

The Sainthood of Maria Goretti

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## Introduction

Nearly fifty years have passed since the canonization of Maria Goretti. Although her legend is most familiar to the Baby Boom generation of American Catholics, I, too, grew up with stories of this child saint. This is due to family lore passed down from my great-grandmother, an Italian immigrant whose family in Corinaldo, Italy, was close to the Goretti family. As my grandmother tells the story, Goretti, a child of a destitute peasant farming family, was killed at age eleven, in 1902, in Italy. Her murderer, Alessandro Serenelli, stabbed her after she refused his sexual advances. The endnote was that she forgave him on her deathbed, and that she "appeared" to him in a dream, spurring his repentance and conversion to holy life. My grandmother would tell me this story with great emotion regarding the tragedy, but implicit was that Maria Goretti was holy for having chosen "God's will" over violation of her body.

This interpretation of Goretti choosing death over rape is in fact how the Catholic church elects to represent her. Thus, her hagiographies largely focus on this "choice." However, in the decades since her canonization, Goretti's legend has expanded: originally proclaimed a

model of chastity, newer interpretations explain her in broader, more social terms. I believe these recent writings are more honest about the social conditions of her life and death; the politics behind her canonization; and the politics behind the Roman Catholic Church's representation of her cause to its constituency. This paper will examine these issues, and in so doing will show Maria Goretti as not only the victim of a brutal sex crime but also as a saint who can only exist in a male-dominated world.

#### The Life and Death of Maria Goretti

There is not much detail to offer about the life of Maria Goretti. Illiterate, she left behind no writings; we are reliant upon accounts documented after her death. Several note her pious nature, stating "had she not been a martyr she still would have been a saint, so holy was her everyday life" (Thurston qtd. in Hoffman par. 10). According to one of her biographers, parts of that holy everyday life include Goretti's willingness to help support her family and her eagerness and gravity about daily prayer (MacConastair 52).

When Maria was approximately nine years old, the Goretti family uprooted from Corinaldo to Ferriere di Conca in an attempt to farm better land. Maria's father entered

into partnership with Luigi Serenelli, whose son, Alessandro, eventually murdered the child. Within eighteen months of moving to Ferriere, Maria's father contracted malaria and died. Beholden to the contract between her husband and Serenelli, Maria's mother took to the farming with her two sons, both under twelve years old, and Maria assumed cooking, cleaning, and looking after her two younger siblings (Buehrle 63). According to MacConastair, Maria often went hungry so that she could give her share of meals to the rest of the family. He also gives several examples of her devotion to prayer: an extra rosary at night in memory of her father, constant rosaries while selling eggs at a nearby market place, and walking barefoot once a week eight miles each way to the nearest church.

Several sources agree that Serenelli made at least two prior sexual advances toward Maria (MacConastair 75). It is unclear by their terminology whether or not these "advances" were just that, or if they were assaults. Sources do say that Serenelli threatened to physically harm her mother if Maria spoke of these "advances" (75). On July 5, 1902, Alessandro attempted once more to "seduce" the girl. When she again refused, he stabbed her fourteen times. Years later, Serenelli reported that during the

attack, Goretti repeatedly protested by saying, "No, God does not wish it! It's a sin! You will go to Hell!" (83). She was found shortly after the attack and taken to a nearby hospital, where she died twenty-one hours later.

While in the hospital, two things reportedly happened: First, Goretti relived the attack as she slipped in and out of shock; in her more coherent moments, she answered authorities' questions as to what happened (86). Second, when asked by the priest if she forgave her attacker, she said, "Yes. I want him with me in Paradise" (89).

Eight years into his prison sentence, a previously unrepentant Serenelli claimed to have seen Maria Goretti in a dream in which she symbolically offered him forgiveness by offering him a bouquet of lilies; this is the event that he claims for his conversion to holy life (Buehrle 15).

#### Martyr of Purity and the Hype about her Virginity

Typically, a martyr is a person who dies in defense of Christian faith. However, with Maria Goretti the Church set a precedent--one it has followed, it should be noted--to broaden the definition of martyrdom, naming her a "martyr of purity" for death "in defense of a Christian virtue" (Woodward 341). Much is made of how to interpret this

"martyr of purity," especially in the portrayal of Goretti to schoolchildren of the Fifties.

According to Debra Campbell, Goretti was offered up as a model of virginity touted by Church officials and Catholic educators as a "hands off" model which "drove home the message that *all* Catholic girls should be willing to die to preserve their virginity, because Catholic educators told them so and because the alternative was unthinkable" (668). She cites "a whole industry of Maria Goretti paraphernalia" that was used to "spiritually terrorize Catholic females of the baby-boom generation," including an audiocassette featuring a dramatic re-enactment of the attempted rape (668). Another item among this "paraphernalia" was a pamphlet by Helen McLoughlin called My Nameday--Come for Dessert, which praised the saint for her courageous defense of chastity and included a recipe for a 'virgin martyr dessert soufflé'" (qtd. in Norris 305).

When writing about the audiocassettes, Campbell notes sarcastically "[o]ne can only be grateful that Goretti's popularity declined before the age of videos" (668). But, lo, several videos have been made. One in particular, Love's Bravest Choice, is guilty of the same melodrama

lamented by Campbell and others. The video spends some time portraying Goretto's murderer as "primitive, regressive, [and lacking] self-esteem." Testimonials from church members about the importance of chastity are mixed with dramatic re-enactments of the weeks leading up to and including the murder of Goretto. These re-enactments, which are seemingly meant to bring the viewer closer to the real-life example of this saint, are quite poorly executed--for example, the actors attempt to affect an Italian accent, but the result sounds like a mock German accent à la *Hogan's Heroes*. Another problem with this effort is that the narrative given Goretto is implausible considering the seriousness of Serenelli's threats to her and her family's lives--voice-overs that are supposed to be the girl's thoughts offer comments such as, "I knew what he wanted. He wanted me, but I would not submit. I wanted to remain pure." This simplistic narrative shortchanges the terror of the dilemma she faced: death or be raped, and it was not even certain that if Serenelli raped her he would necessarily spare her life or vice versa.

In her 1958 book, The Saints and Our Children, Mary Reed Newland expounds upon Goretto's legend as a way to inform Catholic children what is expected of them sexually:

procreation. "St. Maria Goretti teaches us the lesson of purity with utter simplicity: we must understand what God made our bodies for, and we must use them to do His holy will" (81).

Here, Newland's prose lacks sympathy for the horror of Goretti's situation. The same lack is evidenced in others among Goretti's early hagiographers: "She began to be pestered by the overtures of a young man... Eventually he attempted to ravish her, threatening her if she resisted. Resist she did..." (Attwater 236). Imagine the reaction today if a newscaster adopted a similar tone in reporting: "In Seattle, there has been another attempt by a young man simply known as 'The Green River Killer' to ravish teenage girls."

"Virginitv," explains anthropologist Kathleen Young, "is viewed as a spiritual commitment more important than the young Catholic woman's life" (Young 105). This value is supported by some of the reasons given for portraying Goretti as a model of chastity. According to sources about a book by Italian journalist Giordano Bruno Guerri, Guerri claims that Goretti's martyrdom was invented and that the Church used her in Italy as a tool to "counteract the immorality of American troops occupying Italy at the end of



[WWII]" (Hoffman par. 5). In America, though, the rhetoric was not much different: her canonization was touted as "timely...a clarion call of protest against the hopeless dreariness of base personal standards" (Strauss 146).

### Better Dead than Raped?

Focusing on Goretta's virginity as such has precedent in the Church. The hagiographies of virgin martyrs tend to "emphasize their commitment to preserving their virginity" more so than their deaths in defense of their faith (Norris 301). By placing emphasis on Goretta's "choice" to protect her virginity, the Church used her to symbolize its "sexual ethics" (301). Young states that the Church uses the virgin martyrs to reinforce its ideology that "any sex outside marriage, including rape, is associated with a female's disgrace..." (112). Young also notes that there exist conflicting sources as to whether Serenelli also raped her, "but the prevailing myth is that she died with her virginity intact" (107).

This point is important, for "[i]f Maria Goretta had 'preferred' to be raped rather than stabbed to death, she would not be a saint today" (112). Within the context of Goretta's peasant culture, she would have suffered severe consequences had she been raped--and, I would add, had she survived--as "peasant cultures are notorious for not valuing girls, except as cheap labor with potential for motherhood" (Norris 307).

In a thorough examination of Goretti's sainthood, theologian Eileen Stenzel outlines the politics of both the society and the church of which Goretti was part. "Canonization," she writes, "is by its nature political. What is at issue is the nature of the politics at work in the thought and practice of the canonizing church" (93). Stenzel's essay outlines this thought and offers what she calls a "feminist reinterpretation of the sainthood of Maria Goretti" (91).

Rape is defined sociologically as "one partner (usually female) [being] forced, often by actual or threatened violence, to have sex against her will," it is a crime about asserting power through sex (Bart qtd. in Applebaum 288). Stenzel states that violent crime against women (i.e. sex crime) is the extreme example of the "dominant-subordinate model of male-female [relationships, a model which] denies personal, social, and moral autonomy to women" (92-3).

In looking at the political thought behind the papacy of Pius XII (the pope who canonized Goretti), Stenzel notes that in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries two significant trends occurred to which the Catholic Church was in opposition: political liberalism and women's

rights (94). She holds that "the canonization of Maria Goretti in 1950 was a culminating moment in this anti-modernist, anti-feminist papal tradition:

"The social control which the Church sought...could not, in 1950, be established by recreating medieval theocracy. It could be exercised through the control of its members, who would be expected to conduct their personal and political lives in submission to the Church. This authority had to extend to reproduction and the family, especially women, since the primary obligation of Catholic couples was to produce and raise new members of the Church. Consistent with this view, Alessandro Serenelli's sin was not his attack on Maria Goretti. It was his attempt to engage in illicit sexual behavior. Had Maria submitted in an attempt to save her life, she, too, would have been condemned" (94).

It follows, then, that "[Goretti's] sainthood and idealization are used to regulate Catholic women's lives and condone violence against them" (Young 105).

Finding Meaning in the Sainthood of Maria Goretti

Amidst various ecclesial and political uses of Goretti, "[t]he real girl was...lost" (Norris 305). Campbell's mid-Eighties article compares the "Maria Goretti model of virginity" to that of then-recently deceased Dorothy Dohen. A Catholic laywoman who "reclaimed" virginity after a vow of celibacy at age thirty, Dohen's model of virginity was more considered. According to Campbell, Dohen participated in what she herself called a "consecrated virginity," "sacrificing marriage, or human love, for...the freedom and detachment necessary to serve God in the world" (670). This type of virginity, aside from clergy's vows of celibacy, is uncommon. It is one of deliberate choice. Campbell says that in claiming a "spiritual autonomy," Dohen sowed "some of the seeds of the feminist movement...within the U.S. Catholic community." In contrast, Campbell finds Goretti's example "no longer relevant" to women today (670).

But Campbell's opinion does not seem to consider the larger picture of Goretti's sainthood. One of the key elements to Goretti's sainthood is her forgiveness of her attacker and her role in his repentance later on. Several, like theologian Scott Hoffman, interpret Goretti's deathbed

forgiveness as a mirror of Christ on the Cross (par. 25). In an attempt to bring Goretti into "popular discourse," Hoffman compares her cult to that of popular icons Janis Joplin and Madonna (par. 22). He concludes that Maria Goretti as a martyr of purity is but one element, and that Goretti as an embodiment of "the Paschal Mystery" is much truer to her story, and how we should heed it (par. 27).

Kathleen Norris' work also supports this interpretation of Goretti as a mirror of Christ, and she is critical of previous writings with loaded political agenda. Oddly, she particularly criticizes Stenzel's article for its argument that Goretti is testimony to women clergy (305). However, women as priests is an issue within the Catholic Church, and I believe that Goretti's sainthood stands as a good argument for this.

In looking at Maria Goretti's sainthood, it is necessary to be mindful that the Church serves to give its members social and moral codes to live by, not just spiritual examples. Stenzel reviews Goretti's significance in light of these aspects. Her "feminist reinterpretation" of Goretti begins with the girl's act of forgiveness. "God did not send angels to a sleeping prisoner; Maria appeared to him and forgave him" (97). Norris' concurs, "[t]hat a

mere girl could have the power to so change a man is a challenge to the patriarchal status quo" (306).

Strauss' essay attempts to bring the circumstance of Goretto's death into more realistic terms, and to do this he chooses to humanize the image of Alessandro Serenelli by stating, "there is no reason to suppose that he is the monster of depravity that some pious commentators would like to make out, *for any hot-blooded man is in certain circumstances potentially a sex-murderer*" (emphasis mine) (140). However well-intentioned Strauss may be, this line of reasoning does not sit well with many. A powerful response to his essay is found in Young's:

"Maria Goretto exemplified the glorification of chastity and the duty of women to uphold family values, but she had an additional use--to forgive men their sins... Thus the rape victim, the sexually abused girl, and the battered wife are given a message by the Catholic Church to take responsibility for their abusers..." (111).

Enter once more Stenzel, who counters those who "reject" Goretto's sainthood because of its "anti-feminist content... She is a martyr to violence nurtured by a church

which was willing to sacrifice the powerless in the name of its own patriarchal interests" (96). Stenzel goes beyond the papal politics and sociocultural problems that she and others examine. She reminds us of the example given by a child who was "a victim of attempted rape and murder":

"Imagine the possibility that for Maria life was (emphasis mine) worth saving but what she feared more than death was the certain rejection and peril she faced in a society that defined rape as a crime one man committed against another and in which rape could be used to force marriage. Imagine a society that renders a child too frightened by social consequences to seek the protection of adults from threatened rape and death... The world in which Maria struggled to survive promoted the belief that a woman was better dead than raped, and the Church agreed" (96-7).

Stenzel continues with her re-interpretation, arguing that although Goretti's canonization stemmed from the anti-feminist tradition of a patriarchal church, her sainthood



serves to "counteract the dehumanizing effects of patriarchy" (97).

#### Conclusion

As I have been reading about Maria Goretti, I have often been uneasy about offering her as an example to victims of sexual assault. Much of the early writing about her is melodramatic, and the argument rang true about her voice being lost. That voice came through quite powerfully to me when I read Stenzel's essay. Maria Goretti is forever eleven years old, but her example is complex: she serves as a reminder of the patriarchal world which created her circumstance; it is ironic that this system, which essentially killed her, was so dismayed by the changing mores of the world, that it then attempted to glorify everything about her life that worked against her when she was living. To me, Maria Goretti is not a spiritual example. She is, however, an emotional example problems inherent in a male dominant society. She does serve as a reminder, or a perhaps a warning, and with that, hope of change.

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