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INTERVIEW /SR KRISTEN GARDNER

Sister Clare Crockett, the Saint Thérèse of the 21st century

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"Many have called Sister Clare Crockett the Saint Thérèse of the 21st century", primarily, in reference to the "good" she is said to be doing from heaven. This what Sister Kristen Gardner tells us, she is the postulator for the beatification and canonisation cause of her

Irish sister who died at the age of 33 in the terrible earthquake that struck Ecuador in 2016 where she was a missionary. We met Sister Kristen at the Meeting in Rimini, where a popular exhibition was dedicated to Sister Clare's life. She converted at the age of 17 and immediately joined the Servant Sisters of the Home of the Mother, a congregation founded in Spain in 1989 by Father Rafael Alonso Reymundo. Today, the congregation has 220 sisters spread across 22 communities in six countries worldwide. Prepared by members of Communion and Liberation with the support of the nuns, the exhibition consists of texts illustrated by numerous photos. Viewers are transported from moments of Clare Crocket's family life, often captured in her school uniform, to her conversion in Spain, and finally to her life as Sister Clare, serving as a missionary in Ecuador dressed in her white nun's habit.

Why is Sister Clare is compared to Saint Teresa?

Sister Clare Crockett's connection to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux started on the day of her profession, when Father Rafael Alfonso, founder of the Home of the Mother congregation, appointed the French saint as her guide and protector. He always chooses a saint to protect each sister and gives each one a personal motto. 'Solo con el Solo' ('Alone with the Alone') was Sister Clare's motto. Both choices proved to be prophetic. On the day of her profession, she took her vows alone before God, and she was also the only sister to die in the earthquake. Like Saint Thérèse, Sister Clare lived her life doing simple daily chores, but always with great love. There is a photograph of Sister Clare taken a few days before her death; her habit is splattered with mud after a severe flood hit the area. She is smiling as she sweeps the mud off the schoolroom floor. That was Sister Clare: she did ordinary chores with extraordinary joy. Like Saint Teresa, she did everything for Christ. There were no half measures with Sister Clare: 'All or nothing', she used to say. She gave Christ her life.

It must have hard to accept her death.

It was hard. Sister Clare was so cheerful and funny that everyone loved being around her. When we heard that the rescuers had found her body, we asked God why he had taken her from us. Then the testimonies of people who had prayed to her began to pour in. Each one recounted the graces they had been granted through her intercession. Just like Saint Thérèse, it became clear that she was spending her time in heaven doing good on earth and showering blessings. The number of graces being granted is truly astonishing.

What is it about Sister Clare that inspires people to pray to her?

She gives people hope. Sister Clare makes everyone feel that no problem is too difficult

for God, and that no one is beyond redemption. She lived the life of many young people today. She shunned the Church, smoked heavily, got drunk, stayed out late and went to discos. She didn't take school seriously. By the age of 17, she was on the path to stardom. She had already presented several programmes on Channel 4. She had also been offered a job with Nickelodeon. She dreamed of becoming a Hollywood star. However, everything changed when a friend invited her on a free trip to Spain, failing to mention that it was actually a pilgrimage and retreat. She had imagined fun, parties and beaches, but when she found out, it was too late to back out. I remember her; I was there too. She didn't participate much in the retreat's activities. She was always outside, either smoking or sunbathing. On Good Friday, she was told that she should go into the church, as we were remembering Christ, who died for her. She entered and, when everyone venerated the cross, she stood up and joined the queue. She kissed the cross and, in that moment, Our Lord gave her the grace to understand how much He loved her, how her sins and lack of love for Him offended Him and how He died on the cross to save her. It changed her life. Despite her success, there was a void in her life which was filled by discovering Christ's love for her.

Since Sister Clare's death, people have claimed that their lives have changed thanks to her intercession.

The changes that have taken place in her homeland and within her family are a remarkable example. Sister Clare was one of three daughters born in Derry, Northern Ireland. The family was Catholic by tradition. As she describes in her testimony, she was baptised Catholic and received all the sacraments, but never practised or understood her faith. For her and many others, religion was about politics, not faith. She spent her childhood during the Troubles, a period of conflict between Protestants and Catholics, mostly concerning civil rights and discrimination. Derry was the site of the Bloody Sunday massacre. It was also one of the Provisional IRA's major strongholds. This had a catastrophic effect on the youth. Smoking, drinking and taking drugs helped them to cope with the stress and lack of hope. This was the case for Clare Crockett. At only 17 years old, she would get drunk and stay out with boys until the early hours of the morning. Since her death, however, her two sisters have returned to church, practise their Catholic faith and have married. The Home of the Mother has opened three houses in Ireland: one near Clare's hometown of Derry and two in Watford and York. Every year on the anniversary of her death, a retreat is held, and her sister Megan has said that it is incredible to watch all the young people coming through the door to join in prayer.

The number of vocations is on the rise. Sixteen girls entered the congregation this year.

However, the call to religious life is not exclusive to our order. People have found their vocations to other orders after praying to Sister Clare. Discouraged and unmotivated priests and nuns have found renewed vigour and devotion after praying to her.

Then there are the stories of healings. Some of these are being examined as possible miracles. One curious tale concerns a boy with a learning disability who couldn't walk. His mother is devoted to Sister Clare and prays to her. After chewing a prayer card bearing Sister Clare's image, the boy inexplicably began to walk.