

This past Monday, July 6th, was the memorial of St Maria Goretti. I think she is fairly well known amongst Catholics of today but the events of her life, death, and beyond are quite inspiring and thus worth recalling.

Maria was born on October 16, 1890 in Corinaldo, Italy, which is in the southern 1/3 of Italy. She was the 3rd of 7 children of Luigi and Assunta Goretti. Her family was rather poor and her dad, who did mainly farm work, moved them around a lot, in order to provide for the family and to try to better their material circumstances. When Maria was only 9 her dad died of malaria. The whole family had to pull together in order to provide for themselves. Maria would take care of household chores and care for her younger brothers and sisters while her mom and older siblings did field work.

Stop and pause on just this part of the Goretti's family life. As you read this, it undoubtedly provokes a sense of sympathy and compassion for the family, and rightly so. But if you really think about this, it (hopefully) also provokes a sense of deep admiration. What we see here is a family pulling together, working together, living for each other. There was no complaining or throwing a fit; they just pulled together as families are meant to do, each looking out for the other. In a writing on the family, Pope St John Paul II said: family, become what you are meant to be – a school of charity. The family of Luigi & Assunta Goretti are an excellent example of just that. I'm afraid that in our age of technology, comfort, conveniences, and instant gratification, something has been lost in contemporary family life. Is what we see in the Goretti family not something good? Is this example of family life not what God intends? This is how family life makes saints, gets people to Heaven. Is getting to Heaven, to the magnificent Kingdom of our Father, not the very purpose of this life? I'm afraid that modern man has become so inebriated, obsessed, with material good that he has lost sight of true good, even genuine love within a family.

Continuing now with the life of Maria, mention should be made of her great piety and devotion. Maria never learned to read or write, but she did learn the faith. She wanted to make her First Holy Communion but she had to get religious instruction first. Maria convinced her mom to allow her to go to the parish priest for instruction, promising that she would always get her work done, in addition to getting the instruction. She made her First Communion! In fact, the parish priest commented on how well Maria had learned her lessons. Unable to afford it, Maria did not have the white dress of the other girls making their First Communion; it made little difference to her. This was not some social event, she was getting to receive our Lord Himself. Maria also had a great devotion to our Holy Mother. She often prayed the Rosary for the repose her dad's soul and would visit local Marian shrines whenever possible.

After her husband's death, Maria's mom (Assunta) moved the family to a small town near Nettuno, Italy for the sake of work; Nettuno is roughly in the middle of Italy north-south wise, but close to the western coast. It was here that the fateful events of Maria's life occurred. The family was doing farm work for a landowner in that area. Assunta and her family had to share a house with the Serenelli's – a man and his son, Alessandro, both of whom also worked for the same landowner. Maria was about 12 years old at the time. Alessandro, who was 20 years old, took a liking to Maria and made advances towards her multiple times. Maria was always able to fend off his advances and walk away from them, until one fateful day – July 5, 1902 to be exact. After lunch, all of those doing field work had gone back out to work. Maria was still in the house, as usual doing household chores and looking after her younger siblings. Alessandro came back in and started to make aggressive moves towards her. Maria tried to push him away, saying repeatedly: No, Alessandro, no; it's a sin. Alessandro became enraged, grabbed a knife, and stabbed her multiple times – 14 times according to a news account of the time, and apparently 3 more times as she tried to crawl to the door. In spite of being stabbed so many times, Maria did not die right way. There was nothing the doctors could do for her so her last hours here on earth were spent in great physical suffering. She died the next day (July 6) but during those agonizing hours before her death, Maria said in a very simple way: I forgive Alessandro.

Alessandro was caught, arrested, tried, convicted, and sent to prison. Pornography was found in his room when it was searched after the attack. Pornography seems to possess the mind of its users. In fact, some researchers

have actually found evidence of its addictiveness. Of course not everyone who has viewed pornography is going to go out and kill someone but it does lead the person into an obsession with sexuality, obsessions which then lead to actions that the person would not otherwise do, actions that often cause the person problems even in this life, not to mention jeopardizes their eternal soul. Apparently this scourge on mankind is now quite readily available on the internet. See it as the poison (and mortal sin) that it is and stay away from it. Give in and it will control you. You *can* use the internet without running into pornography.

Alessandro was not only completely unrepentant, he was actually arrogant about what he had done. A priest came to see him and Alessandro chased him off. He persisted this way until one night when something “unusual” happened in his prison cell. Maria appeared to him from Heaven, dropping down lilies to him. She said to him: Alessandro, I want you to be here in Heaven with me. The change in him was immediate. He completely turned around. He became deeply sorry for what he had done. He asked for a priest and made his confession, confessing what he had done publicly as well. Up to that point he had been arrogant, unruly, and even violent; he now became humble, contrite, and a model prisoner. He was actually one of the witnesses for Maria’s cause for canonization, testifying to her sanctity. He was eventually released from prison. One of the first things he did was to go see Assunta (Maria’s mom) and ask forgiveness. Assunta said: if Maria forgave you, I forgive you as well. Alessandro was actually present at Maria’s canonization on June 24, 1950. He lived out the remainder of his life as a lay brother at a Capuchin monastery. He died in 1970 at the age of 87.

What can be drawn from the life of St Maria Goretti? There are the more obvious things, things that are frequently honed in on. She is called a martyr of purity or chastity. That is certainly true. She is called a saint of forgiveness, one who shows the power of mercy and forgiveness – and that is certainly true. But yet, there is something deeper than this. The most striking thing to me is the simplicity and strength of Maria’s faith and love of our Lord. “No, Alessandro, no – it’s a sin, it’s a sin.” No, it’s a sin, period. Maria would not have been able to give a great theological or philosophical argument as to why it’s a sin; she would not have been able to prove from Scripture and Tradition that it’s a sin. She knew it was a sin because the Church said so, and that was enough. It reminds me of something another saint said: for those who have faith, no explanation is needed; for those who do not have faith, no explanation will ever be enough. The simple, strong, unshakable faith of youth. How uncommon that is today. Modern man has grown arrogant in his supposed knowledge of the world. Alessandro – I want you to be in Heaven with me. Even now as she beholds the magnificence of Heaven, she speaks in simple, straightforward terms, no complications, just simple truth – and how compelling it was, enough to penetrate the darkness of a mind that had become animal-like.

It’s a sin. For who? Not for Maria even if Alessandro had succeeded in forcing her. It would have been his sin. Maria was looking out for Alessandro. What did Jesus command? Love your enemy as yourself. Yet there is more to it than even that. Maria did not want to see our good Lord offended even by the sin of another. And what was the first of our Lord’s great summary of the commandments? Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. Unless you become like a little child...this little child was far more mature than most adults ever will be.

In the little bit of space left, think again about Alessandro’s conversion. Maria had said “I forgive him” before she died, but he remained unrepentant. An extraordinary, superabundant grace from God was needed to penetrate the darkness of his mind and it was undoubtedly the intercession of Maria that drew down this grace for him. Let us not forget the importance of intercessory prayer – from the saints and for each other. St Maria Goretti, this 12 year old girl, gives us much to think and pray about. Thank you, Lord, for the example of this great saint.

St Maria Goretti...Pray for us.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn