Saint Maria Goretti

Goretti was born Maria Teresa Goretti on October 16, 1890 in Corinaldo, in the Province of Ancona, then in the Kingdom of Italy, to Luigi Goretti and Assunta Carlini. She was the third out of six children. Her sisters were named Teresa and Ersilia; her brothers were Angelo, Sandrino, and Mariano.

By the time she was six, her family had become so poor that they were forced to give up their farm, move, and work for other farmers. Soon, Maria's father Luigi became very sick with malaria, and died when Maria was just nine. While her brothers, mother, and sister worked in the fields, Maria would cook, sew, watch her infant sister, and keep the house clean. It was a hard life, but the family was very close. They shared a deep love and faith for God.

She and her family moved to Le Ferriere, near modern Latina and Nettuno in Lazio, where they lived in a building, "La Cascina Antica," they shared with another family which included Giovanni Serenelli and his son, Alessandro.

Maria's death

On July 5, 1902, eleven-year-old Maria was sitting on the outside stairs of her home, sewing and watching her infant sister Teresa, while Alessandro was threshing beans in the barnyard. Knowing she would be alone, he returned to the house and threatened her with death if she did not do as he said; he was intending to rape her. She would not submit, however, protesting that what he wanted to do was a mortal sin and warning Alessandro that he would go to hell. She desperately fought to stop Alessandro, a 19-year-old farmhand, from abusing her. She kept screaming, "No! It is a sin! God does not want it!" Alessandro first choked Maria, but when she insisted she would rather die than submit to him, he stabbed her eleven times.

The injured Maria tried to reach for the door, but Alessandro stopped her by stabbing her three more times before running away.

Teresa awoke with the noise and started crying, and when Serenelli's father and Maria's mother came to check on the little girl, they found the bleeding Maria and took her to the nearest hospital in Nettuno.

She underwent surgery without anaesthesia, but her injuries were beyond the doctors' help. Halfway through the surgery, Maria woke up. She insisted that it stay that way. The pharmacist of the hospital in which she died said to her, "Maria, think of me in Paradise." She looked at the old man: "Well, who knows which of us is going to be there first?" "You, Maria," he replied. "Then I will gladly think of you," said Maria. Maria also expressed concern of her mother's welfare.
The following day, twenty hours after the attack, having expressed forgiveness for her murderer and stating that she wanted to have him in Heaven with her, Maria died of her injuries, while looking at a picture of the Virgin Mary, and clutching a cross to her chest.

Writing in 2002 based on his own interviews with Alessandro Serenelli and Maria's sister Ersilia in 1952, journalist Noel Crusz provided a more detailed account:

On July 5 in 1902, exactly a hundred years ago, at 3 p.m. whilst [Maria's mother] Assunta and the other children were at the threshing floor, Serenelli who persistently sought sexual favours from the 12-year-old girl approached her. She was taking care of her infant sister in the farm house. Allesandro threatened her with a 10 inch dagger, and when Maria refused, as she had always done, he stabbed her 14 times.

The wounds penetrated the throat, with lesions of the pericardium, the heart, the lungs and the diaphragm.

Surgeons at Orsenigo were surprised that the girl was still alive. In a dying deposition, in the presence of the Chief of Police, Maria told her mother of Serenelli's sexual harassment, and two previous attempts made to rape her. She was afraid to reveal this earlier since she was threatened with death.

A third account of the assault was presented by Italian historian Giordano Bruno Guerri in 1985. He asserted that, while in prison, Alessandro Serenelli stated that he did not complete the assault and Maria died a physical virgin. Guerri identifies the weapon as an awl rather than a dagger.

**Serenelli's imprisonment and repentance**

Alessandro Serenelli was captured shortly after Maria's death. Originally, he was going to be sentenced to life, but since he was a minor at that time the sentence was commuted to 30 years in prison. It has also been suggested that it was due to her mother’s plea for mercy that he was not sentenced to death.

He remained unrepentant and uncommunicative from the world for three years, until a local bishop, Monsignor Giovanni Blandini, visited him in jail. Serenelli wrote a thank you note to the Bishop asking for his prayers and telling him about a dream, "in which Maria Goretti gave him lilies, which burned immediately in his hands."

After his release, Alessandro Serenelli visited Maria's still-living mother, Assunta, and begged her forgiveness. She forgave him, saying that if Maria had forgiven him on her death bed then she could not do less, and they attended Mass together the next day, receiving Holy Communion side by side. Alessandro reportedly prayed every day to Maria Goretti and referred to her as "my little saint." He attended her canonization in 1950.

Serenelli later became a lay brother of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, living in a monastery and working as its receptionist and gardener until dying peacefully in 1970.

**Beatification and canonization**

A statue of St. Maria Goretti in peasant garb holding lilies and a knife

On the evening of the beatification ceremonies in the Saint Peter's Basilica, April 27, 1947, Pope Pius XII walked over to Assunta. She almost fainted. "When I saw the Pope coming, I prayed, Madonna, please help me. He put his hand on my head and said, blessed mother, happy mother, mother of a Blessed!" They both had eyes wet with tears.

Three years later, on June 24, 1950, Pius XII canonized Goretti as a saint, the "Saint Agnes of the 20th century." Assunta was again present at the ceremony, along with her four remaining sons and daughters.
Some sources assert she was the first mother ever to attend the canonization ceremony of her child.

However, at least one source identifies her as the second, after Luigi Gonzaga's mother attended his canonization in the sixteenth century, in spite of the fact that Gonzaga was canonized in the eighteenth century, long after his mother's death. Alessandro Serenelli was also present at the canonization.

Owing to the huge crowd present, the ceremonies associated with the canonization were held outside of Saint Peter's Basilica, in the Piazza San Pietro. Pius XII spoke, not as before in Latin, but in Italian. "We order and declare, that the blessed Maria Goretti can be venerated as a Saint and We introduce her into the Canon of Saints".

Some 500,000 people, among them a majority of youth, had come from around the world. Pius asked them: "Young people, pleasure of the eyes of Jesus, are you determined to resist any attack on your chastity with the help of grace of God?" A resounding "yes" was the answer.

All three of her brothers would claim that she intervened miraculously in their lives. Angelo heard her voice telling him to emigrate to America. Sandrino was reportedly miraculously given a sum of money to finance his own emigration to join Angelo. Sandrino died in the United States in 1917, and Angelo died in Italy when he returned there in 1964. The third brother, Mariano, said he heard her voice telling him to stay in his trench when the rest of his unit charged the Germans in World War I. Mariano, the only survivor of that charge, lived until 1975 and had a large family.

Her body is kept in the crypt of the Basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie e Santa Maria Goretti in Nettuno, south of Rome. It has been often reported that her body is incorrupt but this is not the case. Her remains are kept inside a statue which is lying down beneath the altar, which has been mistakenly believed by some to be her entire body.

Feast day

Goretti's feast day, celebrated on July 6, was inserted in the Roman Catholic calendar of saints for the first time when it was revised in 1969. Maria is the patron saint of chastity, rape victims, girls, youth, teenage girls, poverty, purity and forgiveness.

A statue of St. Maria Goretti in peasant garb holding lilies and a knife