

# ALL FOR THE HEART OF JESUS

## Designs of the Sacred Heart

God constantly waits for people to open their hearts so that He can entrust His plans to them. Then the designs of His Heart, of His infinite love, can be realized from one generation to the next.

In the history of redemption, among the open hearts who heard God's call, are two extraordinary people: Rev. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar, founder of the Congregation of the Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, and Mother Klara Louise Szczesna, co-foundress and first superior.

Joseph Sebastian Pelczar was born in 1842 in Korczyn, near Krosno, Poland. Raised in a religious atmosphere, he entered the Diocesan Seminary in Przemysl where he was ordained in 1864. Fr. Pelczar did not waste the many talents and gifts God had given him. After completing his priestly studies in Rome, he became professor of pastoral theology and canon law at the Diocesan Seminary in Przemysl. From 1877 to 1899, he taught as a professor at the Jagellonian University in Krakow, until he was consecrated as auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Przemysl in 1899. The following year he became the local Ordinary in that diocese. He tended to the holiness of his flock with great pastoral devotion. The inspiration and strength for his many generous, apostolic works came from his prayerful life. Fr. Pelczar died on March 28, 1924 in his diocese of Przemysl. During his fourth pilgrimage to Poland, Pope St. John Paul II beatified Joseph Sebastian Pelczar on June 2, 1991, while in Rzeszow.

During his lifetime, Fr. Joseph Sebastian maintained a fervent devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Mother of God, evident both in his writings and in his homilies. Motivated especially by his burning love for the Sacred Heart and moved by the needs of the abandoned, the poor, and the sick, Fr. Joseph Sebastian founded the Congregation of the Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1894 in Krakow, Poland. When writing the Constitutions, Fr. Pelczar defined the legal character, purpose, and apostolic works of the Congregation, giving the community spiritual and ascetic direction. He desired that the Sisters, motivated by devotion and love of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, would go to the poor, sick, and abandoned in a spirit of generous service. Thus they would expand the Kingdom of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in themselves and the world.

Although Fr. Pelczar desired to be a religious himself, he was unable to completely realize his vision of religious life and remained a diocesan priest until his death. Instead, his vision was fulfilled by Mother Klara Louise Szczesna. The Father Founder actualized God's inspirations in particular socio-historical conditions through Mother Klara. Under his direction, she worked out the way of life of the Sacred Heart Sisters and nurtured it through her example, giving the Congregation its particular spiritual character. Together with her Sisters, she formed the religious tradition of the Congregation which has been embraced and continued by subsequent generations of Sisters.

In contrast to the renown Fr. Pelczar had in Poland because of his writings and academics, Mother Klara was never eminent in society. Her life was hidden, characterized by humility and silence. She concentrated spiritually on living in union with God through service of neighbor. She became the first Sacred Heart Sister, the first Sister to perfectly understand and faithfully actualize the teachings of the Founder, the first mistress and superior, and finally the first to fill the roles of co-foundress and Mother of the Congregation. Mother Klara faithfully followed the evangelical counsels, living her quiet and hidden life with the greatest of humility, an example that demands that her personality, life, and works be made known to the world.

## Family Environment:

Louise Szczesny's native soil was the region of Plock. Other saintly individuals also hailed from this area, including the well-known Polish saint, Stanislaus Kostka, patron of youth.

Anthony Szczesny (1829-1902), Louise's father, came from the village of Zielona. Her mother, Frances (Skorupska, 1827-1875) was born in Stok, a small village belonging to the Lubowidz parish. The two were married in 1848 and lived in Zielona for the first few years, during which their three older children, Antonia, Marianne, and Catherine, were born. The family made its living from farming a small tract of land initially, but Anthony later sought extra work on the local estate. Eventually he gave up his field and went to the village of Cieszki. There he first worked in an alcohol distillery, and later became the caretaker for a local estate.

In Cieszki, Anthony and Frances had their three younger children, Ann, Louise, and Ignatius, who died a few weeks after his birth. Louise was born on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1863. The fifth of the six children, she was also the youngest girl. She was baptized a week after birth in the parish church in Lubowidz.

Much of Louise's childhood remains a mystery. There are no written records of her reception of First Communion or of Confirmation. Despite this lack of information, some aspects of her early years can be inferred. At a time when parish schools were closed, her parents made certain the children all received an elementary education, indicating that they were concerned with securing better futures for their children. Oral traditions have also revealed that the family took advantage of the occasional itinerant teacher who passed through the village.

Between 1870 and 1873, the Szczesny family moved to the village of Borczyny, where Frances died in 1875. Louise's experience of her mother's death was very painful, and this deepened her devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin. Our Lady drew this devout girl's heart to herself through the miraculous picture located in the nearby town of Zuromin. Louise had visited there many times with her parents, but she went more frequently on her own after losing her earthly mother. Four months after her mother's death, her father remarried; Louise had a poor relationship with the eighteen-year-old woman who became her stepmother, and as a result, her love and relationship with Mary became even more intimate.

During her teenage years, many local young men vied for Louise's hand in marriage. In the year 1880, her father promised her to an honest, wealthy man. Anthony met with unexpected resistance from his daughter when he told her of his plan. Falling to her knees, Louise asked him not to force her to marry, since she had previously decided to consecrate herself to God's service. However, Anthony saw only a childish whim in her reaction, and ordered her to prepare her trousseau even as he set a date for the wedding. When Louise realized that there was no hope of changing her father's mind, she secretly left home and went to Męwa, thereby remaining faithful to her decision to stay a virgin for God; she was just 17 years old.

Louise lived in Męwa for 5 years. Nothing is known about her life during this period. It is probable that she supported herself through sewing, since she was a good seamstress. What is certain is that it must have been a time of deep spiritual reflection, since it ended with a decision to follow Christ more closely, as a religious.

## The Way of Religious Life:

Mława, where Louise Szczesna lived, was one region influenced by the apostolic work of Bl. Honorat Kozminski, who established secret religious congregations based on the rule of St. Francis of Assisi. The members of the congregations lived according to the evangelical counsels but because of the political situation had no external signs to distinguish them from the laity. Among these communities was the Congregation of the Handmaids of Jesus, which was established in 1884 in Warsaw. Their apostolic mission involved working with the servants.

Louise participated in a retreat for young women which Fr. Honorat offered in Zakroczym in August of 1885. While there, she spoke with Mother Eleanor Motylowska, the superior of the Handmaids of Jesus. Louise decided to enter the Congregation at once.

Thirty years later, Mother Motylowska related the following about the meeting and decision:

*“During this time Louise Szczesna, a poor girl who supported herself as a seamstress, came from Mława for retreat. Fr. Honorat sent her to me after the retreat ended. With utter simplicity, she stated her desire to serve God. Louise had burned all worldly finery that served only vanity and showed a readiness to go with me at once. She did not even ask where I would take her. I was impressed with her honesty, her courage in breaking with the world, and the offering of herself to God. I took her with me, although I had no idea where I would put her (Memoirs, 1916).”*

Louise entered the novitiate in Warsaw on December 8, 1886. She completed it while sewing in a seamstress shop that also served as a place for meetings with girls. She was held in high esteem for her virtues even then, as related by her future companion, Sr. Aloysius Rostkowska:

*“She was unusually obedient. Louise had much simplicity and cheerfulness. She was quiet and full of love for everyone. These external virtues and qualities made her a very kind and likable Sister and a very good influence on the servants.”*

After a year of novitiate, Louise took what was called a “promise of faithfulness.” Two years later, on December 8, 1889, she made her first profession of vows. Two months prior, although she was still a novice, her superiors appointed her to be the superior of a newly opened convent in Lublin. This new convent was an authentic seamstress shop, but was also involved in a secret apostolate for servants. The Russian police discovered the secret work at the end of 1892 and conducted a search of Sr. Louise’s residence. Thanks to Divine Providence, they did not find a copy of the Congregation’s rule during their search.

Because she was under suspicion, Sr. Louise was ordered to leave Lublin within three days and go to Mława. After this, she returned to Warsaw, however, her superiors felt very uneasy due to the circumstances in Lublin and feared the discovery of Fr. Honorat’s religious congregations. Thus, as a precaution, Sr. Louise spent almost every night in a different place.

Meanwhile, in 1891, Fr. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar founded the Fraternity of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Poland, in Krakow. One of the Fraternity’s purposes was to raise the moral and material standards of servants and female workers. To achieve this end, the Fraternity had established a shelter in November of 1892, which provided free lodging, spiritual and moral direction, and competent training for servants who were between jobs or had moved to the city from the country to find work. It soon became evident that the people being served would benefit more if the institute were managed by a

person consecrated to God. Fr. Joseph Sebastian, who was the vice-president of the Fraternity at that time, learned that the Congregation of the Handmaids of Jesus shared a similar apostolate in Warsaw. Therefore, he requested that Fr. Honorat send at least one Sister to the shelter in Krakow.

After some consideration, the superiors of the Congregation of the Handmaids of Jesus decided to send Sr. Louise Szczesna, who was still under the surveillance of the Russian police. Upon arriving in Krakow in May of 1893, Sr. Louise lovingly and fervently devoted herself to her duties as the shelter's director. When the need for more Sisters was obvious, they sent Sr. Faustina Rostkowska, who was a novice at that time, and Ann Victoria Delezek, who was still a postulant.

Fr. Pelczar frequently visited the shelter, paying great attention to every detail, and was very pleased with the Sisters' work. However, he was not satisfied to help only the servants. He recognized many others who needed care, especially the female factory workers and those who were ill. Fr. Pelczar began to consider extending the works the Sisters were performing and having the Sisters in Krakow wear habits. Wearing habits was possible in this region since Krakow's political situation was different from that in Warsaw.

In his autobiography, Fr. Pelczar noted:

*“At the end of 1893, I came to the conclusion that it would be better to establish a separate religious community in Galicia—the sector of Poland under Austrian rule—to care for servants and to nurse the sick in their homes. This type of work had not yet been undertaken by religious communities. With this thought in mind, I set down rules and obtained Cardinal Dunajewski's permission. I bought a house with my own and borrowed money. Then I wrote to Fr. Honorat, proposing to combine the Congregation of the Handmaids of Jesus in the Congress Kingdom of Poland—the sector of Poland under Russian rule—with the new congregation. The Congregation of the Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus (I gave it that name) was currently in formation.”*

In his correspondence with the superiors of the Handmaids of Jesus, Fr. Pelczar presented precise details of his plan. Fr. Honorat approved the intentions that were presented. However, detailed considerations of the projects, in conjunction with endeavors that were applied in practice, would prove that such a union of the two religious congregations was not possible. When lengthy discussions from both sides were exhausted without any resolution, Mother Motylowska—still the superior of the Handmaids of Jesus—arrived in Krakow on March 27<sup>th</sup> of 1894 with a final decision. Ann Victoria Delezek, the postulant, returned to Warsaw with her. However, Sr. Louise Szczesna and Sr. Faustina Rostkowska remained in Krakow, both declaring that they wished to continue the works outlined by Fr. Pelczar.

Sr. Louise and Sr. Faustina had made their decision after long and prayerful consideration. Their choice was accompanied by intense suffering for Sr. Louise, because she greatly loved the secret Congregation and its superior. She was always particularly sincerely grateful to Mother Motylowska for the *“work on her soul.”* Louise also saw that God's call was directing her towards the possibility of leading a public religious life in Krakow, where she would not have to fear the Russian police. In Krakow, she would continue in obedience to God's will by caring for the servants, as well as helping female factory workers and the homebound sick. Thus she and Sr. Faustina remained in Krakow.

## Co-foundress of the Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus:

After Mother Motylowska's departure from Krakow, Fr. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar explained the rules of the new Congregation to the twelve candidates who sought admittance. The first two candidates in this initial group were Louise Szczesna and Faustina Rostkowska. The formal founding took place on April 15, 1894, the feast celebrating the Protection of St. Joseph, when Fr. Founder accepted the candidates. Speaking for all the candidates, Louise recited the act of consecration to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. Fr. Pelczar then named her the superior of the Congregation for a period of 3 years. From the founding through the end of June, the Sisters received instructions on the rules and works of the Congregation, as well as the principles of spiritual and religious life.

On July 2, 1894, Louise received the habit of the Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, as well as the religious name, Klara. Father Pelczar, her confessor and spiritual director, knew the needs of her soul and her deep love for Mary. Thus, at this occasion, he gave a discourse entitled *“The Blessed Virgin Mary, the Perfect Religious.”* Mary's example became the characteristic trait of Mother Klara's religious vocation.

Six more postulants began the novitiate on July 8<sup>th</sup>, while others entered the novitiate in September and December. Mother Klara served as novice mistress even while she herself was a novice. An increasing awareness that the spirit of the Congregation—both then and in the future—depended on her personal maturity and her influence on others inspired her to make greater efforts and sacrifices. Formation took place in very difficult conditions. The novices could not be instructed in religious life in the quiet of the cloister; the entire Congregation was going through the novitiate while fulfilling its mission among the servants, female workers, and sick. Additionally, Mother Klara and her Sisters went to clinics for lectures on how to better serve the sick. As a result, the earliest novitiate had the character of *“on the job training”* in teaching love of neighbor.

At the same time, Mother Klara faced a very important spiritual task, as mistress and superior: the formation of the novices into Sister Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. She was the spiritual transformer who put the teachings of Fr. Pelczar into practice in the religious life. This religious life concentrated on the mystery of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. Mother Klara—being sensitive to the grace and will of God—also did not hesitate to share her experiences and suggestions with Fr. Founder.

Years later, Sr. Aloysius Faustina Rostkowska, who continued to be Mother Klara's faithful companion, wrote the following about the difficulties they experienced while forming the spiritual foundation of the Congregation:

*“Today, writing fifty years later, God's will seems clear; but then, it looked as if it were something obscured by fog. It was necessary to hold our religious life tightly in our hands. We saw the importance of directing it properly so that it would become that for which we hoped, that is, a new Congregation, a new kind of life. This life that we were forming had to make us happy as well as all the Sisters who would come after us. Sr. Louise had experience and the virtues of perseverance, patience, and perfect obedience to God and Rev. Canon. Our Mother followed the heavenly and earthly Leaders blindly. Both Guides led us on the best road—to the eternal Fatherland. The Heavenly Leader guided with His love and will; the Earthly Guide directed with the instruction and rule that were taken from the Heavenly Leader (Biography of Mother Klara Louise Szczesna).”*

On July 2, 1895, Mother Klara made her religious profession in the Congregation of the Sister Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus; these were her final vows. The other Sisters who were novices made temporary vows on July 10, 1895.

Mother Klara would continue as novice mistress for several years after the founding of the Congregation. She also would remain superior for all 22 years of her religious life.

Rev. John Krupinski, the Bishop's delegate, wrote the following: *"During the time when she was superior, the Congregation expanded successfully and developed spiritually. The Community fulfilled its religious work zealously and appropriately; the number of Sisters increased. The capital administration was exemplary (letter, 1903)."*

In 1907, the first general chapter of the Congregation convened and unanimously elected Mother Klara as Superior General. She was again elected during the second general chapter in 1913, but would not complete this term because of her death.

During her time as Superior General, Mother Klara visited the Sacred Heart Sisters' convents frequently and helped the Sisters with various difficulties. Under her care, the number of Sisters and convents continued to increase; weeks before her death, there were 156 Sisters outside the Motherhouse working in 15 convents and 4 army field hospitals. Mother Klara remained open to the needs of the Church, the needs of society, and the suggestions of Father Founder, resulting in constant growth in the variety of services provided. In addition to the original missions of the community, the following apostolates were added: nursing in hospitals, managing kindergartens, giving sewing courses, conducting household and agricultural schools for girls, and catechizing in villages where there were no priests. Of note in the Congregation's history is the time Sisters spent nursing the wounded and sick soldiers in field hospitals during World War I. Thus, Mother Klara needed to have a clear understanding of each Sister's professional preparation, intellectual ability, and spiritual-religious demeanor for the apostolic works to be as successful as they were.

Additionally, with Mother Klara's help during her lifetime, many legal requirements and documents were executed for the community of the Sacred Heart Sisters. The most important ones included the following: the papal approbation of the Congregation in 1912; the approval of its *Constitutions*, also in 1912; and the Decree of Affiliation to the Order of Friars Minor Conventual in 1908.

### **Characteristics of Spirituality**

Mother Klara's spiritual life demonstrated perfect harmony. Everything was simple, consistent, and in agreement with the theological definition of the purpose and spirituality of the Congregation, as defined in the *Constitutions*. Mother Klara's secret to greatness lies in that combination of simplicity and harmony. Furthermore, her personal spirituality became the basis for the Congregation's spirituality. Thus, the Sacred Heart Sisters' spirit has always been measured according to the standard of Mother Klara.

Specifically, Louise Szczesna was raised in an atmosphere of Marian piety. Mary's unconditional reply to God's call served as the particular ideal of her vocation. The presence of the Blessed Mother accompanied her from childhood. Our Lady guarded her virginity, which she had offered to God. Louise imitated Mary, her Guide, by following Christ unhesitatingly with humility, poverty, and complete obedience to God's plan. Mary's attitude of service appealed to Louise when she began

religious life. Whether as a Handmaid of Jesus or a Sister Servant of the Most Sacred Heart, Louise always imitated the Handmaid of the Lord from Nazareth. Through the external circumstances of her life, Mary, the Mother of God, led her to contemplate the mystery of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Congregation that was consecrated to Him.

Thus, Mother Klara concentrated on the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus with complete simplicity and without compromise. She often met Him in prayer, contemplating His desires and designs for her life. In this way, Mother Klara came to understand His love better. She accepted and cooperated with His graces by choice.

Her motto was, *“All for the Heart of Jesus.”* Every day, she gave all that she was, all that she possessed, and all that she accomplished to the Sacred Heart. This was evident throughout the memoirs of the Sisters who witnessed her life. Mother Klara constantly remained in God’s presence because of her own steadfast faith and undivided love. This constancy of presence was nurtured by her complete obedience to God’s will, by her total dependence on God’s Providence, by her concern to spread His honor, and by gratitude for her religious vocation.

Mother Klara made reparation to the Most Sacred Heart through prayer and penance. She also accepted humiliations, spiritual sufferings, and chronic illness without complaint. She was motivated by the Sacred Heart to love her neighbor and always maintained an attitude of generous service to the needy.

Mother Klara’s great faithfulness to living the rules of the community, in conjunction with being recollected, merited for her the name of *“The Living Rule.”* She valued simplicity, commonness, and the hidden life, perceiving them as great benefits for the soul. She found happiness in a life consecrated to the Sacred Heart and encouraged the Sisters to strive for the same happiness. She loved and practiced silence and humility—virtues Christ told us to learn from His Heart—throughout her religious life.

During her time as Superior, Mother Klara demonstrated great prudence. She was gentle but firm and exacting when reprimanding. She loved the Sisters as a true mother. She possessed pedagogical talents and the skill to win hearts. She served as a visible sign of God’s love, not just for the Sisters, but for everyone she met. Nor did she neglect her own growth in the interior life, taking advantage of great spiritual masters for direction. She sought direction from Bl. Honorat Kozminski in Warsaw, from Rev. Anthony Nojszewski in Lublin, and from St. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar in Krakow. She also modeled her asceticism on the life of her patron, St. Clare of Assisi, and this became evident throughout her life as a Sacred Heart Sister.

Mother Klara’s devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was complemented by her honor and love for St. Joseph, the meek and humble Protector of Jesus and Mary. She found in this patron saint of the Congregation an unfailing help in providing for the spiritual and material needs of the community in its early years. St. Joseph was also the confidant of her personal worries and sufferings, and before her death, the herald of future joy.

Mother Klara did not leave any memoirs that described her spiritual life. Only three meditations, which were in her handwriting, have been preserved. The themes of these meditations are obedience, love of neighbor, and meekness. These virtues portray her spiritual profile very well and were the external expressions of her great love for God, as tested through the fire of experience.

After Mother Klara’s death on February 7, 1916, her body was interred in the Congregation’s tomb in the Rakowicki Cemetery in Krakow. For many years, the Sacred Heart Sisters

prayed with fervent desire for the beatification of their co-foundress, Mother Klara Szczesna. This dream finally began to be realized during the centennial year of the Congregation. On March 25, 1994, Cardinal Francis Macharski opened the beatification process in Krakow, Poland. The process involves a canonical investigation of the heroic virtues, odor of sanctity, and life of Servant of God Mother Klara Louise Szczesna. On January 23, 1995, Mother Klara's remains were transferred to the Sacred Heart Sisters' church, where they were interred in a side chapel. (The church itself is located between the Motherhouse and the General House of the Congregation.)

## **Epilogue**

Mother Klara Szczesna's spirituality became the spiritual foundation for her entire religious family. This spirituality is presented in the Congregation's *Constitutions* in the following manner:

*Contemplation of the mystery of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus shapes the spiritual life and activities of the Sisters. Contemplation should be joined with total giving of self to God and to the Church in an attitude of service according to the words of Christ: "Learn from me because I am gentle and humble of heart (Mt. 11:29)."*

*Love of the Divine Heart obliges the Sisters to accept their daily hardships and sufferings in the spirit of reparation for their own sins and those of the whole world, to "offer acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:5)."*

Formed in this spirit, the Sister Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus continue to fulfill their apostolic mission, serving the Church with various works.

Having learned from the Sacred Heart to embrace everyone with their own hearts, the Sisters went beyond the borders of their native land to carry out their work. In 1905, Mother Klara sent Sisters to France to tend Polish girls who worked in factories there. The Congregation further expanded its territory after World War II. Currently, the Sisters live their community charism in the United States, Italy, France, Bolivia, the Ukraine, Jamaica West Indies, and in their native Poland. The Congregation is also involved in missionary work in Bolivia and Jamaica.

The Sisters do all of this, even as Mother Klara did, according to the Congregation's motto:

*Glory be to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus!*

*Glory forever!*