

A Modern Virgin Martyr

SAINT MARIA GORETTI

By Alexander Gits S.J.

INTRODUCTION

This story of the martyrdom of Maria Goretti is a challenge to our Catholic youth in an unclean world. Maria is a modern St Agnes who deliberately sacrificed her life in the year 1902 rather than commit a sin against the holy virtue of purity. Her life as well as her heroic death will be an inspiration to modern girls. In their hands to a large extent lies the future of mankind. They have the vocation to raise once more the standard of Christian purity in a pagan world. What St Agnes did in the unclean world of pagan Rome has been done anew in this evil age of ours by the example of Maria Goretti.

This sketch has been written as an encouragement to our young girls. There are many generous souls amongst them who have never heard of the ideal of Christian virginity. Many indeed regard this glory as a disgrace. The young martyr, Maria, is a challenge to such false notions.

There seems to be a common opinion among the young today that immodest conduct between the sexes is not sinful provided that it does not go 'too far'. So soon as they have left school boys and girls consider themselves to be emancipated. They must be 'modern'. They pursue pleasure with great ardour and are very soon beyond the control of their parents. They have learned their morality from the cinema, advertisements and popular periodicals. Perhaps God in His mercy has raised up the little maid, Maria Goretti, as an invitation to modern girls to stand up and challenge the modern world with its sinful pleasures. *Aut castus sit aut pereat* — Be pure or perish. The tragedy and triumph of the little Virgin and Martyr was in reality the outcome of a hidden spiritual battle between two forces; on the one hand was the saintly widowed mother who taught her children to love modesty and purity for the sake of Jesus and Mary, on the other hand was the lazy, neglectful farm labourer who taught his sons that there was no harm in 'immodest songs, books and pictures'. The battle was won by Maria.

A remarkable aspect of the beatification which took place in 1947 was the special honour paid by the Holy Father to the child's mother. He emphasized over and over again both in his speeches and in the official documents that the heroic daughter was the glory of the mother's training. The details of the following story are taken from the evidence of the witnesses at the enquiries as quoted by Father Mondrone S.J. from the decree of beatification and from the address of Pope Pius XII.

THE CATHOLIC MOTHER

On 27 April 1947 Pope Pius XII, seated in the *sede gestatoria*, entered the basilica of St Peter in the holy city of Rome for a beatification ceremony which in many ways was unique. He was to award the title of Blessed to a child martyr.

A vast crowd of 25,000 children and over 5,000 men and women were gazing at the splendour and glory of the triumphant ceremony while many thousands in the piazza outside the basilica were waiting to receive the blessing of the Holy Father. There came a pause amid the long ceremonial. The Pope had sent a courier on a special errand. Everybody in that vast crowd watched and waited with breathless interest as a white-haired old lady, aged 82 years, was slowly escorted into the presence of the Vicar of Christ. He spoke to her for some time and then in the presence of that vast assembly reverently kissed her hands.

This extraordinary honour bestowed by the Pope on a poor peasant woman was in reality a public acknowledgement of a mother's life-work gloriously fulfilled. Her daughter had just been beatified as Virgin and Martyr. The child was not yet twelve years of age when she sacrificed her life in defence of her purity. The Pope wished to honour the living mother as well as the martyred daughter. So said the Holy Father addressing the multitudes and so ran the decree of beatification. Another unusual feature of the day was the declaration in the official decree that the child martyr now rejoices 'in Heaven

with her father just as *We on earth now rejoice with her mother*'.

The old lady had known poverty and hard work all her life. As a young girl she was known as Assunta Carlini, an orphan girl of the village of Corinaldo, situated about fifty miles north of Assisi. Since she had no home of her own her young life was one of constant hard work on the farm lands and in domestic service, but it was a life made beautiful by her trust in God and a childlike devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the course of time Assunta Carlini and Luigi Goretti, a young farm worker in the same village, were attracted to one another by their mutual love of the Faith and the purity of their lives. Each recognized the goodness of the other. They were married and started their new life on a little farm barely large enough to support them. They worked from morning till night and knew no fear, for they trusted in the Providence of God.

On 16 October 1890, to their great joy, a daughter was born to them and in accord with an ancient Catholic custom baptized within twenty-four hours in the village church. She received the names Maria and Teresa. This child was the future martyr, henceforth to be trained to sanctity by her father and mother. Maria Goretti, growing up in a good Catholic home, soon learned to recognize the holy pictures upon the wall, to make the sign of the Cross and to repeat her simple prayers after her father and mother. Those were indeed happy days for Assunta and Luigi. As the little girl grew older she began to imitate in small ways the unselfish goodness of her father and mother; she showed signs at a very early age of a gradually awakening sanctity. Her mother's conversation inspired her with an admiration of the glories of the countryside, of the flowers and birds by day and of the stars in the heavens by night, explaining to her how all these things come from the hand of God. Maria quickly responded and began to appreciate the beauties of nature and to talk to God in her own childish way.

Although neither Assunta nor her child had ever attended school, this truly Christian mother was able to teach Maria the catechism and her prayers. She was in fact being educated in the finest of schools, a good Catholic home, and by the finest of teachers, her own parents. At the age of six she made her First Confession and received the strength of the Holy Ghost in the sacrament of Confirmation administered in the village church by the Bishop of Senogallia, the future Cardinal Boschi.

Up to this point all had gone well. Maria, even though so young, had become her mother's companion and helper in the home. During the six years that had passed, God had blessed the little home with three more children. Luigi and Assunta rejoiced to receive these gifts from Heaven and were not afraid of hard work or suffering. The six-year-old Maria became in very truth the little mother of the house, nursing the younger ones, teaching them their prayers and encouraging her own mother in their daily troubles. On one occasion, passing through a meadow where they were helping with the farm work, Assunta remarked that she was afraid of snakes. 'Don't be afraid, Mummy', said the stout-hearted six-year-old, 'I will walk in front of you. You will be quite safe.' This little incident was typical of her unselfish charity. The noble qualities of the child were soon observed by the women of the village, who would say good-humouredly to the mother: 'Assunta, your little girl is a saint'.

Her growing love of prayer is thus described in the papal decree:

'The Holy Spirit desired to enrich the little handmaiden of God with special graces and extraordinary privileges increasing her sanctity every day: by means of natural and visible things He drew her gently and sweetly to invisible and heavenly joys. As the singing lark attracted by the beauty of smiling meadows and blue skies rises to the heavens with rapid wing and remains poised in happy freedom singing and rejoicing, so did the pure little maid of Connaldo find herself charmed by the song of the birds and the sweet perfume of flowers and thus rejoicing amid the gentle breezes and the brilliant sunshine she raised her heart to the beauties of the heavens and with rapture even above the heavens to the choirs of angels and then to the throne of the most High God, pouring out the joy of her heart even unto eternity'.

THE CROSS

The first grief that came upon the little family was the pressure of poverty, which forced them to leave the village

which they so much loved and the church where Luigi and Assunta had been baptized and married, where they had attended daily Mass and where their own children had been baptized and had learned the happiness of loving God.

The farm at Corinaldo was too small to yield enough food for their support. They therefore packed their few belongings and took to the road, making for Colle Granturco, a hill-country village, where Luigi had found work on a larger farm. Here they lived happily enough for three years during which a fifth child was born to them, bringing new love into the home and giving a new interest and new work to the little mother, Maria, now seven years of age.

For three years, from 1896 to 1899, poor Luigi toiled without avail. The farm for some reason or other was a failure until at last he was compelled by dire necessity to accept an offer of work near the coastal town of Nettuno, not far from the Anzio beach, thirty miles south of the Tiber.

The Anzio shore, as all the world knows, is now famous for the furious fighting which took place between Germans and allied forces in the year 1943. Before the 1939-1945 war the country round about had been drained and made healthy through the efforts of Benito Mussolini. Canals and fine roads had transformed the marshy Campagna from a pestilential swamp into a healthy productive countryside. In the year 1900, however, when the Goretti family came down from the hills to work at the farm near Nettuno they found themselves surrounded by marshy ground and uncultivated fields. Soon after they arrived a supply of coffins was sent to them by the owners of the farm in case any of the farm hands should fall victims of the deadly malaria which infested the warm, damp marsh lands.

Luigi and Assunta, on arrival at their new quarters, found that they would have to share a house on the farm with another family consisting of Giovanni Serenelli, aged sixty, a widower with two sons, Gaspar and Alessandro, both of them working on the land. The kitchen and the stairs had to be used by both families. This, of course, led to much inconvenience and trouble. Giovanni Serenelli was a coarse, unpleasant man who cared very little about the moral upbringing of his boys. He was in the habit of buying 'popular' magazines and journals abundantly illustrated with sensual pictures. He gave them to his sons for their entertainment. The walls of the boys' bedrooms were covered with these suggestive pictures.

One can imagine the grief and fear which filled the heart of the pure-minded Assunta when she saw the type of men who were to live so close to her children. One day, as in duty bound, she protested to Giovanni Serenelli concerning the pictures he was bringing into the house. He replied contemptuously: 'You need not look at them if you don't like them'.

From early dawn until nightfall, day in and day out, these ill-assorted people had to toil side by side in the farm lands while the dauntless Maria kept house and managed the children and even repaired the clothing of the farm workers. Luigi, however, was not satisfied. He shared his wife's anxiety and began to make arrangements for a return to their native village, but before he could carry out his plans the terrible malaria fastened upon him. He sank rapidly until at last it was plain to all that God would soon call him to his eternal home. As he lay dying he thought of his children and begged Assunta in the event of his death to return to Corinaldo.

No sooner was the emaciated body of Luigi laid to rest than Assunta had perforce to shoulder the whole burden of her husband's work. To make matters worse Gaspar Serenelli had by this time gone away to seek work elsewhere. In spite of the loss of one man's strength the other two made no effort to work any harder. -From all accounts it would seem that they were content to allow the ever-willing Assunta to supply for their laziness. The contract with the owners of the farm must be fulfilled; the children must be fed. Assunta therefore left all the care of the household in the capable hands of her daughter. After gathering in the harvest of wheat and beans she found herself, after the sales, burdened with a debt of 15 lire.

Maria as usual came to the rescue. With all her might she strove to fortify her mother's courage: 'Cheer up, Mummy', said she, 'we are all growing up. If God will give us health we shall carry on. God will look after us'. The strong-hearted little maid was now eleven years old.

'She had a good and docile disposition', said her mother, 'and was as modest as she was graceful'. The evidence continues: 'Never was she disobedient and never did she cause her mother any trouble or displeasure: with daughterly affection she tried in every way to lighten the mother's work. She became a second mother to her small brothers and

sisters, winning their hearts by her kindly ways. To others she gave an outstanding example of that modesty which St Paul wishes to be known to all men (Philipp. 4:5). Before their eyes and before God she advanced in wisdom and age and grace. She had but one Master and His pulpit was the Cross, and she had only one book, that threefold breviary of the layfolk, the Rosary. She grew in age but advanced more rapidly in that wisdom which our Lord says is hidden from the wise and prudent but revealed by the Father in His goodness to little ones’.

GROWING IN SANCTITY

The Christian courage and unselfishness of Maria Goretti were not only the result of her mother’s careful training; they were also the fruit of her growing love of prayer. She took delight in frequent conversations with Jesus and Mary. In her spare moments at home she would kneel and pour out her troubles and anxieties in the presence of God. Twice a day she would recite the Rosary for her dead father. She was sometimes seen to kneel for a moment at the gates of the cemetery where he was buried. At home she inspired her own brothers and sisters with some of her own love of prayer and in her own way would repeat to them the instructions given by the priest in the chapel of Campomorto, which was two miles away from the farm, or on great feasts she would explain to them the sermon preached that day in the church at Nettuno, seven miles away from their home. Her constant companion when she attended church was Teresa Cimarelli, who after her death bore witness to her blameless life. ‘She was truly a girl brought up from childhood to please our Lord’, said Teresa.

When out of doors neighbours noted her modesty of dress and behaviour. Graceful and fair, with the candid glance of an innocent child, she usually wore a veil over her head and maintained a certain reserve and simple dignity when addressed by others. Her brothers and sisters loved and admired her as a second mother and unconsciously imitated her modest bearing and dignified manners. The Serenellis later on testified that even during the worst heat of the Campagna summer Maria always preserved the same careful modesty in her dress and behaviour. Of course, like all the saints of God she had to suffer ill-natured remarks from those who felt that the purity of her life was a silent rebuke to themselves. By the grace of God, however, she kept her sweetness of character and told her trouble to her mother, whom she trusted completely. As the child grew older she began more and more to long for the day of her First Communion. The future Pius X, the Children’s Pope, was still only Patriarch of Venice. The old custom still remained, so that children did not receive our Lord until very late in childhood’s years. Moreover, the little hamlet in which the farm was situated ‘had neither church nor school but only a bad climate’, as the witnesses quaintly remark. Eventually Maria was judged to be ready and the great day of her First Communion dawned on the feast of Corpus Christi, 29 May 1902. She received God into her heart with great joy. It was only forty days before her martyrdom.

‘After this’, said the child to her mother, ‘I shall be much better.’ To make up for her disappointment at not having her father with her she offered up all the prayers and graces of her First Communion for the repose of his soul.

A short time after the great day it chanced that she was sent as usual to the well to fetch a supply of water for the household. While filling her jug she overheard the bandying of obscene jokes between a young man and one of the girls who had so recently made her First Communion with Maria. The child was hurt and shocked. She hurried home and complained to her mother.

‘You should not listen to her’, said Assunta.

‘I could not help it. I was filling the jug.’

‘You must let the words come in one ear and go out of the other. Take care never to say them yourself.’

‘I will never say them, *mamma mia*: I would rather die.’

‘Remember, Marietta, to pray to our Lady in all dangers.’

So did Assunta train her daughter and the grace of God fortified the soul of the maid. Years later Cardinal Salotti, speaking at Nettuno, said to the assembled crowds: ‘Even if Maria had not been a martyr she would have been a saint, so holy was her ordinary everyday life’.

THE COMBAT

Meanwhile Assunta laboured on the farm lands with the two Serenellis and entrusted the home affairs more and more to her 'Marietta', as she called Maria. Perhaps the continuous heavy work had begun to blunt the watchful perceptions of Assunta; she was losing sight of the fact that Maria was still a child needing a mother's care and protection. Giovanni Serenelli and his morose and silent son, Alessandro, made no change in their loutish ways. The illustrated papers with their *risque* pictures were still coming into the room of the men. Maria worked and prayed in the home from morning till night, cleaning, cooking, repairing clothes and mothering the four little ones. The poor child was blissfully unaware of the stealthy approach of evil. Then the clash came.

One hot afternoon in June 1902 when work was in progress in the fields Maria was surprised to see the young Serenelli returning to the house. He came up to her in a furtive way and spoke in a low tone, the voice of the tempter. She did not understand his words but instinct warned her of the danger and she ran away.

A few days later the same thing happened again but this time the young man spoke more plainly. She blushed with shame and horror, repelling him with energetic words. He seized hold of the poor child but she slipped away and as she ran he threatened with an oath to kill her if she dared to tell a living soul what had passed.

It does not require much imagination to picture the shame and terror suffered by this saintly girl. It is easy for us now to judge that she should have told her mother of this overwhelming danger that threatened her purity and her life. All we know is that Maria redoubled her prayers and begged her mother not to leave her alone. Assunta noticed that her rosary was constantly in her hands when she was not working in the house. She noticed also that the young Serenelli was treating Maria with great harshness whenever he had cause to speak to her and that she was avoiding him as far as she could in those cramped quarters. Nevertheless the possibility of any danger never crossed her mind. Again and again Maria would plaintively beg: '*Madre mia*', don't leave me alone in the house'. But Assunta must needs go out and work. Who would hurt a child so young and innocent? She was not yet twelve years of age.

The weeks went by and Maria seems to have become more tranquil. On Saturday morning, 5 July 1902, she paid a call on her friend, Teresa Cimorelli, inviting her to come to Confession with her: 'Tomorrow is Sunday, Teresa. Let's go to Campomorto. I am longing for Holy Communion'.

Meanwhile 'Satan had entered into the soul of Alessandro', the wretched victim of his own father's neglect and sinful example. He secured possession of a sharp stiletto, a foot long, and hid the weapon in his room. He is determined to conquer the dauntless child.

During midday dinner arrangements were made for the threshing of the beans in the afternoon. The method was primitive. Two bullock carts were to be driven repeatedly over the beans on the threshing floor, thus crushing the pods. It was a long and laborious process, especially in the heavy heat of July. After dinner Giovanni Serenelli sat down at the foot of the stairs and fell asleep. Assunta and Alessandro started out to fetch the bullock carts. Assunta's baby daughter was sleeping on the top of the stairs while Maria sat near minding the baby while at the same time she stitched away, repairing a shirt for Alessandro. Outside in the sun Assunta and Alessandro were leading one of the wagons to the threshing shed. Suddenly without warning Alessandro jumped down from the cart and requested Assunta to take charge. He came hurriedly into the house, ran up the stairs past his sleeping father and into his own room. He secreted the stiletto and came out again. In a low voice he requested the terrified Maria to come into a room. 'What for?' she asked, and then tried to run down the stairs. He seized her, dragged her into the room and closed the door.

THE AGONY

The details of the martyrdom that followed came from the lips of the penitent murderer in later years when evidence was being gathered for the child's beatification.

In that little room, far from human aid but strong in Faith, the trembling Maria heard the wretched youth repeatedly demanding that she should surrender herself to him. 'No, no, no', she said firmly, "it would be a terrible sin and you will go to Hell." God forbids it.' She began to scream for help but there was no one near except the older man sleeping at the

foot of the stairs. The maddened youth drew his stiletto and threatened her, hoping to overcome her resistance by fear. At last he laid hands upon her, whereupon the glorious virgin and martyr made her final refusal:

‘You may kill me but you shall not have me.

Blinded by fury he drove the stiletto again and again into her body ‘as though she were a piece of wood’. Maria fell bleeding to the floor and as she fell gathered her garments around her body. ‘Mother, Mother!’ she cried, ‘I am dying. O my God, help me.’ The murderer shrank back for a moment as she lay bleeding from fourteen dreadful wounds. With grim determination the dying maid dragged herself to the door and called to the father sleeping at the foot of the stairs: ‘Giovanni, come quickly. Alessandro has killed me’.

The youth was now overcome by panic; at all costs he must silence her. He seized her by the throat and drove the stiletto into her back. Then he let her fall and ran away to his own room and locked himself in.

Ten minutes before, as he came up the stairs, he had been determined to kill her if she would not consent to sin with him. ‘I knew I was breaking the law of God. I killed her because she refused. Never by a word or a smile had she encouraged me. It was all my own fault. Maria did well.’ So said the humble penitent many years afterwards.

At last the elder Serenelli awoke from his sleep and seeing the wounded girl gave the alarm. Teresa Cimarelli came into the house and lifted the dying Maria on to a bed. Teresa questioned her. She replied faintly: ‘It was Alessandro. He wanted me to do something bad. I said: “No, Alessandro; you will go to Hell”. He hit me. He wounded me all over.’ Poor Assunta then came running in and fainted at the sight that met her eyes. She then roused herself and bent over the child: ‘Marietta, what has happened?’

‘It was Alessandro.’

‘But why, *carissima*?’

‘He wanted me to do a wicked thing and I refused.’

Later on in the hospital the mother questioned her daughter again at the request of the police:

‘Has he ever troubled you before?’

‘Yes, twice; about two months ago.’

‘But why did you not tell me, *carissima*?’

‘Oh! I was too ashamed. He threatened to kill me if I spoke.’

The papal decree sums up the whole tragedy as follows: ‘He was a degraded youth given up to sensual pleasures. Not even the exceptional modesty and maidenly virtue of Maria were sufficient to shame him into restraining his base and animal desires. Again and again he had tempted her in vain until at the end she had this choice put before her, either to save her life with the loss of her virtue or to preserve her virtue at the loss of her life. It was her life that she cast away, a life to be found again in the world to come and for all eternity.’

THE CRUCIFIXION

The tragic news spread like wildfire among the peasants who had long loved and admired Maria Goretti. ‘They have killed a little saint’, was their comment. A crowd began to gather at the door of the farmhouse; angry cries were heard threatening violence to the murderer hidden within. The police van drew up at the door: the wretched Giovanni watched his son being taken into custody.

Later on the ambulance arrived: the sorrowful neighbours watched the pitiful spectacle as the suffering child was carried out accompanied by her weeping mother. Assunta and Teresa Cimarelli sat with Maria as she was transported to hospital. Those country roads were very rough, so that the ambulance car jolted terribly.

‘Are you suffering, *carissima*?’

‘Oh no, Mummy’, said the unselfish Maria, but the pain at last forced from her lips the query: ‘Will it be long before we get there?’

When the doctors saw her mangled body they declared the case to be hopeless and asked the Father Superior of the Hospital to hear her confession.

‘You won’t have much to do, Father; she’s a little angel.’

No anaesthetics could be given to her, so that she suffered agony when they were treating her wounds and internal injuries. When they had finished with her, she looked at her mother and said:

‘I am much better’, and then begged for some water, but this was forbidden.

‘Will you stay with me tonight?’

‘No, *carissima*; I am not allowed.’

‘But where will you sleep?’

Assunta reassured her and retired for the night. The priest from Nettuno, who knew Maria very well, accompanied by Teresa Cimarelli and two Little Sisters of the Poor, spent the night watching by the bedside of the dying child. Maria frequently kissed the Crucifix with great devotion and prayed to our Lady as she was wont to do. In spite of her pain she showed great joy when the priest enrolled her as a Child of Mary and placed the medal round her neck.

Very early on Sunday morning Assunta was allowed to come to the room and prepare Maria for Holy Communion. The previous day she had expressed to Teresa her great longing to receive Jesus and now her desire was to be fulfilled. The room was prepared. ‘Marietta’, whispered the mother, ‘you must forgive Alessandro.’ In a short while the priest who had watched by her bedside through the night went to the hospital chapel to bring her Holy Communion. Assunta, Teresa and the two nuns recited the prayers. Presently the priest came to the room bearing the Blessed Sacrament. He placed it on the altar by her bed and then spoke a few words to Maria the child.

‘Tell me, Marietta, who is here in Holy Communion?’

‘Jesus whom I am going to see very soon.’

‘Do you forgive Alessandro?’

‘Yes, of course, Father. Jesus forgave the penitent thief on the Cross and I shall pray that Alessandro may be penitent.’ Maria received her Viaticum with greatest joy and was anointed with the holy oils.

The Sunday morning wore on. The watchers prayed. Maria was sinking but her lips moved as she spoke to Jesus and Mary. From time to time she became delirious, thinking she was still lying on the floor: ‘Oh, take me to bed. I want to be near our Lady.’ (At home she kept a small altar near her bed with a picture of the Blessed Virgin which she honored daily with fresh flowers.) Sometimes in her wanderings she would cry out in sudden horror: ‘No, no, Alessandro. You will go to Hell.’ She moved her hands as though to drive away the tempter and then drew the clothes around her.

The weeping Assunta tried to comfort her child and when tranquillity returned she said to her: ‘Good-bye, little one. Pray for us all. Pardon everything.’

The swoons now became more frequent.

It was a quarter to four on the Sunday afternoon, 6 July 1902. The faithful Teresa Cimarelli was sitting at the bedside praying without ceasing. Maria lay silent and pale. Suddenly she turned towards her friend, caught hold of her arms and said: ‘Teresa!’ It was her last cry. She sank back on the pillows and gave up her pure soul to God.

The previous day had been the Feast of the Precious Blood when Maria had ‘shed her blood for the Lamb of God who had died for her. Her few years had been passed in innocence and her brief life will shine for ever as an example to all, but especially to girls. Her twelve years of life will shine like the twelve stars that adorn the crown of the Virgin Mother of God. The Servant of God closed her life in charity with all. She pardoned her murderer from her heart, as Jesus Himself pardoned the thief whom He was to take with Him into Paradise. She closed her life in the love of God the Father whose commandments even in her agony were sweeter to her than honey and the honeycomb. She closed her life in the love of her blood-stained Spouse on the Cross who laid down His life for His friends.

THE TRIUMPH

Maria’s funeral was more like a triumph than a day of mourning. The country folk turned out *en masse* and acclaimed her sanctity:

‘Maria Goretti is our new St Agnes. She is in Heaven.’ She was laid to rest in the cemetery near her father, but later on,

when enquiries were being made for her beatification, her body was removed to her parish church, Our Lady of Grace, in Nettuno, whose priest had attended her in her last agony. On the occasion of her removal to this church Cardinal Salotti addressed a great concourse of people who had come to honour their heroine.

The popular verdict was echoed by the words of Pius XII when he addressed the multitude on the day of her beatification: 'Maria Goretti resembled St Agnes in her characteristic virtue of Fortitude. This virtue of Fortitude is at the same time the safeguard as well as the fruit of virginity. Our new *beata* was strong and wise and fully aware of her dignity. That is why she preferred death before sin. She was not yet twelve years of age when she shed her blood as a martyr, nevertheless what prudence, what foresight, what energy she showed when aware of danger! She was on the watch day and night to defend her chastity, making use of all the means at her disposal, persevering in prayer and entrusting the lily of her purity to the special protection of Mary, the Virgin of virgins. Let us admire the fortitude of the pure of heart. It is a mysterious strength far above the limits of human nature and even above ordinary Christian virtue.

'There are many other generous and pure souls like Maria Goretti, but the number would be still greater if only parents would exercise greater watchfulness over their children and encourage them to a more trusting obedience'.

Legal documents are usually written in official and unattractive language but the papal decree of beatification for Maria Goretti is a notable exception. Dated 27 April 1947 and issued from the Sacred Congregation of Rites, it begins as follows:

'Never has there been a time when the palm of martyrdom was missing from the shining robes of the glorious Spouse of Christ. Even today in our very degraded and unclean world there are bright examples of unearthly beauty. The greatest of all triumphs is surely the one which is gained by the sacrifice of one's life, a victory made holy by the blood-red garments of martyrdom. When however the martyr is a child of tender age with the natural timidity of the weaker sex such a martyrdom rises to sublime heights of glory.

'This is exactly what happened in the case of Maria Goretti, a poor little girl and yet very wonderful. She was a Roman country maid who did not hesitate to struggle and to suffer, to shed her life's blood and to die with heroic courage in order to keep herself pure and to preserve the lily-white flowers of her virginity. We can justly say of her what St Ambrose said about St Agnes: "Men must marvel, children take courage, wives must wonder and maids must imitate". These words are true indeed: *The father of a saintly child may well jump for joy. All honour to the father and mother. Happy the mother that gave thee birth* (Proverbs xxiii).

'Thrice happy maid, you are now rejoicing with your father in Heaven while your mother rejoices with us on earth like the happy mother of the angelic youth, Aloysius. So also let Italy, your Motherland, rejoice, smiling once more through her tears as she reads the motto you have written for her in childish letters of brilliant white and gold: *Brave and Beautiful* (Proverbs xxxi).

'Italian girls especially in the fair flower of their youth should raise their eyes to Heaven and gaze upon this shining example of maidenly virtue which rose from the midst of wickedness as a light shines in darkness. We call her a model and protector. God is wonderful in His saints; He sets them before us as examples as well as patrons. Now He has given to the young girls of our cruel and degraded world a model and protector, the little maid Maria who sanctified the opening of our century with her innocent blood.'

On Christmas Eve, eight months after the Beatification of Maria Goretti, a man humble and penitent stood knocking at the door of the priest's house in the village of Nettuno. It was Alessandro Serenelli. He had served his sentence of imprisonment and for some time had been living in retirement: now he had travelled to seek the forgiveness of the martyr's mother. Assunta Goretti, now aged and infirm, was living at the village presbytery.

Like Our Lady of Sorrows, she freely pardoned the penitent murderer. Moreover, in token of her forgiveness the saintly mother on Christmas morning, in the presence of all the villagers, knelt side by side with Alessandro at the altar rails to receive Holy Communion together at their Christmas Mass. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, entered into their hearts. It was His triumph and His victory; for Charity is stronger than Death.

24 June 1950 was the day of Maria's final triumph, her canonization by Pope Pius XII in St Peter's, Rome, in the presence of a vast multitude of Holy Year pilgrims.

PRAYER TO SAINT MARIA GORETTI

O Blessed Maria Goretti,

With the strength of God's grace you did not hesitate even at the early age of twelve years to shed your blood and sacrifice your life in order to defend your virginal purity.

Look kindly upon the unhappy human race which has strayed so far from the path of eternal salvation.

Teach us all and especially the young with what courage and promptitude we must for the love of Jesus fly from anything that would offend Him or stain our souls with sin.

Obtain for us from our Lord victory in temptation, comfort in the sorrows of life and also favour which we now earnestly beg (*here mention the favour*) and may we all one day rejoice with you in the unfading glory of Heaven. Amen.

Our Father. Hail Mary. Glory be to the Father.

(300 days' indulgence.)
