Maria Goretti—a saint for today?

Brian McNeil CRV

I was born in Scotland in 1952, so that I belong to the very last generation of those who personally experienced preconciliar Catholicism. The saints played an important role in the spirituality in which we were brought up. Some were Scottish saints, such as Columba the missionary (+597) and Margaret the queen (+1093); but the Scottish church under Pius XII and John XXIII was not encouraged to be too Scottish. We were proud of being an outpost of the international church, and our spirituality was to be that of the universal church. This meant that most of the stories we heard concerned persons whose veneration was officially approved by Rome. Some were to be admired (great missionaries and martyrs, but also still living persons such as the stigmatised Padre Pio), while others were consciously presented as models to be imitated. Maria Goretti (1890–1902) belonged to this second group.

Churches and chapels were built in her honour, pious associations were founded. We heard about her in sermons and in religious instruction in school. Pamphlets with her biography could be bought for a few pence. Holy pictures in our prayer-books reminded us of her. Indeed, her face was very familiar to us—in classrooms, in churches, sometimes in our own bedrooms. What kind of image was this?

Against the background of an Italian landscape, one saw the radiant face of a beautiful girl, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years old. A narrow halo encircled her head. She looked up to heaven with a smile. Sometimes she carried red roses as a symbol of her love for Jesus, sometimes there were snakes at her feet as a symbol of her struggle against the devil. There was usually a cross somewhere in the picture, around her neck or in her hand, or on a church steeple in the background. For she was a martyr!

The meaning of her story was further indicated by a lamb, symbol of purity. For Maria Goretti was, in an incomparable manner, the martyr of purity. Physical beauty does indeed play a role in many narratives of early Christian women martyrs, such as Agnes, Lucy and Catherine of Alexandria. There is a standard scene in which the persecutor offers to marry the lovely virgin, if only she will renounce her faith in Christ. Ultimately, however, the reason for the death of these saints is not their rejection of the sexual advances of the persecutor, but their refusal to abandon their Christian faith. Things were quite different with Maria

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Goretti. Her murderer was himself a Christian, and she laid down her life exclusively for moral purity: she preferred to die rather than commit impurity!

This iconography merely reproduces the message of the written accounts. I quote as one example Wilhelm Schamoni's narrative in a German standard work on saints, "Die Heiligen" (Mainz, second edn. 1976):

> "Maria Goretti' s parents had a small farm in Corinaldo, which was not large enough to support the growing family. Accordingly, they moved to Ferriere di Conca, eleven kilometres between Rome and Naples, where they rented a farm along with Serenelli, a widower, and his son. This was in the Pontine marshes, and the father died of malaria after only a year. The only option for his poor widow with her six children was to continue the tenantry. Her great support was Maria, the oldest daughter, who did the housework and looked after her younger brothers and sisters when her mother was working outside with the older siblings. She also had to help with cooking for the Serenellis, widower and son. This son, Alessandro, the son of a drunken father, tried to persuade Maria with words to go to bed with him; when this was not successful, he employed violence, and Maria only just managed to escape by using all her strength. The following weeks were a time of terrible fear and distress for her. She implored her mother never to leave her alone, but her mother thought this was nonsense, and told her off. Maria did not know how to tell her mother what was going on, for Alessandro had sworn to kill her if she betrayed him by so much as a single word. Since relations with the Serenellis were already tense, Maria did not want to make things even more burdensome for her mother. The young girl kept silence, therefore, but she prayed all the more to her heavenly Mother. She was no longer a child, and she knew what was at stake.
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> At midday on 5 July 1902, a Saturday, Maria was alone. When she refused to come into his room, the boy took hold of her, held his hand over her mouth, and pulled her into his bedroom. She struggled with him, crying out again and again: 'No, no, that is a sin, Alessandro, you will go to hell.' Since he was not getting what he wanted, he took out a long, sharp knife and struck wildly at her. He inflicted fourteen deep wounds on her, and four smaller wounds. (...)
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> The doctors operated on her for two hours. Maria was fully conscious, repeatedly calling on Jesus and Mary. When she was asked if she forgave her murderer, she replied at once: 'Certainly I forgive him. I will pray in heaven for his conversion. For the sake of Jesus, who forgave the penitent thief, I also want to have him close to me in heaven.' In her fever, she experienced her struggle with Alessandro again and again. And her imaginings showed what stuff this child was made of, right down into the depths of her unconsciousness: she kept on crying out, 'Don't do it, Alessandro, it is a sin, you will go to hell.' The crime was perpetrated on Saturday, and Maria Goretti died on Sunday 6 July 1902."

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Maria's readiness to forgive Alessandro was heavily emphasized by those who spread her cult. Another German author reports her words in the hospital as follows: "Yes, I forgive Alessandro out of love for Jesus. I want him too to go to heaven" (Hans Hummeler, "Helden und Heilige", Kempen 1969). I could quote yet other versions of her words, but these two suffice to show that historical exactitude has played a subordinate role in the veneration of Maria Goretti. All that mattered was the model attitude of the martyr vis-à-vis her killer.

"Model" is the correct word. In her sermon at her canonization in St Peter's Square in 1950, Pius XII described Maria's death—"Everyone knows how this defenceless girl had to resist a violent attack when a savage storm broke over her and threatened to destroy her purity ... She laid down her life and preserved her glorious virginity"—and drew the following conclusion for the conduct of young people: they should learn from "the angelic virgin" Maria Goretti to "be on their guard against the temptation of sinful pleasures and the wretchedness of yielding to vice. Rather may they strive vigorously to form their character in the way of Christian living, hard and rough though the way may be."

The liturgical reform after the Council gave Maria a place in the universal calendar. The principal reason was no doubt the wish to include representatives from every century and every part of the earth. In 1969, however, only a few canonized saints from the twentieth century were available, and two of these were judged suitable for inclusion, Pius X (+1914) and Maria Goretti. Another factor may have been the wish of Paul VI (documented in the memoirs of Archbishop Bugnini, the architect of the liturgical reform) to have a larger number of female saints in the calendar.

The prayer in the missal interprets her death in complete accord with the pattern we have seen above: "Father, source of innocence and lover of chastity, you gave Saint Maria Goretti the privilege of offering her life in witness to Christ. As you gave her the crown of martyrdom, let her prayers keep us faithful to your teaching. Through our Lord Jesus Christ ..."

Let us read one final text which continues this interpretation of the figure of Maria Goretti and even widens the significance of her message. When he visited Nettuno in 1979, Pope John Paul II said: "Maria Goretti sacrificed her bodily life precisely because she did not want to stain it with sin, because she did not want to commit any sin against her body! She understood—and this is her message for us—that the true ill is not so much suffering (for she was able even to accept death), but rather the voluntary action—sin—which one commits against the body and against the meaning of life and of the transmission of life which the wisdom of the Creator has established in the body." It is clear that this sermon extends the "classical" interpretation in keeping with the development of

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the papal teaching on sexual morality, for now Maria Goretti warns not only against unchastity in general, but also against so-called artificial contraception, something about which the historical person—the girl in the Pontine marshes—could never even have heard.

It is obvious that the Pope's assertion that she had "understood" that it is forbidden to do anything "against the meaning of life and of the transmission of life which the wisdom of the Creator has established in the body" lacks all connection to the historical facts; it would be absurd to accept this as an interpretation of the events of 5 July 1902 in Nettuno. But precisely *this* makes the Pope's affirmation so interesting: it raises the question of the role that the *historical* person Maria Goretti played in her ecclesiastical veneration.

Her story was not invented; her existence and her murder by Alessandro Serenelli are documented in police and judicial records. But was this story perhaps different from the account we heard in the pious sermons? Was the true history retouched in the service of the magisterium, in order to "fabricate" a saint out of her?

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This question is not new. It was raised by the Italian journalist Giordano Bruno Guerri in 1985 in a polemical book entitled "Povera santa, povero assassino—La vera storia di Maria Goretti" ("Poor saint, poor murderer—the true history of Maria Goretti"). The Congregation for the Causes of the Saints in the Vatican replied to this a year later with "A proposito di Maria Goretti: Santita e Canonizzazioni".

Guerri's intention was to demolish all Maria's claims to "sanctity". She was just a simple girl from a poor family, killed in a fit of rage by a sexually frustrated young man. This sad—though not especially remarkable—occurrence was transformed for ideological reasons into the heroic struggle of an "angelic virgin" against the lust of the flesh, but there is no historical basis for interpreting Maria Goretti's death on these lines. She was not even particularly pious, as can be seen from the fact that she received communion very seldom (even bearing in mind the restrictive praxis of that period). While other candidates had to wait for centuries before receiving the honours of the altars, Maria was beatified as in 1947, and canonised only three years later. Why did this happen so quickly? Guerri points to the many American soldiers who had come to Italy during and after the Second World War: the Vatican sought a bulwark against the encroaching tide of sexual immorality, and the Pope found this in Maria Goretti.

Apart from a brief discussion of the general question whether children can genuinely become "saints", the reply of the Vatican commission limits itself to drawing up a lengthy list of the factual errors

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in Guerri's book. The almost exaggerated precision with which these are enumerated leads the reader to suspect that the only point in amassing so much detail is to disqualify Guerri as a dialogue-partner who must be taken seriously. But the commission's logic fails to convince; for even if one admits that the journalist has not studied his files thoroughly and reproduced their information correctly, his imprecision does not suffice to neutralise the sharpness of his questions.

Nevertheless, Guerri has got things wrong, paradoxically enough because he fails to question the ecclesiastical interpretation at a sufficiently radical level. Both sides in this debate misunderstand the sexual dimension of what happened on 5 July 1902. I wish to suggest another approach to the figure of Maria Goretti.

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Let us begin by saying that the story of Maria Goretti has nothing whatever to do with the defence of the virtue of chastity. For it was not a young woman—the radiant beauty of the pious pictures—that Alessandro Serenelli wanted to seduce. It was an eleven-year-old child.

Maria's body lies in a glass shrine under the main altar of the pilgrimage church in Nettuno. The visitor notices at once how small the saint was. This is surprising only because her hagiography and iconography lead one to expect a young adult. But Maria had not had the time to reach physical maturity. She was only eleven years old when she was murdered.

"I did not find her beautiful or attractive," said Alessandro later. The visitor to Nettuno will agree with him; Maria was no beauty. Why then did he try to get *this* girl into his bed? The answer lies in her defencelessness. He was not looking for a sexual relationship between equal partners; all he wanted was to demonstrate his male power. He was eighteen years old, physically her superior by far. When she resisted, he killed her at once. To sum up: *what is involved here is the sexual abuse of a child.*

A typical element in sexual abuse in the home is often the mother who knows but does nothing. Alessandro did indeed threaten Maria: "If you tell your mother anything, I'll kill you", and the biographers emphasize that Assunta Goretti knew nothing about Alessandro's attempts at seduction. It is however highly implausible, given the close quarters in the farmhouse, to suggest that she had no notion at all of what was going on, and this is in fact confirmed (against their own intentions) by even the most resolutely pious of Maria's biographers. "She implored her mother never to leave her alone," writes Schamoni, "but her mother thought this was nonsense and told her off" The only consolation she offered Maria was the assurance that Alessandro would soon have to

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begin his military service. In other words, she understood perfectly well that danger threatened, but she was afraid of a confrontation with the young man in the house. When Schamoni tells us that Maria sought refuge with her heavenly Mother, this shows that the girl had grasped how hopeless it was to seek any real help from her earthly mother.

The tragical potential in this situation explodes when the mother — compelled by her own fear—literally drives her daughter into the arms of the murderer. Let us read the account by another pious biographer, Vinzenz Ruef ("Die wahre Geschichte von der hl. Maria Goretti", tenth edn., Jestetten 1990):

> "Alessandro said to the girl, 'Marietta, look! There is a shirt on my bed that needs mending!' When she did not reply, her mother assumed that she had not understood him. She said, 'Marietta, did you hear what Alessandro said to you? He has a shirt that needs mending.' Marietta pretended not to have heard Alessandro's words, because she sensed what it was he really wanted. She replied, 'But how can I tidy up the kitchen *and* mend the shirt? And I have to hold little Teresa on one arm too.' Her Mamma lost her temper and threw one of her slippers at Marietta, hitting her on the head. Then she said, 'Very well, Mamma, then I will just stay here alone.' Her mother's conscience reproached her for this until the day of her death."

Maria was not the only one transformed into a figure utterly remote from reality: Assunta Goretti too was portrayed as the model of a Catholic mother. But by then, a holy curtain had long been drawn before the unholy psychodynamics of the relationship between Maria and Assunta and Alessandro. For if the public had realized the *true* meaning of Assunta's slipper, the preachers would have had to stop portraying her daughter as a glorious defender of purity. The historical person Maria Goretti was something else, something much less exceptional: a child who was sexually abused and cruelly murdered by a young man. And her mother failed to help her.

Maria shared the fate of countless other victims. What meaning might we find in the canonization and cultic veneration of this one victim?

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We find exact parallels to the case of Maria Goretti in the Holy Innocents and Edith Stein (+1942). It is irrelevant here whether we view the murder of the children in Bethlehem as an historical event or as a literary creation; what is important is the fact that the following passage from the infancy narrative of Matthew (2:16) is read in the liturgy every year on 28 December and that these children are celebrated as *martyrs:*

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> "Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men."

The Holy Innocents were not killed because of their faith in Christ. They were voiceless, nameless victims of a tyrannical ruler who was afraid of losing his throne. Faith in Christ played absolutely no role in their death. And yet they are honoured as martyrs.

Edith Stein was indeed a Christian, who accepted baptism as an adult and later made solemn profession as a Carmelite nun. But her membership of the Catholic Church played only an accidental role in her death in Auschwitz: she died because of her Jewish origin. If she had not been Jewish, it would never have occurred to the German occupation authorities in the Netherlands to liquidate her. This was how she herself understood her death. When she was arrested, she said to her sister, "Come, we will go for our people!" And yet she was canonized by the Pope, not as a virtuous nun or a Christian philosopher, but explicitly as a martyr.

Maria Goretti, the Holy Innocents, Edith Stein ... names that emerge for a brief historical moment from the illimitable sea of human misery and remind us of all those others whose names are now forgotten. It is simply impossible even to guess at the number of children who have been exposed to sexual violence; for it is only in recent years that we have begun to speak openly about this, and to see domestic violence against women as a problem that affects society as such, and it was only in the 1990's that the international public became aware of the systematic employment of rape as a weapon against civilian society in the former Yugoslavia. And who can name all the victims of political, ideological, or military violence?

Perhaps the cultic veneration of these persons as "martyrs" can motivate us to work for a more humane world. Perhaps it can also remind us of the profound theological truth that no one is forgotten before God, and that all suffering—even the meaningless pain and involuntary death of the victims—is given a place in a hidden manner in the unfathomable divine mystery of cross and resurrection.

A third "perhaps": perhaps one cannot go much beyond such fragmentary indications; in the face of suffering, our search for meaning and our words fall silent. But if one can say as much as this on the feast of St Maria Goretti, then—despite all the pious painting-over of her figure under Pius XII—she is a saint for today.

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