

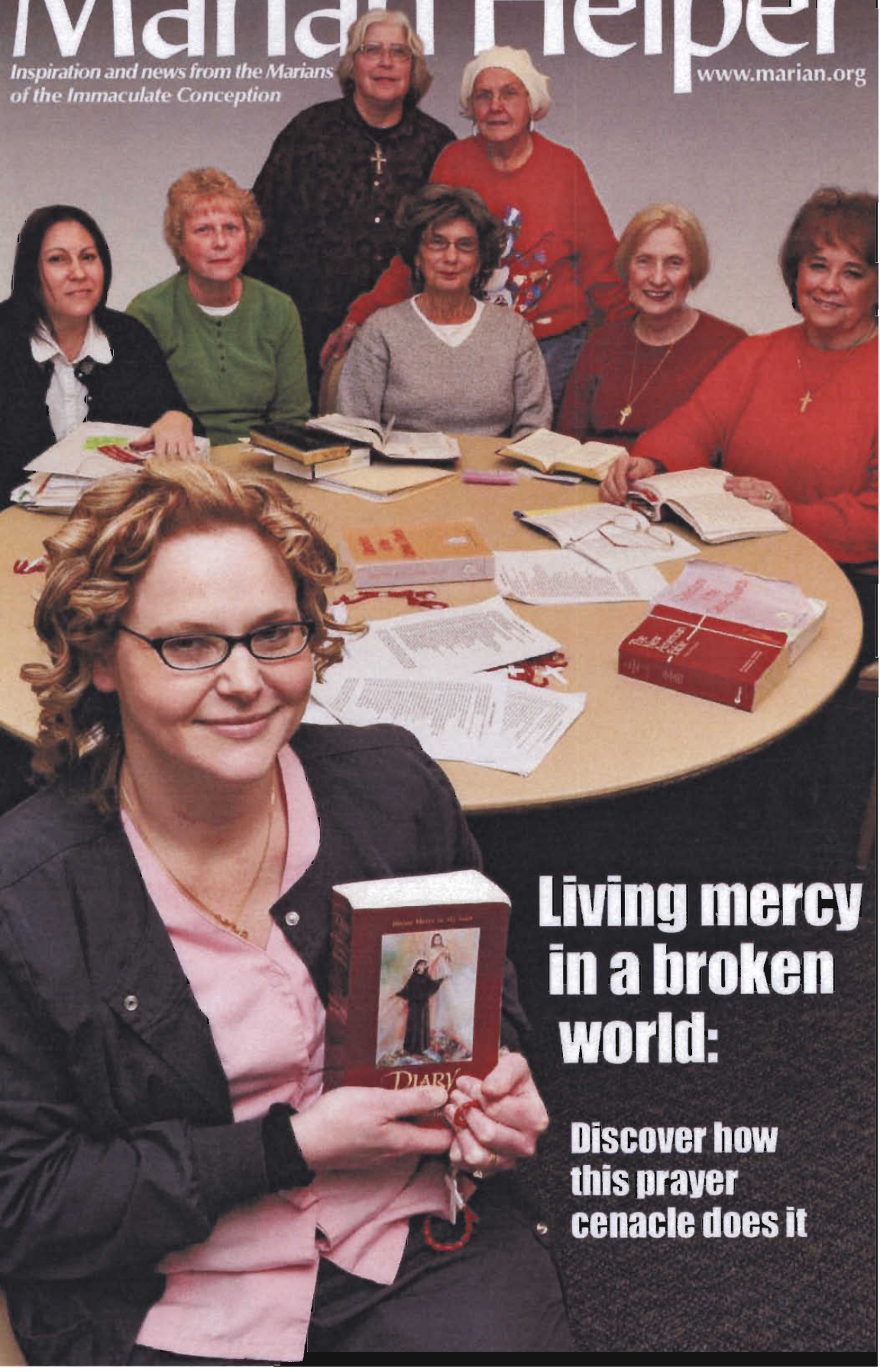
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**Living mercy
in a broken
world:**

**Discover how
this prayer
cenacle does it**



Queen of Heaven Parish's cenacle members meet in Uniontown, Ohio. Like cenacle members throughout the world,

LIVING MERCY IN A BROKEN WORLD

A Divine Mercy cenacle provides prayer and encouragement in a time of crisis.

by Felix Carroll

In a cold basement apartment miles outside of town, with moving boxes still unpacked and her faith forestalling an emotional breakdown, Vicki Fleeman fingers through a photo album.

"This is my favorite picture," she says. "This was the guy I was crazy about."

His name was Jim. Vicki and he are leaning arm-in-arm against an early-model, world-worn Chrysler.

They're posing like couples in love do for pictures, with embarrassed smiles and tied at the hip.

Time has taken away much of the color photo's vibrancy. Time has taken away so many things since Jim Fleeman's death at the age of 57 on March 1, 2010.

Vicki lost her "buddy," her "soul mate," her husband of six years, the first man in her life with whom she could hold a genuine conversation. She also lost her home in town, which she says she could no longer afford.

The evening of Dec. 7, she made a brave effort to add a little liveliness to her apartment. She set boxes out on the floor and pulled out a small artificial Christmas tree and her home-made decorations. Soon, she came upon an old Christmas bulb with the names "Jim" and "Vicki" written in sparkles. The names were



Vicki Fleeman had never heard of the *Diary of St. Faustina* until the cenacle's founder, Chriss Slaughter, told her all about it. "I started reading it, and I couldn't put it down," Vicki says.

held with glue, and she promptly fell apart.

Going to the cenacle

It's now Thursday evening, Dec. 9. The clock on her wall has its hours marked with the suffix "-ish" (Vicki maintains her wit). It's "6:30-ish." She pulls on a winter coat, stuffs a handbag with the *Diary of St. Faustina*, her Bible, her *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and a workbook. She grabs her car keys and her cane, and she steps out into the wicked wintry weather of northern Ohio. It's a dark, 25-minute drive

toward Uniontown, to her church, Queen of Heaven Parish.

From different directions, others, too, converge with the same books stuffed into bulging handbags. Rose Marie Parasi is one of them. She has just successfully battled Hodgkin's lymphoma. Jan Lombardi is another. She has celiac, an autoimmune disease. Jennifer Ertle is another. She recently underwent two surgeries on her spine. Her son Andrew, 10, has Asperger's Syndrome. Her daughter Meagan, 9, has a lung disease.

Others, too, are on their way. They drive through neighborhoods with homes in foreclosure. Behind nearly every door, something



these women say they are called to be ambassadors of Christ and witnesses of His great mercy.

is not quite right. They know this town. They know who's lonely, who's unemployed, and who's in need of a hot meal. They know who's enduring crises of faith, marital problems, or health issues.

This is Uniontown, Ohio. But this is also America in 2011. These are the wounds of a broken world.

'Times of great trial'

Everyone in this prayer group, known as a Divine Mercy Cenacle, is tuned in to the suffering. Rather than shrink from it, they've chosen to mobilize — out of love for Christ and neighbor.

"We're living in times of great trial but also great opportunity for spiritual growth," says Dr. Bryan Thatcher, founder of Eucharistic Apostles of The Divine Mercy (EADM), a lay apostolate of the Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception. Fifteen years ago, EADM launched its Divine Mercy cenacle program. Thousands of cenacles have since formed in parishes around the world that meet regularly for prayer and discussion on Scripture, the *Catechism*, and the writings of St. Faustina (1905-1938), whose *Diary* contains Christ's call of mercy to "aching mankind" in its misery (*Diary*, 1074).

"It's people like the cenacle members in Uniontown," says Dr. Thatcher, "who uphold the Church and the world with their spirituality, their strength, and their embrace of the words 'Jesus, I trust in You!'"

The word "cenacle," also known as the "Upper Room," is the term used for the site of the Last Supper. It was Ground Zero for humanity's salvation and, as it were, the first Christian church. Today, Divine Mercy cenacles resonate with the Good News that the Feast of the Lamb is a buffet for all. Its members follow Christ's call to grow in union with Him and to perform works of mercy.

Hitting the books, hitting the streets

The sound of bouncing basketballs in the gymnasium ricochets down a hallway in the

parish center, past a well-lit classroom where the Queen of Heaven's cenacle is undergoing its own rebound.

Its numbers had dwindled a year ago. Even its leader, Chriss Slaughter, could no longer attend meetings. She was dying of cancer. She eventually called EADM headquarters in Riverview, Fla., to ask if they should call it quits.

"No, don't stop. Wait it out," Chriss was told. That was sound advice. The cenacle is too important. Besides, after Christ's crucifixion His disciples first withdrew from public life, remember? Yet the Church eventually flushed to the surface, flourished, and changed the world. Why not emulate that? So the cenacle did.

New members have joined. Two of them, Rose Monnot and Theresa Spicer, have taken their seats as the meeting begins. Tonight's lesson plan, drawn from one of EADM's *Cenacle Formation Manuals*, focuses on how to strive for perfection and the importance of bearing witness to Divine Mercy. Christ Himself told St. Faustina, "Mankind will not have peace until it turns with trust to My Mercy" (*Diary*, 300). And peace would be a welcome change of pace in today's world.

"We're all walking the road to Calvary," says Rose at one point. "If we model Christ, if we



As a testament to her devotion to The Divine Mercy, Vicki crocheted the image of The Divine Mercy sewn onto the vestment of her pastor, Fr. David Durkee.



“Anyone could tell you he always had good words to say,” Vicki Fleeman says of her late husband, Jim. She keeps a photo album close to savour the memory of their marriage.

are merciful to others, and if we walk in faith rather than in fear, we can help convert hardened hearts,” she says, adding, “People will see us and will want what we have.”

Striving for perfection, says Jan Lombardi, requires being ever aware of our behavior. “I’ve learned to ask myself in situations throughout my day: ‘Am I being merciful right now?’” she says.

When troubles and suffering seem too enormous to surmount, “offer it up to the Blessed Virgin Mary,” says Linda Roversi, “so she can sanctify it and put it toward the best use.”

In many ways, this meeting feels like an homage to the cenacle’s founder, Chriss Slaughter, who died in May. She lit the torch of Divine Mercy in her parish. Through Chriss, Queen of Heaven Parish has come to embrace Divine Mercy, an Adoration chapel was built, and the pastor, Fr. David Durkee, has made the celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday an annual event.

“She would say, ‘No matter how hard it gets, you always have to trust.’ That’s always stuck with me,” recalls Jennifer Ertle, who was asked by Chriss to take over as cenacle leader. More than anything, says Jennifer, it was Chriss’s death last May — she embraced the Sacraments and witnessed Christ’s mercy to the end — that galvanized the parish’s Divine Mercy apostles to continue.

Despite their own trials — or because of them — the cenacle members seek to serve others, including taking Holy Communion to shut-ins; praying the Chaplet of Divine Mercy for the sick and dying; and serving the “lepers” of today — the rejected, lonely, poor, hungry, disabled, elderly, and dying.

“With all the troubles that are happening in the world, we can’t do enough acts of mercy,” says Vicki.

Cenacle members also support one another. Vicki knows firsthand.

‘I knew he was gone’

It was Chriss who introduced Vicki to St. Faustina’s *Diary*. As Jim’s health deteriorated, she picked it up and couldn’t put it down.

Jim and she had so much in common. Both had emerged from failed marriages. Both had unshakable faith. Both struggled with physical ailments — she, disabled from a leg fracture, and he with heart and kidney disease.

“He was my teddy bear,” she says.

On March 1, he sat up in bed at the hospital. It was the only position that allowed him to breathe. Vicki and he held hands. “It was a beautiful visit,” Vicki says.

When she got home, the phone was ringing. “How-de-do, it’s me,” he said. Those were his last words. Everything turned real bad, real quickly. She heard him fighting for breath. She heard the phone drop to the floor. She heard the nurses performing heart compressions.

“I knew he was gone,” she says.

She rushed to the hospital. She prayed the chaplet. Then, she slipped the wedding band from his finger, and she wears it to this day.

She now talks of moving back to Uniontown, somewhere near the church. She’s on three waiting lists for affordable housing.

“I’ll be patient,” she says, adding with a laugh, “and chilly.”

It’s “7-ish.” It’s sleeting. She pulls up to the parish center.

“Saint Faustina’s words make me stronger,” Vicki says. “And the cenacle members always help me to remember that God has a plan.”

She heads toward that well-lit classroom, her spiritual refuge, to meet her friends and to share in His mercy.

To learn how to start or join a cenacle, please call 877-380-0727 or e-mail eadm@marian.org.