

ST. MARIA GORETTI

**ST.  
MARIA GORETTI**

**A Teenager's Story of Courage**

Fr. Godfrey Poage, CP

## ALLOCUTION OF POPE PIUS XII

The life story of Maria Goretti resembles very closely that of St. Agnes. The features of the Roman martyr and those of this little girl of Corinaldo shine with the same charm. The souls of both emit the same fragrance. Yet there is danger in that a too superficial, too natural conception of their adolescent beauty and candour overshadow their characteristic virtue which is *strength of soul*. Their youth set off in a more living, more radiant light, the courage of the martyr and the courage of the virgin. Courage was both the result and safeguard of their virginity.

Those individuals err greatly who consider virginity as the effect of ignorance or the simplicity of small souls. They who smile with pity on virgins, thinking of them as passionless, ardourless, or inexperienced, misjudge their true worth. How can he or she, who has ceded without struggle, imagine the courage required to dominate through long years, without an instant of weakness, the secret excitations and troubles of sense and heart?

In the humble family circle where Maria Goretti grew up, her education was simple but careful, and she corresponded to it perfectly. The testimony of her mother that this little girl never caused her the least voluntary displeasure is proof enough. And who can read without emotion the declaration of her murderer that he never ascertained in Maria Goretti a failing in the law of God!

Our Saint was a valiant girl. She knew, she understood, and that is why she preferred to die. Her twelfth year was not completed when she fell martyred. Yet, what discernment, what prudence, what energy she displayed! Though but a girl, conscious of danger, she watched night and day in defence of honour, and in persevering prayer. No! Hers was not a small, weak soul. She is a heroine who, in the clutch of a murderer and under the knife of an assassin, thought not of her suffering but resolutely repelled sin with horror.

Thank God, there are still many more like her. They are more numerous than is thought or mentioned, because they make no display of their seriousness and virtue as other girls do of their levity and disorders. Raised by God-fearing parents they modestly pass happy and joyful down the streets of our cities and in the byways of our country sides. They pursue domestic, professional, scholarly and charitable duties. They know how to make their pleasing manner loved, and their unbending dignity respected.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

In view of such lamentable weaknesses, so many miserable falls, we must admire the strength of pure hearts. It is a mysterious power. It is a strength that outstrips the limits of human nature, and often enough the limits of ordinary Christian virtue. It is the bond of love for God. It is the strength of the soul which spurns whoever dares test its fidelity or threatens the purity of its affections.

Maria Goretti was only a child and there is no reason for asserting that she would have consecrated herself to God by the Vow of Virginity. There is nothing to indicate that, as she advanced in years, she would not have followed the path of so many other young women who bring the flower of their integrity to the altar in order to give God new adorers through holy Matrimony – chosen members to the human family, devoted children to the Church, future saints to heaven. Yet Christ knew well that He had chosen her for His own. Without thought of the future she had given herself entirely to Him in her heart. She desired but one thing: fidelity to Christ at any price, even at the cost of her life. Never for anything in the world, would she violate the Divine Law.

She was not merely an ingenuous, candid girl, instinctively frightened at the menace of sin as at the sight of a snake (Eccl. 21:2 ). She may not be compared to the legendary ermine that permitted itself to be killed rather than soil its paw on the muddy road. She was not guided simply by natural sentiment of reserve. Though still very young we can catch a glimpse in her of a deep, intense love for God. She had not yet learned to read. Poverty and distance kept her from school. But her love knew neither difficulty nor distance. She set about her household tasks more courageously and hurried off to attend catechism lessons far away. In order to receive her Eucharistic Lord, she did not hesitate to travel a long dusty road in midsummer under a scorching sun. “I don’t know at what time tomorrow I will receive Holy Communion,” she said one day. That tomorrow was to come and that Holy Communion. But what a tomorrow! And what a Communion! The very afternoon of that day on which she spoke those words, she shed her blood in order to remain faithful to Christ.

Years have gone by since the pathetic death of Maria Goretti. The period has been one seething with stormy vicissitudes and sudden revolts. Radical transformations have upset the life of our young girls and women. We have fully pointed out on other occasions how within the past fifty years, a woman has departed from the retirement and reserve that formerly characterized her life, and has lunched out into the domain of

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

public life, including military service. That transformation has taken place with pitiless speed.

Lest such deep and speedy alternation effect most grave consequences to the religion and morals of woman, it is necessary at the same time and in equal degree to strengthen in her those deep *personal* and *supernatural values* that shone in our Saint. There must be a spirit of faith and modesty – not mere natural modesty and decency – but a carefully cultivated virtue. Those who have at heart the welfare of human society, as well as the temporal and eternal salvation of woman, must resolutely demand that public morality protect the honour and dignity of woman. What is the present situation? Are you wrong in affirming that in this regard perhaps no epoch has failed as ours in its duty toward women?

Thus the cry of our Saviour Jesus rises to our lips: “Woe to the world because of scandals!” ( Matt. 18:7 ). Woe to those guilty perverters – authors of corrupt novels, newspapers, periodicals, theatres, films, indecent styles! Woe to those who, by their artful and thoughtless cruelty, introduce deadly infection.

Legal justice punishes the slyer of a child, and it has duty to do so. But what human legislation could or would dare, if it chose to do so, punish those who furnished the weapon to the slayer’s hand, those who encouraged him therein, or were indifferent, or even with indulgent smile let him be? And yet they are really the more guilty. The terrible justice of God weight heavily on them, those willful perverters or indolent accomplices!

Has human power, then, no strength to move and convert those corrupt and corrupting hearts? Has it no strength to open the eyes and arouse those many careless, timid people from their torpor? We hope this martyr’s blood, and the tears of her repentant and penitent murderer will perform that miracle!

Full of such confidence let us raise up our eyes to heaven and consider the saints, virgins and martyrs, who have preceded us to their eternal reward. Let us call upon their intercession. Let us unite our humble prayers to theirs in order to bring down upon the earth the abundant shower of grace that cleanses and strengthens.

As a pledge of that grace we accord you with all our heart our Apostolic Blessing.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

*Pope Pius XII*

### PROLOGUE

*It is said that if you go from Rome to Nettuno via Campo Morto and Ferriere, you will hear everybody speaking of Maria Goretti. Throughout that countryside she has become a legend. The old people remember her; the young have learned to love her.*

When I asked her neighbour, Theresa Cimarelli, about her, she exclaimed: “Madonna mia! I used to see her every day as she passed by the door to get water from the well. But she never stopped. She was a serious girl. She went and came quickly and busily, and there was no reproach when we nicknamed her *the little old Lady*.”

“Maria was always modest and reserved. We all liked her and deep down we admired her. She was more religious than the rest of us. I was just a girl then and would that I had followed her example! But at that age, most of us are senseless. We scarcely know what we are doing. We seek pleasure and popularity. We permit ourselves to be distracted from better things.” She hesitated a moment and sighed. She seemed to have more to say but remained silent.

“Come in,” she invited, “and meet Domenico.” I needed no urging, for Theresa Cimarelli and her brother-in-law had lived through the events of our story and were witnesses of many of its details.

I sat down at the simple wooden table and looked about the plainly furnished room. Theresa went to the back door, and called: “Domenico!”

There was no reply; but the wood chopping in a nearby shed had ceased. The old lady then drew out a jug of wine and set glasses on the table. In a moment Domenico entered.

Domenico was advanced in years and walked with a stoop. The sun had tanned his skin. His blue work-clothes gave off the pungent odour of sheep. He offered me his hand in honest welcome, drew up a chair, and filled glasses with cool sparkling wine. Theresa then explained to him my interest in the life of Maria Goretti; she urged him to help retell her story.

The pleasure that these two friends of Maria had with a foreigner in their home and to narrate to him the drama they had witnessed was all too

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

evident. They seemed to relive those tragic scenes. No detail could have been omitted.

Theresa and Domenico have not left Ferriere since Maria's death. I can guess the hundreds of times they have gone over the terrible story together in the past forty-five years. All I did was to listen. They told me the story about Maria from the beginning. They concluded with these words:

“The day of the burial of Maria – and it was a real triumph – all the people of Nettuno accompanied the body to the cemetery. Thereafter her mother, Assunta, came back to Ferriere. She did not stay long. You do understand. She could no longer live in the house that recalled such sad memories. So she left this region with her children. And they returned to Corinaldo. Old Serenelli disappeared too. No one ever heard of him again. The Ferriere farm was once more abandoned and once more became known as “the old cheese factory.”

“What about Alexander?” I asked. I was eager to know how he had paid for his crime.

“Alexander!” said Domenico. “That is a whole story in itself! First of all, he was imprisoned at Nettuno. They then transferred him to the Regina-Coeli at Rome when his trial began. I was called in as a witness. Alexander was arrogant and cynical before the judges. He denied that he had anything to do with the crime. He said he was the object of grave injustice. He became highly indignant should anyone accuse him of such a transgression. But the evidence was overwhelming. Though he put on a brave front he was not able to escape, and finally made a confession of guilt. In order to influence the judges, he feigned insanity, calling up the cases of his mother and brother. Doctors examined him; they declared he was responsible for his own actions. Since he was a minor, he was sentenced to only thirty years of hard labour.

“I heard that he was sent first to the Noto penitentiary in Sicily. It was said that in the beginning of it term, he seemed happy as a bird in a cage. He even composed a song with refrain:

“Take courage, Serenelli,  
Banish your fears,  
You'll be welcomed home with cheers.”

“His conscience did not seem to be troubled with remorse until one day a priest came to see him. As the guards brought Alexander in for a

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

talk, a fierce anger seized hold of him; and he yelled wildly: ‘It was all your fault I lost her! You and your teachings!’

“The priest tried to reason with him. He asked him to appeal for God’s infinite mercy and Maria’s own generous pardon. But Alexander only howled like a maniac; he lunged at the priest. As the guards pulled him away, the priest said: ‘Soon, Alexander, you will want me. Maria will see to that.’

“‘Never,’ the prisoner screamed. ‘I’ll never want you, never!’

“In the days that followed Alexander could not sleep. He grew nervous and lost his appetite. Then, one night, in the solitude of his cell, Maria appeared to him. Terrified, he screamed for the guards. When they arrived, he was almost incoherent.

“‘I saw her! I saw her!’ He gasped in great fear. ‘I saw Maria dressed in dazzling white and gathering beautiful lilies in a garden which she handed to me. As I took them from her outstretched hands, they were transformed into small lights that glowed like candles. Call the priest! Bring me the priest!’

“It was now the jailers’ turn to laugh. ‘Write to the priest if you have something to say,’ they answered callously. So Alexander knelt on the floor of his cell and crawled the following note:

*‘I am deeply sorry for what has happened. I have taken the life of an innocent girl whose one aim was to save her purity, shedding her blood rather than give in to my sinful desires. I publicly admit the evil I have done, and beg pardon of God and of the stricken family. One hope encourages me – that I also may one day obtain God’s pardon as so many others have.’*

*- Alexander Serenelli*

*November 10, 1910.*

“This note from Alexander only confirmed our belief that Maria was a saint, a real martyr. The manner in which she had died was circulated throughout the country; people started making pilgrimages to her tomb. We prayed to her and asked for cures... and miracles were performed.”

I looked skeptical. Domenico noticed my astonishment and continued.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

“I saw a boy of Nettuno brought to the cemetery by his mother. He was stricken by consumption, a wasted child, Hermano by name. They prayed at Maria’s grave and the boy left the cemetery cured. From that day forward he grew strong and healthy, and when he was twenty he was drafted into military service.

“I heard also of a man in Rome who was instantly cured of an internal abscess by calling on Maria. His doctor attested to the fact. I could tell you of many other incidents equally marvelous; for instance, the Lady Miscetti, who was to undergo an operation, was cured of a cyst in her thyroid gland after praying to Maria. Then, too, a Sicilian priest was freed of a serious kidney condition by praying to her. But what does it matter after all? Miracles don’t change anything. When one has chosen to die rather than to offend God, one is a martyr and that’s that! That’s why our little Maria is a saint today.”

I was getting more astonished. The good Domenico seemed to know his history. He was full of his theme. He was not just talking. He was expatiating with remarkable ease. I began to perceive that he had been more closely involved in the affair, although I did not know to what he was leading: “Did you say she has been cononised?” I asked innocently.

He was more astonished than I. “You mean you think she doesn’t deserve it?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. “But why has it taken so long?”

“Rome,” he answered, “moves slowly in cononising saints. There are inquiries, depositions, discussions. .. and then all the data put away in the archives. Then some fine day, the case is taken up again. New inquests, new depositions, new discussions are later brought forth.

“I was called in several times to testify,” Domenico continued. “Police, doctors, nurses were also called in – everyone, in fact, who had something to tell. Assunta, naturally, was the first defendant of her daughter. We were all of one mind. Maria was innocent; she had given proof of her heroic courage. But that was not enough. One witness was still wanting – the only one able to settle the question, her murderer, Alexander!

“After thirty-five years he came back to Corinaldo, a changed man. Maria’s prayers had won him over completely. He had served his prison

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

sentence, now he wanted to make amends for his crime. He who had formerly taken every means to prove himself innocent, now humbly admitted his guilt. It is no small matter that a criminal rises in defence of his victim. He affirmed that she had been innocent. She had opposed his brutal passion with all her strength. Finally, he obtained what he wanted – a vindication of her innocence.

“He went further than that; on Christmas Eve of 1937 he begged pardon of Assunta. The old mother’s voice broke as she fought back tears: ‘Maria forgave you, Alexander.’ She answered, ‘so how could I possible refuse?’”

“The following morning being Christmas day, the parish Church at Corinaldo was filled to overflowing, Assunta and Alexander entered together. A hush fell. At the communion rail”, Alexander turned around; all eyes were upon him.

‘I have sinned deeply,’ he said. ‘I have murdered an innocent girl who loved virtue more than life. May God forgive me! I beg your pardon!’

“After this, I heard that Alexander retired to the Monastery of Ascoli, where he put on a habit of the Tertiary order. He works there now as gardener, tending flowers. Lilies are his favourites.”

Domenico seemed to have finished his ale. I had listened with intense interest. What a story! And all so true!

I learnt from a friend of mine who had been present at Ferriere of the popular enthusiasm that accompanied the Cononisation on June 24, 1950. In front of the great throng Assunta, an old lady, had the place of honour. She raised her head and with tear-filled eyes saw the veil removed from the picture of Maria, just as His Holiness Pope Pius XII proclaimed her saint.

The excited Holy Year throng seemed to express her thoughts. “There she is . . . Maria Goretti. . . Saint Maria Goretti!”

Thus the drama of Ferriere terminated in the glory of the Vatican!

“For me,” mused Domenico, “she will always be our little Maria. I wouldn’t know how to call her otherwise. You know we were her

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

neighbours. We lived in the house next to hers. I was twenty years old when she died.”

Domenico gave in to silent musing. He was recalling the past. The village clock struck eleven. As I was about to leave, the door opened. A little girl looked in. At the sight of me she hesitated, doubtful as to whether she should enter or withdraw. A great straw hat covered her head. She wore a blue and white summer dress, that scarcely reached her knees. Her bare arms were tanned with the sun.

“Angelina, come in and speak to Father,” said Domenico. “Don’t stand there gaping.”

“This is my grand-daughter,” he explained. The little girl seemed timid, frightened at my presence. But she came over, and shook hands with a smiling face, then went out by the back door.

I rose and thanked Domenico and Theresa for their kindness and hospitality. I paused a moment on the threshold to adjust my eyes to the burning sunlight, then set off resolutely, for the long, hot walk to Nettuno. Maria had made this journey before me; it seemed as if I was following her. No one else was on the road at that time of day. I walked alone with my thoughts.

Maria. . .Angelina – girl of yesterday. . .youngster of today.

Styles of dress have changed. The light dress and straw hat have replaced the heavy skirts and shawls. Long braided hair had given place to a simple cut. Adornments and mannerisms have altered. But deep down there has been no transformation. A girl’s real beauty still comes from within. It is a reflection of her soul, shining through her pure eyes, radiating her whole body. It is something with which she makes people aware of truth, of beauty and the goodness of God reflected in herself.

Let us go back some ninety years to the important story of how Maria actually won her victory over sin.

1

**MARIA'S FIRST JOURNEY**

“Assunta, I tell you, we’d do better if we leave this place,” Luigi exclaimed.

Assunta only bent over the fire and banked the embers. The flame glowed warmly. Her three children gathered about the hearth and spread their hands to the heat. Assunta straightened up, heaved a sigh, but said nothing.

“You know, I was talking to the Cimarellis last night. They are leaving in the spring,” he continued.

It came as a shock to her! Assunta realized immediately that her husband had reached a decision with their neighbours. He was trying to break the news gently to her.

For several winters now the idea of immigrating had been tempting him. Luigi was a hard-working farmer, a man of action. On bad days when snow and rain confined him to pacing the kitchen, going from window to door, to the cupboard and back again, he could not help but complain about the land and climate. It was useless arguing with him then, thought Assunta. She had tried it often. She had learned that discussion was futile. So now she was ready to accept whatever she could not prevent. But she fought back her tears.

“Then you want us to leave with them?” she asked.

Her voice was calm and slow. Luigi looked at her: her eyes remained fixed on the flames. She seemed resigned. He had not expected so easy a victory.

“Yes, Assunta, we must. We can no longer remain here. Over there you will be much happier, believe me. In the neighbourhood of Rome there are vacant farms and lands to be leased. We will find ourselves something worthwhile.”

The storm-door slammed! A blizzard was at its height. Snow was falling heavily. Winters were severe around Ancona. Though one might well love that countryside for its pure air and steep pathways, when storms arose it could become a land of misery.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

There was a long silence in the Goretti home. The two boys and Maria continued to warm themselves by the fire. Assunta passed a damp cloth over the table she had just cleared.

She was a farm-bred, healthy woman, in her early thirties. Slender still in spite of the loose skirts that hung in folds about her. Luigi watched her work. Her slow movements spoke more eloquently than words of painful fatigue and discouragement. He understood she had just accepted the hardest sacrifice of her life. She was attached to this village, where she had always lived; where her parents lay buried. She had known no other horizon than the mountain slopes. With him it was different. As a soldier he had traveled over the Appennines and through the fertile plains beyond.

“Why should one kill oneself in these mountains, steeped in rock, rubble, and harsh weather for sentimental reason?” He had asked himself time and time again.

The cold weather came in through the door. The three youngsters were turning sleepy by the hearth. Assunta was now washing the dishes. Luigi’s anguish mounted. With his fingernail he scraped a hole in the frost on the windowpane. He saw a huge blanket of white covering everything and the snow continuing. There was no end to it, the stone bench and the rose bushes were hidden from sight.

Then a little hand slipped into his own. He lowered his eyes, and the hard lines in his face softened. It was his darling Maria who had come and snuggled up to him. He kissed her forehead and ran his fingers through her long chestnut hair. This little girl of six was his favourite. She had indeed a temper that broke out occasionally, but in her calmer moments she was so affectionate and sweet! She turned her limpid eyes to look up to her father and begged him to take her in his arms. Her rosy cheeks reminded Luigi of warm sunshine blazing beyond the Appennines to the shores of the Mediterranean.

Later, when the children had been put to bed, Assunta and Luigi sat long before the fire and spoke in hushed voices. Maria was listening. She heard them speak of a long journey. In her sleep she dreamt marvelous happenings.

At length the winter was over. The snow melted and rivers rushed madly down to the sea. Then one bright morning Luigi loaded his cart, hitched

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

up his oxen and drove slowly away from Corinaldo. All he had was his household goods and a few hundred lire, for he had sold his cottage and his field. The two boys Angelo and Marino, ages nine and four, played amid the bundles of belongings, Assunta, sitting in front with Maria and Luigi, was nursing a new-born child, Alessandro.

The Cimarelli cart followed behind them. Domenico and Luigi had always been close neighbours. Theresa and Assunta, friends from childhood, did not wish to be separated for anything in the world.

Together the two families crossed the Appennines. Together they followed the winding road towards Rome. It took them several weeks to make the two-hundred mile journey by ox cart. At times, Luigi walked behind, deep in thought.

Maria watched the white mountain peaks fade in the distance. In her young mind would always be impressed that last picture—the great snowy heights of Corinaldo reaching heavenward.

2

## HOME IN THE SWAMPLAND

They arrived at last in Rome, Luigi soon began to think it were better had they never come!

To these simple farmers, the great city was a universe. For two days the Gorettis and Cimarellis wandered the streets of Rome. They knew not where to go, helplessly wandering about, retracing their steps. A dozen times they passed the same place without noticing it. They visited churches, prayed before the Virgin's statues, lit candles, called on the saints. Despite their prayers, a pitiless fate seemed to be steering them toward their ruin.

At last, from a chance acquaintance they learned that Count Mazzoleni owned rich lands in the neighbourhood of Nettuno. He rented them out, they were told, at a reasonable price. And, better still, he ceded them on a profit-sharing basis. They were supposed to be good farms, lands that furnished a rich livelihood, regardless of the season. There were swamps there, too, and the climate was damp. But that should not deter anyone.

Luigi and Domenico thanked the good man and set off without further delay. If only they had known what lay in store for them.

As they approached the marshes the air became heavy. Heavy, too, was the cart in which sat the children and who, tired of their cramped quarters, began to complain. Maria alone was patient and quiet. With her little legs hanging over the back of the cart, she thought of many things. The heavy wheels rumbled over the road. She was not worried or concerned about where this strange adventure would end, and it little mattered to her where they would be by dusk. She noted that they were leaving behind the city. Little by little all that great world was left behind – its many people, its beautiful churches, its great houses stuck close together. Soon they were out in the open country, and vineyards and fields of wheat and corn appeared. It was hot and she began to thirst, but father had said there would be no stopping. The oxen trudged along. Luigi was whistling in contentment. Domenico cracked his whip.

When they saw afar off the first houses of Ferriere they sighed with relief. The journey had been long. Luigi stood up and peered through the trees at a turn in the road. He noticed that there was no church spire. But

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

then you cannot expect everything. He urged on his beast, and, in short time, they were in the midst of the poor village. No shops welcomed them. Not a door or window was ajar along the dirty road. It was siesta time, apparently strictly observed. Luigi knocked three times at the door of one of the houses. There was no reply but movements within gave hope of an answer. The door was unbolting, and a wrinkled old lady peered through the opening with blinding eyes.

“Could you tell me where to find Count Mazzoleni’s farm?” Luigi asked. The old woman was not quite awake, so it was necessary to repeat louder.

“Oh, you mean the old cheese factory!” She took a step forward out of the doorway. “It’s over there on your left. The last place, you can’t miss it.”

They found the place all right. It was an oblong, tile-roofed building set on a rise above the ground. All about it was a flat, low-lying, swampy farm. The children piled out of the cart and began exploring the yard. The heat was intense. There were no trees about the place, nor shade of any description. Everything seemed dead. The hen house was empty and the stone-watering trough scorched and dry.

Luigi and Assunta looked over the farm, visited the stable and shed, went through the kitchen, the two rooms of the house, then climbed the stairway to the upper floor. They met neither dog nor cat, nor any other living thing. And thus, without arousing anyone, they took possession of the Ferriere farm.

Next day the arrangements were settled. Luigi and Domenico became share-croppers of Count Mazzoleni. The Cirmarellis took over the house adjacent to that of the Gorettis. They were not partners, just neighbours.

Assunta very quickly had the place cleaned and swept. It was a difficult situation for this family, accustomed as it was to the invigorating air of mountain heights, to now, reconcile to being stranded on the edge of the Pontine Marshes, damp and unhealthy, a hotbed of malaria.

Luigi set about his work courageously. No longer was he working with little plots, as at Corinaldo. Here low-lying fields and meadows stretched out in a flat panorama.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

For the past three years the property had been neglected. The preceding hireling had lived on the spontaneous yield of the ground, without taking any pains to develop any resources. Neglected ditches failed to carry off the excess water which spread out in pools over the land. With great energy Luigi tried to bring the land under control. Ditch digging occupied him for the rest of the summer. The water seeped off and he began ploughing. By fall he was able to sow eight acres in wheat and barley.

Such harsh labour in the heat and damp of the Pontian Marshes was too much, even for a robust farmer of the mountain country. Luigi's strength was undermined. The first attacks of fever were light, so he paid no attention to them. Assunta urged him to rest. But Luigi could not remain idle, and set out to work. A few days later, he began to cough; and then he was obliged to admit his defeat. For a week he lay in bed suffering from bronchial trouble. No sooner was he feeling better than he set about working on the roadway. For two weeks he hauled rocks and stone from the quarry. Next the hedge trimming and fire-wood supply took up his attention. All through the winter he worked desperately, despite continued weakness and a bothersome cough.

As soon as the land was in shape, Luigi undertook repair of the buildings. The repair of roofs, the cleaning of lofts, making partitions in the stable...; one task followed another, each project gave rise to others. He went on without taking any rest, without a thought of the dreaded disease that had begun to undermine his health.

Meanwhile, at home, Maria was growing rapidly. Her little eyes were opening upon life, her little hands learning the family arts. No one was aware, least of all Maria, that before long death would come to pay a visit.

3

**COMING OF THE SERENELLIS**

Harvest time came. Luigi sharpened his sickle and set out early. He was counting on doing the harvesting alone. If he did not hire any one to help bring in the crop, there would be more sustenance for his family. That proved to be his last imprudence.

In the first days of harvesting all went well. The sheaves, accumulating behind him, gave ardour to his task. For hours at a time he bent over the furrows, dripping with sweat, not pausing for an instant. It was foolish of him to work so hard. Each evening he came back more worn out than the preceding day. He went to bed with hardly any supper. At this rate he was not able to carry on. Towards the end of the week he felt dizzy; for one whole afternoon he lay helpless in the field. When he finally struggled back to the house, he was breathing heavily.

The next morning he was unable to go to Sunday Mass at Campo Morto. On Monday he was prostrate in bed, not able to return to work. That same morning Count Mazzoleni came to examine his Ferriere farm. He was quite dismayed to see Luigi's harvest delayed more than that of his neighbours. Their crops were practically in the barn, while Luigi's crops, half-mowed, lay limp in the field. The grain was ready and any day it might fall. The Count could not understand why the bundles had not been gathered up. Luigi was apparently slowing down on the job, he believed Mazzoleni was quite angry and resolved to let his hired man know his mind. He stormed into their house and gave vent his wrath upon the helpless invalid.

Luigi could not reply. He tried to explain then finished by admitting that he would not be able to bring in the harvest. He would have to have help, at least for this time. After that he would be able to maintain the farm.

"I'll send you two men tomorrow," Count Mazzoleni cut in. "The harvest can't wait any longer! Giovanni Serenelli and his son came to this morning, looking for work. I'll send them to you, and you can make your own arrangements."

Luigi remained silent. His weakness plus the thought of having to share the fruits of his labours was heavy upon him. No matter what the price, there was no other solution. It remained to be seen how Assunta

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

would take it. He called his wife and decided to tell her, but then his courage failed him. She, too, was over-burdened with work. A few weeks ago she had given birth to Ersilia; she was always occupied with the children and could not even sit down for supper. Luigi watched her straighten up the sick-room and kept silent. He realized that two more men in the house would be a terrible burden on her. She certainly would not agree to lodge and feed them.

Slowly, plans turned about in his mind. He could lend them his ox-cart to take them to Nettuno each evening and to come back again in the morning. Or, again, he might find them lodging in the village, somewhere. But each idea was impractical – lack of time, lack of lodging. Besides, he was not able to hire them at a fixed salary. He had not even fifty lire to his name. Of necessity he must take them into partnership and accede them a part of the house. Another series of insurmountable difficulties crowded his mind.

Luigi was not well, his troubles were wearing him down. When the children were asleep, Assunta returned. The husband and wife said their evening prayers together and put out the light. ‘Tomorrow,’ Luigi thought, ‘I’ll tell her.’ He made a great effort to lose his troubles in sleep.

Giovanni Serenelli and his son knocked on their door early next morning and introduced themselves in the provincial speech of Ancona. At first, Assunta did not understand the object of their visit. As she dressed the children in the bedroom she followed the conversation in the kitchen. They spoke in her native dialect and of persons and places that were dear to her. Giovanni seemed to be about sixty. He had an easy flow of speech and knew how to touch Luigi with a recital of his miseries. His wife had died in an insane asylum. Another son was still there. The other children were married and settled near Ancona. He was left alone and penniless with this youngest son, Alexander. Luigi looked at the young man. He was well-built and apparently strong beyond his eighteen years.

At length they came to the vital question. Giovanni proposed sharing work and profits on a fifty-fifty basis. “Count Mazzoleni,” he said, “proposed that arrangement last evening. Besides, we don’t need much in the way of lodging. We could all eat together and we’ll get along fine.”

Old Serenelli was very amicable and would not hear of detailed conditions. What he wanted most, he said, was a home and family life; he had suffered enough loneliness since the death of his wife.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

Luigi was touched with sympathy and gave in. even Assunta did not dare interfere. The deal was concluded; and the newcomers began immediately.

The following Monday Luigi accompanied Giovanni and his son to Nettuno to get their furniture and belongings. The trio returned together. Two iron beds were set up in a room Assunta had prepared. Their meatloaf and bread were put in the cupboard along with the Goretti food supply. Their clothing was hung in the family press. In the evening they supped together. Their common life had began.

4

## MISUNDERSTANDING AND WARNING

For the first few weeks, all went well in the Goretti home. It is easy to get along with those hailing from one's own native place and speaking one's own dialect. Giovanni and Alexander were out to work early; the harvest was under control. Assunta prepared her best meals. The children were happy and after work-hours played with the new boy. He taught them how to catch birds. He would make reed whistles. They were fascinated by the things that he could do. A bit of joy returned to the Goretti household. The sheaves of wheat piled up in the barn. 'Better days are coming for us,' thought Luigi.

As long as the heavy work lasted, there was no misunderstanding or discussion. The newcomers were hard workers. They lost no time, and in the evening they were too tired to wrangle. After the harvest, the sale of the produce and ploughing kept them busy.

Then winter set in with its long days of rain and idleness. Time hung on their hands. Old Serenelli took to drinking. The wine of the southern lands is strong and, though he rarely became drunk, his character soured. He was irritable, overbearing, and dissatisfied.

Alexander, too, began to show evil tendencies. Having lost his mother in childhood, there was a void in his heart. He resented the fact that he had been left in the careless tutelage of a cousin, then of an aunt. His own father had taken no interest in him. At the age of twelve, Alexander had found work with the stevedores. In that first apprenticeship he had learned the foulest language of men at sea, he would curse and swear at the least provocation. At fifteen he led a lonely life. His character was warped: the family life at Ferriere could not alter it.

He became increasingly taciturn, shunned the children, had no friends, and visited no one. When the others went to Mass at Nettuno or Campo Morto, he went off by himself. Assunta noted that he went regularly to a news-stand, and came back with a bundle of lurid magazines. He would then lock himself in his room and would not come out for the rest of the day. Such brooding was bad for him. His manner changed; something of the sneak appeared in his look. Assunta became alarmed. She wondered what was going on in his mind. Soon, to her grief she would learn.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

The next time Assunta cleaned out Alexander's room she saw to her dismay that he had clipped a number of immodest pictures from magazines, and hung them around his bed. Her first impulse was to tear them out and throw them into the fire. But she thought that would only start a quarrel and bring more trouble into the home. Perhaps it would be better not to interfere. I am not, after all, responsible for his conduct. His father is aware of these things and it was up to him to take action. But Assunta resolved to watch carefully her eldest son, Angelo. He was approaching his teens and the evil influence of a good-for-nothing might lead him astray. So she forbade him strictly to enter the Serenelli room. She did not breathe a word, even to Luigi, of her discovery.

Things went from bad to worse. Luigi suspected that Giovanni was slyly disposing of grain from their common store. This matter needed to be settled. He proposed a separation in equal lots of their produce. Their terms of agreement as friends needed to be made practical. Also Giovanni was becoming rather exacting. There were quarrels and harsh words. They might have come to blows had not Luigi ceded for the sake of peace in the home.

The poor man, Luigi sighed for his mountain home. He regretted much especially that these two men had been admitted into his fellowship. If he could but stand up against them and emphasise his paternal authority! But he felt weak before them and capitulated. Malaria had undermined his strength. During the winter, malaria had taken control of his life.

By spring a subtle apathy came over him. Chills came and went at intervals; but he held on stubbornly. He tried not to complain and went out to work with apparently the same ardour, only he never seemed to urge his oxen on as before. In the evening he would sit down as soon as he entered the house, and eat very little. Assunta noted his exhaustion, his pail complexion, and the dark circles under his eyes. But what could she do? She dare not say anything. The contract of work must be kept.

Toward the end of April Luigi went to bed. The sickness was making great strides. Maria would run over to Nettuno for quinine, but he had little relief. In less than ten days Luigi's strength was gone. His breathing was quick and measured. His pale arms lay limp on the covers. The little children, not too well understanding the significance, knelt about his bed in prayer. Maria especially, his own little Maria, redoubled her fervent prayers; she wept in silence.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

One afternoon Luigi had a spasm of suffocation. He threw his head back and remained still, his hands tense. Assunta was alarmed. Giovanni and Alexander were out in the fields. She sent Maria in haste to get help. The little girl hurried out and notified all the neighbours. When she got back Luigi had regained consciousness. She went over to his bed. A smile of tenderness played about his lips, and with his icy hand he touched the moist forehead of his darling daughter.

“How warm you are, Maria, where have you been?” The little girl hesitated a moment and then whispered: ‘It is nothing, Papa, I just ran in from outside.’”

She took the trembling hand of her father in her own little hands and kissed it.

A few days later Luigi asked for the priest. It was his journey’s end. The neighbours assembled silently in the room of the dying man. Assunta had placed a crucifix and two candles on the white cover over a little table. Holy water and twig were there too, with a few pieces of cotton. They knelt to recite the rosary while waiting for the priest. Luigi followed the prayers. His lips moved and he tried to answer aloud. Then he drifted off into a sleep and, in his last dream memories returned.

He saw again the low cottages with their red-tiled roofs on the mountain slope at Corinaldo. He saw the lofty bell-tower from where the Adriatic was visible. Wind whistled through the valley and shook the olive trees. Sheets were spread beneath the branches to catch precious fruit. The oil-press turned in the yard. Again he climbed the pathway to his field, but it was steeper now and his breath came short. Pictures became distorted in his imagination.

He opened his eyes. The candles were lit. He looked about at all the neighbours praying. All were hushed in silence. He seemed to be looking for someone. Finally his eyes, that of a dying man, glowed like embers in the hearth of a darkened room. Giovanni and Alexander were standing there in the doorway.

Luigi wanted to cry out but was unable to do so. He tried to rise but fell back on the pillow. Assunta leaned over him. He murmured in a broken voice that only she could hear. “Assunta. . .go back . . .to Corinaldo.”

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

When the priest came Luigi was breathing lightly, but he was still fully conscious. They were left alone. He received the Anointing of the Sick and answered to the Last Blessing. He seemed more calm now. Yet from time to time he raised himself and repeated with suppliant haggard eyes: “Assunta. . .go back to Corinaldo. . .go back to Corinaldo.”

That same evening he died.

5

**MARIA'S HAPPIEST DAY**

“Mother, when will I make my First Holy Communion? I can no longer live without Jesus.”

It was the month of June 1901. Maria Goretti would soon be eleven. At that time it was not customary to receive the First Holy Communion before twelve, except in rare cases. God knows with what ardour the lovely girl longed for that happy day. Divine grace was working within her soul with such strength that it had already aroused an insatiable hunger for the Holy Communion.

“Your First Holy Communion? But, my child,” replied the mother sadly, “how can you do it? You can’t read...and I have nothing to pay for your dress and slippers. We have no time to spare; there is so much work to be done here.”

“At that rate I can never make my First Holy Communion,” Maria pleaded, “and I want Jesus so badly!”

“What can your poor mother do? It hurts me to see you grow up without instruction, like animals in the field.”

“Well, mother, if that is the case, don’t worry. God will see to it. There is a lady at Conca, Elvira Schiassi, who can read. I will hurry through the housework, if you will let me go to Conca to learn the Catechism. Besides, Dom Paliana comes from Citerna every Sunday to teach religion. He will instruct me along with the other children preparing for First Communion.

The mother consented to the proposal, and for eleven months Maria prepared for that great moment when Jesus would come to her as the Bread of Life. Her First Holy Communion was a triumph of her tenacious piety and not the rather rigid piety of her mother. Without that tenacity and constancy she would have died probably without ever having received Jesus.

Once the decision was made, Assunta saw to it that her daughter received instruction. Sometimes she took Maria to Campo Morto or to Conca. She would send Maria to the priest at Nettuno for instruction that she might learn to go to Confession and prepare for Holy Communion.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

As the great day approached, Assunta began to wonder if her daughter was really ready. Did she understand the act she was about to perform? Poor Assunta was troubled with anxieties and responsibilities for her Maria. Finally, she set the matter before Dom Temistocle Signori, the Archpriest of Nettuno.

The wise and holy Dom Signori examined the girl. He was filled with admiration at her answers and expressed his complete satisfaction. “Be at ease, good mother. Your daughter is very well prepared. Place her under the protective mantle of Mary, Mother of Jesus, and have no fear.”

Assunta followed the priest’s advice, and years later she was able to say: “My Maria made her First Holy Communion like a saint.”

From that day Maria intensified her piety and recollection, her obedience to her mother, and her care of her brothers and sisters. Playthings and nice clothes had no interest for her. She was busy preparing her soul for her Jesus. One day she returned home beaming. “Mamma Mia! Dom Signori said I would be making my First Holy Communion on the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ!”

The whole Ferriere hamlet took part in her adornment for that great event. One family furnished slippers, another the veil, a third a crown of flowers. Assunta offered her own earring to enhance the beauty of her daughter. Maria was full of expectation. With tears of joy and sorrow she knelt before her mother, her brothers, her sisters and her neighbours, and she asked pardon of her faults.

Twelve more girls and two boys were in the First Communion Class. A priest, Father Jerome, from Nettuno, was the president of the Eucharist. During the sermon he spoke to the children in fervent words on the great love of Jesus for them. He exhorted them sincerely to preserve their souls pure and innocent, and **to die rather than commit a sin**. He recommended to them the practice of praying to the Mother of Jesus.

Such words of advice added force to the already growing flame of love in Maria’s heart. What must have been her words of love to Jesus? What did the Divine Host say to her at this great tryst of two inflamed hearts? The glow on her countenance, the modesty and gravity in bearing, showed but a feeble glimmer of the Light that burned within Maria. While the others hastened to the sacristy after Mass to thank Father Jerome, Maria remained behind, wrapped in silent prayer before her God.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

A light cloud of sadness veiled her complete joy of this day... the remembrance of her dead father. Maria loved her hard-working father, as only an eldest daughter of the poor can love a parent. The hardships of his life were ever present to her mind. His great sacrifice and pain at having to quit this life before having provided for his family were deeply impressed on her memory. Each evening before retiring to rest, she prayed for the repose of his soul. Whenever she passed the cemetery where he lay, she paused to say a prayer for him. And now, while furtive tears stole down her cheeks, from her heart a fervent prayer went heavenward for her dear father.

Throughout the whole day Maria remained under the spell of Jesus' visit of that morning. A visible joy beamed in her countenance and coloured all her words and actions. Maria, ever docile and obliging, now became ardent in her endeavour to serve and to please. The good Assunta took the occasion to urge on her daughter: "You have received Jesus today. You must try ever so hard now to be good and pleasing to Him." Toward evening Maria's thoughts started in a new direction. "Oh! When shall I be able to receive Jesus again?"

So ended the happiest day of her life. The King of Martyrs, Jesus Christ, had come to nourish with His own presence this lily of purity. The day was not far distant when He would come again and take her home to Heaven.

6

**THE LITTLE WOMAN**

Years passed since Luigi had passed away. Life at Ferriere became very sad. Assunta experienced many an hour of deep distress. At first she had hoped to return to her native village. Deep down she had long been home-sick; besides it was the last wish of her poor Luigi. However it was necessary to set aside this dream. How could she undertake such a journey with her children with neither money nor assistance? Angelo, her eldest, was hardly thirteen. She resigned herself to remaining at Ferriere, where Giovanni now had become master. He was harsh; he would not accept her for work in the fields except on condition that Maria, now going on twelve, took her place in the house.

Maria had become one of those children whom hardship and bitter experiences of life make serious beyond their years. She went about her chores with scarcely a smile on her face, more a bit of sadness in her deep brown eyes. Overnight, she had changed from a laughing girl to a quiet little woman, preoccupied with her responsibilities.

Maria managed the household and cared for her little brothers and sisters. Meals, washing and mending occupied her from early morning to late night. At any hour of the day she could be seen working about in the kitchen, her long chestnut hair curling over her shoulders. It was her pleasure to be helpful, obedient and obliging. If, at times, she paused at the door and gazed dreamily at the distant horizon, it was because the first troublesome moods of adolescence had begun to steal over her.

She was tall for her age. One would have taken Maria to be fourteen or fifteen. She was slender and graceful with the black shawl over her shoulders, she looked more like a young lady of tomorrow. Her soul at peace, she quickly took up each duty.

Unfortunately, Maria had never gone to school. She knew not how to read or write. Like her mother before her, she was a poor, unlettered, country girl. Her prayers she learned by heart from Assunta, and now, in turn, she was teaching them to her brothers and sisters. When she made her First Holy Communion, she was behind the other children of her group. To be the poorest, the most humble, was her lot in life. She did not realize, though, that she was also the richest in virtue and most loved by Him who on that day had given Himself to her.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

Soon that great day slipped into memory. It seemed as though Maria would be lost in the obscurity of the swampland. But God had chosen her to do great deeds early. She heard no mysterious voices, like Joan, calling her to feats of battle. The bread she gave to the poor did not turn into roses in her apron, as with Germaine. Unlike Bernadette and Therese, the Mother Mary did not smile on her. Maria expected nothing. Between her morning prayer and her nightly remembrance of her father, she did only the holy will of God.

One morning, not long after her First Holy Communion, Maria had gone down to the public well in Ferriere to draw water. While waiting for her bucket to fill, she had overhead one of the village girls telling her boyfriend and off-colour joke. Maria recognized this girl as one of her companions in the First Holy Communion class . . . and was shocked. “How could she so soon forget Jesus?”

Hurrying home, Maria could not contain herself. Hardly had she entered the door when words tumbled out in a torrent: “Mama! Do you know ... at the well, the girl said terrible things...and the boy laughed....

“Why did you then listen?” chided her mother.

“I couldn’t help it! I had to wait for my bucket to fill.”

“Yes,” Assunta nodded wisely. “I know you are astonished that girls and boys talk about such things. Just remember, if you were to say such things, people would be even more astonished at you.”

Maria could hardly believe her ears. Did her mother really think that she would ever offend God in that dreadful way? “Talk about such things,” she said with amazement in her voice, “Why! I would rather die....”

But her life was not serious. At rare intervals there were innocent distractions in her life. On some days with her godmother and neighbour, Theresa Cimarelli, she went to market at Nettuno to sell vegetables and eggs. Maria enjoyed those seven miles of pleasant talk, while their cart jogged along and pigeons cooed in their cages. She, who was so silent, now had much to say. Maria at these times recaptured her childhood gaiety.

These hours of fun were few and passed all too quickly. Always she would pick up her daily routine again, and muster her courage to begin anew, without complaint, the same old tasks.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

Little did this girl realize the way that God was leading her to ...  
and that on one of those tomorrows she would need the strength of a  
martyr!

7

**THE ANGEL OF DARKNESS**

It was getting close to the end of June. The day had been very sultry and now at night there was a bit of a cool air creeping up from the swamps. Toads and frogs could be heard croaking for rain, while a hoot-owl, nestled in the hollow of an elm, was sending forth his stupid wail into the night.

At the Ferriere home behind closed doors, the kitchen fire smouldered to ashes. All of them were wrapped in sleep, save the white form at the bedside.

Maria had not gone to rest. Kneeling in her night gown for evening prayer, she continued indefinitely. Strange things of that day had upset her mind. The examination of conscience, ordinarily so easy and rapid, now became painful and complicated. There were things that she did not understand well. An evil, she could only guess but yet not know, troubled her conscience. She was filled with shame, with deep trouble, and wondered if she had offended her God. Thoughts about Alexander frightened her.

And so, before God, she recalled everything that had happened. One day last week her mother had been too tired to go to work and had remained at home. She had sent Maria to take her place in the fields. It was a pleasure for the girl to help. She had set out with Alexander to hoe at the other end of the property. They were alone in the field and, worked side by side for more than an hour. Suddenly Alexander, throwing aside his hoe, crossed the furrow that separated them, and stood before her.

He seemed beside himself. His eyes were alight with a strange fire. He seized Maria by the arms, stammering words that she could not understand. She was stupefied, unable to understand what he wanted. Then it suddenly dawned on her that he was soliciting her to sin. Indignation brought the blood to her face. Violently she shook herself free and fled down the field. She hid herself in a hedge till noon, and later went in for lunch. In the afternoon she pretended to return to work with him, but under the pretext of getting a basket from the barn, she had climbed into the loft and buried herself in the hay, where she remained motionless for three hours.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

Thereafter, for a whole week she avoided him. Never would she let herself be caught alone with him. She seemed confident he would not try again.

But this morning he had surprised her. She had been making the beds. There was no one in the house. He had entered from behind and taken hold of her. She had sunk her nails into his face until he cursed in pain and let her go. Immediately she had started for the door to seek help, but he was there before her and silenced her with a threat: "If you say a word to your mother. I'll kill you." And he shook his fist before her frightened eyes.

Alexander then went out; she locked herself in her own room. She feared he might return and so was afraid even to go to the kitchen to prepare a meal. When, through the window, she saw her mother returning from work, she hurried to start the fire. But it was too late. The soup was not warm at noon; she had not had time to set the table. She received a harsh scolding from her mother. Alexander, seated before an empty plate, laughed and made sport of her.

How it pained her! Once she thought she would tell her mother everything. The words were there on her tongue, but she closed her lips. What was the use? Her poor mother could do nothing. And if the evil intentions of Alexander were known, there would be more wranglings with the Serenellis. Life would become unbearable. Besides, too, he had said he would kill her. It would be best to keep her secret to herself.

But tonight at her bedside, reliving the painful hours of this sad day, she was unable to keep back her tears. Her little body trembled and a wave of fear swept over her. Her throat was dry and tense. She buried her head in the covers; her prayer terminated in bitter sobs.

This was not a childish vexation. From now on the soul of Maria changes. A veil of sadness clouds her eyes. Her smile is gone. There is nothing left of the little girl, neither laughter nor the playfulness that at times betrayed her twelve years. She understands at last. Her actions are measured, her spoken words rarely heard. She avoids sitting down at the common table and flees from Alexander as one might flee from plague.

But he did seek her out, as she soon perceived. He did wait, he watched and followed her about the house. The cat and mouse tactic had begun, a duel unsuspected even by Assunta. Maria becomes increasingly

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

reticent, the terrible threat ringing in her ears. Each time she sees Alexander she reads in his eyes; 'If you speak, I'll kill you.'

From then on Maria lived under a reign of terror. When she was small, the ghost-stories told by her father did not even frighten her; she laughed heartily at them. When she was eight she was not afraid to cross the yard in the blackest of nights to shut the door of the hen-house. And, on the way to Mass at Conca, she would run ahead of the rest to beat off the snakes that lay in their path. She could not remember ever having been afraid. But now, whenever alone, an indescribable anguish chilled her heart. Alexander might try again. Alexander might surprise her. Alexander might overcome her. She felt so weak.

But a voice in prayer reassures her and tells her she is strong.

Who could overcome God, living in her heart?

8

**MARIA FACES DEATH**

It is midday. The sun beats down on the Ferriere farm. A burning wind, storm laden, sweeps across the swamps, licks the walls of the house and enters the kitchen through the open door.

The Gorettis and Serenellis as usual are seated around the table. They have just finished their lunch. It is rather hot, so they delay a bit before returning to work. If Giovanni would only permit, they would gladly have their siesta. But he insists on their working immediately after lunch; they await his orders. Maria is doing the dishes, and there is the clatter of the plates.

The hay and straw are already in the barn. But the unthreshed beans are still spread out in the yard, drying in the sun.

“Go harness the team!” Giovanni orders. “There is no time to lose! We will have rain this afternoon. The beans will have to be stored before it rains.

Slowly Alexander and Angelo rise, Assunta clears the table and pushes the benches beneath it. The other children scamper out of doors. Giovanni alone does not move. “Put the beans into bags and place them up into the loft!” He continues ordering. However Alexander does not hear his father. He has another project taking shape on in his mind. For the past hour, his eyes have followed Maria. Before returning to work, he goes to his room where he is heard fumbling in his closet.

“Maria, I have a torn shirt that needs mending,” he call out. “I’ll need it to go to Mass tomorrow. You’ll have to repair it for me this afternoon. I’m leaving it for you on my bed.” He says it all with studied nonchalance.

The dishwashing stops; Maria does not reply. Within the girl’s heart emotions struggle for expression. She feels like crying out: “No! I have no time.....!”; that cry would have relieved her. But, in spite of an instinctive repugnance to his order, she consented again to be of service. True charity came from her heart.

While he was harnessing the oxen in the stable, Alexander’s thoughts pursued their evil trend. His plans took definite shape. He visualized the scene. Maria will be quietly seated by the bed and there

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

will be nobody in the house but the baby, Theresa. He will hurry in, close the kitchen door, then lock the door of his room. It will be so easy!

“Giddap!” he calls to the oxen. Then leaping on the cart he drives out into the yard.

For want of a thrasher, the Gorettis improvised a method of their own. The beanstalks were heaped in the yard and the cart loaded with youngsters passed and repassed over the piles. Meanwhile, Assunta turned and shook the lot with her fork..

Poor mother, her heart was full as she paused from time to time to witness the joy of her little ones. “Look at Angelo,” she muses, “so like his father directing the cart. What consolation he is to me – my eldest. If we can only carry on for a little while longer, perhaps things will be brighter. Then, too, there’s my Maria, so good to everyone! She is so sweet and holy. Maybe she’s a little too reserved. For the past month – especially since her First Holy Communion – she seems to be timid and worried. She hardly speaks and her eyes are always downcast. She blushes so easily – her prayers are prolonged. What can be taking place in her soul? Apparently, she has some secret....but then she is at an age when girls are easily disturbed.

Thus while the oxen turned on the thrashing floor and the children shouted and laughed, Assunta pursued the thread of her maternal love – her only joy on earth. Suddenly Alexander stops the cart and jumps down. “take my place for a while,” he tells Assunta, “I forgot my handkerchief in my room. I’ll be right back.” His forehead is moist with sweat.

Obediently, Assunta puts aside her fork and climbs up in his place. The cart is off again and the joy of children and mother is doubled.

As Alexander disappears through the doorway, a flash of lightening is seen on the horizon and a clap of thunder follows. The storm is approaching. The noon-day devil prowls about the Ferriere farm.

Meanwhile, Maria is seated on the porch above the kitchen door. It is much too hot within the house. She has taken Alexander’s shirt and found a whole sleeve torn. It will be a long job, but courageously she sets about it and her needle flies to and fro. Beside her on a blanket is her baby sister, Theresa, fast asleep. From the other side of the house comes hardly a sound to disturb her contentment and hope. Alone she dreams of the morrow.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

“Tomorrow will be Sunday, the feast of the Precious Blood. I will start early with Theresa Cimarelli,” she tells herself, “so we can get to Confession and Communion.”

Her little soul expands already in anticipation. She has so much to tell, so much advice to seek, such great strength to receive from the Lord.

Suddenly Alexander looks out of the kitchen door. Maria is filled with apprehension. He has seen her on the porch. Up the stairway he comes and without a word passes into the bedroom. Why has he come back? She can hear him fumbling with tools in the end room. What is he up to? Perhaps he forgot to take a sickle with him. Then he reappears in the doorway.

“Maria, come here!”

His voice is harsh, she is thoroughly frightened. The sewing drops to her lap; she neither answers nor moves.

“Do you hear me! Come here immediately!” Alexander has already become very impatient. He grabs her by the arm and though clings to the banister and calls for help, it is of no avail. He drags her roughly into the room and bolts the door. She is now his prisoner with little chance of escape. The bird is caught; a fiendish grin curls Alexander’s lips.

Only too well does she now understand his intention. But in spite of the frightened sobs that reach her throat, a supernatural energy animates her. She will defend herself to the end – even to death, if need be.

“Give in Maria. Let me have you, or else...” And he holds up a knife threateningly.

Frantically, Maria wenches free and screams for help....but no one can hear her amid the noise of the cart and children and beans. Maria leaps around the table for protection, but with a laugh Alexander knocks it aside and trips her. As she falls Alexander pins her down with his knee.

“I will not take “NO” for an answer!” he snarls. “Are you going to give in, or must I kill you?”

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

Her only reply is a wild struggle for release, twisting and scratching and biting.

‘No! No! I will not! I will not!’

Alexander had not expected such resistance from her. ‘Apparently, she will not consent?’

“Why?” he argues, “Why will you not?”

“Because it is a sin. God forbids it. You will go to hell, Alexander. You will go to hell if you do it!”

Her constancy seems only to enrage him. However he knows how to silence her. He draws the cruel knife menacingly over her, and asks for the last time:

“Will you or will you not?”

For an instant Maria is quiet. She knows the danger. This brute that is crushing her with his weight is now capable of anything. He is getting beside himself with rage. His eyes are blood-shot.

She pleads, desperately: “Alexander, let me go! Let me go!”

The knife now hangs over her breast. She must choose: death or life, heaven or hell, God or Satan, sin or martyrdom. Then, in a burst of heroism, making desperate efforts to free herself, she answers him energetically, superhumanly.

“No! I will not, Alexander, no!”

Then the tragedy followed. The infuriated Alexander said later that something seemed to snap within him. With mad rage he plunged the steel knife into her breast and abdomen fourteen times in all.

“It was just like I was sticking a knife into a log,” he testified later.

Maria uttered not a cry. She did not even attempt to ward off the blows. With her right hand she tried to hold her dress modestly over her knees. Then mercifully, she lost consciousness.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

Alexander thought her dead. Dumbfounded he got up. The sight of blood had sobered him. He threw the knife behind the closet, went into his own room, and locked the door.

The sun was now flooding in through the window. Black clouds were seen in the distance; the storm had passed.

9

**HOURS OF PAIN**

The cracking of beanstalks and the shouts of the children continued in the yard. For another hour the thrashing was carried on without respite, though less hurriedly, as the threatening storm has passed. All that remained to do was to separate the chaff from the grain, and gather the precious harvest into the barn. In the evening, a bonfire of stalks would symbolize the family's joy of abundance.

Alexander had not returned to work; baby Theresa was crying on the porch; Assunta became worried.

"Mariano, go see what is keeping Alexander back; and tell Maria to look after the baby. I'm afraid the child will fall down the stairs."

Suddenly a call is heard from the house. "Assunta! Assunta! Come here!" It was Giovanni, yelling as though the house were afire. What now? surely something serious had happened!

The poor mother dropped everything; she hurried up the stairs and into the room to see Maria writhing in pain, close on her heels came her neighbours Theresa Cimarelli and faithful Domenico. All of them were filled with confusion at the sight of Maria's body covered in blood and the room in disarray. Tenderly, Domenico lifted Maria and carried her into their bedroom. The sight of the limp form of her daughter was too much for poor Assunta. She fell in a faint onto the floor.

When Assunta did revive Theresa was attending to Maria, and Giovanni was explaining his story; "I was sleeping in the shade beside the house when Baby awoke me with her crying. I didn't pay much attention at first, then I heard Maria calling out with a feeble voice from the doorway. So I got up and then I saw her fall in the doorway. She had fainted, so I shouted for Assunta and all of you. I don't know what has happened. But look, her dress is blood-stained!"

Assunta leaned over her daughter: "What's the matter, Maria did you hurt yourself?"

The girl made no reply. Apparently, she was suffocating. With her hands she was trying to undo her clothing. Her mother lent her a hand, unhooking and loosening the blouse; a trickle of red blood crept across

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

her throat. With infinite precaution, the two women raised Maria a little and slid her arms out of the sleeves, before removing the blouse. Her underclothing was all saturated with blood. The underwear, sticking to the wounds, had to be cut off, bit by bit.

On her breast near the heart the thin blade had made a narrow but deep gash. Four gashes crisscrossed her stomach. The whole of that little body was horribly torn. Blood covered the wounds and trickled in drops upon the sheet.

The heroic child did not even whimper. She was resting after the battle, enjoying a repose after victory. Her long disheveled hair formed an aureole around her head. Her discoloured lips remained closed. They had not yet revealed the name of her assailant.

“Maria, my little one, tell me what has happened? Who did this to you?”

Maria hesitated a bit, then raising her large innocent eyes to her mother, she whispered: “It was Alexander, Mama.”

“Who? Alexander! But why?”

Maria seemed to reflect before speaking. The whole drama repassed swiftly before her eyes. Then quietly she answered: “Because he wanted to commit an awful sin and I would not accede.”

Here was the secret of her martyrdom. The two women dared not pry further.

Meanwhile there was much going on outside. Domenico had hitched up his cart and had hurried off to get a doctor from Nettuno. Along the way he notified neighbours: the tragic news flew from farm to farm. “A crime had been committed at Ferriere; Maria has been attacked.”

Housework, ploughing, gardening and sheep were all abandoned, and the whole countryside seemed to flock to “the old cheese factory”. Some of the men carried pitchforks, others staves and clubs, and still others came with rifles. No one knew what to expect.

Soon the house was thronged. Women were getting in each other’s way and everybody wanted to see the little victim. She looked so sweet

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

and good! Some wept, others whispered in little groups. With each newcomer the details were told again and Alexander's name was repeated. The blood on the floor seemed to tell its own story.

Suddenly there was a commotion. Someone had discovered the knife behind the closet. Indignation flared up, tempers grew hot. "Alexander!" "Where is Alexander?"

"He must be there," shouted one of the men, trying to open his door. "But the door is barred from the inside," Several tried to open the oak panel door with force of their shoulders. Someone suggested a crow-bar. Then Count Mazzoleni came rushing in. Seeing the struggling to get at Alexander, he tried to calm them:

"No, wait, we better notify the police. They'll come and arrest him." Mazzoleni feared that these excited men might only add a murder to the first murder. So two of the farmers rushed off for the police – one to Nettuno and other to Citerna.

With so many people around and such turmoil in the next room, Maria felt terribly fatigued. In vain she begged to be left alone with her mother and god-mother. But each one thought his or her presence was necessary in the room. After Dr. Bartoli's arrival, order was restored. Everyone was put out of the house.

The doctor made his examination quickly. The case was most serious. An operation was necessary. Another messenger was sent for an ambulance to take Maria to the hospital. He administered first aid. With the help of a bed-sheet, the little body was bandaged temporarily. Precious time did slip by while waiting for the ambulance to arrive. Maria alone remained quiet. Her little body was weakening steadily. From two o'clock that afternoon she had been bleeding, and it was now six o'clock before the horse-drawn ambulance arrived.

## 10 THE FINAL STRUGGLE

The stretcher had to be brought right up to the bedside. Maria had become too limp. Painful gasps escaped her when the Doctor and Domenico aroused her, however they were so gentle. They laid her on the stretcher, covered her with a blanket, and carried her down into the ambulance waiting at the bottom of the stairway.

Neighbours crowded around to see their Maria for the last time. Her brothers and sisters climbed into the wagon to kiss her good-bye. She was haggard, pale and disfigured. Tears welled up in her dark eyes and stole furtively down her cheeks. Assunta then took her position at her head; the doctor sat up with the driver, and they were off. This was Maria's farewell to Ferriere... and theirs to her. White pigeons careened overhead turning and fluttering about the roof she had called home

Many a time had Maria traveled these seven miles of dusty road to Nettuno. Many happy trips had she made along this way with Theresa Cimarelli to sell poultry and eggs. At other times, too, she had gone this way with her dear mother to visit the Shrine of Our Lady of Grace. Then she had been able to laugh and enjoy life, which seemed pleasant in spite of hardships. But now her teeth are clenched, her face is set, and her hands clutched the sides of the stretcher. The road was rough, the horses unsteady, and with every jolt her whole body was dipped anew in a flood of pain.

“Are you suffering, my little one?” Assunta asks.

Maria made an effort to smile, “Yes, mama, a little. Have we still far to go?”

With great effort she turns her head a little to the side, trying to recognize some familiar landmark; the trees along the way, the cemetery fence, the iron cross at the fork in the road. At last they reach the bridge over the canal – the halfway mark. How long these seven miles seem to be! Pain racks her body. Even breathing is painful. Her head rests stiff on the cushion, her feverish eyes stare up into the blue heaven which never did seem so beautiful as it did now.

At a bend in the road two mounted police-men hurry past the ambulance. Between their two horses a handcuffed man was being

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

dragged, Assunta is unable to conceal her surprise! In the perspiring, dust-covered runner, she recognized Alexander. Fortunately, Maria had seen nothing.

As they entered Nettuno, crowds gathered and escorted the ambulance. The sad story had preceded them. The arrival of the criminal had been witnessed at the prison gates by a threatening tumult. But at the Orsenigo Hospital doorway, throngs gathered in silent awe. Everybody wanted to see the heroine. And they did see her as the stretcher was borne up the stairway. Buried in a wave of chestnut hair, a beautiful, innocent face looked kindly out at them and tried to smile. When the doors of the hospital shut her from their eyes, the crowd dispersed. Some were heard to murmur: "She's a real martyr."

She had not reached her full measure of suffering. A second time she had to experience the knife on her flesh. The hospital chaplain came to visit her on the operating table. She betrayed no concern, she gladly made her concession. She scarcely believed death was so near. At such early age one could not feel death's approach. The body is too well equipped for reaction against even the most severe suffering. As the priest was leaving, a surgeon whispered into his ear: "Where you have found an angel, I am afraid we will leave but a corpse."

Fourteen wounds were discovered; the intestines were torn, lungs were pierced completely through, and the heart grazed. The lower bone structure was seriously injured, showing four chest wounds and five in the abdominal region. Added to this were five minor gashes. Stitching and bandaging only added torture to the poor sufferer. In spite of her intense pain she uttered not a sound. She had no more strength left. The surgical work continued for two long hours. No anaesthetic was administered because the attendants feared peritonitis. Finally, she lost consciousness.

When Assunta entered the sick-room she thought her child was dead, and she began to cry. Little by little Maria recovered. Her eye-lids slowly opened. She called for water, but that little relief was denied her. She willingly accepted the sacrifice in remembrance of Jesus' thirst on the Cross. She was told not to speak. She had difficulty in understanding that, because she felt she was much better. Her sufferings had abated somewhat. She remained motionless. Her body was completely wrapped as in a cast. Only her arms were out-side the covers, but she could not move them without great pain. Her bloodless hands were cold and white and her feet were icy cold.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

Towards ten o'clock that night she seemed to have slipped into a coma. She moaned continually. Dr. Bartoli dropped in again before leaving the hospital for the night. He urged Assunta to go and take some rest: a nurse could remain with Maria. When finally the poor mother agreed to do so, the noise of her chair scraping the floor awoke the sufferer. She guessed that her mother was leaving. She made an effort to protest but no word was uttered. Courageous to the end, Maria accepted still another sacrifice.

Throughout the night, in a half-conscious state, Maria moaned as though hot flames touched her body. Spasms of pain racked her body. Every now and then a convulsion would bring an involuntary cry to her lips. At dawn exhausted, she fell into a laboured sleep.

At five o'clock Dr. Bartoli returned. He found Maria sleeping. Her respiration was regular but scarcely perceptible. Half an hour later she awoke with a groan. She seemed to remember nothing that had happened. When Assunta entered with the hospital chaplain a light smile passed over Maria's face. She informed her mother that she felt well, inquired where she had passed the night, spoke of her brothers and sisters, and said she would like to see them.

Maria's thoughts went back to Ferriere without fear in her heart. The name of Alexander did not cross her lips, nor did anyone dare to recall for her the tragic events of the preceding day.

When the priest offered to bring her Holy Communion, her face lit up with evident joy. She had been expecting that Heavenly Visitor. Slowly, she crossed her hands on her breast, and asked her mother to raise the pillow a bit.

Her soul was ready. Yet there remained one more heroic act before her final tryst with God. The Chaplain reminded her of how Jesus had pardoned His murderers when He died upon the Cross.

She seemed to reflect. Her eyes rested upon the crucifix on the wall. Then with a voice, expressive of her generous soul, she proclaimed.

"I, too, pardon him. I, too, wish that he comes some day to join me in heaven."

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

Assunta wept. The priest too brushed away tears as he turned to get the Blessed Sacrament. In a few moments he was back. Maria received her dear Jesus in her last Holy Communion.

At ten o'clock that morning Dr. Bartoli returned to change the dressings. Great violet scabs had formed about the wounds. Black and blue lumps now showed on the knees, the legs and elbows, indicating with what desperate fury the child had fought for freedom. But these were only slight injuries compared to the wounds she had received. The perforation of the intestines was especially grave. Internal hemorrhages were threatening a blood poisoning that could carry her off within a few hours. The doctor saw by her failing respiration that the end was not far off.

During the morning Sergeant Fantini came to question the victim; he drew up a charge sheet against Alexander. Maria answered calmly in monosyllables, without showing the least resentment. When she was asked where the dagger had struck, she pointed very simply to the wounds in her breast, adding modestly, "and elsewhere." The sergeant and the Carabinieri dared not inquire further.

When Assunta was again alone with her daughter, she asked if Alexander had not tried to seduce her at other times. Maria admitted simply that there were two other attempts rejected by her.

"But why didn't you tell me about it then?" Assunta pleaded.

"Because he said he would kill me if I did." Then with a sigh she added, "And you see, he killed me anyway."

By now Maria was failing fast. Anointing of the sick was administered. For three hours she battled with an invisible enemy. Her head tossed on the pillow, her hands were clenched.

"Alexander! Alexander, let me go... No! No! No! You will go to hell! Mama, Mama, help!"

The memory of the struggle haunted her last delirium.

There were some moments of lucidity in those trying hours. "Mama," she said, "forgive me." Her mother's answer was a warm kiss.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

The last agony began at three o'clock in the afternoon. Her eyes settled on the statue of Our Lady, placed at the foot of her bed. Suddenly her lips stammered, "Theresa." The nurse took her icy hand: "Your baby sister is not here, Maria."

A long spasm shook her whole body, her muscles tensed; she threw back her head violently against the pillow. A long gasp seemed to tear out her lungs. Then her head settled calmly on the pillow. The light in her beautiful eyes went out. Maria had breathed her last. God had rewarded her victory over sin.

It was July 2, 1902. Over the city, bells were ringing the Vespers hour. In the nearby Church, Passionists were chanting the antiphon from the Feast of the Precious Blood. "Who is this that cometh....this beautiful one... and why is thy apparel red and thy garment like them that tread in the wine press?"

## 11 EPILOGUE

It was forty-eight years later, on June 24, 1950, that over two-hundred thousand Holy Year pilgrims thronged the Piazza of the greatest Cathedral of Christianity. They heard His Holiness, Pope Pius XII, in the first out-door canonization, proclaim Saint Maria Goretti, the new patroness of Catholic Youth.

Looking up, through hear-dimmed eyes at the magnificent picture of Maria, now in glory, was Assunta Goretti. She is the first mother ever to witness her daughter's canonization. Did she, perhaps, remember in the thrill of that moment what Maria had said to cheer her up in that darkest hour at Ferriere ... "Mama, why are you crying? All will be well ... We shall be great ....we shall have everything!"

## 12

# MODEL OF YOUTH

*The address delivered by His Holiness, Pope Pius XII, at the ceremony of the Canonization of Saint Maria Goretti, in the Piazza of St. Peter, June 24, 1950.*

By the loving providence of god, we have assisted this evening at the supreme exaltation of a humble daughter of the people, in a ceremony whose solemnity and dignity are unique in the history of the Church. For tonight's canonization has been held in this vast and inviting place of mystery, made for the occasion into a sacred temple, whose vault is the open heaven that proclaims the glories of Almighty God – a choice for which you first expressed the desire before we had decided to make the disposition.

The concourse of the faithful come here for the occasion exceeds anything ever before witnessed at any other canonization. You have been lured here, we might almost say, by the entrancing beauty and intoxicating fragrance of this lily mantled with crimson whom we, only a moment ago, had the intense pleasure of inscribing in the roll of the Saints: the sweet little martyr of purity, **Maria Goretti**.

But why, beloved children, have you come here in such countless numbers to assist at her glorification? Why is it that when you read or listen to the story of her brief life, which reminds you of the limpid narrative of the Gospels in the simplicity of its details, in the colour of its circumstances, in the sudden violence of death with which it closes – why does this story move you even to tears? Why has Maria Goretti so quickly conquered your hearts, and taken the first place in your affections?

The reason is because there is still in this world, apparently sunk and immersed in the worship of pleasure, not only a meager little band of chosen souls who thirst for heaven and its pure air – but a crowd, nay, an immense multitude on whom the supernatural fragrance of purity exercises an irresistible and reassuring fascination.

If it is true that in the martyrdom of Maria Goretti there stands out above everything else her purity, it is also true that in her and with her the other Christian virtues are not less glorified. For, in her virtue of purity, we have the most basic and significant confirmation of the perfect dominion of her spirit over gross matter. In her act of supreme heroism,

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

which was not something unprepared, we see an evidence of her tender and docile love, at once obedient and practical, towards the parents of her flesh. There was also the sacrifice she had made in her difficult daily labour. There was the poverty to which she freely submitted and in which she was sustained by her confidence in heavenly Providence. There was her religion to which she tenaciously clung and which she desired to understand better with the passing of every day – which she nourished by the practice of her prayers and which thus became for her a veritable treasure in her life. There was her ardent longing to receive Jesus in the Eucharist. Finally, as the crown of her charity, there was the heroic pardon she granted the man who had murdered her. A rustic garland of flowers in the field – these virtues – but ever so dear to God, for they adorned the white veil of her First Communion, and shortly after, her martyrdom.

This sacred rite of Canonization has really developed into a spontaneous and popular demonstration in favour of purity. For although, against the light of every martyrdom there is perforce the ugly contrasting stain of some iniquity, behind that of Maria Goretti stands the spectacle of a scandal that at the beginning of this century was practically unnoticed.

During the past fifty years, coupled with what was often a weak reaction on the part of decent people, there has been a conspiracy of evil practices, propagating themselves in books and illustrations, in theatres and radio programmes, in styles and clubs and on the beaches, trying to work their way into the heart of the family and society, and doing their worst damage among the youth, even among those of the tenderest years in whom the possession of virtue is a natural inheritance.

Dearly beloved youth, young men and women, who are the special object of the love of Jesus and of us, tell me, are you resolved to resist firmly, with the help of Divine grace, against every attempt made to violate your chastity?

You fathers and mothers, tell me – in the presence of this vast multitude, and before the image of this young virgin who by her inviolate candour has stolen your hearts... in the presence of her mother who educated her to martyrdom and who, as much as she felt the bitterness of the outrage, never complained about her daughter's death and is now moved with emotion as she invokes her. Tell me, are you ready to assume the solemn duty laid upon you to watch, as far as in you lies, over your sons and daughter, to preserve and defend them against so many dangers

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

that surround them, and keep them always far away from places where they might learn the practices of impiety and of moral perversion?

Finally, all of you who are intently listening to our words, know that above the unhealthy marshes and filth of the world, stretches an immense heaven of beauty. It is the heaven which fascinated little Maria; the heaven to which she longed to ascend by the only road that leads there, which is, religion, the love of Christ, and the heroic observance of His commandments.

We greet you, O beautiful and lovable saint! Martyr on the earth and angel in heaven, look down from your glory on this people who, loves you, venerates, glorifies and exalts you. On your forehead you bear the full brilliant and victorious name of Christ. In your virginal countenance may be read the strength of your love and the constancy of your fidelity to your Divine Spouse. As His bride espoused in blood, you have traced in yourself His own image. To you, therefore, powerful intercessor of God, we entrust these our sons and daughters who are present here, and those countless others who are united with us in spirit. For which they admire your heroism, they are even more desirous of imitating your strength of faith and your inviolate purity of conduct. Fathers and mothers have recourse to you, asking you to help them in their task of education. In you, through our hands, the children and all the young people will find a safe refuge, trusting that they shall be protected from every contamination, and be able to walk the highways of life with that serenity of spirit and deep joy which is the heritage of those who are pure of heart, Amen.

## ST. MARIA GORETTI

### NOTES

1. *Martyr* – a person who accepts death for the sake of God, religion or a noble cause.
2. *Consecrated* – dedicated or set apart for God alone.
3. *Vow of virginity* – the promise to remain unmarried and chaste for the sake of God.
4. *Catechism* – the teachings of the Church arranged with a view to instruct people.
5. *Eucharistic Jesus* – Jesus is really but mysteriously present in the **Blessed Sacrament (Consecrated Bread)**
6. *Holy Communion* – the rite of sharing God's life through sacred signs, viz., bread and wine.
7. *Resplendent Host* – the Eucharistic Jesus and Blessed Sacrament.
8. *Canonization* – an official proclamation that a person is a saint.
9. *Communion rail* – the place one comes to in order to receive Holy Communion.
10. *Habit (religious)* – the official dress or uniform of a consecrated person.
11. *Tertiary* – a member of a religious association.
12. *First Communion* – the first time a Christian receives Holy Communion.
13. *Confession* – the rite of acknowledging one's sins publicly.
14. *Sermon* – the explanation or talk given during a religious service.
15. *Examination of conscience* – reflection on one's behaviour with reference to God's commandments, with a view to improve or change.

ST. MARIA GORETTI

16. *Blessed Sacrament* – the abiding presence of Jesus in the Consecrated bread.
17. *Anointing of the sick* – the rite for those Christians whose health is seriously impaired by sickness or old age.