

Seeking the Truth in the Covenant of Love

Steve and Angela Carlson

Hello, my name is Steve Carlson, and this is my wife Angela.

We greet you all and bring you blessings from our home shrine- Seek the Truth.

Both of us were born and raised in the Twin Cities, which is in the state of Minnesota. We are now living in a small town near Rochester, Minnesota. This year we will be celebrating our thirtieth wedding anniversary. I (Steve) am an Engineering Technician and design computerized drawings for fire suppression systems.

I (Angela) am a Registered Nurse and returning to work this summer after eighteen years of being a stay at home mom. We have eight children, three still at home, and five who have already left. Our oldest three daughters are now Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary; Sr. M. Jennifer, Sr. M. Erica, and Sr. M. Sara. All three of them are living here in Waukesha.

Our son Phil has joined the Schoenstatt Father's Community and is living in Santiago, Chile. Our daughter Elizabeth is currently attending the University of St. Thomas, and resides in St. Paul, Mn. Our youngest three children are still at home, Rachel, Mary, and Joseph.

To give you a quick look at what we will be talking about today, there are three areas we would like to cover: Renewal through the Home Shrine, Educated in the Home Shrine, and Sent from the Home Shrine. Our home shrine, Seek the Truth, is where these chapters of our story take place.

Over the years many spiritual changes have taken place in our home shrine as well as physical ones. We've added statues, hung paintings, and used fresh flowers for feast days to adorn the shrine, to name a few.

One of the most amazing changes, for example, was when we cut a big hole right through the front of the home shrine. Because of the way it fit up against an empty wall, Angela thought it would be fun if the kids had a place to climb into the shrine and play. And the children loved it. Pillows, blankets, stuffed animals, and children holding rosaries, prayed inside the shrine, while mom and dad led the rosary outside.

Steve put a hinged door on it and the children would close themselves in it and hide. The children huddled quietly inside to surprise their first "victim," Father Jonathan, one of our Schoenstatt Fathers. He entered the shrine room and Steve and I began to pray as if nothing was unusual and that certain children weren't missing. Then at the pre rehearsed time I said, "Are the angels listening?" and a unanimous "yes" with giggles exploded from underneath the

shrine and the door burst open as our three smiling cherubs, Rachel, Mary and Joseph, appeared.

For 18 years we have had these wonderful home shrine experiences. Our home shrine would become the uniting force that would draw us all together. This unity was not only with our own family, but with the whole Schoenstatt family and with Father Kentenich as our spiritual father and teacher.

As we have learned about Fr. Kentenich's teaching during his years in Milwaukee, he proclaimed that couples should strive to become an image of the Holy Family. Not just a heavenly idea, but a very real down to earth ideal lived in everyday life in the midst of our world today. He gave them three principles:

“Firstly, in the Nazareth family the father and the mother occupy the position foreseen for them by God from all eternity.

Secondly, in the Nazareth family, the child is the focal point.

Thirdly, in the Nazareth family, father, mother, and children are united by the bond of deep, warm love.” (J. Kentenich. *Family at the Service of Life*, pp 30)

As the couples worked closely with Father, Divine Providence led them to give birth to the home shrine as a way to live out this Nazareth Ideal. This gift of the home shrine was not only meant for the Milwaukee couples, but for us as a family and for every family, as well. In order for us to arrive at an understanding of this Ideal, God needed to use Mary in our home shrine to renew our family.

I. Mary Renews our Family through the Home Shrine

To our great sorrow, the first ten years of our married life we lived far away from this Nazareth Ideal. Our desire for family unity was present, but dormant deep within our hearts. We both worked full time to meet the many expenses of a growing family. We were convinced that the children were most important, so we decided to arrange our work schedules to always have one of us home with the children. This meant we were rarely together as a family and eventually, we even quit attending Sunday Mass.

The few times that we were together, I was often angry with Angela. It was not a just anger, but a selfish anger, usually having to do with our daily routine. The angrier I was, the more distant she became. While she was at work I was focused on the kids. When she was home, I would get away from my responsibilities by hanging out with a friend.

I (Angela) enjoyed my job as a nurse, which gave me breaks from Steve and the fights we frequently had. But that was really hard for me because I had to leave the children. Working out of the home and running to different activities, kept me distracted. I was often unable to give my full attention even to the children. So I became bitter towards Steve, and ignored him the rare times we were together. Because of the pressures of life and of the world, we grew farther and farther away from the truths of the Church, even to a point where we both completely closed ourselves off to the gift of new life.

Deep down we knew we loved each other and would do anything for our children, but because of heated arguments, financial struggles, the stress of raising a large family, and the lack of family spiritual life, our marriage finally hit a wall. One day Angela packed up our 5 kids and left for her Mom's house while I was at work. It made me realize that all that mattered to me was gone. I called her morning, noon, and night. I told her I would do anything if she would just come back home.

As I (Angela) sobbed and held our children I wondered how to pray. The only prayer that I could pray was: "Grandpa Tony, please help me, Grandma Mary pray for us." When Steve told me he would do anything, I remembered how much my grandparents prayed and how important church was to them. I told Steve I would be willing to get back together if we would start going to church.

I said yes and was so happy to have Angela and the children back. Even if this meant going to church, I was going to do everything to make it work. A time of grace and renewal began to embrace us both.

At this time our oldest child was enrolled in a parochial school and her class was preparing to receive the sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion. We rearranged Angela's work schedule, so that we could attend Mass together on Sundays and by helping our daughter prepare for Confession, we prepared to make our own homecoming to the Church. It had been over ten years since we had gone to confession.

Another part of our daughter's preparation was learning to pray the whole rosary. She came home very sad one day and said, "Mama, everyone knows how to say the Hail Mary in my class except me." I remembered my grandparents again. I took up the materials she brought home and we began to pray the rosary every day.

Since Angela had cut back on her hours, I decided to deliver newspapers for extra money. There happened to be a Catholic Church on my paper route. I would see a light on in the chapel and wonder why people would be coming in and out at 5 a.m. I learned it was for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and we began to attend.

Soon we were invited to a Schoenstatt couples group. With our tarnished beginnings, we didn't really feel like our family could ever belong to Schoenstatt. Now we have come to realize that the misery we experienced in not living the unity of a Nazareth Family was exactly the key God would use to open the door to our hearts for our renewal and education in the school of Father Kentenich.

Less than half a year after returning to the church, we headed down to Sleepy Eye, the Schoenstatt Shrine in Minnesota, for our Covenant of Love. Some people ask us why we ever entered Schoenstatt, and all we can say is that we were desperate. Essentially all we knew about the Covenant of Love was that we were calling on Mary.

Finally here was something we agreed upon. If I were to ask Steve, I'm sure he would say that he took me to the Shrine to straighten me out. I would say going to the Shrine was to straighten him out.

We were both right. We both sincerely loved our children and just weren't sure what to do next. They were getting older now and sensed our lack of discipline. It was only a matter of time before they would sense our insecurities and rebel. We intuitively saw that we, in our little "Nazareth family", were not living as a true father and mother, as Fr. Kentenich had shown in the Ideal. It was through the grace of education of the Blessed Mother that our eyes began to open.

In our Covenant Prayers the thing that struck me (Angela) the most was how the Mother Thrice Admirable wanted to take our children. We placed them in her hands with such confidence that we almost felt childless. We knew we needed to do our part, but it seemed so much lighter now. The Covenant of Love for us is united with our Home Shrine, which we dedicated just four days later.

So on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8th, 1994 our parish priest blessed our home shrine. We chose the title "Seek the Truth" as its name. We felt we had been lost in darkness and didn't always know where to find the light. We wanted to be educated in the truth especially for our children's sake. Deep in our hearts our children were at the center.

To have Mother Mary move in with us was such an intimate moment. It gives us great pleasure to think of all the times she has watched the children play, laugh, sing, and even cry. She renewed our family unity as we all took her into our home and made her our mother. We now felt that in our little "Nazareth family", we as father, mother, and children were more united by the bond of deep, warm love."

II. Mary Educates our Family in the Home Shrine

As each one experienced the healing of renewal, the Blessed Mother began to educate us in our *Seek the Truth* Home Shrine. In this process we decided to educate our children at home.

There was so much ground to cover, and so little time left before each child would move away. Every subject was taught through the eyes of faith. Material that was given to the children in Schoenstatt groups was literally taken, and incorporated into family life and daily Religion classes. It wasn't just knowledge of God however, that Mother Mary taught us. It was the knowledge of who we were as a family, and how we could embody the Nazareth Ideal as Father Kentenich had proclaimed it. Through her loving education we were able to know the deep joy of coming back to the fullness of the truth of the Church's teachings, especially in saying our 'yes' once again to the openness for life. After the devastation of our falling away, this return home was overpowering.

Through the singing of Christmas carols at bedtime, we discovered how talented the children were at singing and harmonizing. Music was added to prayer time, and even substituted for prayers. We loved praying the Angelus three times a day with mealtime, but certain children couldn't wait that long. We sang a short Ave Maria in its place.

As the children grew, they began writing their own songs. Their songs were always a prayer. When Sr. M. Jennifer left home we wrote a short prayer song that expressed our family ideal. It was our own way to live the Nazareth Ideal. After every letter or phone call, after each mystery of the rosary, or whenever we were missing someone, we would sing this prayer song. This was grafting us closer in the home shrine, even though we were miles apart.

Another area where the Blessed Mother educated us was in helping our children live chastity. When our first daughter Jennifer reached the age of 16, we wanted to teach her the truth about her dignity as a young woman. We bought her a chastity ring, and presented it to her. With our next three daughters Erica, Sara and Elizabeth, this special ceremony took place in the shrine. A beautiful white dress was chosen, and the purity pledge written on special paper that was placed in our Home Shrine. Our son Phil also received his ring at a boy's camp in Sleepy Eye. This became a constant visual reminder of the dignity they had been educated in.

An important part of educating the children in the home shrine was helping them discover the importance of the Covenant of Love and the desire to make it themselves. Everyone prepared and celebrated these milestones together. Usually their covenants were made away from home with the Schoenstatt Father or Sister who was working with the youth.

This is when the home shrine symbols seemed to come alive. For instance Sr. M. Erica's living shrine symbol is the rainbow, a sign of the covenant. She discovered her talent for drawing and

painting, and now the rainbows she had only colored with crayons, became alive in her artwork with breathtaking colors - as shown in her Blessed John Paul II's portrait. New interest in living out individual ideals awoke in the heart of every family member, and this found its expression in many ways, such as gardening, singing, writing music and poetry, and even shepherding animals such as our goats. Whenever the children were away on retreat or during difficult times their symbol from the home shrine would be placed in their room shrines and all of us would pray intently for them. Mother Thrice Admirable was truly educating each of us to Seek the Truth.

Mother Mary needed to educate Steve and me too. As usual this proved more difficult and took a lot longer than the children. I would hold Steve's home shrine symbol—the rock—and gaze at Mary, desiring that she teach me. How could I let Steve be the spiritual leader of the family, and help myself do what God asked of me in my own way. I had quit my job to stay home so that I could focus all my energy on caring for our precious little ones. Many things that had distracted me were eventually let go of, allowing our Mother Mary in the home shrine to teach me to seek the truth. I prayerfully read every book Sr. Marie gave us, and tried to put the principles into practice. I learned how to cook, run the house and see the importance of my role as wife and mother. My home shrine symbol is the crown, which Mary was teaching me to live, so I could bear fruit and help Steve live out his symbol as well.

For me (Steve) seeking the truth meant learning to control my anger by seeing the dignity in my wife and my children. In the home shrine, the Blessed Mother used the tools of the Spiritual Daily Order and monthly confession to help me see if I was making any headway. As the rock, I was beginning to understand my role as spiritual leader, but always with Jesus and Mary. From our home shrine, Mary was educating us to be a reflection of the Holy Family almost without us knowing it. We were truly falling in love again as a couple, all the while the Blessed Mother united us in our Seek the Truth Home Shrine.

III. Mary Sends us from the Home Shrine

Now came the moment when Mother Mary sent us forth from our home shrine. The bonds of love were so strong, they needed to be shared. But it was so hard to leave our oasis, and somehow she knew we weren't ready. Our patient and tender Mother responded by saying "That's ok; I will just send other people to you".

For example, a religious Sister approached us and asked if we would consider providing housing for unwed mothers. These women usually only stayed about three months, but we grew very close to each one. One expectant mother came to stay with her three children. This was especially fun for the children as they tunneled through snow forts with their new best friends. We were truly able to show our children the universality of being a child of God no matter your

heritage. The women who attended Angela's Schoenstatt mother's group helped give one of these expectant mothers a baby shower that took place in our home shrine room. Mother Mary was truly showering us and them with gifts and graces.

One of the first families that encountered Schoenstatt in our home shrine was the Bauer Family of St. Paul, Minnesota. As they learned of our MTA, we embraced their devotion to the Sacred Heart. We enthroned our homes to the sacred heart of Jesus on the same night as our parish priest went from one home to the next. From then on we include the renewal of this consecration at our supper meal.

Mealtime became a special way to bring others to share in the graces of our home shrine. As our family grew, and the number of home shrine visitors multiplied, it was decided we needed a bigger table. I (Steve) decided to make it myself, even though my tools were primitive. It is a work in progress. I made it with oak pallet boards given to me by a friend who regularly attended the boy's group at our house with his four sons. I built the table over about a six month period, with the words 'Queen of the Feast' carved in the middle of the table top. It's hard to count how many families shared a meal with us at our table, but I'm sure the graces were multiplying each time they did.

The Schoenstatt youth groups at our house weren't always very productive, but everyone seemed to have a great time. We tried to incorporate fun things at each event. There were Nativity Plays in the goat pen, numerous obstacle courses, singing under the stars around the campfire, and saint scavenger adventures and racing in the woods. In the pole barn there were numerous choices for woodcrafts, violent tennis ball wars, and awesome square dances. In the large field, there was ultimate Frisbee, capture the flag, and intense volleyball games. When youth groups would come from Wisconsin, the games became supercharged, and you couldn't help but be drawn into the fun.

On May 13, 2006, we had a rosary procession and a crowning in our home shrine. Our daughter Elizabeth had carved a beautiful crown, and we crowned the Blessed Mother Queen of Vocations for the New Holy Springtime. For this event a local parish priest, Father Kasel, who had visited our boy's group, agreed to preside. The Blessed Mother used that event to draw Father Kasel to herself and he soon made the Covenant of Love with her.

Now we were ready to be sent out from our home shrine. Over the next few years, Schoenstatt Covenant Celebrations, and Schoenstatt Family Sundays in the St. Paul, Minnesota, kept us pretty busy. It was hard for many families to travel all the way to Sleepy Eye, a 2 ½ hour drive, to experience the shrine, so we tried to bring the shrine to them. Father Kasel would give a talk while we would lead the boys/girls groups. Then everyone joined together in the parish chapel before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, praying Litanies and closing with Benediction and

renewing our Schoenstatt Consecration Prayer. That was followed by a huge potluck shared with families, visiting and just being together. It was a way that our Home Shrine Mother sent us out to share what she had given us.

On our 25th wedding anniversary, when we visited Schoenstatt on the Lake, the shrine in Sleepy Eye, and renewed our Inscriptio, our being sent forth took an unexpected turn. On returning home, we learned that Steve was going to be laid off. This started a time of uncertainty for our family. Numerous hours were spent in our home shrine as we sought the truth. She guided us a little at a time, but only enough to take little steps. We prayed the Divine Providence prayer daily, asking God to tell us what to do.

The decision was eventually made to leave our beautiful home, and move our family to Rochester where more steady work could be found. During this difficult time, our couples group listened, offered support, and helped us grow stronger, always connected to our Seek the Truth Home Shrine. They provided the prayers that finally helped us find a home. We commuted two hours back and forth from Rochester to home every week. A soon to be special friend, opened up her apartment to us, guided by the MTA in her home shrine, which is named "Come To Me."

As we searched for homes online, the first thing we looked for was where would the home shrine go? Secondly, was the dining room/kitchen big enough for our rather large table? Even our realtor began looking specifically for homes to fit our table. When it was time to move, we prayed that the children would not suffer or miss their home too much. Our capital of Grace had been filled to the brim for them.

In order to remind us that she was with us, she sent a Schoenstatt Father to bless and spend the night in our new home on our very first night. A few days later came the words from Rachel, I will never forget. "Mama, how come it seems like we always lived here?" Thank you Mama Mary!

It has been two years since we moved to our new home, and we see God's Providence unfolding daily. Our church of St. Joachim is only two blocks from our home. We have Eucharistic Adoration from Tuesday through Friday. We serve as family sacristans every Sunday morning, and together bring Holy Communion to the elderly who are homebound, once a month. Most of them live in our back yard as the nursing home is directly behind us.

We are on the route for Schoenstatt Family members going from the shrine in Waukesha to the shrine in Sleepy Eye, so they can stop and visit our home shrine. It seems the Blessed Mother still wants to send us out, just now in different ways. With our renewal and education in hand, our family has been sent out from our home shrine to Seek the Truth in the Covenant of Love.

We are so grateful that Divine Providence chose to bring Father Kentenich here to unfold for us the ideal of the Nazareth Family, an ideal that is to be lived in everyday, practical family life. Through this time of education and guidance of the families here, the world was blessed with the gift of the home shrine. As you can see, the Blessed Mother has renewed us as a couple and family through our home shrine, educated us in our home shrine and sent us forth from our Seek the Truth Home Shrine. We still strive to live as the Holy Family did in Nazareth, growing more and more as a couple, placing our children at the center of our family and staying united even if we are miles apart. Happily the Blessed Mother is the one in charge. Our gratitude goes to her and our father and founder. If anyone deserves a round of applause, it is them. Thank you!

(Carlson Family living shrine song)

Seek the Truth

Words and music by Sr. M. Sara Carlson

Refrain:

Chosen by the Father God to seek the truth from our shrine,
A fruitful family of Mary, for the new holy springtime.
One in family unity to seek the truth for eternity;
You are our mother, and we are your own.

1. *(Joseph, the Chalice)*

Chalice on the altar, strength that's proved in sacrifice.
Gentle Joseph, strong and kind with power of tenderness.
(Mary, the heart monstrance)
Heart of Mary opened wide you behold the needs of all.
Tenderly you love and serve with purity of heart. (refrain)

2. *(Rachel, the Lamb)*

As the lamb you show to us how to love the smallest ones.
Arms embrace the lowliest, you're raised to heights above.
(Elizabeth, the stained glass window)
Through the window of your soul, light breaks through the dark of night.
Star of hope, now point the way that leads us all to God. (refrain)

3. *(Phil, St. Michael)*

On the battlefield of God, you protect with sword of zeal
Offering your life for souls to lead us all to God.

(Sr. M. Sara, the Flower)

Blossom of simplicity, serving in a silent way.

Sacrifice of mercy that blooms for God alone. (refrain)

4. *(Sr. M. Erica, the Rainbow/Sanctuary light)*

Royal globe of light that shines ever radiant faithfulness,
Through your being we behold the love of God for us all.

(Sr. M. Jennifer, the Bell)

Lifting hearts to look above, listening to the voice of God.
You proclaim in all you do: God's mercy never ends. (refrain)

5. *(Angela, the Crown)*

Bearing crown and scepter, you're a queen because you serve.
Staff and scepter joined as one brings deepest unity.

(Steve, the Rock)

You are the foundation, living stone of truth and might.
Guardian and protector with staff you lead the way. (refrain)

Bridge:

Set apart and called to be a family for our times.

Mother please transform our hearts to be your living shrine! (refrain)