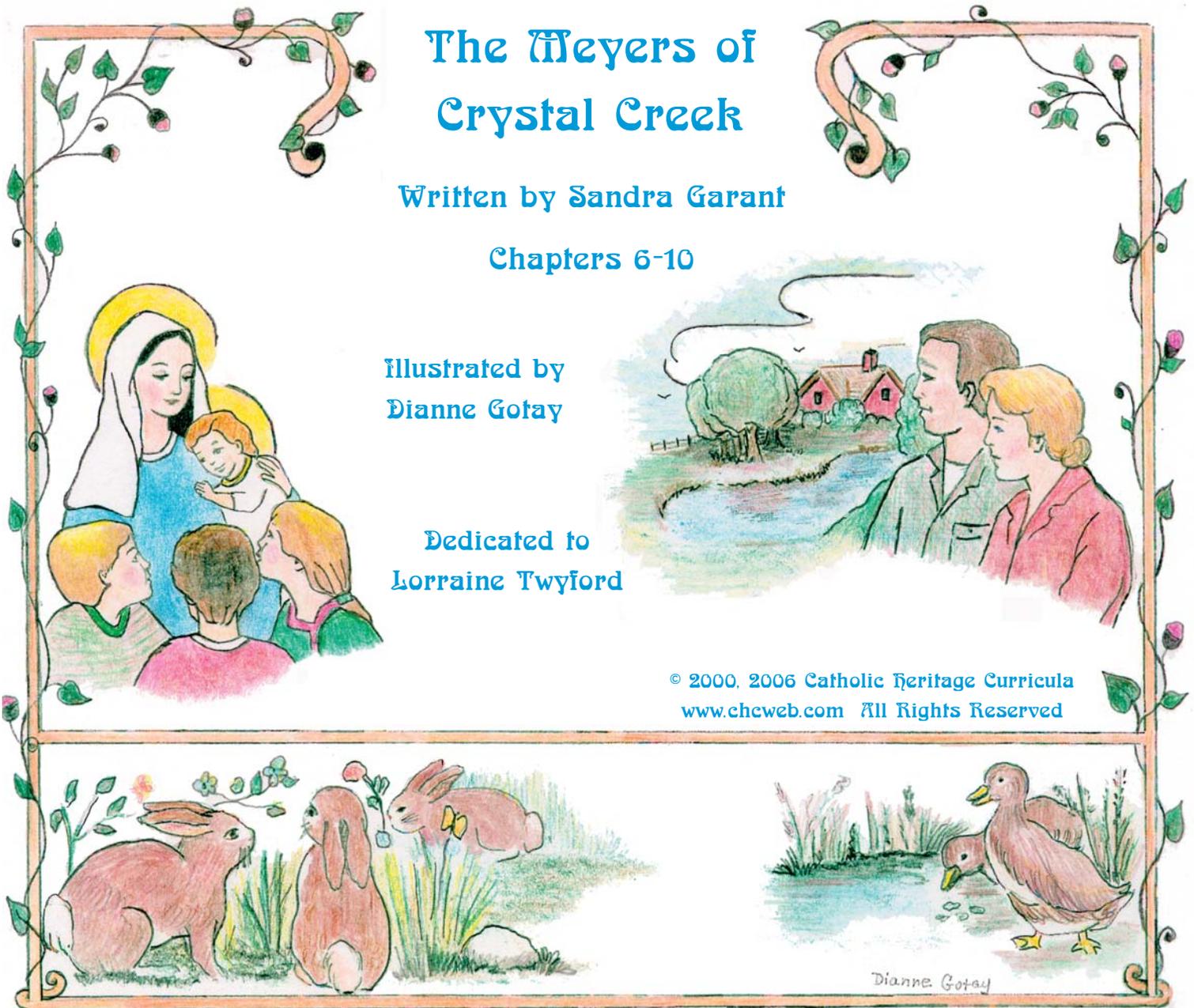
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Chapters 6-10

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Dedicated to
Lorraine Twyford

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The three Meyer children are loosely based on the author’s own three children. All other characters and events are purely fictional. Crystal Creek is a fictional place, although it is roughly located in the Pearland/Manvel area of Brazoria County, Texas.

Other Titles by the Author:

A Catholic Garden of Puzzles
Creative Communications

It’s a Mystery! Catholic Children’s Retreats: The Holy Trinity, The Perfect Personality, The Secret Garden, The Household of God

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Chapter Six



Mom and Dad Take a Walk

On Easter Monday, the children ate their dyed eggs with hot blueberry muffins. Their holiday from school was over, but Easter Monday was the day they wrote their Easter stories.

After breakfast, they found their files of old stories. They each picked one, and Mom read them aloud. They laughed at Victor's rabbit story. It was short because he had been five years old, and Mom had written it down while he told it to her.

"When Jesus broke out of the tomb, He was a new man. No one knew Him, except for Bernard. Bernard recognized Jesus right away. Bernard hopped right up to Jesus, and Jesus scratched his ears. What I mean is, He scratched Bernard's ears, not His own ears. The End."

Mom read Nicole's story about a little girl who got lost on Good Friday on her way home. She didn't find her family until they began singing on Easter morning. She heard them and recognized their voices and ran home in time for Easter breakfast.

Irene's story from last year was about a family who painted their family room to look like a garden. They added symbols, like a fish, grapes, and a dove. Some people came into the house and knew the symbols right away, but other people never saw them. They just thought it was an "interesting" way to decorate the family room.

Mom left them at the kitchen table with pencils, pens, and a stack of writing paper. Irene bit her lip. She wanted to write an Easter story that had something to do with emails. Hmmm...

Nicole wrote very quickly and then stopped. She started over and wrote something else. Then she wadded up the paper and started a third time. She stopped again and went to stare at the Easter lilies. Finally she knew exactly what she was going to write.

Victor stared into space for a while. He drew a horse on his paper. "Mom, can I put a sword in my Easter story?" he asked.

Mom came into the kitchen. "That depends, Victor."

"What does it depend on?"

"On the purpose of the sword."

Victor smiled. He had the greatest idea ever.

They worked on chores after lunch. The vegetables needed picking again, and clothes had to be washed.

In the afternoon, Nicole felt restless. She curled up on the couch with a pillow. She had finished her story and practiced the piano for an hour. She had finished her chores. It wasn't time for Dad to come home. It wasn't time to begin supper.

Irene put her pencil down. "I'm finished," she called to Mom.

Nicole jumped up. "Let's do something, Irene!"

"Like what?" said Irene and Victor at the same time.

Nicole wrinkled her forehead. "Something Easterish..."

"How about a game?" said Irene.

"I don't know any Easter games," said Nicole, "except hiding candy or eggs."

Mom walked past. "Then why not make up your own Easter game?" She left the room to fold up some laundry.

"She knows a game," Victor said, going after her. "Tell us, Mom, tell us!"

Mom laughed and sat on her bed to fold laundry. They piled up on the big bed to help. "Well, this game could be called 'Remember Me'. One person thinks of something common, like a towel, and the others try to think of something about our faith that the towel reminds them of."

"Veronica wiping the face of Jesus," said Victor.

"And when Jesus washed the feet of the Apostles," added Nicole quickly.

"Good! Irene, you think of an object," Mom said.

Irene looked up and saw the curtains of the bedroom window. "Curtains," she said.

"Oh, the curtain of the Holy of Holies," said Nicole. "It was torn."

"I've got one," said Victor. "What about a pencil?"

"A pencil? They didn't have pencils back then, Victor," said Irene.

"But what does it remind you of?" he insisted.

"I think he means the writing on the wall," suggested Mom.

"But that was the hand of God." Nicole shook her head.

"But that's what a pencil reminds me of," Victor grinned. "And the game is called 'Remember Me',



isn't it? A pencil reminds me of God."

"I promise you, Victor, I will never look at a pencil in quite the same way." Mom smiled at him.

"At least he didn't say a computer reminded him of the handwriting on the wall," said Nicole. "And now that it's my turn, I will say computer. That's my word."

"A computer? That's too hard," Victor said.

"It will seem easy if we figure it out," Irene said. "How can a computer remind us of God?"

"There's got to be something," murmured Nicole.

"Help us out, Mom," pleaded Victor.

"I don't know, Victor, but it's interesting to think about," she said. "I believe it was St. Therese that recommended we let everything remind us of God, but naturally she never mentioned computers."

They kept thinking about computers during the first week of Easter, but by Mercy Sunday, they hadn't found a satisfactory answer. They completed their novena and went to the cathedral to venerate the image of the merciful Jesus. The cathedral was very crowded. Everyone wanted to get close to the image, and Victor couldn't see a thing.

He got mad. Nicole saw his red face and whispered to him, "Sh, Victor. You can make a sacrifice, and Jesus would prefer that."

"But how can I venerate the image if I can't even see it?"

"You already know what it looks like. Imagine it in your mind," she whispered back. "I can only see a corner of it myself."

Later that evening, Mom and Dad went for a walk. "Can you wait for supper until I get back?" she asked them. "We'll be gone for about forty minutes."

Irene said, "Yes" right away, but Victor and Nicole looked a little uncertain. It had been a long time since lunch.

"They're going to talk about something important, I think," said Irene.

"How do you know?" Nicole asked. "Did Mom tell you?"

"No, they just look like they have something important to talk about."

Irene went to the kitchen. "Anyway, I have an idea. Mom does all the cooking, so since it's Mercy Sunday, why don't we cook to give her a break?"

"Great!" Victor ran to get a pot. "Let's have hotdogs."

"Whoa! We can't use the stove or a sharp knife when Mom and Dad aren't here! You know that, Vic-



tor,” scolded Irene.

“Then how can we cook anything?” asked Nicole.

“Can’t we break the rules since we’re going to do something nice for Mom?” Victor asked.

“No!” said Irene firmly. “I’m sure we can make something for supper without breaking any rules. Let’s think.”

“You mean you don’t have any ideas?” Nicole said crossly.

Irene hurriedly said, “We can have a cold supper.” She went to the refrigerator to see what was available—cheese, vegetables, and fruits.

Victor went to the pantry. “We have a can of black beans,” he suggested. “And crackers and some oatmeal and raisins.”

Nicole snapped her fingers. “We can make a big salad!”

Victor headed for the back door. “I’ll pick some spinach. We can wash that and tear it into little pieces.”

“And see what else you can find. Maybe some parsley and nasturtiums,” suggested Irene.

“Not too many nasturtiums, Victor. They’re hot, and we want a cold supper,” Nicole reminded him.

Irene opened the can of beans and rinsed and drained them. Nicole found some tomatoes, but they couldn’t cut those without using a sharp knife. “We have some green olives we could put in whole,” she said. “And here’s some lettuce. I’ll tear it.”

“How can we add this cheese?” Irene murmured, staring at the chunk of cheddar in the refrigerator.

The salad began to fill the large wooden bowl Irene had set on the countertop. “If we can’t cut the tomatoes, why don’t we add some salsa to the salad?” suggested Victor. “And pickle relish?”

“No pickle relish!” said Irene and Nicole together.

“But add some salsa. Make sure it’s the mild kind,” said Nicole.

The salad was finished, except for the cheese. Irene put butter and bread on the table. Nicole washed grapes and apples and pears to put in a fruit bowl. “We can have those for dessert,” she said.

It was nearly time for Mom and Dad to return. Irene looked longingly at the cheese again. She sighed and set the table with plates and cups.

“Good thing we aren’t having mango in this salad,” remarked Victor. “Last time we had mango, it got stuck in my teeth, and I had to use a lot of dental floss, and I cut my gum.”

“Victor Meyer!”



He looked up startled. “What did I do?”

“You’re my favorite brother, that’s what. Please, go get the dental floss for me,” Irene said. She pulled the cheddar cheese out of the refrigerator.

Victor brought the dental floss, and Irene took a strand. “Watch this!” she said. The dental floss cut neatly through the cheese. She quickly cut bite-size chunks of cheese, and Nicole tossed them in the salad.

The front door opened. They ran to lead Mom and Dad to supper.

“What a nice surprise!” Mom exclaimed. She was pleased, but then she noticed the cheese chunks cut so evenly. She frowned but didn’t say anything.

“Mom, we didn’t use a sharp knife,” Irene said proudly. When she held up the dental floss, Mom and Dad laughed.

During supper, they discovered that Mom and Dad had been having an important talk. The children weren’t the only ones with a surprise. School was going to finish early that year, but Mom and Dad wouldn’t tell them the reason just yet.

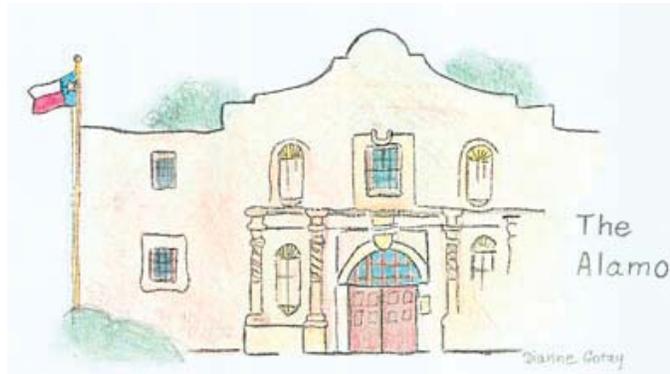
“I don’t think you’ll be disappointed,” was all Dad would say, although Mom said that it might have something to do with lost objects that people wanted to find again.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Could you have guessed which child wrote which Easter story? How?
2. Why did Victor want to break his mom’s kitchen rules?



Chapter Seven



Remember the Alamo!

“Are you disappointed?” asked Father when the white sedan was loaded with their vacation luggage.

“No, sir!” the children shouted.

“I’m so glad there was a St. Anthony,” said Victor, “or otherwise we couldn’t go to San Antonio for vacation.”

Irene laughed. “But Victor, the Franciscan missionaries would have named it something else.”

“But then we would be going somewhere else, right?”

“That’s right,” Mom said. “We might be going to San Francisco.”

“Or St. Louis?” asked Irene.

“Or St. Augustine?” suggested Nicole.

“Or Timbuktu!” finished Dad, “but we aren’t going anywhere if we don’t get in the car.”

Maggie and her brother were going to look after the rabbits and ducks while they were gone, so Dad stopped by their house, and Nicole ran to give them the house key and instructions. And then they headed west.

Although they drove fast on the interstate highway, the scenery changed slowly. The flat coastal plains seemed to go on forever. After five rounds of Frere Jacques, the children began looking for “foreign” license plates.

“Louisiana,” said Nicole.

“Oklahoma and California,” were Irene’s contributions.

“Texas, Texas, and there sure is a lot of Texas,” said Victor.

Although there was a lot of Texas, they began to notice the land was getting hilly. They saw bluebon-

nets, Indian paintbrush, and cattle along the way.

They arrived in San Antonio in time for lunch downtown. Dad parked the car just outside Market Square. They were eager to get out of the car after the long drive.

They walked into the air-conditioned coolness of Mi Tierra Restaurant. Immediately, Victor smelled the delicious pastries from the bakery inside. Irene and Nicole thought he looked like a rabbit, the way he kept sniffing the air. The restaurant was large, but it was filling up fast. A brightly dressed hostess found a place for them to sit. Musicians were traveling from table to table singing if they were offered a tip.

The waitress brought them hot plates of green enchiladas, tamales, tortillas, and of course, rice and beans. They ate and ate. The restaurant was a lively place. Irene noticed Christmas lights blinking in one area and a portrait of a beautiful girl on another wall.

When they finished eating, they walked out into the Market Square. Pigeons and people were everywhere. No one had to worry about cars because the square was closed to traffic. Victor saw colorful wool blankets and large sombreros for sale.

Nicole saw a group of dancers. They walked over to watch. The young men and women smiled and danced in and out, weaving a pattern on the small stage.

They walked along, trying to see everything at once. Mom wanted to go down to the River Walk on the far side of town where it was shady.

The river was not very deep and not very wide. Nicole still didn't want to walk too near the edge. The crowd walking along the riverside seemed to be solid. She hoped no one would accidentally push her in. People were sitting in the shade resting. Others were posing for pictures, but everyone else was moving toward the Meyers or trying to get around them. Irene noticed a bridal party standing on a bridge, having their photograph taken. The bride was beautiful in her lacy dress. The bearded groom wore a gray tuxedo.

Mom was calling out the names of some of the plants they passed by. She saw blue plumbago, salvia, white petunias, and ferns. People were sitting at tables that were arranged along the riverside cafes. People were floating by on barges, waving to them. They waved back.

They walked by many young Air Force men and women dressed smartly in their uniforms. Dad said they liked to come downtown to get off the military base every once in a while. They always seemed to travel in groups.

When they grew tired of walking, Dad bought them snow cones, and they found an empty bench. They heard English, Spanish, German, and even Australian spoken.

Before they left downtown, they went to visit San Fernando Cathedral. It was a very old church on the Main Plaza. Victor thought it was magnificent. He would have liked to go there every Sunday.

They went up the steps and opened the old wooden doors. Just inside was a carved Crucifix that was surrounded with photos and handwritten notes. Mom said those were petitions. An old man and woman were kneeling and praying, so they quietly went to see a tomb that was resting under a stained





glass window. The tomb held the bones of the heroes who had died at the Alamo during the battle for independence from Mexico.



“Mom, how did they fit all the soldiers’ bones in that white box?” Victor asked. “It barely looks big enough for one.”

Mom shook her head. She didn’t know. They prayed, “Eternal rest grant them, O Lord” before moving on.



The windows were filled with beautiful stained glass. It was even more beautiful than the stained glass at Notre Dame at home. Irene tried to guess the saints in each window without looking at their names below. She knew St. Paul and St. Peter easily.



Because the cathedral was old, it had large columns to hold up the roof. Near one column was a stairway and a little platform.



“What’s that for?” Nicole whispered.

“It’s for the homily,” answered Dad. “The bishop or priest can stand there to give the homily, and it will be easier for people to hear him.”



“Why don’t people build churches like this anymore?” Victor whispered. It was frustrating to be living in such a modern time!



They passed around the side to touch the foot of the statue of St. Anthony, and then Dad put some money in a box to help with the upkeep of the cathedral. People stared at them when they genuflected toward the Tabernacle and blessed themselves with holy water.



When they were outside, Dad explained that San Fernando had a lot of visitors and not all of them were Catholic, so they didn’t understand about holy water and the Blessed Sacrament.



Early the next morning, they drove downtown again and ate pastries at Mi Tierra. Then they went to the Mission San Antonio de Valero, which most people called the Alamo. It was older than San Fernando, but it was no longer a church. It had been abandoned even before the big battle in 1836.

The guides at the entrance reminded men to take off their hats and not to take photographs or touch the walls. “This is a shrine to the fallen heroes of Texas, so please be quiet once you enter.”



It was cool and dim inside and on the left and right were flags. The flags indicated the places where the soldiers had come from—Virginia, Tennessee, Germany, England, Ireland, and so on. They saw stained glass that wasn’t set in a window and a beautifully carved walking stick. They saw Davy Crockett’s rifle and a model of how the mission looked in 1836. It covered a large area that was now filled with hotels and restaurants. At the very back of the chapel were plaques that named the soldiers. Everyone died except for a few women and children.



When Victor closed his eyes, he could imagine the women and children and the wounded men hiding in the chapel. The Mexican cannons were making the walls shudder, and the air would be smoky. It would have seemed like the end of the world to those people, but it would only be a few weeks later when Santa Anna’s army was defeated at San Jacinto, which was not far from Crystal Creek.





They left the chapel and wandered the grounds. They read the story of the mission on a wall outside. The Church no longer owned the Alamo. The Daughters of the Republic of Texas took care of it and continued to research information. Whenever someone wanted to build something in the area, they had to have archaeologists check the digging in case they found an artifact, like a cannonball or an old button.

The Mission San Antonio de Valero was not the only mission in town. They spent the rest of the day visiting the other four missions. They had a picnic lunch in the park area of Mission San Jose where they saw a Rose Window and watched a crowd gather for a wedding. They saw old Indian paintings at Mission Concepcion and very old carvings of Jesus and Mary at Mission Espada. Set back in a wooded area was the old aqueduct. The stones and mortar seemed loose, but the water still flowed. They finished the day by praying the Angelus at Mission San Juan, which was tiny but well-kept. They did not all fit on one pew.

The next day the family went to the large city park and took a horseback ride through the woods and along the river. The guide chose horses for them, and they mounted and followed the trail.

Victor had a horse called Tex, which was spotted white and brown with a tail that nearly swept the ground. Nicole's black horse was Thunder, and Irene had a roan named Billy. Billy did not get along with Thunder and tried to nip his hindquarter, but Irene coaxed him away. Mom and Dad had frisky buckskins called Christabel and Carlos.

Before they saw the water, they heard it rushing across the dam. Sometimes the river rose and flooded the park roads their guide Isabel told them. She was a student at Incarnate Word College. She had a single black braid that plopped up and down as the horse walked.

Irene's knees began to tire before long. She changed position in her saddle, and the leather squeaked. They ambled through sunlight and shade. The insects droned in the heat. They saw picnickers and smelled a charcoal fire.

A gray and white mockingbird fussed at a shiny black grackle that perched in the mockingbird's tree. The mockingbird's long tail went up and down as it scolded. A dog barked, and they could hear the sounds of children swinging. The swings made a pleasant creaking kind of a noise. Someone was feeding bread to the park ducks.

The horses were used to the trail and moved slowly and surely until they all heard a sudden splash. A child screamed. Isabel kicked her horse and trotted off the trail. The Meyers followed.

They saw a small white object under the water. It was a baby! Dad and the guide slid off their horses and jumped into the water. Victor was ready to jump in, but Mom told him sharply to stay put. The baby's older brother and sister were in the water. They were panicking and splashing so much that Dad and Isabel could not see the baby.

The water was waist deep but getting murkier and murkier. Dad felt cloth and grabbed but missed. Suddenly the baby popped up coughing and crying. Isabel got hold of the baby's hair and pulled him out. He was wearing a t-shirt and diapers.

The parents ran to Isabel and snatched their baby away. "Who do you think you are?! Don't touch my baby!" The father made a fist and threatened them. Isabel began to shake. Dad led her back toward



the horses away from the angry parents.

“Isabel! What’s up?” a park ranger demanded. He had seen the commotion and driven over.

Isabel panted and wrung her shirt. She was breathless, so Dad answered the ranger. “We heard a splash. When we got here, we saw the baby under the water and jumped in.”

Isabel nodded, and the park ranger told them to go back to the stables. Irene was glad that she did not stay to hear what he would say to the parents. He walked purposefully toward them.

They drove back to the hotel so Dad could change to dry clothing. “Why did the parents get so angry?” Irene asked once they were in the car.

Dad paused and then he said, “They had been drinking. They both smelled of beer. Sometimes when people drink alcohol, they don’t behave well.”

“They’re still responsible for their children,” he said, “even if they’ve been drinking. It’s no excuse.”

“Are they in big trouble?” asked Victor.

“Yes,” Mom said firmly. “You may not think so, but grown-ups have to be even more obedient than children. And if they don’t use their common sense, people will get hurt. When you’re a grown-up, you can get punished, too, but it won’t be a simple spanking or being grounded from playing with a friend.”

“Do you think they will have to go to jail?” asked Nicole.

“I don’t know,” said Dad. “But I am glad that I’m not in their shoes, even if mine are wet.”

The rest of their trip was much calmer. They went to a cowboy museum, which made Victor dream about horses and roping longhorn cattle. The girls said he was yippee-i-oing in his sleep.

They took an elevator ride up to the Tower of the Americas and walked around the observation deck. They could see for miles! Then they went down to the restaurant and ate while the floor slowly moved around. They started their dinner looking out the windows to the west and finished it on the south side.

On the last day of their trip, they visited a wax museum across from the Alamo. The figures looked almost real. At first, they saw movie actors and actresses. There was John Wayne! They saw famous historical people, like Sam Houston.

At the end, they walked through the Passion of Christ very slowly. Each scene was beautifully arranged and labeled with elegant writing. People had been talking and laughing earlier, but here everyone was silent. They paused at each scene, looking at all the details. Irene could look into the sad eyes of Jesus. He suffered terribly because He loved her so much.

Irene would like to create art like that when she got older. She made up her mind that she was going to be an artist. She would create sculptures that would remind people of God.

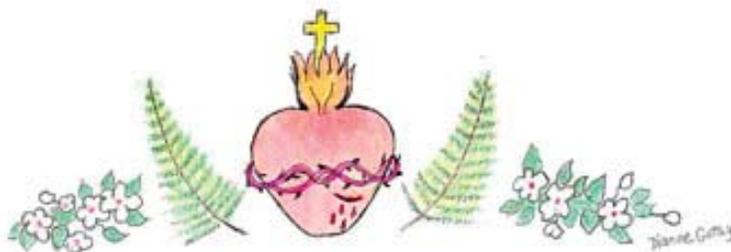
She would tell Diana about being an artist. Then she remembered that Diana was still angry. But maybe, by the time they got back, Diana would have changed her mind.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Why was Dad glad that he was not in someone else's shoes even though his were wet?
2. How can you tell that Irene misses Diana's friendship?



Chapter Eight



Summer Days at Home

On June 1st, the children went with Mom to the store for hurricane supplies. Irene carried the list —batteries, matches, paper plates and cups, masking tape, canned goods, crackers, dried fruits, and gallons of bottled water.

“Why don’t we just wait to buy the supplies when we know the storm is coming?” Victor asked as they walked along, pushing the grocery cart. It seemed a shame to him to buy all this food that he couldn’t eat unless there was a hurricane.

“Because then stores get crowded and shelves get empty,” said Irene.

“Sometimes a storm suddenly changes course, too,” added Mom. “I think we have enough now.”

“What if we don’t have a hurricane at all?” Nicole wanted to know.

“Then we’ll have a no-hurricane party, eat some of it, and give the rest to the church food pantry,” Mom explained.

One June Saturday afternoon, they went to confession. Irene thought it was hard to go to confession sometimes. Her knees felt shaky, and her mouth got dry. But when she had received forgiveness, she felt like she could fly. Jesus was sleeping peacefully in her heart, and she was going to be careful not to disturb His rest. She would fly smoothly and serenely.

The children rode their bikes to the park later that evening. The sun had burned off the humidity, and a breeze was blowing steadily. Maybe someone would be playing soccer or tag.

Nicole stopped pedaling. “Irene, I think Diana’s here. Do you want to go home?”

Irene shook her head.

“I see Maggie, so you can play with us,” Nicole said.

Victor went for the empty tire swing, and Irene and Nicole joined Maggie at the balance beam. It wasn’t a real balance beam but a long log about a foot off the ground. They all jumped on and tried walking backwards. Then they tried walking sideways.

Diana was with her older brother and his friend. Out of the corner of her eye, Irene saw them coming closer. She heard Diana say loudly, “Jimmy, I want you to meet this girl I know.”

Irene's heart began to thump. Nicole stopped and whispered to Maggie. They stepped off the balance beam.

"Hi, Irene," said Diana. Her brother was tall and thin. Irene knew he played basketball. His friend Jimmy was even taller. Maybe they played on the same team.

Jimmy smiled uncertainly. He opened his mouth, but Diana said, "This is Irene. She used to be my friend, but as you can see, she prefers to play with the little girls." She waved her hand carelessly at the three girls. She tossed her brown curly hair.

Irene's face burned. She bit her lip. Nicole sputtered and put her hands on her hips, and Irene said to her in a low voice, "It's O.K."

Jimmy shut his mouth. Diana's brother laughed.

Diana continued, "She buys all her clothes at garage sales. You don't have to bother talking to her, Jimmy, she thinks she's too good to talk to anybody." Diana smiled at the three girls very sweetly.

Irene was surprised when she heard herself say, "Were you just born mean, Diana, or have you been practicing?" She covered her mouth with her hand, but the words had escaped.

Diana made a face and walked away. Her brother laughed again. "She's been practicing," he said. Then he said, "Let's go shoot some hoops, Jimbo."

Irene could not look at them. She sat down on the log. Maggie said, "She's just showing off, Irene."

"Don't let Diana spoil everything," urged Nicole. But Irene did not want to play. Suddenly she realized that tomorrow was Sunday, and she had ruined her confession already. What did Jesus think of her now?

The next morning, Irene put on her blue dress and sandals slowly. Everyone was kept waiting for her. Mom went to her room to hurry her. Irene was sitting on her bed. She knew she would not be able to look at Jesus in the Eucharist and say "Amen" when Fr. Michaels offered her Communion.

"Do you have something you want to tell me, Irene?"

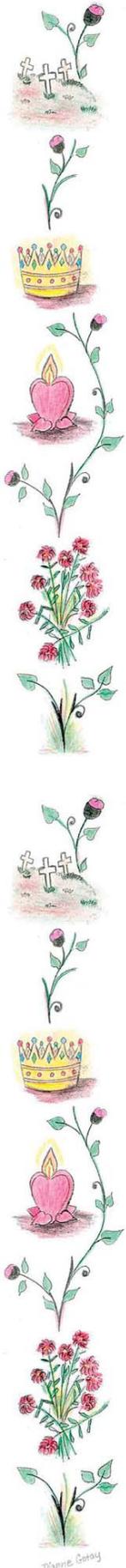
"Yes and no," said Irene. She picked at the bedcovers.

Mom sat down beside her.

Irene took a deep breath. "I tried very hard not to say anything mean to Diana yesterday at the park, but I did. She said some mean things about my clothes and being too proud to talk to them, and I got mad, and now I can't go to Communion."

"Do you want to receive Communion?" Mom asked.

"Yes."



“Then be sorry about what happened yesterday, and offer up your Communion today for Diana. I want you to keep this to yourself, but Diana’s parents aren’t getting along very well. I’m sure that hurts her, and she’s probably frightened.”

Irene’s eyes opened wide. “But she didn’t seem to be afraid.”

Mom hugged her. “Wouldn’t you be?”

Irene nodded. She would be indeed. She could see herself doing mean things if she were afraid. Last summer she had yelled and hit Victor when he had unexpectedly thrown a dead cricket at her.

They did not see Diana for the rest of the summer. Tommy and Victor had sleepovers, and they all went roller-skating. Sometimes, Irene saw Jimmy and Diana’s brother at the rink, and she nodded to them. The boys waved back but did not talk to them.

When Maggie came for a sleepover, they popped popcorn and watched the video of *The Sound of Music*. They knew all the songs and sang along. Nicole got up and danced and sang, “The hills are alive...”

Irene ran to get scarves, and they twirled around the room, making the pink and lavender scarves flutter. Maggie spun around just like a ballerina. Victor said he couldn’t see the movie with that much audience participation.

Peppy had her babies, but she had too many to take care of and pushed three out of the nest. Irene put them back in, and Peppy pushed them out again. They wriggled and cried on the wire floor of the cage. Mom said she couldn’t feed them all, and so the three kits died. Peppy didn’t seem sorry at all, but the children tried to make up for her lack of concern.

Victor and Tommy dug the grave, and Irene and Nicole laid the kits in a shoebox. They asked St. Francis to look after all the babies. Each day, they put a frozen block of ice in Peppy’s cage to keep the rest of the babies cool.

Many of the plants dried up. No more tomatoes. No more green beans. No more nasturtiums. The zucchini even gave up. Victor wasn’t too unhappy about that. No more garden until early September.

They went swimming at the pool nearly every morning. Most people swam in the evening, but the Meyers preferred an early morning dip. The water was cool, and they jumped in. They had races and floated on their backs and watched the clouds floating in the air above. They dove off the board again and again. Sometimes they found brown June bugs in the water and scooped them out. June bugs had scratchy legs and tickled when they walked across your hand.

Mom let them spend hours in the library. Sometimes, the librarians let Irene read stories to the little kids who came and made a lot of noise. That kept them quiet for a while.

For the Feast of the Sacred Heart, they made table decorations. Irene used clay to sculpt the Sacred Heart onto the side of an empty jelly jar. Then she baked the jar in the oven. The roses were not blooming, so they cut red zinnias from the front flowerbeds to put in the vase.



Nicole made a candle. She used a cookie cutter to cut two large hearts out of red beeswax. Then she sandwiched a wick between the two hearts. The candle wouldn't stand up, so she made five small hearts out of Irene's leftover clay. The hearts formed a ring for the red candle to sit on.

Victor decorated round sugar cookies with pink and red icing and sprinkles. Mom showed them how to fold red paper napkins to look like crowns since Jesus was the King of their family. They set a place at the head of the table for Him.

"Mom, it's a good thing we don't have any more kids," Victor said, looking at the table.

Mom frowned at him. "Now why do you say that, Victor Meyer?"

"Because we wouldn't have room to set a place for Jesus at the table," he said. He seemed to have said the wrong thing, but he wasn't sure why. Mom had a funny look on her face, but not the kind of look as if she were going to laugh.

Mom shook her head. "There's always room for one more in this family. Don't you forget that, Victor."

Victor couldn't see how there could always be room for one more as they only had six chairs, and it wouldn't be fair to make Jesus stand up on His own special feast day.

After the evening Mass, Mom said that she could hardly believe that June was over. She would have to get busy and order school supplies for August.

The children wondered what books they would be getting. They would soon begin looking over catalogs and searching web pages on-line. Then in late July, they would begin finding boxes on their front door step, half-hidden by the white impatiens and frilly ferns.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Name some of the virtues the children show in this chapter.
2. Why did the children set a place for Jesus at the table?



Chapter Nine



Getting Ready for School

The Fourth of July began with a bang. Nicole got up early and woke the family with her rendition of the National Anthem! The notes boomed throughout the house. “Ohhh, say can you see?” Victor tumbled out of bed and got caught in his bed sheets. Dad grumbled that even the dawn’s early light was still in bed. Irene sat up and began singing along, and Mom told them they would wake the neighbors. She went to help untangle Victor.

Crystal Creek had a parade each year. The children were going to be part of it again. They had spent the day before decorating their bicycles.

They lined up near the park. Dad was in charge of helping all the bike riders stay organized, so he didn’t have much time to see the parade.

Two children on tricycles lost their mothers, and after much searching, Dad finally reunited them. Tommy’s aluminum foil Statue of Liberty fell off, and Dad helped him wire it back in place. Then another child’s tennis shoe came untied, and Dad re-tied both of his shoes, just in case. Someone else had to go to the bathroom, and Dad asked Mom to take the little girl. She forgot to put her kickstand down, and her bike fell on her brother who started to cry. Dad untangled the bikes and hugged the boy until he felt better.

The Meyer children waited in line astride their bikes. They were at the very end. Irene had made red, white, and blue tissue paper flowers for her bike. She wore a white cap, a red t-shirt, and denim shorts. Nicole had wound streamers through the spokes of her bike wheels. Victor wore an old top hat that Mom helped him cover with red, white, and blue felt. He blew on a horn and had attached three little American flags to his bike.

Suddenly, the parade began. The parade chairman sat in a white convertible waving and following a group of boys banging on drums. A large black and white horse pulled a black and white buggy that belonged to a man who kept a horse stable near Tommy’s farm.

Many people had tied bows around their dogs’ necks and walked them in the parade. Some people





were roller-blading. They all wore red helmets and blue kneepads.

A group of children were sitting on a flatbed trailer and singing “America the Beautiful.” They each held balloons, and when the trailer hit a bump, some of the children lost their balloons. They stood up, watching the balloons float away until a lady jumped out of the truck that was pulling the trailer to tell them to sit down.

Several marching men were dressed in military uniforms, and one of them carried a rifle. The volunteer firemen drove their truck and ran the siren. The children on bikes followed the firemen at the very end of the parade. People sat on the curbs and waved flags and sipped iced tea and sodas. They cheered at each group that passed by. Irene saw many people that she knew. She saw Diana’s parents, but she didn’t see Diana anywhere. She waved uncertainly, and Diana’s parents waved back.

During the picnic, Victor ate three hotdogs and had to lie down. Nicole spilled lemonade on her t-shirt, and Irene lost her white cap when a gust of wind snatched it off her head.

They had ice-cold watermelon and didn’t have to eat it with a fork. Nicole and Maggie had a watermelon seed spitting contest. It wasn’t exactly lady-like to spit, but Mom said she had done the same thing when she was Nicole’s age. She told them not to spit into the wind.

Miss Sophie ran a face-painting booth. When Victor felt better, they went to get painted. Irene got a red rose on her cheek. Victor wanted Miss Sophie to paint a cowboy on the back of his hand, but she painted a longhorn cow instead! Miss Sophie decorated Nicole’s cheek with a red, white, and blue butterfly.

Victor saw Fr. Michaels walking around, and he went to show off his longhorn. Fr. Michaels said the cow reminded him of ice cream, and they went to get double scoops. Victor had to lie down again, and Mom wouldn’t let him eat anything else that day.

In the evening they sprayed on mosquito repellent and sat at the edge of the park grounds to watch the fireworks. There were spinning wheels of light and rows of firecrackers and big beautiful bursts like stars exploding in the sky.

“Pop, pop, POP!” went the fireworks. All the children said, “Oooohh!” and then they said, “Aahh!” Dad fell asleep with his head on Mom’s lap, and he didn’t wake up until it was time to go home.

One quiet summer evening Victor looked over his mother’s shoulder. She was sitting on the couch, looking through catalogs for Latin posters. He saw some interesting looking ones. He wondered which ones she was going to buy.

The girls were putting together a jigsaw puzzle that had too many pieces to interest Victor in joining them, and Dad was working on the family budget. He said the air conditioning was getting expensive.

“Mom, why did everyone stop talking in Latin?” Victor asked when she looked up.

“It just fell out of fashion, I guess,” she said. “Customs change. Before Latin, many people spoke





Greek.”

“What language do you think God speaks?”

“Every language.”

Victor persisted. “But which one is His favorite?”

“Victor, if I ever get to Heaven, I will ask Him,” Mom said a little impatiently.

“But Mom, don’t you wish we lived in the old times when we could all have an adobe house without air conditioning and speak Latin and have horses instead of cars?”

Everyone in the family looked up and said, “Offer it up, Victor!”

Mom murmured that God’s least favorite language was complaining. Victor sighed.

A few days later, Mom spread out her list of school supplies on the kitchen table. The children gathered around to take a look. She was buying a new math book for Irene, two colorful Latin posters, more maps, several storybooks, and more holy cards.

They were going to be trice blessed again Nicole said because Mom was letting them choose one special subject each. It was hard to choose the right one. Everything looked interesting.

Irene chose a book on how to sculpt people. She was going to use her baby-sitting money to buy extra wax and modeling clay. She was secretly planning to make a small statue of the Blessed Virgin and give it to Mom for Christmas.

Victor chose a book on cowboy rope tricks, even though Mom warned him that he would have to practice outside and that he absolutely could not use the rabbits, ducks, or rosebushes for targets.

Nicole looked over each catalog carefully. Did she want to learn a new language? No. What about learning to write italic handwriting? Maybe. She could get another Hilda van Stockum book. Well, what should she get?

“What should I get, Jesus?” she asked the Baby who was sleeping quietly in her heart.

Suddenly, Nicole saw a catalog with a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. “Catholic Songs for Children” she read. When she saw the description by the picture, she knew that that was what she wanted for her special subject. She could sing with the audiocassette and learn to play the music on the piano. Nicole could hardly wait. She would sing a solo concert for the whole family after supper once she had learned the songs!

Nicole would get to sing those songs, but she was going to have a different and much larger audience than the one she was expecting. It was not a coincidence that one of the songs was about trusting in God no matter what happened.



Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Why does Victor want to live in a different time? Do you think that people who lived long ago wished they lived at a different time?
2. What is Victor not supposed to use for targets when he's practicing rope tricks?
3. Nicole has a difficult choice to make. Did she choose wisely? Why or why not?



Chapter Ten



Hurricane Delores

The boxes of school supplies arrived in time, and the children arranged everything neatly on a bookshelf. Victor sharpened all the pencils in the house. Nicole tested the pens and found erasers, rulers, and scissors that had “walked off” during the summer. Irene straightened the computer desk and put all the educational software together.

The night before the first day of school, the family gathered at the table for a dinner of lasagna. Dad rapped on the table with a spoon. “As principal of the Meyer Family schoolhouse, I officially declare the opening of a new year. May God the Father be pleased with you, may Jesus bless you, and may the Holy Spirit inspire you with diligence and wisdom.”

“Amen,” said Irene.

“Alleluia,” said Nicole.

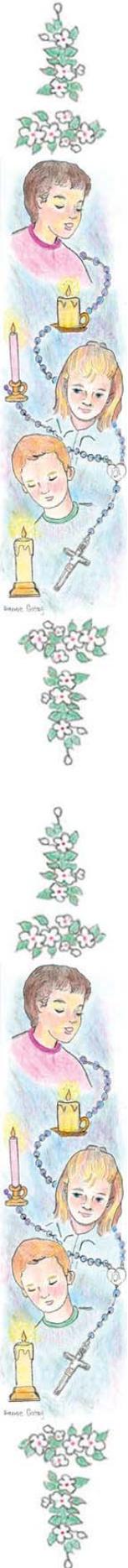
“Hurray!” cheered Victor.

After the first two weeks of school, Mom was amazed at their progress. Irene was already making a beautiful sculpture of a very pretty lady, and Nicole spent hours singing and playing the piano. Victor was a little slower learning rope tricks, but he was “almost as fast as a quick-draw” at saying his times tables. Well, at least much faster than molasses.

In early September, Irene began plotting a tropical storm on the hurricane map Mom had picked up for her at the grocery store. The storm seemed to pop up suddenly in the Gulf of Mexico and it gathered strength over the warm waters. It wobbled westward for a few hours and then began moving north.

Mom did not say anything, but she left the radio on all day Tuesday. The storm got closer. On Wednesday Dad called her from work. The computer predictions were that Hurricane Delores would strike the coast somewhere between Corpus Christi and Port Arthur. Irene looked at her map. Crystal Creek was fifty miles inland between those two cities!

They cancelled school, and Mom gave them each a job to do. She said Dad was coming home early. They washed all the dirty clothes as quickly as they could. Victor and Mom went outside to pick up garden stakes, water hoses, and sprinklers. They had just planted new tomato plants, turnips, peas, and lettuce last Saturday. Mom sighed, but she couldn’t do much to protect the plants. They turned the porch swing on its side and pulled it under a shrub.



“When your dad gets home, we’ll help him move the rabbit hutch into the garage,” Mom told Victor. However, the rabbit hutch had been built in the backyard, and although they tried, Dad could not fit it through the gate. The ducks had settled themselves far under the silverberry bush and wouldn’t come out for anything.

Mom and Irene began taping the south-facing windows with masking tape in case they broke. The tape would keep the glass from shattering too much. It made Irene’s arms ache, but she offered it up to Jesus so that no one would get hurt in the storm.

On Thursday morning, they covered the rabbit hutch with old blankets. Dad filled their bathtubs with water. They drank the last of the milk for breakfast. If the power went out, it would spoil within a day.

The air seemed to be turning yellow, and a strong wind blew. Dad let them run out for a few minutes to lean against the wind. When they faced north and leaned back, the wind held them upright.

At ten o’clock the power went out, and a wild wind enveloped them. Mom had already lit their blessed candles. Dad turned off the little battery-powered radio.

They sat on blankets in the family room away from the windows and prayed the entire Rosary. The children could scarcely hear Dad’s voice over the noise. “...Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven...deliver us from evil. Hail Mary...Jesus...now and in the hour...”

Delores became louder and louder, and she seemed to be roaring mad. They heard things hitting the house, slamming into the bricks and scraping across the shingles. The house groaned and cracked.

Victor shut his eyes. He tried not to imagine what was happening, but when he thought he heard a scream, he grabbed Mom’s hand tightly and shivered. He hoped it wasn’t Bernard, and then he thought it might be Miss Sophie. She was alone in her house.

They all heard a loud long crack and jumped. Irene and Nicole covered their ears, but the roaring continued. The rain smacked against the house suddenly. Irene was sure she heard glass breaking. She was not going to cry. She was not going to cry.

Lunchtime passed by. They waited and waited. The candles burned steadily. The children sat on the floor and watched the candle flames. They were tired from the noise and from jumping every time something hit the house. Their eyes grew heavy, and they fell asleep while Mom and Dad were praying the Angelus.

When they woke up, everything was quiet, except for a gusty wind. But Dad was missing. Irene’s heart jumped. Mom told them to be still. Dad had gone to check on Miss Sophie. She said they couldn’t leave the room because windows had broken, and the kitchen was a mess.

Dad brought Miss Sophie back. Part of her roof had come off, and she was drenched. She was limping because she had slipped on the wet vinyl, trying to get under some cover.

Dad helped her to the couch. She looked very pale. Mom ran to find dry towels.

Nicole wanted to do something. The words to a song flashed in her mind, and she began to sing. She



sang the new songs she had learned, and Miss Sophie closed her eyes and smiled a little.

Someone knocked on the door, and Dad went to answer it. When he came back, he whispered something to Mom. She did not tell the children what he said, and they decided not to ask.

Dad cleared a path in the kitchen, and he and Mom brought out hard-boiled eggs and bread and butter for everyone to eat. Victor wondered why they weren't eating the hurricane supplies, and Dad said they would have to eat everything in the refrigerator as soon as possible before it spoiled. He warned them not to try to turn on the water. They would open the jugs of bottled water to use right away.

Irene gave Miss Sophie a peeled egg. After she ate it, she looked better, but Irene could tell that her leg was hurting her.

Dad turned on the radio, and then they discovered that the roads were all under water. The announcer on the Emergency Broadcast System warned them not to try to leave Crystal Creek. Helicopters and boats would soon be coming only for people who needed immediate medical care.

Dad went out again. He wanted to check on the other neighbors. Nicole asked him in a small voice if he would knock on Maggie's door, and he promised her he would. He was gone for a long time.

They heard shouting once, and someone sobbing loudly. Mom went to the front door and looked out. When she came back, she sounded unexpectedly cheerful.

"Why don't we sing again, Nicole?" she said brightly. Nicole slid onto the piano seat and began to play "Amazing Grace." She knew that Miss Sophie liked that song. Miss Sophie looked as if she were going to cry when she saw Mom come back, but she cleared her throat and began to sing.

Before dark, Dad stumbled in. He was muddy and nearly fell on the floor in a heap. "We'll have a camp out here tonight," he said. He smiled at them. The children could hardly believe that he was looking so cheerful.

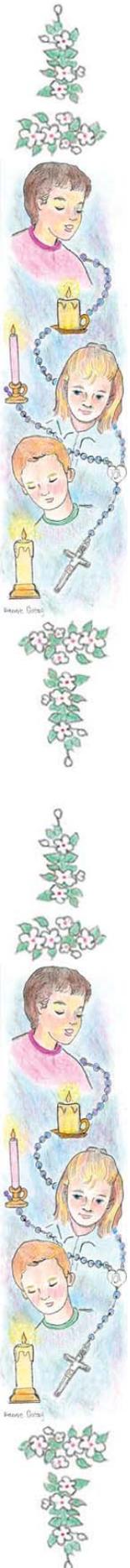
"Is Maggie all right?" Nicole whispered.

Dad nodded. "She's fine. Their pine tree fell, but it missed the house. They're in about the same shape we are."

Mom had already gotten their sleeping bags and more blankets. She made them move closer to an inside wall. Miss Sophie stayed on the couch.

In the night they heard more shouting and several crashes. Things were falling, thought Irene wearily. She wished Mom hadn't blown out the candles. She felt sticky and hot, and it was too dark. Then she remembered that with the power out, the street lights would not be shining.

She sang her lullaby silently to keep her imagination from scaring her. "Hush, the baby's sleeping, Hush, you're much too loud, Hush, we need the quiet, Hush, we need it now."



Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Dad turn off the radio during the storm?
2. Why do you think Mom and Dad acted cheerfully after the hurricane?



The Meyers of Crystal Creek

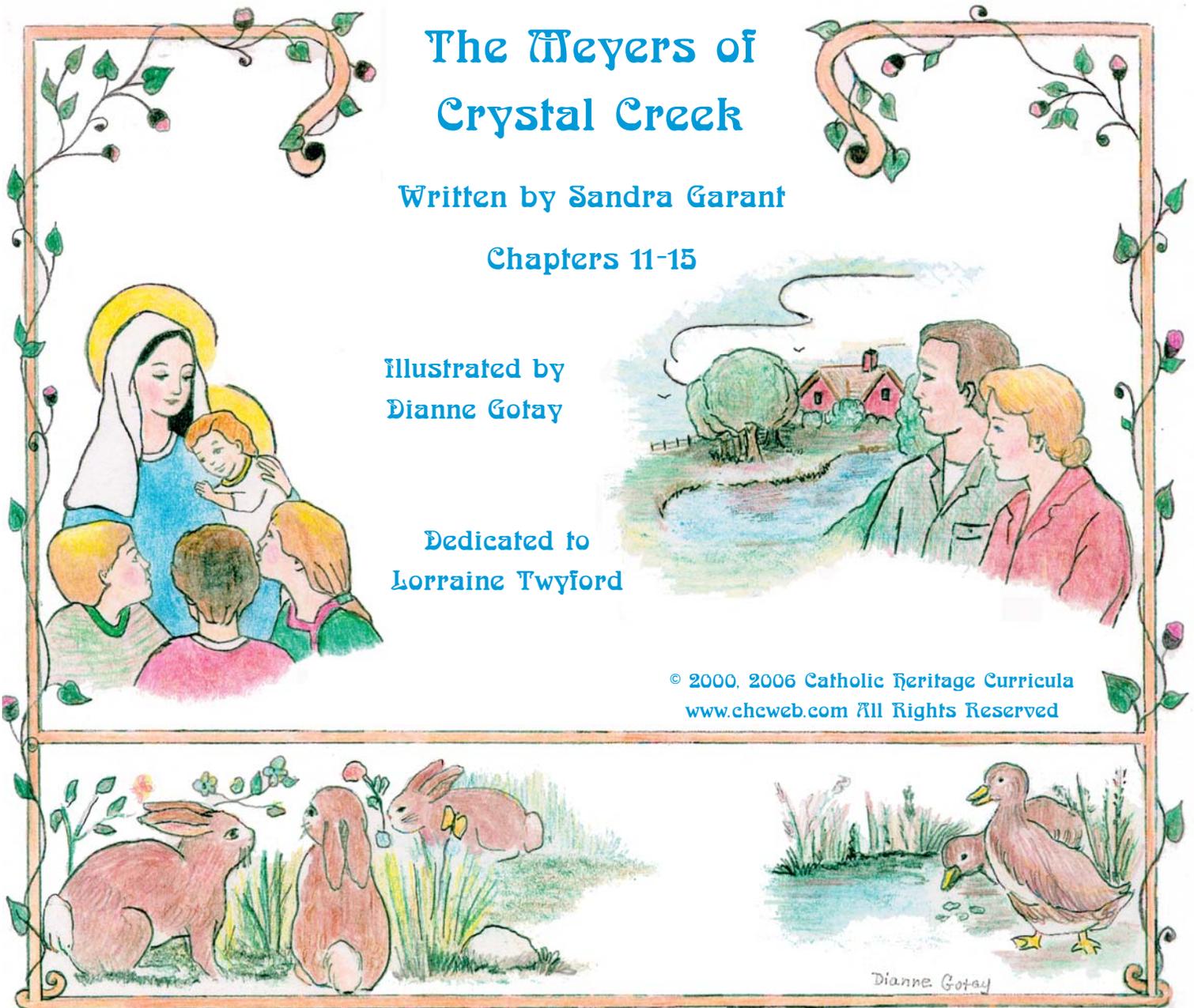
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Chapters 11-15

Illustrated by
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Dedicated to
Lorraine Twyford

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The three Meyer children are loosely based on the author’s own three children. All other characters and events are purely fictional. Crystal Creek is a fictional place, although it is roughly located in the Pearland/Manvel area of Brazoria County, Texas.

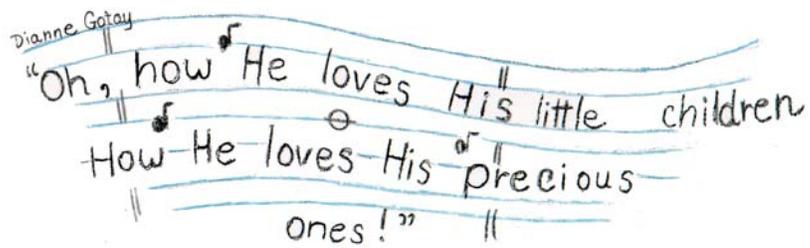
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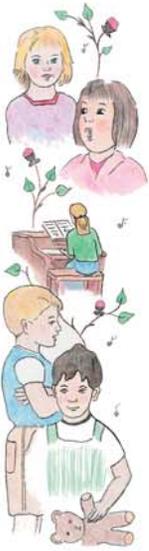
It’s a Mystery! Catholic Children’s Retreats: The Holy Trinity, The Perfect Personality, The Secret Garden, The Household of God

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Chapter Eleven



The Days After Delores



It felt strange to wake up in the family room and see Miss Sophie first thing in the morning. Everyone felt sticky, but they could not even have a sponge bath until later in the day. They had to conserve water, and Mom was going to put them to work right after breakfast.

"Victor, you're getting a taste of the old days," said Mom with a grin. "Most people didn't have baths everyday. It was too much trouble."

Victor frowned, "How did they stand it?"

Mom let them sponge their faces off. Irene brought a sponge for Miss Sophie. She was glad she could do something to help. It made her feel better inside even if she felt bad outside.

Dad went out again to check on the neighbors. Mom put them to work with a broom and dustpan, cleaning the glass off the kitchen floor.

"Shouldn't we go feed the ducks and rabbits?" asked Irene. She started to pull back the kitchen window curtain, and Mom caught her hand. The curtain was torn in several places from the wind and glass shards.

"I need to tell you something," she said slowly. They looked up at her. "Our little garden is a real mess, and..." They waited. "I'm not quite sure where the ducks are. Their pond has overflowed. In fact, the garden looks more like a swamp."

"And the rabbits?" asked Victor.

"The rabbit hutch was broken by the wind, and the rabbits all drowned," Mom said finally. "I'm sorry."

Victor sniffed and gripped the broom tightly. Nicole couldn't say a word. Irene just let the tears roll down her cheeks. She couldn't remember where the tissues were.

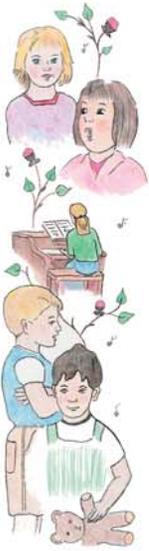
Mom kept them busy inside all morning. She said that Dad would begin cleaning the yard as soon as he could find the time. He was forming a group of men to go from house to house to see who needed help. They were having to wade through deep waters.

The air was thick, and the children soon grew hot and sweaty. "We'll just have to offer it up," thought Irene firmly. They didn't feel hungry at lunch and ate a few crackers with peanut butter and drank lots of water. Irene brought Miss Sophie water whenever she wanted it.

Then they began clearing Victor's room. His window was not broken, but water had blown in around the edges, and they mopped it up. Miss Sophie would move into his room since she couldn't go back



to her house yet. Victor was going to sleep on the floor in the girls' room.



Dr. Weiss knocked on their door, and Mom let him in. He wanted to take a quick look at Miss Sophie. Fortunately, he decided that she had suffered a bruise and not a break. She needed rest and plenty of water. He reminded them all not to drink or brush their teeth with the tap water.

“We don’t want any epidemics, do we? Good thing you had your shots, eh, Victor?”

“What shots?” Victor asked.

“What shots!?! How could you have hollered so loud and not remember it? I do!” Dr. Weiss laughed. He had to see more people, so Mom let him out.

“What’s an epidemic?” Victor wanted to know.

Miss Sophie explained, “That’s when a whole bunch of people get sick at the same time of the same thing. The water system goes bad sometimes with all this flooding. Used to be, people would get sick by the hundreds and die of the bad water even if the floods didn’t kill them.”

“When you were a baby, Dr. Weiss’s nurse gave you all the shots you needed to keep you from getting things like typhoid and diphtheria,” his mother added.

In the evening, Mom had to get more water off the shelves in the garage. The gallon jugs took up too much space to keep them in the kitchen pantry. She opened the garage door and then shut it. She found the broom and went back into the garage. She returned with one jug of water.

“Don’t you think we ought to have another one?” Dad asked. “I’d like a sponge bath.” He had come back in the afternoon as muddy as he could possibly get.

“I’ll get it,” he said, but Mom shut the door quickly. Dad raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t bother,” Mom said. “I’ll get it.”

“I’ll get it,” Dad said firmly. He reached for the doorknob, but Mom blocked his path. “I don’t think this is very funny,” Dad said in a quiet voice.

The children got very quiet themselves. That was Dad’s no-nonsense voice. What on earth was Mom doing?

“You don’t want to go into the garage,” she said, looking at his unshaven chin.

“Yes, I do,” Dad insisted.

Mom sighed. “The problem is, we have a few visitors.”

Dad opened the door and shut it again. His mouth hung open.

“You are not going in that garage again!” he told Mom.

“It’s no trouble. I’ll just sweep them out of the way,” she said. “Besides, the water jugs are in the garage, and we need the water.”



“What else is in the garage?” Miss Sophie asked emphatically.

“Just a few snakes,” Mom said. “Nothing to worry about.”

When water flooded the low-lying areas, the snakes naturally slithered toward the highest ground, which was usually where the houses were.

Mom said she saw “about two” snakes in the garage, and they didn’t look poisonous. She was sure they were king snakes, which was a good thing because they would eat any mice that came into the garage.

Dad finally agreed to let her go back because she argued that as she was the only person in the house who was not afraid of snakes, she was the logical water carrier.

Victor thought she was very brave, but she told him not to be silly because even if a non-poisonous snake bit her, she wouldn’t get hurt. Irene didn’t want to mention that a poisonous snake could drop by at any time, but she thought it.

That evening, they prayed another Rosary. It was Friday and time for the Sorrowful Mysteries. Miss Sophie would not join them even though Nicole invited her and was about to give her a pink Rosary. Miss Sophie shook her head firmly. She was a Methodist and said she had had all the sorrow she wanted for one day. She said “Good night” politely and went to Victor’s room.

The next day, there was more cleaning inside. The blowing curtains had knocked Victor’s clothespin Crucifix off the wall and broken it. Mom and Dad had sealed the broken windows yesterday with heavy blankets and nails after Mom had retrieved the toolbox from the garage and the reach of the snakes.

Dad let them walk outside at lunchtime, and they could hardly believe their eyes! Trees were leaning on top of houses. Shingles and lawn furniture were floating in the streets. The water was lapping at the base of their front porch. Victor’s birdhouse was missing from the pine tree in their front yard.

They watched a helicopter fly over, and they saw people paddling by in canoes. Other people were trying to clean up. Irene heard a baby crying. Mom heard it, too.

“I can’t imagine how the Garzas and the Ofilis are going to be able to do much cleaning. They have such young children,” Mom thought out loud.

“We’re nearly finished cleaning here. Couldn’t we take the little ones for a while?” suggested Irene.

Mom nodded. “But how will they get here?”

Victor knew the answer to that. He rushed out and hailed a passing canoe. The canoe came up their driveway with no problem, and Mom asked the man if he would bring the little Garzas and Ofilis over for a while.

She pointed out their houses. “The white one with the basketball goal on top of the car, and the green one with the big hole in the roof.” He nodded and paddled off.

In less than an hour, the Meyer family room was full of children. Irene and Mom were expecting five, but somehow they ended up with ten!



Miss Sophie said they should just have a party, so that's what they did. Irene and Nicole got the children to play "Duck, Duck, Goose" after they moved the furniture out of the way. Mimi Ofili wanted to be first. She walked around and said, "Duck" twelve times. Then she sat down.



Linda Garza burst out, "You're supposed to say 'Goose'!"

Mimi said, "Goose!" but she was still sitting down.

"Maybe we should play something else," Victor said.

"Linda, you be next," encouraged Irene.

Fortunately, Linda knew the rules and named Toby the goose. They raced around, and Toby ran into the prayer table. He knocked over the candles, the Bible, the rosaries, and the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Meyer children's hearts sank when the picture frame broke.

Miss Sophie comforted Toby. Mom cleaned up and told them to play something else. Nicole ran to the piano and began playing "Old McDonald Had a Farm." All the children knew this song and jumped up and crowded around Nicole. Toby slid out of Miss Sophie's arms and forgot about his accident.

Miss Violet's little boy wanted to sit beside Nicole, so she scooted over. He clapped his hands in time to the music.

"Teach them a new song," Irene suggested when the children finished "Old MacDonald," so Nicole sang "Our Father's Love." "Always trust Him, come what may, Through the good and bad look upward..." she taught them. The children enjoyed the chorus, filling the hurricane damaged house with their voices, "Oh, how He loves His little children! How He loves His precious ones!"



When they were tired of singing, Mom gave each of the children some water in a paper cup and a handful of raisins and sunflower seeds.

Before dark, the canoe man returned and took the children home. "Do you want them back tomorrow?" he asked Mom. She looked at Dad who nodded.

"It's a big help," the man said. "I hope you don't mind if I sneak in my little girl tomorrow. I've got some extra plywood. I can bring it to you so you can board up your windows. Looks like you need shingles too. They won't match, but it's better than nothing."

"That would be a big help to us," said Dad. "Thanks a lot." They waved good night.

Over the next few days, the water subsided, but the number of children at the Meyer house grew. Maggie came to help them. They worked hard to keep the children entertained. Irene showed the children how to make simple clay birds. Nicole kept teaching them songs from her new music book. Victor stood on his head and told them upside down jokes. Maggie played "Simon Says" with them.

And each day Mom managed to give them a snack. Their hurricane supplies began to disappear more quickly than Mom had expected.

"Everyone's running low," Dad said. He went to Miss Sophie's and found a few cans of beans. They had cold beans for breakfast for three days in a row.



Maggie brought them more water. The man in the canoe appeared with crackers, candy, and tuna fish.

“What in the world would we do without neighbors?” Mom wondered.

“We have a lot more than I realized,” said Nicole, who had made a new friend. Cindy was eight years old and brought her twin brothers over. They were just learning to walk and couldn’t play many games. They wobbled on their unsteady legs when Nicole played the piano. “They’re trying to dance!” shouted the children.

Finally the news came over the little radio that the roads would be open the next day. They were covered with debris once the water ran off, and road crews had had to clear them. Meanwhile the electric company rushed to take care of fallen power lines.

When the lights came on again that evening, Victor gave the loudest cheer of all.

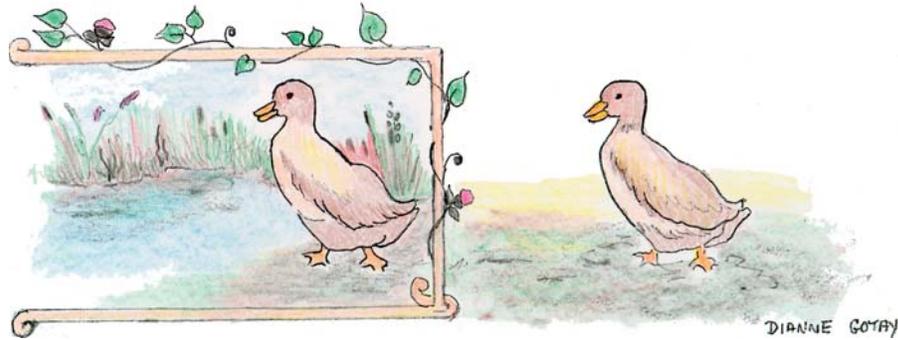
“Thanks be to God,” said Mom. She was planning to go to the grocery store first thing in the morning.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Why is Miss Sophie living with the Meyers?
2. What animals end up in the Meyer’s garage?
3. How do the children help their neighbors?



Chapter Twelve



An Early Thanksgiving

“Mom! Mom!” Victor shouted the next morning. He had been sleeping on the floor in the girls’ room for over a week.

Mom rushed in.

“Oh, Mom, we missed Mass,” Victor said. “We didn’t even think about it.” He shook his head, wondering how they could have been so bad as to forget Sunday Mass.

Mom relaxed. “Victor Meyer, you gave me three gray hairs. The church was flooded, and Fr. Michaels was injured, but he’s much better now. I didn’t want to tell you until I heard more. He was taken out by helicopter.”

“What happened?” they asked, jumping out of bed.

“He was going from the church to the rectory when a gust of wind knocked him against the brick wall. A police officer was driving by and carried him into the rectory. He broke several ribs and his right arm.”

“Mom, would he have died if the helicopter hadn’t taken him to the hospital?” Victor asked solemnly.

“I’m not quite sure, Victor. But a helicopter did come for him right after the winds died down, and he’s going to be fine.”

As soon as she got back from the store, Mom fixed them a lunch of chicken soup and French bread with apple pie for dessert. It was the first hot meal they had eaten since Delores.

“This is the best meal I’ve ever eaten,” said Dad.

Miss Sophie nodded and spread more butter on her bread. Her leg was much better. “Just a little stiff,” she said. She was moving back to her own house that afternoon. The roof had been temporarily repaired.

The neighborhood still looked messy, but it was no longer “pathetic” announced Irene. When they took a walk that evening, many of the little children they had watched the week before ran out of their houses to wave and say hello.

They turned the corner, and Diana was standing near her mailbox.

“Hello, Diana. Is everything O.K. at your house?” Irene said as cheerfully as possible.



Diana rubbed the toe of her shoe in the mud. “It’s O.K. I’m fixing to move though. My mom doesn’t like hurricanes. We’re moving away.” She gulped.



“I’m sorry,” said Irene. “I’ll miss you.” She meant it. She gave Diana a hug, and then Diana ran back to her house crying.



They kept walking. They saw the man who had paddled the canoe and brought them plywood and candy after the storm. He waved to them.

“It’s kind of nice to use the old legs again, isn’t it? I sure built up my arm muscles with all that paddling.” They laughed when he flexed his muscles. His little girl was standing beside him, and she showed them her muscles, too.



Miss Violet was outside trimming her crepe myrtles of broken branches. “Hello. I sure appreciate you keeping Ricky after the storm.”



They nodded and walked on. Jimmy was riding his bike down the street. He stopped. “Hey. Are y’all O.K.?”



“Sure,” said Victor. “We’re fine.”

“Thanks for keeping my sister,” Jimmy said.

“Your sister?” Irene asked.



“Yeah, she was getting into everything, and Dad was using our canoe to take stuff to people who needed it while Mom and I were trying to clean up.”



“Oh, that was your dad! And your sister!” The Meyers laughed. “We didn’t even know.”



Irene took a deep breath. “I guess we were like the old woman who lived in the shoe. We had so many children, we didn’t even know all their names.”

Jimmy shook his head and laughed. “It must have been crazy.”

“We told them we were having a party,” explained Irene. “It was Miss Sophie’s idea. I think it helped.”



Jimmy said, “It must not have been too much of a party for you.”



He was about to ride off when he stopped again. “Hey, why don’t we have a block party?” he said suddenly. “Everyone’s tired of just cleaning and cleaning. I met a ton of people I never knew before. We could all get together.”



Apparently, Jimmy’s dad liked the idea. He came over to see Mom and Dad the next evening. He walked in and blessed himself with the holy water immediately.

“We ran out. My wife sprinkled it on every window and door and the roof for all I know. It must have

helped because I only lost a couple of shingles and a shutter.”



They sat up late and planned the party. “We can make it an early Thanksgiving, especially since we can’t have a Mass for a while. No priest and no church building. We’ll make do,” he said. “I’ll even see if someone can distribute the Blessed Sacrament.”



“He’s a good man,” said Dad after Jimmy’s father left. “I like his ideas. So we’ll have both early eucharist and Holy Eucharist,” he told the children.



“What do you mean?” they asked.

“Eucharist comes from a Greek word meaning thanksgiving,” he said. “We’ll have an early Thanksgiving dinner and a sacramental Thanksgiving.”

“Dad, we’d better have the Holy Eucharist first, and then the dinner,” Victor said.



“Right! First things first,” Dad agreed.



Jimmy was right, too. People were ready for a party. Two days later, the streets that had been so full of water were set with tables and chairs. Little kids ran everywhere and generally got in the way, but no one fussed at them.



The party went up and down the streets. It was even better than the Fourth of July. Before the meal, everyone stood up and Miss Sophie’s pastor said a long prayer. He thanked the women for the food, he mentioned Jimmy’s dad and his canoe, he told about the Meyer family and Dr. Weiss, and he thanked God that no one had died in the terrible hurricane.



The Meyers lined up to receive the Blessed Sacrament. Fr. Michaels could not come, but he sent his blessing and Deacon Thomas. Victor hoped that all the food wouldn’t be gone before they had received Communion and made a thanksgiving. Jimmy whispered that there was too much food to worry about that.



They did have a lot of food. Irene had never seen so many pies, cakes, and cookies. They had chicken fixed every way you could imagine. They had her favorite barbecued brisket with potato salad, dill pickles, and cole slaw. They had spiral-cut ham, hotdogs, and hamburgers.



Mr. Luigi brought pizza, although they discovered that his restaurant was ruined. The back wall had collapsed. Mrs. Garza had a restaurant, too, and she brought green enchiladas, beef tacos, and warm tortillas.



After they ate, Miss Violet came looking for Nicole. She was followed by a long line of children. “Nicole, we’re going to provide some entertainment,” she announced.



Nicole blushed.



Miss Violet paraded the children up and down the streets. They sang “Amazing Grace” and “Trust in the Lord” and all the songs that Miss Sophie and Nicole had taught them. The crowds hushed and smiled as the children walked by. It reminded Nicole of Christmas caroling. She was sort of glad that Delores had descended upon them because now the children’s voices were going all the way up to heaven.

When the children had finished, someone began playing a saxophone. The music sounded jazzy, and Irene liked it. She swung her foot.



“So how do you like being home schooled?” Jimmy asked.



“I love it!” she said, still swinging her foot. “I’m going to teach all my kids at home if God lets me have any.”



“Well, don’t you get a little lonely?” he wanted to know. “I mean, with just you and your sister and brother.”

“After all the excitement of the past two weeks?” Irene raised her eyebrows.

Jimmy held his hands up. “O.K., O.K.”

The saxophone player took a break, and Jimmy’s dad stood up.



“I’d just like to say a few words.” He paused and lifted his plastic cup of iced tea. “Friends, Texans, countrymen, lend me your ears! For I have not come to praise Delores, but to bury her!”



Cheers erupted and much laughter rippled down the street, as the short speech was passed along. A lady whose name was Delores, stood up and said, “Goodness, if that’s your plan, I’m out of here!” The laughter continued.



“Your dad is hilarious,” Irene said.

“Yeah, I like him,” Jimmy agreed.

The early Thanksgiving was just about over. The children began helping with the clean up. The sun was sinking fast, leaving a brief but lovely burst of lavender and pink on the horizon.



Irene suddenly heard a familiar sound. “Wack!”



“It’s Portugal and Brazil!” shouted Victor and Nicole. The two ducks were calmly waddling down the street in the direction of their pond.



“What?” said Jimmy, dropping a stack of used paper plates and looking around in alarm.

“Oh, it’s our ducks, Portugal and Brazil! They came back!” Irene shrieked. “Good night! Good bye!” She took off running as fast as she could.



Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What serious sin was Victor afraid they had committed? Did the family sin? Why or why not?
2. What new information do we find out about Jimmy?



Chapter Thirteen



The Rosary Month



Although life wasn't completely back to normal, Irene, Nicole, and Victor picked up where they had left off on their lessons. Every once in a while, they would go to the kitchen window to make sure that Brazil and Portugal were really home. The ducks appeared to be happy to be back. They quacked and nosed around in the remains of the garden. Maybe they were looking for their babies, Irene thought. They didn't seem very sad. She was sure that she felt worse about them losing the ducklings than the ducks did.

Mom's Katy Road Pink rose had died. She said that roses didn't like wet feet, but there wasn't much she could do to dry the ground. The daylilies looked as if raccoons had ravaged them, but in a few weeks they had revived. The tomatoes and other new transplants were history according to Victor. Mom was sure that some of the plants would make a comeback, but their secret garden looked rather raggedy.

"It looks un-loved," fretted Irene. She liked things to be neat and pretty.

"Why don't you plant a Mary garden?" Miss Violet suggested one day when she brought Ricky over for Irene to baby-sit. Irene had gotten several new baby-sitting customers since the hurricane. "You've got to replant anyway."

The children thought it was a wonderful idea. Miss Violet brought them a magazine article about plants that reminded people of the Blessed Virgin. Cornflowers represented Mary's crown. Snapdragons were supposed to look like the Infant Jesus' shoes.

"But I thought He always went barefoot," said Victor. He looked at a picture of the Divine Mercy. "He's not wearing shoes."

"You have to use your imagination," Mom said. She shook her head. "Goodness, Victor! I never thought to hear myself telling you that."

Morning Glory, rosemary, roses, marigolds, and so many other plants had reminded gardeners of Our Lady. Irene thought they must have been very clever, and she memorized the article Miss Violet had given them.



“Oh, Mom, please let us plant a Mary garden. We can do it by ourselves. And we can label the plants to let everyone in the neighborhood know that marigolds are really Mary’s gold. I can buy plants with the baby-sitting money.”



Mom and Dad agreed, but they suggested waiting until spring. Irene drew picture plans of how she wanted the Mary garden to look. It was going to be right near the street.

She showed Diana her plans. Diana would be moving as soon as her house was sold. How Diana wished she could help with the planting!

“It looks wonderful. You should be a landscape gardener when you grow up. I’ll bet people would pay you to design pretty Mary gardens like this. You could make a whole park.”

Irene pondered this. Almost all summer, she had been certain that she wanted to be a sculptor, but then she had enjoyed taking care of Miss Sophie when she was hurt. And she had heard people talking at the early Thanksgiving party about how grateful they had been when Dr. Weiss had waded through the water to check on them. She sighed. She hadn’t made any progress at all in growing up. And she was very nearly twelve years old!



On the first Saturday of October, the Meyers went to Mass. Poor Notre Dame! Some of the windows were still boarded over. A section of the roof was missing, and repairmen had covered it with heavy plastic.

“But at least, we can come for Mass again,” said Nicole.

“And Fr. Michaels is here!” Victor said.

“Almost as good as new,” Fr. Michaels grinned.

After the morning Mass, Fr. Michaels asked a favor. “I know you’re still busy with one thing and another, but if you could find the time to make some rosaries, I’d sure appreciate it. The instructions are in the bag.”

“Of course. We’d love to!” the children said. They took the large bag.

“What should we do with them once we’ve made them?” Irene asked.

“Bring them back to me, and you’ll see.” Fr. Michaels winked at the children. His arm was still in a cast, so he didn’t shake their hands. The white cast would come off in another three weeks.

“Fr. Michaels, do you know how a computer can remind us of God?” Irene asked before they left.

But the good priest was already talking to another family, and he didn’t hear the question.

When they got home, the children opened the Rosary bag. Mom read the directions. They were supposed to tie knots to secure the beads and Crucifix onto the cord. It wasn’t as easy as they had expected.

Victor’s knots didn’t come out quite right, and he ran out of cord by the end of the fourth set of mysteries. He scratched his head. That wouldn’t work at all.

Nicole’s fingers got tired. She managed to fit all five mysteries onto one cord, but when Mom counted



the Hail Mary beads, Nicole had left out two.

Irene took all afternoon, but she completed one Rosary. “We’ll never get them all finished at this rate,” she said. “Fr. Michaels is going to be disappointed.”

“I think he will be disappointed if you give up so quickly,” Mom said.

“We could ask Cindy to help us,” said Nicole. “And Maggie and Tommy and Diana.”

So the Rosary Makers met on the following Saturday. Mom served them cookies and let them spread out their supplies on the floor of the family room.

“Do you know what?” Diana said, tightening a knot.

Naturally, they didn’t.

“When the hurricane first began, we were watching ‘Singing in the Rain’ on TV. We still haven’t finished the video. It cut off at the song about making people laugh. It wasn’t very funny then.”

Cindy said, “We were eating a late breakfast since school was closed. I was too scared to finish my toast. I wonder what happened to it.”

Maggie had been listening to the news when the power went off. “I thought it was going to be fun because we didn’t have to have lessons, but I’d rather do lessons. And our computer was ruined.”

Tommy had been trying to call his dogs in when the wind got rough, and his mother made him come inside. His older brothers had rescued the dogs and brought them in. “They got to sleep with me,” he said. “On the rug next to the bed because they wouldn’t all fit on the bed.”

They had made several Rosaries before they stopped. By the time Tommy’s brother came to take him home, they had completed nearly two-thirds of the Rosaries.

When everyone was gone, Dad said, “Let’s make one more Rosary before bedtime.”

The children groaned but pulled out another cord.

Dad laughed. “No, I mean let’s make one by praying it.”

Mom lit the candles on the prayer table, and they each chose a Glorious Mystery to lead.

The mystery of the Resurrection reminded Irene of gaining Diana’s friendship again. Somehow, the mystery of the Ascension brought to Nicole’s mind the children’s happy voices rising upwards as they sang for the early Thanksgiving. During the mystery of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, Victor wondered if God had found a safe place for the ducks under His wing. Dad thought how fortunate they were to have such a beautiful prayer to help get them through the danger of the storm during the mystery of the Assumption. And Mom pondered on how the Queen of Heaven and earth had watched over so many families during and after the storm.

As soon as the Rosary Makers tied the last bead in place, they called Fr. Michaels. “We’re done! All the Rosaries are finished!” they told him.



He was surprised. “How did you make them so quickly?” he wondered.

“We called our friends to help. We knew we could work together better and faster,” Irene explained.

“Aaah,” he said over the phone. “I guess you’ve figured out the mystery of the communion of saints.”

“Oh, we aren’t saints,” Irene told him.

“Yet,” Fr. Michaels added. “Well, bring them around tomorrow after the Mass. You are coming to Sunday Mass, aren’t you?” He teased her.

“Oh, yes!” Irene assured him. “If we really were saints, we wouldn’t though.”

“Why not?” Fr. Michaels said.

“Because we’d be in Heaven, and we would be so happy we wouldn’t be able to sit still. Think how distracting that would be during Holy Mass.”

“I can’t even imagine it,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow, God willing.”

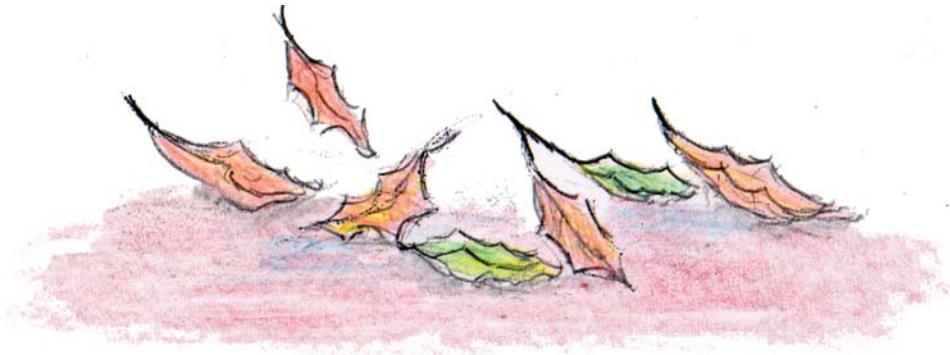
Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What does Fr. Michaels want the children to do?

2. Why does Irene say they wouldn’t go to Mass if they were saints? Do you think she was serious or joking?



Chapter Fourteen



The Second Thanksgiving

“I really want to thank you for making these Rosaries,” Fr. Michaels said after Sunday Mass. He looked tired but very pleased with the Rosaries.

“But what are they for?” asked the children.

Fr. Michaels smiled. “They are for the hurricane victims in the hospital and their families. The hurricane didn’t pass directly over us. It did much more damage in other places.

People are still in the hospital, suffering from their injuries. And families are still grieving over the loss of relatives and friends.”

“But I thought no one died,” Victor said.

“No one in Crystal Creek, but it was a big storm. I thought it would be appropriate for us to remember the less fortunate. Some people lost everything, except for their faith. These Rosaries will mean a lot to children and adults. I’ll tell them about the Rosary Makers of Crystal Creek.”

The children were very quiet on the way home. When a person has lost everything, it must be a tremendous sacrifice to offer to the Baby Jesus. Jesus had not asked such a sacrifice of them, but He had asked it of other children.

When All Soul’s Day arrived, the Meyers took a long drive. They drove to a town that had suffered badly during Delores. They found a cemetery. Dad parked the white sedan.

They walked along the rows of graves, praying silently for the Holy Souls. Other people were walking in the cemetery. Some had flowers. One boy had a balloon. He tied it to an evergreen shrub growing near a new grave.

They passed by a statue of the Sacred Heart. Irene hoped that some poor soul was flying towards the real Sacred Heart right now, lifted on her prayers. She could be a nun when she grew up and pray always for the Holy Souls. That would be a very important job to do for the rest of her life.

Mom squeezed her hand. “Isn’t it good of God to let us pray for the dead, Irene?”

Irene took a deep breath and nodded.



Thanksgiving was extra nice that year. They had “tons to be grateful for” Victor told Jimmy. Jimmy came over unexpectedly the day before Thanksgiving. He met Victor practicing his rope tricks in the front yard.

“Roped any European or South American countries lately?” Jimmy asked. He had a cardboard box under his arm.

“What do you mean?” said Victor puzzled. He stopped swinging the rope.

“Portugal and Brazil,” Jimmy explained.

“Oh, no. Mom told me I couldn’t. What’s in the box?”

“Maybe it’s Russia. I’m not sure.” Jimmy laughed.

Victor ran to get the girls.

Jimmy set the box down on the driveway, and he opened it when they gathered around. “It was my dad’s idea,” he said. “He laughed so hard when I told him about the ducks coming back on the night of the early Thanksgiving. He got these two from a friend of his.”

Inside the box were two beautiful New Zealand white rabbits.

“Ohh!” exclaimed Victor.

“They’re so pretty,” said Irene.

“Are they for us?” asked Nicole.

“Yeah, my dad said you could have them, but as payment, he wants to know what you’re going to call them. He thought you would probably come up with something clever.”

They thanked Jimmy over and over. Irene picked up one of the rabbits, holding its hind legs securely. The rabbit snuggled into her arms. Victor held the other one on his shoulder.

“They like you!” Jimmy said. He picked up the box. “Well, let me know when you find the right names for them.”

Before they even got the rabbits settled into a makeshift cage, the children’s grandparents drove up.

“Hello, hello, hello!”

Grandma had brought a new rosebush for Mom. Grandpa said he had just brought Grandma, but really, he had a large box full of good things to eat. “And not a single can of beans or tuna fish in the whole box!” he told Victor.

The house got very noisy. They showed Grandma and Grandpa where they would sleep and helped bring the luggage inside. Victor moved back into the girls’ room temporarily, but he didn’t mind at all.

Grandma took one look at the torn curtains and said she knew what to get Mom for Christmas. She promised to make new ones.



Mom looked a little embarrassed. “There just doesn’t seem to be time to get everything back the way it was.”

Grandma shook her head. “Don’t bother. Things are supposed to change. You can’t go through a hurricane and look like you just stepped out of the beauty shop.” She looked at Mom and winked. “People are supposed to change, too. How do you feel?”

“She feels fine,” said Victor who didn’t want his mother to change at all.

Nicole didn’t say the blessing for their Thanksgiving meal; she sang it for them. She had practiced for two days and didn’t make a single mistake.

Irene felt a spark of envy that Nicole already knew what she wanted to be when she grew up. She smothered the envy with a little effort. It wasn’t Nicole’s fault, and maybe God wanted her to be uncertain for a while. He always had a good reason even if Irene didn’t always know what His reasons were.

She was going to have a talk with Grandma during the weekend about all the things she wanted to be. Thanksgiving was a time to be grateful, and Irene was very grateful that Grandma had come for a visit.

After the meal and the dishes, Grandpa told them stories. He knew a lot of stories about different places and different times. He told about the farm he grew up on and the time their goat ate a five dollar bill during the Great Depression. It was hard to believe that Grandpa had gone to the movies and gotten a bag of popcorn for a dime. Victor listened thoughtfully.

Grandpa had a new joke. A man had seen a friend at a football game wearing a very nice pair of shoes. The friend said they were alligator shoes. So the man went down to Florida and jumped into the water on the first alligator he saw. He wrestled and wrestled and nearly drowned, but he finally managed to drag that alligator to the shore. When he got to the shore, he threw the alligator back into the water.

“Why did he do that?” Victor asked. “After all that trouble?”

“Because he saw it was a bare footed alligator!” Grandpa said.

Later the children asked Grandpa if he knew how a computer could remind him of God. Grandpa said no, but that it did remind him of alligators. Computers and alligators do not wear shoes, he said, pulling a pair of Victor’s sneakers out from under the computer desk.

Victor turned red and ran to put his shoes away.

Irene and Nicole looked around hurriedly to see if they had left their shoes on the floor. Then Irene sat on the couch next to Grandma, but Grandma was already busy talking to Mom. Irene waited and waited to have her special talk. Grandma and Mom talked and talked until Irene fell sound asleep on the couch.

The next day the children were grateful that they had rabbits and ducks to take care of again. Dad and Grandpa got to work building a new hutch. “One that will fit through the gate in case of hurricanes,” said Dad.

The children sat on the porch swing. They watched the hutch take shape. “We still have to pay for the



rabbits,” said Nicole.

“Jimmy’s dad is waiting, and we can paint their names over the doors when the hutch is finished.”

They swung in silence. A cool breeze stirred the garden. Soon it would be cold. They missed the fall vegetable garden. It was a good thing Grandma and Grandpa had brought so much food. Usually they had Thanksgiving out of the garden.

Irene was glad they had another chance for a spring garden in a few months. Winter never lasted long in Crystal Creek. Why, one year, their garden never died down. They had lots of green vegetables all winter.

“We’re lucky we can plant a vegetable garden in March, and I can hardly wait to start the Mary garden,” she said aloud.

“We ought to have a white garden this year to match the rabbits. That would be pretty, like snow in the summer,” said Nicole. “But if they get loose, we’ll never be able to find them.”

“What do people way up north do for vegetables?” Victor asked. “They hardly have any summer at all.”

“I don’t know, Ah’ll ask a,” said Nicole.

Irene stopped swinging. “We can call the rabbits Alaska and Antarctica!”

“Cool!” said Victor and Nicole. They all laughed.

“Do you think Jimmy’s dad will approve?” wondered Nicole.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Who will receive the rosaries the children made?
2. What did the children do on All Soul’s Day?



Chapter Fifteen



Special Graces from God



Advent swiftly followed Thanksgiving. Before Grandma and Grandpa left, they helped the children set up an Advent wreath. Grandma placed a large glass baking dish on the table, and Grandpa poured in Epsom salts. It looked like snow drifting down and forming soft mounds inside the dish. Then the children set purple and pink candles in the snow salt. They soaked pine needles and little pine cones in water and then arranged those around the candles and sprinkled more Epsom salt on the greenery. Grandma tied a large purple bow around the base of the glass dish. It was gorgeous. “The best Advent wreath we’ve ever made,” they decided.



On the first Sunday of Advent, Mom and Dad told them about a present the whole family was going to get in the spring. It wasn’t a present they could unwrap. It wasn’t a toy or anything like that. It wasn’t the kind of present that you would get tired of and stuff into the back of your closet.

“It’s the kind of present that grows on you,” said Dad.

“It’s the kind of present that you put in a crib,” said Mom.



“Oh, it’s a baby!” the children shouted.

“I hope it’s a boy,” said Victor. “Can he sleep in my room?”

“Oh, we’ll have to think of more names!” said Irene, holding her head. “The baby will have to have a really nice human name.”



They were still talking about the new baby the next day when Miss Violet came to see them. She wanted to talk to Nicole.

“To me?” Nicole asked.

Miss Violet smiled. “The choir, as you know already, is for church members twelve years of age and up. However, after some discussion and prayer, Mrs. Garza suggested that we have a guest singer for the early Christmas morning Mass. Mrs. Ofili nominated you, and everyone approved.

Do you think you would be able to practice with us over the next few weeks?”

Nicole’s face shone. “Oh, yes! Yes, yes, yes!”





“Hurray!” said Victor. “You’re going to be famous!”

Irene hugged her sister. “Isn’t it wonderful? It’s just like a miracle.”

“It’s not even Christmas yet, and we’ve already gotten two gifts,” said Mom. She shook Miss Violet’s hand and thanked her.



Miss Violet nodded, and later that evening she returned to take Nicole with her to choir practice.

When Nicole left for her second choir practice, Irene wandered about the house, feeling a little left out. Diana had moved away, and Irene had already sent her two emails. She couldn’t start the Mary garden for months yet. Victor was cleaning his room and couldn’t play. Mom was sorting through boxes of baby clothes that Mrs. Garza had given her that morning.

“Mom.”

Mom looked up. She seemed very happy thought Irene. “Yes?”



Irene sat on the floor beside the boxes. “Do you think Nicole is going to be a famous singer?”

“I don’t know. I think she will try to be the best singer she can be.”

Irene picked up a little blue terry cloth jumper. It looked much too small for even a baby. “Well, what if a person never figures out what she will be when she grows up? What does she do then?”



Mom thought about that. She refolded a yellow blanket. “You pray.”

“But I’ve already done that. The problem is that I want to be so many things. I just don’t know which one.” Irene said unhappily.

Mom considered Irene’s problem. “Irene, how many hours a day is your dad an accountant?”

“About eight,” Irene answered with a puzzled look.



“And how many days a week?”

“Five.”

“Well, what is he the rest of the time?” Mom continued.



Irene didn’t answer. She had started to say that Dad wasn’t anything, but she knew that wasn’t right.

Mom patted Irene’s arm. “He’s patient and kind and so many other things, isn’t he? And he’s those things all of the time, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day.” She laughed. “Well, O.K., maybe not when he’s asleep.”

“Oh,” said Irene. “Do you mean it doesn’t matter what kind of job I have?”



“That depends. I certainly don’t want you to be a bank robber! But seriously, maybe it’s more important for you to decide what kind of person you want to become than to choose a particular job.

“If you choose the wrong job, you can look for another. If you choose to be the wrong kind of person,



well, look out! It's not so easy to switch vices for virtues.

“And things are changing so fast because of technology that the job you eventually find may not even exist right now.” Mom smiled and picked up a neatly folded pile of clothes. “Help me put these away, please.”



“I think I'd better help you stand up first,” said Irene, giving her mother a hand.

Alaska and Antarctica sat in their hutches with front doors and no back doors. Irene had neatly painted their names over their front doors. Alaska tried to chew on the wood of the hutch, but Dad and Grandpa had covered it with wire. She gave up and sipped some water from the bottle hanging on the side of the hutch.



Victor brought both of the rabbits pine needles to chew on, and suddenly they heard Jimmy's dad's voice booming. “Hello, there! Anybody home?”

Nicole opened the gate for him. He came in to admire the hutch. He scratched his chin. “Hmmm, Alaska and Antarctica. It fits. It fits. The rabbits are officially yours,” he declared.

“Thank you so much! We really like them.”



“Under one more condition,” he added.

“What's that?” they asked in amazement.

“That you don't name your baby brother the United States of America!”

They laughed.

Irene stopped suddenly. “We don't even know your name. We've just been thinking of you all along as the man in the canoe and Jimmy's dad. What is your name?”



“It's Jones. Peter Jones, but my friends call me...”

“What?” Victor asked. “What do they call you, Mr. Jones?”

“Rocky,” he said. “It's a joke. Do you get it? Peter...Rocky? Since I'm Catholic.”



“Oh! Peter was the rock on which Jesus built the Church!”

“That's a great name,” said Irene. “It fits you. But I'm glad you didn't get it because you rocked the canoe too much.”

Mr. Peter Rocky Jones nodded in agreement. They invited him inside, but he said he had to go. He thought he could hear his wife calling him, and her name was Regina, so he had better answer the royal summons.



“What did he mean by that?” asked Victor when Mr. Rocky had left.

“Regina is Latin for queen,” said Irene and Nicole.



“Oh, we should have asked him how a computer can remind us of God,” said Nicole, shaking her head at the lost opportunity. “I think he might know.”

They went inside. “If we could just figure it out,” murmured Irene. They saw that Dad was sitting at the computer desk. They looked over his shoulder, examining the computer closely.



“I didn’t know I was so fascinating,” he remarked as he saved the family budget onto a floppy disk.

Irene grinned. “Mom thinks you are.”

“Mom is a very charitable lady,” Dad said.

Mom heard her name and came to join them.

“What we really want is to figure out how a computer can remind us of God,” Victor said. He stared hopefully at the monitor. He frowned at the mini-tower. He pondered the printer.



Mom explained the game to Dad. Somehow, he hadn’t heard about it yet.

He scratched his head. He took his hands off the keyboard. “Ah, I think I have it.”

“You do? Just like that? How? Tell us.”



Dad pointed to the keyboard. “What’s that little key say?”

“It says ‘esc’,” answered Nicole.

“And what does ‘esc’ stand for?” Dad prompted them.

“Escape,” the children answered.

“Oh,” Irene smiled. “The escape key reminds me of the Holy Family escaping from King Herod!”

“Very good!” said Dad.



Nicole said, “I get it! Look, the control key can remind us that God is in control.”

“What about the F keys with the numbers on the top row?”

Mom said, “Those can remind us that no matter how many times we fall into sin, God will forgive us.”



Dad added, “Sure, all we have to do is remember to backspace, that is, repent, and God will delete, or absolve us from, our sins.”

“And the enter key reminds us to enter through the narrow gate,” continued Irene.

“And the home key is for Heaven,” Victor said.

“Isn’t it magnificent?” he sighed contentedly, looking at his family.



“That we figured out the answer?” Mom asked, giving him a hug.



“No, that we have computers that remind us of God, and helicopters that can rescue people, and medicine that can keep us from getting sick, and even emails so that Diana and Irene can still talk.

“Do you know what? If I lived a long time ago, I would really miss y’all, Mom. I wouldn’t even be able to see the new baby. Wasn’t God smart to put us together all at the same time?”

Dad grinned, and putting his fingers on the computer keyboard, he typed, “Amen!”



The End

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What is one of the special graces the Meyers received?
2. How does a computer remind you of God? Can you think of something the Meyers didn’t mention?

