

# ST. MARGARET OF CORTONA

(1247—1297)

The life of St. Margaret of Cortona is an example of God's mercy to the sinner, and is full of consolation for the penitent. In St. Margaret we see one who had abandoned God, but was not abandoned by Him. God watched over her, listened to her faint cries for help, treasured up her feeble desires of a return, till at length, by a great act of His love, He brought her out of the wilderness of sin in which for nine years she had wandered.

This glorious Saint, who was destined by Almighty God to draw numberless souls from an evil life to a life of grace, was born in the year 1247, at Laviano, a hamlet distant about twelve miles from Cortona. Laviano at the present day has little attraction except for those who love St. Margaret. It stands on a hill which rises out of the Val di Chiano, and is picturesquely situated in the midst of pine woods. The little Church of SS. Vitus and Modestus, some four or five houses, and the cottage pointed out as the birth-place of St. Margaret, are all that now remain of the village. This cottage is little better than a shed, for which, it would seem, the ground floor is used. The upper room—there is only one—is approached by a staircase from the outside. In this room is a faded picture of St. Margaret, over a broken bracket, where an altar may once have stood, and a fire-place in one corner.

The cottage stands at the foot of a little height on which Margaret, in her happy childhood, no doubt often played with her companions. Her eyes then looked upon the scene upon which on our visit we gazed with admiration. To our right was the valley of the Chiano, before us a mountain-range on the lower slope on which we could see in the distance the white houses of Montepulciano. Above Montepulciano rose the beautiful outline of Monte Santa Fiora, and ranging further to the left, Monte Citone, whilst in the valley beneath were the placid waters of the Lake of Montepulciano.

Margaret's parents were simple country people, who lived by their daily labour. Her father cultivated his little plot of ground, whilst her mother was occupied in the care of the house and of her children. Soon after Margaret's birth her pious parents took their little babe to be baptized in the parish church of St. Peter at Pozzuolo, a village on the hill which rises above Laviano. In baptism the name of Margaret, or Pearl, was given to the child by what has well been called a special dispensation of Providence, Who had destined Margaret to be a precious Pearl in the corona of Saints that surround His throne. As soon as Margaret could speak, her pious mother taught her to pronounce the sweet names of Jesus and Mary, and to love Jesus crucified. So fond did the little one become of the crucifix that she would often hold it in her infant hands and cover it with kisses.

But death came to this happy home, and Margaret lost her mother when she was only seven or eight years of age. This was naturally a great grief to Margaret, as well as a great misfortune for her, since she was now deprived of a mother's love and that training which a mother alone can give. Time passed on, and Margaret's father, wishing to provide some one to look after his children and his house, married again. But his wife, to his sorrow, took a dislike to Margaret, treated her harshly, and made her home unbearable to her. The high spirited girl resented this treatment. Her heart sought for love and found it not; she shrank into herself, and her home became miserable. Her father, who was most of the day absent at his work, would find, on his return home, discord where there should have been peace: and Margaret's tearful eyes showed him how unhappy she was. So were sown the seeds of her trouble.

As Margaret grew in age she grew also in beauty and grace of form. All who knew of her unhappiness at home felt a sympathy for, and all admired, the beautiful girl of sixteen years of age. About this time a young nobleman from Montepulciano came to reside at the country seat of his family, the Palazzo as it is now called, not far distant from Laviano. He heard of Margaret, and desired to see the village beauty. One day when riding to Laviano he caught sight of Margaret, and he was smitten with her charms. His visits were repeated, and at length he told her of his love. He spoke of his palace at Montepulciano, which he asked her to share with him, and of the rich dresses and jewels which he would give her if she would consent to leave the path of virtue. Margaret, unhappy at home, and desiring to exchange ill-treatment for affection, her poor cottage for a grand house, splendid attire for her humble garb, yielded to the persuasions of the young nobleman, and went to live at his palace. Margaret, dazzled by the splendour of her surroundings and

flattered by the attention she received, for a time felt a joy to which she had long been a stranger. Still she was not truly happy; the pleasures which surrounded her, the society into which she entered, the affection lavished upon her, the luxurious palace, could not satisfy her heart. Margaret looked back to the days when she was at home; she thought of her dead mother's love and her father's care, and she sighed for release from what she felt to be slavery—the slavery of sin. Her conscience reproached her. She would often retire from society to weep in secret and beg for the mercy of God, which she strove to gain by works of mercy to the poor. Still she had not as yet the courage to break the bonds which enchained her. But God's time was at hand. He was about to make His justice felt, and at the same time to show His mercy.

Some dispute having arisen respecting the boundaries of the property at the Palazzo, where Margaret was now residing, the young nobleman went out to endeavour to settle the disputed claim. He met those who denied his right;—a quarrel ensued—and the young man was killed. His assailants, to conceal the body, dragged it into a thicket and covered it with leaves and brushwood.

When, on the day of his departure, the sun was about to set, Margaret looked anxiously from the window of the Palazzo, expecting the return of her lover, but there was no sign of him. She retired to rest and arose the following morning, wearied and depressed. That day was followed by another night of distress, and another day of alarm and almost despair, when she saw approaching the castle the faithful dog that had accompanied his master. At length he is coming, she thought, and ran down to welcome him home. But no, the dog lay down at her feet, howled mournfully, and then pulled her by the dress as if desiring her to follow him. Trembling and fearing some ill, Margaret followed where she was led. After they had gone some miles, the dog stopped beneath an oak-tree, scratched away a heap of leaves with his paws, and revealed to Margaret the body of him she had loved. A faintness came over her, and she fell to the ground. On recovering her senses she arose, gazed at the corpse before her, and then by God's mercy the eyes of her soul were opened. She saw the state to which death had reduced that countenance which had been so pleasing in her eyes; she thought of where the soul had gone; she knew it had passed the judgment-seat of God, and only too probably had been condemned to that Hell which would be her portion also unless she repented.

These thoughts, by God's grace, penetrated into her heart. They converted her, and she, who had fallen to the ground a sinner, arose a penitent.

Margaret returned to the Palazzo an altered woman and whilst grieving over what she had reason to fear must be the sad state of him she had lost, she grieved yet more over her own sins. Had she not been the cause of the unhappy nobleman's continuance in sin? She determined henceforth to do all in her power to blot out her sins by penances and by prayer. "O Lord, be merciful to me a sinner," was now her continued cry "Lord, save me, or I perish;" for she felt, from the weakness of her nature, a return to sin even now was possible.

The attendants at the Castello were surprised to see the sad and downcast look of Margaret, so different from her former proud and stately bearing. They soon learned the cause of her woe, and their sympathy prompted them to minister to her with even greater willingness and deference than before. She begged them, for the love of God, not to show her so much respect. "I am not worthy to receive attentions from you," she would say; "I am Margaret the sinner, who for so long has offended our God; I do not deserve your homage; reserve that for those who may be worthy of it. Think of me no longer as your mistress, but pray for me that God may forgive me my sin."

Having laid aside her rich robes, she clothed herself in the garb of a penitent, disposed of all the wealth that had been lavished upon her, gave to the relations of the young lord all that had belonged to him, and then began to consider where she might find a shelter for herself and her child.

But where could she go? Should she return to Montepulciano, the scene of her sinful life? No, that would be again to place herself in fresh occasions of sin, and that she was determined to avoid. Should she go to Laviano? Here poverty and a hard life awaited her, and she knew not if her father would receive her. Her step-mother she felt would be still more harsh in her treatment of her. But no matter; she had sinned, and now she would accept humiliations and harsh treatment as some compensation to God for her crime. So, like the prodigal in the Gospel, she said: "I will arise and I will go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against you, but you are my father still, refuse not to receive your

penitent child, forgive me the pain I have caused you, the shame I have brought on your name—father, forgive me!” With words such as these she threw herself at his feet, and obtained his forgiveness, sealed by his fatherly embrace. Not so with her step-mother; she could not bear the presence of Margaret in the house, and gave her husband no peace till she forced him to send away his repentant child—now a woman of twenty-five—to seek for some other dwelling. When Margaret was turned away from home, she went into the garden not far from the cottage, and there, kneeling beneath a fig tree, she wept bitterly. Some shoots from the tree are still to be seen. God never forsakes the soul that returns to Him, and Margaret was a true penitent. Not all the suggestions and temptations of Satan, with which he now troubled her, could shake her resolve of giving herself wholly to God. A voice bade her go to Cortona and there place herself under the direction of the Friars Minor of St. Francis, and become a Tertiary of the Order. Margaret obeyed the call, weak as she was, and ill able to take so long a journey on foot. She arose and set out, leading her child by the hand. On quitting Laviano, the home of her early days, where she left behind her a loving and much-loved father, Margaret ascended the hill to the crest of the ridge, to take one look at the church tower of Pozzuolo, in which she had been baptized, and then she set out on her way to Cortona.

When she reached the place where she had found the dead body, and where God’s grace had touched her heart, she remained awhile to rest and pray. How she thanked God for the mercy He had shown her! Offering once more all her sufferings to Him as a penance for her sins, she fervently renewed the oblation of herself to His service, and earnestly implored grace and courage to keep her resolutions.

A chapel now marks this spot. It is called the Chapel of Repentance. Over the door is a representation of St. Margaret as she knelt there with her child on the ground beside her. By the road side is an old oak, partly decayed, but yet retaining some vigorous branches. The tree may be taken as a symbol of St. Margaret, who, though once dead in sin was now living again by the grace of God, putting forth the fresh green leaves of repentance.

Margaret pressed onwards. Turning her glance away from the Palazzo, near which she passed, she looked to her right and saw the beautiful lake of Thrasimene; but her eyes scarcely noted its beauty. They were directed to Cortona, which, after weary hours of walking, she entered.

Where was she, a total stranger, to go? Who would take pity on her and her child? God’s mercy watched over her. He Who had not forsaken her in her sinful days was now at her side. As she was climbing the steep hill which leads from the gate, she saw two ladies, the Countess Ranieri and the Lady Maineria. They saw and pitied the poor forlorn and weary woman who stood before them, and, perceiving that she was in need of help, offered her assistance. Margaret, encouraged by this kindness, told them briefly the sad story of her life. They were so touched by her confession, that, seeing she was determined to lead a good life, they offered her hospitality in their own house.

The one desire which Margaret had after her conversion was to do the will of God as perfectly as she could. It was therefore in obedience to the Divine Inspiration which she received at Laviano, that after she arrived in Cortona she placed herself under the direction of the Friars Minor.

Fra Giunta was the Father appointed to be her confessor, and it was under his guidance that she reached the height of sanctity at which she afterwards arrived. Margaret’s first act was to purify her soul from sin by confession. In making it, she was so overcome by her emotion and her grief for her sins that it took her eight days to complete her avowal of them.

Even when Margaret had received absolution, she feared that she was unworthy of it, and that such grievous sins as hers should be so speedily forgiven seemed to her hardly credible.

Henceforth she always made her own those words of the Psalm of the penitent David, and with him she cried out: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy. Wash me yet more from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Create a clean heart in me, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

The gravity of her offences was always present to her mind. She felt what a share her sins had had in the sufferings of her Saviour. When she looked at her crucifix which she had so much loved as a child and which was now still more dear to her, she saw in the wounded Hands the work of her own hands. In gazing at the Sacred Feet she knew they had been pierced with nails because of the wanderings of her own feet in the ways of sin. In beholding the wound of the Side of

Jesus she felt that it was her crimes which had plunged the lance into His adorable Heart. In the Crown of Thorns and in the mangled Body she saw the expiation of her guilty pleasures: and so out of love for Jesus Crucified she made His Passion and Death the subject of her constant meditations, and endeavoured day by day to blot out the ill-spent past, and cleanse her heart from all which might prevent her from that close union with God which she so earnestly desired.

Grace had wrought so great a change in the heart of Margaret that while the world considered her to be a Saint she was in her own eyes but a sinner. That heart which before had been inordinately bent on worldly pleasure now aspired to nothing but the joys of heaven. If Margaret had been like Magdalene in her sin, she now imitated her as her model in her conversion, hoping like her to regain innocence by penance, and so share in its reward.

Though Margaret had with deep contrition confessed her sins, she did not feel that she had thereby done enough; she realized that satisfaction was due for them, and so resolved on making the remainder of her life one of penance and of prayer, for she knew well that her satisfaction must bear some proportion to the gravity of her sin.

Her whole life was changed. Instead of the enjoyment of wealth, she was now content with poverty. Mortification of her desires took the place of self-indulgence, and instead of days which she had devoted to worldly pleasure, she now passed her hours in weeping over her sins, and in retirement from the world. Within her heart the love of the Creator now took the place which had been filled by the love of the creature. In the poorly clad woman with her hair close cut, and concealed by a coarse linen cap, those who had seen her in all the splendour of her worldly attire could scarcely believe that they beheld the same person. She went daily to confession and to Holy Communion, and in order to pray undisturbed, she chose a chapel where she would be little noticed, which adjoins the Church of St. Francis. This chapel is now used as the sacristy.

When hearing the word of God, she chose a spot beneath the pulpit where she could neither see nor be seen. Then when her hours of prayer were ended, she would return to her cell, and at Vesper time would again return to the church, in order that she might end the day in the immediate presence of God.

Her life was spent in prayer and mortifications, and in work which was necessary in order to provide that subsistence she required for herself and her child; but even in her work, prayer was not neglected. Intercourse with the world was now however forced upon her, and with an exceeding charity she would assist such poor persons as needed her services, such, for instance, as women in child-birth. But even in these offices of humble duty, she yet maintained great reserve and recollection of mind. She used to retire to pray in some corner of the room when for a time her services were not required. Her food was of the simplest, and when away from home on her errands of mercy, nothing could induce her to break the rule of abstinence that she had imposed upon herself.

The pardon of her sins had in no way diminished the abhorrence she felt for them. So deeply did she even now feel her offence that she would tell those she met, as she passed along the street, of her guilt, and ask them to pray for its perfect remission, expressing to them her desire to know if God had in reality forgiven her, and moving to tears all whom she addressed. And these sins which she made known in public she did penance for in the solitude of her cell. Days of prayer in the church were succeeded by nights of prayer contrite and broken only by her sobs, "the sacrifice of a contrite and humbled heart."

The brief hours which she allowed for sleep she took lying on boards with a stone for a pillow. What a contrast to the slight penances by which we punish our sins!

But Margaret thought not of herself alone, she felt that by her example she had been the occasion of sins to others, and so her desire now was to repair the scandal she had given that she might at the same time show her love for God and her neighbours. As Montepulciano had been the chief scene of Margaret's sin, so did she now desire that it should be witness of her repentance. She wished to make such reparation as lay in her power to its inhabitants for the bad example she had given them. She designed to go to that town, clothed in sackcloth, with a rope round her neck, as some atonement for her luxury in dress and for the rich necklace of jewels she had formerly displayed. She even intended that the town-crier should proclaim aloud "Here comes Margaret the sinner!" so earnestly did she wish that in the place where she had been treated with such deference and respect, she should now be overwhelmed by the reproaches which she felt were her due.

Her confessor, however, forbade this, and in obedience to him she gave up her design.

Father Giunta, however, permitted Margaret partially to carry out her wish at Laviano, where she had first fallen into sin. It was on a Sunday, when all were assembled for Mass, that Margaret entered the church of that village with her hair close cut and her feet bare, clothed in sackcloth and with a rope round her neck. She knelt where she would be least perceived. No one recognised in the pale and emaciated face of the mysterious pilgrim the Margaret they had formerly known so well. When Mass was concluded, Margaret arose and, throwing herself at the feet of the Lady Manentessa—scarcely able to speak from the sobs which choked her—with sighs and tears of contrition, begged pardon of all the astonished bystanders, imploring them to forget the scandal she had given them, and beseeching them to learn the lesson from her example that the greatest evil in life is sin.

The great desire Margaret had to free herself from all that had ever been an occasion of sin to her, and her fear that her beauty which still remained might yet be an incentive to it, she sought to destroy her comeliness by striking her face with a stone, in order that the livid bruises might disfigure it, and at other times she would cover it with soot, that the fairness of her skin might not be seen.

So far was Margaret from lessening her austerities and mortifications as the years went by, that she increased them both in number and severity up to the very day of her death.

By the kindness of friends, Margaret's child had been sent to be educated at Arezzo, and she was now left free from the necessity of providing for him, and able to devote herself completely to the service of God, and to that life of retirement which she so much desired. It was Margaret's wish, in order to lead a more perfect life, to enter the Third Order of St. Francis, the confraternity of penance, that branch of the great Franciscan family which has produced so many saints in the world. Later on, her son also was to join the Seraphic Order in which he became a priest and a noted preacher.

The Friars Minor did not at first accede to Margaret's wish. It was considered more prudent that a long trial should be given her in order to test the sincerity of her resolve to lead a new life, and it was not till after three years waiting—years borne by Margaret with patience and resignation—that she was at length admitted, in the year 1275, to the privilege of becoming a child of St. Francis. Margaret, once she had been received, wished not only to be a member of it by name and by wearing the habit, but closely to imitate her Seraphic Father. Thus by following his life, by the rigour of her penance and by the fervour of her prayers, she raised herself to so high a degree of contemplation as to become a perfect imitator of the poor man of Assisi. Margaret had a great love and desire for solitude, and in fact cherished it so deeply that she never left her poor dwelling except to seek God in His Church, or to assist the poor whom He had confided to her care. Up to this time Margaret had lived in the Palazzo Moscardi, the palace of the ladies who had given her hospitality on her first arrival in Cortona. Though in this house she had but a little cell separated from the other part of the house and its occupants, yet a palace and its neighbourhood to the world did not seem to be a fitting dwelling for one who had become a Tertiary. Margaret therefore sought and obtained from the charity of her benefactresses a poor dwelling in the street beyond the Porta Berarda, where she might live in silence and alone. In order that our Saint might unite herself more closely to God, she wished to free herself from everything that could attach her to the earth; she accordingly discontinued the services which she had been used to render to women in childbirth; she ceased also to be present at baptisms, to which mothers would invite her, in the belief that her presence would bring a blessing on their offspring.

In a short time nothing would be left to Margaret but her solitary cell, in which she might weep for her sins, and the Church of St. Francis, which she frequented to be nearer to God, and to fortify her soul with His word which was preached in it by the Franciscan Fathers. But to reach the church, Margaret had to go out into the street, and she feared even for this short distance to set her foot in the world which had been the cause of her sin. Earnestly did she wish to fly to some solitude to be alone, that she might prepare for the time when God would call her to Himself.

God, Who had destined Margaret to be a means of withdrawing sinners from their sin, and at the same time of purifying herself yet more from her own, did not for some time permit the accomplishment of her desire. As Margaret was prevented from retiring into actual solitude, she endeavoured to form a hermitage in her own heart. On her way through the streets to church, Margaret kept her eyes fixed on the ground, so that she might avoid seeing anyone or anything. She

guarded her ears likewise from useless talk, and put a restraint on her tongue, only speaking when the honour of God or the good of her neighbour required her to do so. Margaret seldom opened her door to anyone, and then but for a short time, and for no other purpose than to speak of God. With these rare exceptions, the silence of her cell was unbroken—nothing was heard in it, save during the hours of the night, when it resounded with her lamentations and the strokes of the scourge.

Though there was tranquillity in Margaret's cell, still she did not find within it that perfect peace for which she sought. A storm was raging within her soul, owing to the intense desire she had to feel assured of the forgiveness of her sins. It was Satan who brought back her former sins to her remembrance and endeavoured to make her despair. He would tempt her with the thought that after all she was still in her sins, that the peace of mind which she had enjoyed was but a woman's fancy. In this anguish of soul a cold sweat would break out on her, her despairing cries reveal the fear that overwhelmed her. Though she made her fasts yet more strict, her disciplines more frequent, her prayers more prolonged, the disturbed state of her soul often prevented her from approaching Holy Communion, or if she did approach, it was with fear and trembling as if she who had sinned so deeply was unworthy of a love which was the privilege of more faithful souls.

All these trials developed in Margaret new characteristics, for her doubts and fears led her to the feet of her confessor and, purified by the furnace of interior trials, the last remnants of earthly miseries were burnt out, and the contrite penitent became the future saint.

Margaret, like other servants of God, was raised to a height of sanctity to be an example to us. We see in her a singular love of the poor whom she tended in their needs, often saving for them what was necessary for her own sustenance. Nor did she relieve their bodily wants only, but she took the deepest interest in their sorrows and in the welfare of their souls.

St. Margaret teaches us in this our day that there is no other way to solve our social difficulties than to take a Christian's view of poverty and of wealth. If there were more who, like Margaret, would make themselves instruments in God's hands to teach the poor to be contented with their lot, and the rich that this world is not our Heaven, then mutual misunderstanding would cease, and the two classes who now look coldly on one another would be united by that love which is bred by charity.

She had known what it was to be in affliction; the heart of Margaret was able to be a help to others. As she had been a sinner, so she was able to lead back those who had wandered from the right path; she became a true comforter of the afflicted.

The life of St. Margaret was not only one of edification for all those who lived in Cortona, but for all who read of it in the "Leggenda", written by her confessor, Fra Giunta, how God drew her more and more to Himself, and how our Saint in turn corresponded with the graces which He conferred upon her. In this biography are to be read God's dealings with the soul of Margaret, favours she would willingly have concealed, had she not been enjoined by her confessor to make them known. They give us courage to follow the footsteps of her who blotted out her sin by the fervour of her penance. They show, too, how great was Margaret's charity towards her neighbour, whose spiritual maladies she was instrumental in healing. Still, amidst all the gratitude and praise for the good she effected, she kept the humility of a penitent, considering herself to be still a sinner.

Prayer was a necessity to our Saint, and in her prayer she embraced the Church triumphant, militant, and suffering, so that her charity was as universal as her faith. She not only prayed to the Saints; she always endeavoured to imitate their virtues. The holy souls suffering in purgatory, were objects of Margaret's special zeal and love, and at her last hour those holy souls that she had been instrumental in freeing from Purgatory, came to lead her soul to heaven. Amongst the living, too, all who needed help, shared in the benefit of her Prayers, and many experienced the effect of her powerful intercession. To God alone is known the result of such never failing charity.

Though but a frail woman, Margaret had an influence on her age. Her virtues were an edification to all. To the turbulence of the time Margaret opposed her gentleness. To the licentiousness of the age, she gave an example of austerity of life. To the troubled in body and mind she gave consolation, and, like our Lord Himself, she went about doing good. As

a penitent, few were like her, and she sanctified herself in a period which appeared so unfavourable to sanctity. She taught all how much, with the help of Divine Grace, a strong will and a firm purpose can accomplish.

Poor and humble as Margaret's life was, she yet left to posterity two valuable works, the first a form of community life in the Third Order for those who wished to live retired from the world. They took the name of 'Poverelle'—Poor Little Ones—from the name by which Our Lord had called Margaret when speaking to her in the Church of St. Francis and this institute existed almost till our own day. The other work that Cortona owes to Margaret was a hospital which still goes by the name she gave it, of Our Lady of Mercy—Sta. Maria della Misericordia.

Through all this active life spent for the good of others, Margaret never allowed herself to relax the severity of her penances or the austerity of her life, and these years of penitential exercises wonderfully endeared her to our Lord.

At last, our Saint, who had long desired greater solitude that she might give herself more completely to God, retired to a desert place on the hill above Cortona. Here the last nine years of her life continued to be spent in penance and in prayer.

As Margaret's earthly career drew to its close, she sighed more than ever after that Heaven where she longed to be, nor was our Lord, on His part, less desirous to receive His faithful penitent and loving child into His eternal embrace, to place her, as He had said, in the choir of virgins, to sing for ever the praises of Him, Who had drawn her from the depths of sin to make her a signal example of His never-failing mercy to the penitent sinner.

Margaret, who had been told by God that the appointed hour for her departure from the world would not be long delayed, received with a great joy the welcome tidings that now at length the day was at hand. During the last days of her life, Margaret's only food was the Blessed Eucharist.

At the announcement that Margaret's end was approaching, all Cortona was filled with grief. Many went up to the little Church of St. Basil, close to which was her poor dwelling, to see the dying Saint, and to gather from her lips some words of edification.

Margaret received with joy those whom she had loved so well and served so tenderly, but her thoughts were absorbed with God, and she sought not to prolong farewells which would prevent the intercourse of her soul with her Creator.

The morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February dawned, and the soul of Margaret passed into the unveiled Presence of God to receive the reward which she had so earnestly striven by her life of penance to gain.

In the days of her vanity, when one of her companions reproached her for her conduct, Margaret had replied, "Never fear, the day will come when I shall be called a saint; yes, I shall be a saint, and pilgrims will come to my shrine." This, which we may call a prophecy, is now literally fulfilled.

From Cortona and the neighbouring villages, crowds come to venerate "Santa Margherita" on the day of her feast, the 22<sup>nd</sup> February, as also on that of the translation of her relics, the Sunday within the Octave of the Ascension. Before ascending the hill to the church in which the body of St. Margaret lies, the pilgrim, if he be a stranger to Cortona, will stay a moment in the Piazza at the foot of the hill, to gaze on the beautiful vale of the Chiano which stretches out before him. On the lower slopes of a mountain range which bounds the view, he will see the towers and domes of Montepulciano, where part of St. Margaret's life was spent. Under the peak of Monte Citone, but at some distance from it, one acquainted with this country can distinguish the little hill on which Laviano, St. Margaret's birth-place, stands. As she went on her errands of mercy in Cortona, our Saint would have had these two spots frequently in view, and so might say with David, "My sin is always before me."

To the left are the blue waters of the beautiful Lake of Thrasimene. Turning his back reluctantly on such a scene of beauty, the pilgrim ascends the hill to the church of Santa Margherita. As he stands on the level ground in front of the church, he reads the words: "Penitenti Margheritæ."

The pilgrim enters and takes a hasty glance around, for he is impatient to approach the High Altar to venerate the Saint whose body rests above it. It is a modern church, devotional in character. St. Francis and other Saints look down from their brackets between the arches. In the right hand transept is the statue of St. Margaret, and over the altar in the same transept is a wooden crucifix, somewhat rude in execution, but of the greatest interest, for this is the crucifix that in the church of San Francesco spoke to St. Margaret. Pausing for a moment before the High Altar, the pilgrim sees a

sarcophagus which rests against the wall of the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. It is the work of the great sculptor, Giovanni Pisano. In this sarcophagus the venerated body of St. Margaret once lay. A marble tablet on a pillar near the chapel tells the pilgrim that on this spot was the humble room where Margaret spent nine years in penance and in prayer, and that here on the 22<sup>nd</sup> February, in the year 1297, as a victim of penance, she died and went to enjoy the Beatific Vision, having by common accord been given the title of Saint. The pilgrim now kneels before the High Altar, and there he sees in the rich metal shrine the incorrupt body of St. Margaret, the object of his pilgrimage.

A Franciscan father, to a pilgrim like himself, remarks that the body of St. Aloysius, whose life was spotless, has followed the ordinary course of nature, whilst the body of Margaret, once a sinner, has nevertheless been preserved. And does not this, he went on to say, show God's love for the penitent and for that innocence which has been regained by penance?

The body lies with the head to the left, a white cap or veil covers the head, a dress of flannel, marked with squares formed by dark lines, covers the body. The hands, which are small, are crossed on the breast, and the feet are bare. The nails of the hands are perfect, but of the colour of an acorn that has fallen ripe from the tree in autumn time. The skin, of a greyish colour like the parchment covering of a book, is tightly drawn over the bones of the face. The sockets of the eyes are deeply sunk—the eyelashes wanting, the lips compressed. The whole aspect is that of peace, and the pilgrim feels as if he could gaze for long hours on this countenance which so rivets his attention. It has been said that an odour of sweetness comes from the venerated body, and that the mark of the stone with which Margaret struck her face to disfigure its beauty is yet to be seen upon it.

On the eve of the Feast, the canons from the Cathedral of Cortona walk in procession from the Cathedral, clad in copes, preceded by a cross-bearer, with ecclesiastics in surplices, to venerate the body. They kneel around the altar and sing a hymn to St. Margaret with its versicle, response and prayer, "O Margarita pœnitens," &c., and the prayer ended, they return back as they came to the town.

The pilgrim goes down to the town and, as he does so, visits the Church of St. Francis, where St. Margaret was wont to pray before an altar, when the crucifix, now transferred to her own church, spoke to her, addressing her as "Poverella," and asking her what she wished for. In passing through the streets he sees how the people of Cortona venerate "Santa Margherita." There is her statue on the Piazza of the Cathedral, and at no great distance a picture of the Saint before which several lamps are lighted to honour the saint whom they so deeply love.

On the feast itself, the pilgrims from Laviano, the birthplace of St. Margaret, ascend the hill to the church to venerate the body of their countrywoman, and as they come near, they sing a penitential hymn. They have started in the early morning and walked the miles that separate Laviano from Cortona, and arrive in time for the High Mass. After the procession has entered the church, which already full, is now packed with a dense crowd, the pilgrims come up to the altar. They are headed by a picture of the Saint borne by a woman from the village. Then comes the crucifix with lamps on either side, and the processional cross, and after it the villagers and girls complete the procession which passes several times round the High Altar, above which is exposed the body of the Saint, and as they do so, they sing hymns in plaintive notes. So crowded is the church now, that even the choir of the Friars, which is behind the altar, is filled with people, who, eager to see their Saint, find it difficult or impossible to find room elsewhere. Those in the church crowd up, clustering like a swarm of bees round the altar.

But evening has come, and the officers of the municipality arrive to close in the shrine; for the body of St. Margaret is under their custody. First, however, the Father Guardian enters the church, vested in a cope. He kneels with his attendants before the Altar, over which hangs St. Margaret's crucifix, the very one that had spoken to the Saint. After a few prayers have been said, and a curtain drawn before the crucifix, he passes on to the High Altar, where a hymn is sung and some prayers recited. When these are ended, the Guardian rises, turns to the people and says, "Let us devoutly recite a Pater, Ave, and Gloria in honour of St. Margaret, that she may obtain for us a good and holy death." The prayer over, the Guardian has mounted the Altar, and wipes with a cloth the glass which closes in the shrine. He then draws a curtain before it, and St. Margaret's body is lost to sight, but not to the love and veneration of the pilgrim.

When the Father and his assistants have retired, the members of the municipality now come forward. Two, with lighted candles, kneel at the side of the altar, whilst other two close the shrine with a massive iron bound board, which they lock in three places. They then place before it an antependium, on which is a representation of the Saint's body as it lies in the tomb. This too is locked, the candles are extinguished, and the feast is over for that year.

May the love of St. Margaret of Cortona be to us and to all poor sinners, a pledge of God's goodness and infinite pity!

\*\*\*\*\*