



Saint Maria Goretti

Painting: "Saint Maria Goretti"
Located in the Shrine Church
Artist: Noah Buchanan

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This past July 6th [year 2002] was the centenary of the passing away of Maria Goretti, whom Pope Pius XII at her canonization on June 26, 1950, called «the Agnes of the twentieth century.» *God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor 1: 27-29).* During a pilgrimage to the place of the martyrdom of the young saint, on September 29, 1991, Pope John Paul II remarked: «God chose, He glorified a simple young girl from the country, of modest origins. He glorified her with the power of His Spirit... Dearest brothers and sisters! Consider Maria Goretti... She has become a joy for the Church and a source of hope for us.»

Maria was born on October 16, 1890, in Corinaldo, in the Ancone province of Italy, into a family poor in earthly goods, but rich in faith and virtues. Every day they had common prayer and the Rosary; on Sundays, Mass and Holy Communion. Maria was the third of seven children of Luigi Goretti and Assunta Carlini. On the day after her birth, she was baptized and consecrated to the Virgin Mary. She received the sacrament of Confirmation at the age of six.

After the birth of his fourth child, Luigi Goretti, too poor to remain in his native land, emigrated with his family towards the vast plains, still unhealthy at that time, of the Roman countryside. He settled down at Le Ferriere di Conca, in the service of Count Mazzoleni. There, Maria did not hesitate to reveal a precocious intelligence and sense of judgment. She was never found to throw a temper tantrum, to disobey, or to lie. She was truly the angel of the family.

After a year of exhausting work, Luigi was struck with an illness which carried him off in ten days. For Assunta and her children a long Calvary began. Maria often mourned the death of her father and took advantage of the least occasion to kneel before the cemetery gate; her father was perhaps in Purgatory, and since she did not have the means to have Masses said for the repose of his soul, she tried hard to compensate with prayers. One should not think, however, that this

child practiced kindness naturally. Her astonishing progress was the fruit of her prayer. Her mother would say that the Rosary became a necessity to her, and in fact she carried it always wound around her wrist. She drew from contemplation of the Crucifix an intense love of God and a profound horror of sin.

«I want Jesus»

Maria yearned for the day when she would receive Holy Communion. According to the custom of the day, she had to wait until the age of eleven. «Mother,» she asked one day, «when will I make my First Communion?... I want Jesus.»—«How can you make it? You don't know your catechism, you don't know how to read, we don't have the money to buy you the dress, the shoes, or the veil, and we don't have a free moment.»—«Mother, I will never make my First Communion this way! And I can't be without Jesus!»—«But what do you want me to do? I can't let you go to receive Communion like a little ignorant girl.» Finally Maria found the means to prepare herself, with the help of a person from the area. The entire village came to her assistance to furnish her with the Communion garments. She received the Eucharist on May 29, 1902.

Receiving the Bread of Angels only increased Maria's love of purity, and made her resolve to keep this angelic virtue at all costs. One day, after having heard an indecent exchange of words between a young man and one of his female companions, she said with indignation to her mother: «Mother, how terribly this girl speaks!»—«Be very careful not to ever take part in such conversations.»—«I can't even think of it, Mother; rather than do it, I would prefer to...», and the word «die» remained on her lips. A month later, the voice of her blood would finish the sentence...

In putting himself in the service of Count Mazzoleni, Luigi Goretti had associated with Gianni Serenelli and his son, Alessandro. The two families had separate apartments, but a common kitchen. It was not long before Luigi regretted this union with Gianni Serenelli, a personality so different from his, a drinker and without restraint in his words. After the death of her husband, Assunta and her children fell under the despotic yoke of the Serenellis. Maria, who understood the situation, tried her best to support her mother: «Courage, Mother, don't be afraid, we are getting big. It is enough that Our Lord gives us health. Providence will help us. We will struggle, we will struggle!»

Always in the fields in order to make a living for her children, Mrs. Goretti did not have time to take care of the housekeeping or the religious instruction of the youngest. Maria took it all upon herself, as much as she was able. She didn't sit at the table until she had served everyone, and

took for herself only what was left. Her willingness to help extended to the Serenellis as well. For his part Gianni, whose wife had died in the psychiatric hospital in Ancone, hardly looked after his son Alessandro, a robust fellow of nineteen years, crude and vicious, who took pleasure in papering the walls of his room with obscene pictures and reading bad books. On his deathbed Luigi Goretti had a presentiment of the danger which the Serenellis' company represented for his children, and he repeated endlessly to his wife: «Assunta, go back to Corinaldo!» Unfortunately, Assunta was in debt and bound by a tenant farming contract.

«Don't do it... It's a sin!»

Through contact with the Gorettis, some religious sentiment was awakened in Alessandro. He sometimes joined in the Rosary that they recited as a family; on feast days he attended Mass, and he even went to confession from time to time. However, he would sometimes make indecent proposals to the innocent Maria, who at first did not understand. Then, realizing the boy's depravity, the young girl held her guard up and rejected his flattery as a threat. She begged her mother not to leave her alone in the house, but didn't dare clearly reveal to her mother the grounds for her fear, for Alessandro had warned her, «If you let your mother know anything, I'll kill you.» Her sole recourse was prayer. The day before her death Maria again asked her mother, with tears, not to leave her alone. Not having obtained any further explanation, Mrs. Goretti believed it to be a childish whim, and did not give any consideration to this repeated plea.

On July 5, 1902, the fava beans were being threshed about forty meters from where the Gorettis lived. Alessandro drove an ox cart around and around over the beans spread out on the ground. Towards three o'clock in the afternoon, while Maria was alone in the house, Alessandro asked, «Assunta, would you drive the oxen for me for a minute?» The woman complied, without mistrust. Maria, seated on the threshold of the kitchen, was mending a shirt that Alessandro had given her after the meal, while watching her little sister, Teresina, who slept close to her.

«Maria!» exclaimed Alessandro. «What do you want?»—«I want you to follow me.»—«Why?»—«Follow me!»—«Tell me what you want, or I won't follow you.» Faced with this resistance, the boy took her violently by an arm and dragged her to the kitchen, where he barred the door. The child screamed, but the noise did not carry to the outside. Not succeeding in making his victim yield, Alessandro gagged her and brandished a dagger. Maria trembled but did not give way. Furious, the young man tried with violence to tear her clothes off. Maria freed herself of her gag and cried out, «Don't do it... It's a sin... You will go to Hell!» Little concerned with the judgment of God, the miserable soul raised his weapon: «If you don't want to, I will kill

you.» In the face of her resistance, he stabbed her repeatedly with his knife. The child cried out, «My God! Mother!» and fell to the floor. Believing her dead, the assassin threw his knife aside and opened the door to flee, when he heard that she was still groaning. He retraced his steps, picked up his weapon and stabbed her all over once more, then climbed to his room and locked himself in. Maria had received fourteen serious wounds; she had fainted.

Teresina, awaked by the noise, let out a shrill cry which Mrs. Goretti heard. Frightened, the mother said to her young son Mariano, «Go quickly to look for Maria—tell her that Teresina is calling her.» At that moment, Gianni Serenelli climbed the stairs and, seeing the horrible scene before his eyes, exclaimed, «Assunta and you, too, Mario, come!» Mario Cimorelli, a worker on the farm, climbed the stairs four at a time. The mother arrived in turn: «Mother!» moaned Maria who had regained consciousness. «What happened?»—«Alessandro wanted to hurt me!» The doctor was called, along with the town police, who arrived in time to prevent the terribly excited neighbors from putting Alessandro to death on the spot.

«I forgive him for the love of Jesus»

After a long and painful ambulance ride they arrived at the hospital towards eight o'clock in the evening. The doctors were astonished that the child had not already succumbed from her wounds—the pericardium, the heart, the left lung, the diaphragm and the intestine had all been struck. Seeing that she could not be saved, they called the confessor. Maria made her confession in complete lucidity. The doctors then lavished their medical attentions on her for two hours, without putting her to sleep. Maria did not complain. She did not stop praying and offering her sufferings to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Sorrows. Her mother was admitted to her bedside. Maria found the strength to console her: «Mother, my dear mother, I am well now!... How are the little brothers and sisters doing?»

Maria was consumed with thirst—«Mother, give me a drop of water.»—«My poor Maria, the doctor won't allow it, it will make you worse.» Astonished, Maria continued, «Is it possible that I can't have a drop of water!» She glanced at Jesus on the Cross, who had also said, *I thirst!*, and resigned herself. The hospital confessor helped her in a fatherly manner. At the moment of giving her Holy Communion, he asked her, «Maria, do you forgive your assassin with all your heart?» She suppressed an instinctive repulsion, then replied, «Yes, I forgive him for the love of Jesus... and I want him to come with me to Paradise... I want him at my side... May God forgive him, because I have already forgiven him...» It was in these sentiments, those of Christ Himself on Calvary, that she received the Holy Eucharist and the Last Rites, serene, tranquil,

humble in the heroism of her victory. The end was approaching. She was heard to call out, «Papa.» Finally, after a last appeal to Mary, she entered into the immense joy of Paradise. It was the 6th of July, 1902, at three o'clock in the afternoon.

«You are wasting your time, Your Excellency»

Three months after the drama, Alessandro's trial was held. On his lawyer's advice, he admitted, «I liked her. I had propositioned her twice and hadn't been able to get anything out of her. In my frustration, I had prepared the dagger which I was to use.» He was condemned to thirty years of hard labor. He acted as though he did not regret his crime and was even heard sometimes to exclaim, «Be cheerful, Serenelli, twenty-nine years and six months more and you will join the middle class again!» But Maria, from Heaven, did not forget him. A few years later, Bishop Blandini of the diocese where the prison was located, had the inspiration to visit the murderer to lead him to repent. «You are wasting your time, Your Excellency,» asserted the guard, «he's a tough one!» Alessandro, muttering to himself, received the bishop. But remembering Maria, her heroic forgiveness, and the infinite kindness and mercy of God, he allowed himself to be touched by grace. When the prelate left, he wept in the solitude of his dungeon, to the great astonishment of his guards.

One night Maria appeared to him in a dream, dressed in white, in the flowery gardens of Paradise. Overwhelmed, Alessandro wrote to Bishop Blandini: «I regret my crime so much more, aware that I have taken the life of a poor innocent girl who, up to the last moment, wanted to save her honor, sacrificing herself rather than give in to my criminal desire. I publicly beg pardon from God and from the poor family for this great crime committed. I want to hope that I too will obtain my pardon, like so many others on this earth.» His sincere repentance and his good conduct in prison earned him his release four years before the end of his sentence. He then found a position as a gardener in a Capuchin convent and proved himself exemplary. He was admitted into the Third Order of St. Francis.

Thanks to his good dispositions, Alessandro was called to testify at Maria's Beatification Procedure. It was for him a quite delicate and very difficult matter. But he confessed, «I must atone for and do everything in my power for her glorification. The evil was all from me. I gave myself over to brutal passion. She is a saint. Hers is a true martyrdom. She is one of the foremost souls in Heaven, after what she had to suffer because of me.»

At Christmas 1937, he went to Corinaldo, where Assunta Goretti had retired with her children, solely to atone and ask forgiveness from the mother of his victim. Hardly was he before her than

he begged, crying, «Assunta, will you forgive me?»—«Maria has forgiven you, how could I not forgive you, too?» stammered the mother. Christmas Day the residents of Corinaldo were not a little surprised and moved to see Alessandro and Assunta approach the Eucharistic Table side by side.

«*Look at her!*»

The influence of Maria Goretti continues to our day. Pope John Paul II has made her a model especially for youth: «Our vocation to holiness, which is the vocation of all the baptized, is encouraged by the example of this young martyr. Look at her, especially you adolescents, you youth. Be, like her, capable of defending the purity of your hearts and bodies; make an effort to fight against evil and sin, sustaining your communion with the Lord by prayer, the daily practice of mortification, and the scrupulous observance of the Commandments» (September 29, 1991).

The complete observance of the Commandments is a fruit of love. «Love of God and of one's neighbor cannot be separated from the observance of the commandments of the Covenant,» recalled the Pope in his Encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (August 6, 1993, n. 76). *The way we can be sure of our knowledge of Him is to keep His commandments. The one who claims, «I have seen Him,» without keeping His commandments is a liar; in such a one there is no truth... The love of God consists in this: that we keep His commandments (1 Jn 2: 3-4; 5: 3).* It is always possible, with the help of divine grace, to observe the commandments. «For God commands not impossibilities, but, by commanding, both admonishes you to do what you are able, and to pray for what you are not able (to do), and aids you that you may be able; *His commandments are not heavy (1 Jn 5: 3); His yoke is sweet and His burden light (cf. Mt 11: 30)* (Council of Trent, Session VI, ch. 11). The virtue of hope is unceasingly offered to man. It is in the Cross of Jesus, in the gift of the Holy Spirit and in the sacraments (especially in Penance and the Eucharist) that one finds the strength to be faithful to his Creator, even in the most serious difficulties (cf. *Veritatis splendor*, 103).

The reality and the power of divine assistance is manifested in a particularly tangible manner in the martyrs. «In raising them to the honor of the altars, the Church has canonized their witness and declared the truth of their judgment, according to which the love of God entails the obligation to respect His commandments, even in the most dire of circumstances, and the refusal to betray those commandments, even for the sake of saving one's own life» (*Veritatis splendor*, 91). Assuredly, few individuals are called to endure the martyrdom of blood. But, «faced with the many difficulties which fidelity to the moral order can demand, even in the most ordinary

circumstances, the Christian is called, with the grace of God invoked in prayer, to a sometimes heroic commitment. In this he or she is sustained by the virtue of fortitude, whereby—as Gregory the Great teaches—one can actually 'love the difficulties of this world for the sake of eternal rewards' » (*ibid.*, 93).

The Pope also reminds young people: «Do not be afraid of going against the current, of rejecting the idols of the world... By sin, one turns away from God, our only good, and chooses to take one's place next to the 'idols' which lead us to death and eternal condemnation, to Hell.» Maria Goretti «encourages us to experience the joy of the poor, who know how to renounce everything, provided they do not lose the one thing necessary: the friendship of God... Dear youth, listen to the voice of Christ which is calling you, you too, on the narrow road of holiness» (September 29, 1991).

Saint Maria Goretti reminds us that this narrow road goes through faithfulness to the virtue of chastity. Nowadays chastity is often ridiculed and scorned. Cardinal López Trujillo writes, «For some who find themselves in situations where chastity is offended against and not valued, living in a chaste way can demand a hard or even a heroic struggle. Nonetheless, with the grace of Christ, flowing from his spousal love for the Church, everyone can live chastely even if they find themselves in unfavorable circumstances» (*The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, The Pontifical Council for the Family, December 8, 1995, n. 19).

A slow and long martyrdom

Guarding chastity implies refusing certain sinful thoughts, words, and actions, as well as avoiding occasions of sin. «Let laughing childhood and ardent youth learn how not to give itself up madly to the ephemeral and vain joys of sensual pleasure, nor to the pleasures of intoxicating vices which destroy peaceful innocence, breed a gloomy sadness, and sooner or later weaken the strength of the soul and body,» warned Pope Pius XII during the canonization of Maria Goretti. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds, «Either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy» (CCC, 2339). Also it is necessary to follow a rule of life which «requires strength, constant attention, as well as a courageous renunciation to the seductions of the world. We must show an unceasing vigilance which we must abandon on no account... up to the end of our earthly journey. A struggle against the self is required, which we can liken to a slow and long martyrdom. The Gospels clearly exhort us to this struggle: *The kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force (Mt 11: 12)*» (John Paul II, September 29, 1991).

In order to create a climate favorable to chastity it is important to practice modesty in vision, speech, action, and dress. By these virtues the individual is respected and loved for himself, instead of being regarded and treated as an object of pleasure. Thus parents should be on guard that certain fashions do not violate the entrance to the house, particularly through the misuse of mass media. Children and adolescents should be encouraged to value and practice self-mastery and self-restraint, to look at others with respect, to live in orderly fashion, to make personal sacrifices in a spirit of love for God and generosity for others, without stifling feelings and tendencies but channeling them into a virtuous life (Cf. Pontifical Counsel for the Family, *op. cit.*, n. 56-58). In following the example of Saint Maria Goretti, young people will discover «the value of the truth which liberates man from the slavery of material realities,» and they will be able to «savor the taste of the genuine beauty and good which overcomes evil» (John Paul II, *op. cit.*).

Saint Maria Goretti, on this centenary of your martyrdom, intercede for us. Since «purity of heart is the precondition of the vision of God... and demands prayer, the practice of chastity, purity of intention and of vision» (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2519 and 2532), obtain for us from God these graces which will lead us to eternal life!

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