

6. July 2024

## Saint Maria Goretti

1 Cor 6:13c-15a.17-20 (*Reading for the memorial of St. Maria Goretti*)

*'The body is not for sexual immorality; it is for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. God raised up the Lord and he will raise us up too by his power. Do you not realise that your bodies are members of Christ's body. But anyone who attaches himself to the Lord is one spirit with him. Keep away from sexual immorality. All other sins that people may commit are done outside the body; but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Do you not realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you and whom you received from God? You are not your own property, then; you have been bought at a price. So use your body for the glory of God'.*

Today we look at St. Maria Goretti, martyr of purity, to whom these words from the Letter to the Corinthians apply very well.

Maria Goretti was born and baptised on 16 October 1890 in Corinaldo (Ancona, Italy), the third of seven children. She lost her father when she was only 10 years old. Maria took care of the household chores and looked after her younger siblings, so that her mother could earn a meagre living by working in the fields. Because Maria resisted vigorously when a young man tried to rape her, he wounded her so brutally that she died the next day (6 July 1902). When asked if she forgave her murderer, she replied: *"I certainly forgive him. From heaven I will pray for his conversion. For the sake of Jesus, who forgave the repentant thief, I also want to have him near me in Paradise"*.

Alessandro Serenelli, her murderer, was sentenced to 30 years of forced labour. He says that he repented thanks to a dream in which he saw his victim, who gave him fourteen lilies. At Christmas 1928, he was released early from prison for good behaviour. Alessandro asked Maria's mother for forgiveness, which she granted him. He then went to work as a gardener in the Capuchin monastery in Macerata and joined the Franciscan Third Order. He was still alive when Maria Goretti was canonised in 1950.

To give one's life to preserve purity is a heroic act of love. Maria Goretti knew her murderer. He had already harassed her several times, and as he beat and stabbed her, Maria had warned him that he would go to hell.

This heroic act of St. Maria Goretti is increasingly difficult to understand in the spirit of these times, in which the great good of chastity is less and less appreciated. Those who keep themselves from fornication and decisively turn away from the corresponding temptations are becoming fewer and fewer. Our society is already too flooded with sexual provocations, which are practically taken for granted. As soon as one participates in public life, one is often confronted with content that lends itself to infringing on this particularly sensitive area. Added to this is the fact that not a few people are weak in the face of such temptations, so that they are faced with a double struggle: on the one hand, to reject outside provocations and, on the other hand, to restrain the outburst of sensuality, which easily tends to be carried away by the provocations offered to it.

There is no doubt that it is up to us to face this struggle, if we do not want to remain at the hands of the impure spirit, which unfortunately is often not even in our Church forcefully identified and rejected. But this is indispensable! Otherwise we will allow ourselves to be determined by our sexual inclinations.

However, we must not remain merely defensive; we must try to discover more deeply the beauty of chastity.

In fact, chastity and purity encompass more than just the struggle against the temptation of impurity. Therefore, the acquisition of these virtues is related to the activation of our whole spiritual life.

Just as on the way to holiness we must strive for the virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are to be unfolded with the help of the holy sacraments, it is also important to allow ourselves to be attracted by purity and to seek it. This happens, for example, when meditating on those words of the psalm which clarify our thinking: "*Your promise is well tested, your servant holds it dear*" (Ps 119:140); or also when contemplating the example of the saints and, even more, of the Lord Himself, whose eyes are too pure to look upon evil, as the prophet Habakkuk says (cf. Hab 1:13).

We must seek to know the Lord in His goodness and learn to see people with His loving gaze. Therefore, purity and chastity are not only obtained by rejecting evil, but by drawing ever closer to the source from which these virtues spring, which is God Himself. In other words: the closer we come to God and do everything in our power, the more the desire for purity will grow, as well as the strength to resist impurity, even in its subtlest manifestations. The Holy Spirit plays an important role here: *"For Wisdom is quicker to move than any motion; she is so pure, she pervades and permeates all things"* (Wis 7:24).

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a soul that is in a state of grace and docile to Him, penetrates everything that cannot stand before God. He accomplishes this work of transformation in us, purifying our hearts. His presence unfolds more and more finely in us, so that the longing for purity in every way grows. Since our soul has its true home in this sacred realm, it will more readily perceive when it is violated and will turn away from all that offends it. It will be more and more pained by impurity in any of its manifestations, and will attentively and naturally withdraw from every occasion that brings with it that dark sphere, whether it comes from without or from within.

St. Maria Goretti had a difficult childhood as far as external conditions were concerned; but she had received a good religious education from her mother. Thus she knew how to preserve the treasure of chastity. When this was violently attacked, she defended it in the spirit of the fear of God. And let us remember that she warned the murderer of hell.

She demonstrated the greatness of her love by forgiving her assailant on her deathbed: *"For the sake of Jesus, who forgave the repentant thief, I also want to have him near me in Paradise"*.

One cannot but bow down before the presence of God manifested in this young girl, and take one's hat off to the magnanimity of her soul!

NOTE: On the subject of purity, you can listen to this lecture by Bro. Elijah: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hah27gFGKRI>