

FORMATION AND CATECHESIS

18



## Saint Maria Goretti

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# Jubilaevum

A dramatic story with an unpredictable ending. The initial setting is in the Pontine Marshes, one of the most malaria infested and dangerous areas on the planet, and it ends in the exhilarating locale of St. Peter's Square among a beaming crowd that came from all over the world to invoke her intercession.

The Goretti family was from Corinaldo, a delightful Italian town near the sea of Senigallia. It was a poor family but with solid and deeply Christian values.

Marietta (as the future Saint was called by the family) was born on 16 October 1890. Tonino and Angelo were born before her, then Mariano, Alessandro, Ersilia and Teresa after her. Luigi and Assunta Carlini did not even take the time to organize their family life before deciding to emigrate to the Roman countryside which they felt was the only alternative to hunger.

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In the town of Colle Granturco near the city of Paliano they worked as sharecroppers on Senator Scelsi's farm. It was only a brief time period, but it was a decisive moment in the life of Marietta. This was where they met and became partners with Giovanni Serenelli and his son Alessandro. It was also where they developed a close friendship with the Passionists of the nearby church of Santa Maria di Pugliano. It was precisely during this time that in the retreat founded by St. Paul of the Cross, Grimoaldo Santamaria the future "Blessed" was making his novitiate. Therefore, it is possible that a meeting between Marietta and Grimoaldo might have taken place.

In February 1899 they moved to the village of Le Ferriere di Conca in the heart of the Pontine Marshes. Here the soil was fertile, the climate was mild, and they could live in a brick house. Their hopes for a better future could finally become a reality; however, they suddenly found themselves in the midst of tragedy. On 6 May 1900 at the age of 41, Marietta's father, Luigi Goretti died of malaria, leaving his wife Assunta and 5 children in shock.

In this scenario of pain and bewilderment Marietta began to compose her unwritten will, comprised of words and gestures. To her grief stricken mother she said -- "Mamma, I am going to take care of the household chores, and you take Papà's place doing the field work. You will see, we will keep going, God will not abandon us". The little girl was just ten years old, but she already demonstrated tenacity and a "mature" faith. Doing her daily chores, she became an icon of a young life lived with generosity and sincerity.

An important date was that of her First Communion. Although she had not reached the canonical age for the sacrament, to the amazement of Assunta, Marietta insistently asked to receive Jesus in the Eucharist. Since she did not know how to read and write, she learned everything by heart. On the morning of 16 June 1901 after asking forgiveness from all those at home, together with her brother Angelo she went to the small church of Borgo Montello for her First Communion. The presider at the Mass was the Passionist, Fr. Basilio Morganti of the Nettuno community.

Faithful to the promise she made at the death of her father, Marietta took care of the household and taught her little brothers and sisters to dress themselves, play and be composed during prayer. Her contemporaries describe her as judicious, happy, tidy, and receptive to new and beautiful things.



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The Goretti and the Serenelli families lived in the same farmhouse; however the rapport between the two families were never tranquil and with the death of Luigi, the relations deteriorated further. Alessandro, seventeen years old, had a restless and problematic personality. He began to make strange advances toward Marietta, that included death threats. Marietta found his brusque manners, ploys, and his explicit and harassing gestures to be annoying and repugnant.

Marietta was only a child, however the depth of her faith, hope and charity enabled her to develop a sensitivity that was contrary to the logic of violence and concession.

One sultry summer afternoon, 5 July 1902, Alessandro stabbed to death that little girl who, in the name of God and man, would remind him of the absurdity of that outrageous act.

The unrefined men of the Marshes would kneel before the “little wounded field flower”. At the former Orsenigo Hospital in the Tyrrhenian city they did everything possible to save her life, however, septicemia took its course and left her no hope. Before her death Marietta offered the most significant gesture of her journey toward holiness and her identification with Christ Jesus. When asked by the priest, Temistocle Signori, if she forgave the one who had slain her she replied- “For the love of Jesus I forgive him and I want him close to me in heaven”. It was a statement that removed any doubt about the Christian meaning of her life and death.

Maria Goretti died on 6 July 1902. It was a very hot afternoon and the news of the incident of a little girl who died by the sea spread like wild fire, from door to door, through entire city of Nettuno.

The similarity between her death and that of Jesus on the Cross --considering the succession of the various events, gestures, and words -- is impressive. Healing and conversions took place at her tomb. The Church examined the extensive dossier presented by Passionist Fr. Mauro Liberati and Pope Pius XII declared her “Blessed” on 27 April 1947 and then “Saint” on 24 June 1950.

The most outstanding miracle would be the conversion of her murder Alessandro Serenelli who subsequently lived in a saintly manner until his death on 6 May 1970, the same month and same day as the death of Marietta’s father. Alessandro declared that he was saved and redeemed by Marietta’s forgiveness.

Maria Goretti did not become “the good Saint in five minutes” -- blessed and the product of quick results and a disposable culture of clever slogans. Her holiness was rooted in everyday life, in service, in acceptance of a life plan that God put before her day by day. She walked towards God as a pre-adolescent, as a laywoman, in the context of her family and in the precariousness of a life lived with a child’s heart and like one of the little ones of Yahweh.

Some stages of this itinerary have a name and a specific inspiration: Trust in providence even in pain (**“Mamma do not worry, God does not abandon us”**). Love for her neighbor (**“I’ll take care of doing the household chores.”**) Rejection of violence and respect for women’s dignity (**“God does not want this nor for you to go to hell.”**) Attention to prayer and love for the Eucharist (**“Mamma I want to make my First Communion; I cannot wait for the day.”**) Always forgiving (**“For the love of Jesus I forgive Alessandro.”**) Witness to life beyond this life (**“I want Alessandro close to me in heaven.”**)

“Holiness is not improvised,” said Pope Pius XII in his canonization homily. A flower does not consist of only a petal; only an overall vision allows us to admire it in its inimitable originality.

It is worth noting the role played by the Passionists who, risking their lives, spiritually and humanly cared for the men and women who lived in the Pontine Marshes. Additionally, they organized schools there to eradicate illiteracy. Through Fr. Mauro Liberati, they were determined to put together the pieces of what seemed to be only a dream that would eventually become a reality that afternoon of 24 June 1950.

