

## THE WAY OF THE CROSS

Maria das Dores was scared. But really scared!

It began when her period didn't come. This surprised her because she was very regular.

More than two months passed, but nothing happened. She went to a gynecologist. She diagnosed a clear-cut pregnancy.

"It can't be!" screamed Maria das Dores.

"Why not? Aren't you married?"

"I am, but I'm a virgin, my husband has never touched me. First of all because he's a patient man and secondly because he's already half impotent."

The gynecologist tried to argue:

"Who knows, maybe one night you..."

"Never! Absolutely never!"

"In that case," concluded the gynecologist, "I don't know how to explain it. You are already at the end of the third month."

Maria das Dores left the doctor's office with her head spinning. She had to stop at a restaurant and have some coffee. In order to be able to understand.

What was happening? A great anguish took hold of her. But she left the restaurant somewhat calmer.

Walking home she bought a tiny jacket for the baby. Blue, because she was sure it would be a boy. What name should she give him? There was only one name she could give him: Jesus.

At home she found her husband in his slippers, reading the newspaper. She told him what had happened. The man was startled:

"Then I'm St. Joseph?"

"You are," was the laconic response.

They both fell into deep thought.

Maria das Dores sent the maid to buy the vitamins which the gynecologist had prescribed. They were for the good of her son.

Her divine son. She had been chosen by God to give to the world the new Messiah.

She bought a blue cradle. She began to knit little jackets and to make soft diapers.

Meanwhile her belly grew. The foetus was energetic: it kicked violently. Sometimes she would call St. Joseph to put his hand on her belly and feel the son living so forcefully within.

St. Joseph's eyes would then fill with tears. It was going to be a vigorous Jesus. She felt filled with light.

Maria das Dores told the entire awe-inspiring story to her closest friend. She also was startled:

"Maria das Dores, but what a privileged destiny you have!"

"Privileged, yes," sighed Maria das Dores. "But what can I do to prevent my son from following the way of the cross?"

"Pray," advised the friend, "pray a lot."

And Maria das Dores began to believe in miracles. Once she thought she saw the Virgin Mary standing at her side, smiling at her. Another time, she herself performed the miracle: her husband

had an open wound on his leg, Maria das Dores kissed the wound — the following day it was gone without a trace.

It was getting cold, it was the month of July. In October the child would be born.

But where could they find a stable? Only if they were on a farm out in the countryside of Minas Gerais. So they decided to go to Aunt Mininhas's farm.

What worried her was that the child would not be born on the twenty-fifth of December.

She went to Church every day, and even with her swollen belly she remained kneeling for hours. For the child's godmother she chose the Virgin Mary. And for godfather, Christ.

And so the time passed. Maria das Dores had gotten barbarously fat and had strange desires. Such as wanting to eat frozen grapes. St. Joseph went with her to the farm. And there he continued his cabinet-making.

One day Maria das Dores stuffed herself too much—she threw up and cried. And she thought: the way of the cross of my sacred son has begun.

But it seemed to her that if she left the child with the name of Jesus he would be crucified upon reaching manhood. It would be better to give him the name Emmanuel. A simple name. A good name.

She awaited Emmanuel seated beneath a jaboticaba tree. And she thought: "When the hour comes, I won't scream, I'll only say—Oh, Jesus!"

And she ate the jaboticaba cherries. She stuffed herself, the mother of Jesus.

The aunt, in on it all, decorated the room with blue curtains. The stable was there with its good smell of manure and its cows.

At night Maria das Dores looked up at the starry heavens in search of the guiding star. Who would be the three Magi? Who would bring him myrrh and frankincense?

She took long strolls because the doctor had recommended that she walk a lot. St. Joseph let his graying beard grow, and his hair reached down to his shoulders.

It was difficult to wait. Time didn't pass. For breakfast the aunt made them little cakes which crumbled in their mouths. And the cold left them with hard, red hands.

At night they lit the fire and sat around it warming themselves. St. Joseph found himself a shepherd's crook. And, as he didn't change clothes, he gave off a suffocating smell. His tunic was of cheap cotton tow. He drank wine next to the fireplace. Maria das Dores drank thick white milk, with a rosary in her hand.

Bright and early she went to check on the cows in the stable. The cows mooed. Maria das Dores smiled at them. All were humble: the cows and the woman. Maria das Dores was on the point of crying. She arranged the straw on the ground, preparing a place where she could lie down when the hour came. The hour of illumination.

St. Joseph, with his shepherd's crook, went to meditate on the mountain. The aunt prepared roast pork, and everybody ate like mad. And the baby did nothing about arriving.

Until one night, at three in the morning, Maria das Dores felt the first pain. She lit the night lamp, woke St. Joseph, woke the aunt. They got dressed. And with a torch lighting the path, they made their way through the trees towards the stable. A huge star sparkled in the black sky.

The cows, awakened, became uneasy and began to moo.

Shortly, the pain came again. Maria das Dores bit her own hand in order not to scream. And the dawn wouldn't come.

St. Joseph was trembling with cold. Maria das Dores, lying on the straw, under a blanket, was waiting.

Then came a really sharp pain. "Oh, Jesus," moaned Maria das Dores. "Oh, Jesus," the cows seemed to moo.

The stars in the sky.

Then it happened.

Emmanuel was born.

And the stable seemed filled with light.

It was a strong and beautiful boy, who gave forth a bellow into the early morning air.

St. Joseph cut the umbilical cord. And the mother smiled. The aunt cried.

Nobody knows if this child had to go the way of the cross. The way all go.

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