

"All the money in the world"
couldn't cure little Ann O'Neill
of leukemia, but her mother's prayers
brought a startling recovery
that made medical history

By MRS. WILLIAM O'NEILL
as told to Jack Ryan



Ann's mother, who prayed for her recovery, is greeted by late Pope John.

communion with God. Yet there had always been an answer for me.

But had my prayers for Ann been somehow prideful or selfish? "Give me back my daughter . . . She will live . . . she cannot die." Had I prayed or had I demanded? Had I remembered that prayer is a petition and that its answer is not always what we personally desire? I don't know. But now it was Good Friday, and our Ann sobbed in agony. I felt so inadequate. I knelt before the crucifix on our wall and looked up at Jesus on the cross with a new prayer:

"Dear Lord, as You are relieved of Your suffering this day, please relieve the suffering of our child. If she must die, take her with You today. I realize now her soul is more important than her body. If living means she may lose her soul, I give her up with all the love in my heart."

Doctors recommended still another transfusion, one that would last eight hours. We again took her to the hospital. As she lay on a stark, hard table, doctors tried to attach the transfusion devices, but Ann's veins had collapsed, and the probing brought screams from her. I pleaded with God: let them find a suitable vein. At last they did, and Ann lapsed into exhausted silence. Our vigil began.

Ann had been given a sedative, and Bob and I sat beside her praying. Hours passed. Suddenly gasps broke the silence. Ann was wide awake, staring blankly at the ceiling. The sedative had worn off, and she was in deep pain. "It hurts!" she cried. "Stop hurting me!"

Bob ran into the corridor for a doctor. I tried to calm Ann, but she was hysterical. An intern came in and discontinued the transfusions. Ann went limp. "What other treatment is she taking?" the intern asked.

"No other treatment," Bob said flatly. "She's going home for good."

We wrapped her in a sheet. Her body was dripping wet. Outside Bob turned to me. "We've put her through too much, Sis. I'm not going to allow Ann to suffer any more. If it is God's will that she is to die, then we must let her die. Do you understand?"

I nodded and renewed the prayer I had said Good Friday. In humility and resignation, I asked now only for God's mercy. Even that seemingly was withheld. Ann thrashed about in pain, and Bob and I placed her in a baby buggy and took turns pushing her back and forth across our living room for hours or end. Her choked cries became unbearable so, at last, we called in our family doctor.

"Congestion is building up in her lungs," he said. "It's a matter of hours now. I'll send her to St. Agnes."

We had determined that Ann receive no more treatments, but the doctor explained: "I want her in the hospital only to place her in an oxygen tent. They can make the final hours easier for her—and for you two, especially. If you keep on like this, you'll both be ill. After all, you have two other children."

Easter Sunday we went to church before visiting Ann. Our neighbors and their children were bright in new spring clothes, something

we had skipped this year. As it was, we would have to sell our home to pay for Ann's care. But we were thankful that we had been given children, and I felt certain that our prayers would be answered as God willed this day.

Ann had lost all spirit: it was almost as if life were gone and just some reflexes were left. Bob and I waited for the words we were resigned to hear. As I sat beside her bed, I saw the nun in charge of the children's ward approach us and my breath caught. I wondered: Is she coming to tell us Ann is going now?

Instead, Sister Mary Alice said: "I know you are a woman of great faith. I think you might be a person for whom Mother Seton would show her power with God. If it is His will, she possibly could ask on your behalf that Ann be cured."

We did not know anything about Mother Seton. Sister Mary Alice explained that she was a New York society woman (Franklin D. Roosevelt was a distant relative) born in 1774. The mother of five children and widowed at 29, Elizabeth Bayley Seton received special permission to found the first American-organized community of nuns, called the Sisters of Charity. Today the order, with headquarters in Emmitsburg, Md., includes some 10,000 sisters who work in every field of social betterment—nursing, founding homes, child care, education, and care of the aged. Sister Mary Alice said that since 1940 Mother Seton had been considered for beatification by the Vatican.

A Novena to Mother Seton

"I had a patient beyond hope for recovery," Sister Mary Alice continued, "but we prayed for Mother Seton's help, and this patient is living today in wonderful health. I'll get all the sisters to pray; you get your family. We will have a novena (nine days' devotion) to Mother Seton for Ann."

"You don't know how happy you've made me," I said. I felt I could ask again for Ann's recovery. Not ask by myself, but ask through another mother who had devoted a lifetime to children and the ill and who, we are sure, had been rewarded in heaven. We might be unworthy even to ask such a great favor, but surely this woman was not. Bob and I went to the hospital chapel that Easter and began our novena. We were prepared to accept Ann's loss, but we were sustained by new hope. In our hearts, we asked:

"Dear Mother Seton, who knew the blessings of motherhood and blessings of dedication to God, please obtain for us, if it be God's will, the special favor we now implore, the return to health of our daughter, Ann."

Through the night we knelt in prayer. Our relatives joined our novena and so did many thousands of children taught by the Sisters of Charity.

Ann was still alive Monday, but I heard no word of encouragement. I hardly dared ask how she was. I felt that would be wrong somehow. We

(Continued on page 6)