

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOP OF ALBANO  
FOR THE CENTENARY OF THE DEATH  
OF ST. MARIA GORETTI**

To my Venerable Brother Bishop Agostino Vallini of Albano

1. A hundred years ago, on 6 July 1902, Maria Goretti died in the hospital at Nettuno, brutally stabbed the day before in the little village of Le Ferriere, in the Pontine Marshes. Her spiritual life, the strength of her faith, her ability to forgive her murderer have placed her among the best-loved saints of the 20th century. Appropriately, therefore, the Congregation of the Passion (C.P.), entrusted with the care of the shrine where the saint's remains repose, wanted to celebrate the anniversary with special solemnity.

St Maria Goretti was a girl whom God's Spirit endowed with the courage to stay faithful to her Christian vocation even to the point of making the supreme sacrifice of her life. Her tender age, her lack of education and the poverty of the environment in which she lived did not prevent grace from working its miracles in her. Indeed, it was precisely in these conditions that God's special love for the lowly appeared. We are reminded of the words with which Jesus blesses the heavenly Father for revealing himself to children and the simple, rather than to the wise and learned of the world (cf. Mt 11,25).

It was rightly observed that St Maria Goretti's martyrdom heralded what was to be known as the century of martyrs. It was in this perspective that at the end of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I stressed that "this lively sense of repentance ... has not prevented us from giving glory to the Lord for what he has done in every century, and in particular during the century which we have just left behind, by granting his Church a great host of saints and martyrs" (Novo Millennio ineunte, n. 7).

2. Maria Goretti, born in Corinaldo in The Marches on 16 October 1890, was soon obliged to emigrate with her family, and after sometime they arrived at Le Ferriere di Conca in the Pontine Marshes. Despite the hardships of poverty which even prevented her from going to school, little Maria lived in a serene and united family atmosphere, enlivened by Christian faith, in which the children felt welcomed as a gift and were taught by their parents self-respect and respect for others, as well as a sense of duty based on love of God. This enabled the little girl to grow up peacefully, nourishing her simple but deep faith. The Church has always recognized the role of the family as the first and fundamental place for the sanctification of its members, starting with the children.

In this family environment Maria assimilated steadfast trust in God's provident love, which she showed in particular at the death of her father, who died of malaria. "Mother, be brave, God will help us", the little girl was in the habit of saying in those difficult times, bravely reacting to her deep feeling of loss at her father's death.

3. In the homily for her canonization, Pope Pius XII of venerable memory pointed to Maria Goretti as "the sweet little martyr of purity" (cf. *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi*, XII [1950-1951], 121), because she did not break God's commandment in spite of being threatened by death.

What a shining example for young people! The non-committal mindset of much of our society and culture today sometimes has a struggle to understand the beauty and value of chastity. A high and noble perception of dignity, her own and that of others emerges from the behaviour of this young saint, was mirrored in her daily choices, giving them the fullness of human meaning. Is not there a very timely lesson in this? In a culture that idolizes the physical aspect of the relations between a man and a woman, the Church continues to defend and to champion the value of sexuality as a factor that involves every aspect of the person and must therefore be lived with an interior attitude of freedom and reciprocal respect, in the light of God's original plan. With this outlook, a person discovers he or she is being given a gift and is called, in turn, to be a gift to the other.

In the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte* I noted that "in the Christian view of marriage, the relationship between a man and a woman - a mutual and total bond, unique and indissoluble - is part of God's original plan, obscured throughout history by 'hardness of heart', but which Christ came to restore to its pristine splendour, disclosing what had been God's will 'from the beginning' (Mt 19,8). Raised to the dignity of a sacrament, marriage expresses the 'great mystery' of Christ's nuptial love for his Church (cf. Eph 5,32)" (n. 47).

It cannot be denied that today the threats to the unity and stability of the family are many. However, at the same time there is a renewed awareness of the child's right to be raised in love, protected from every kind of danger and educated so as to be able to set out in life with confidence and fortitude.

4. In the heroic testimony of the saint of Le Ferriere, her forgiveness of the man who killed her and her desire to be able to meet him one day in heaven deserve special attention. This spiritual and social message is of extraordinary relevance in our time.

The recent Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, among other aspects, was marked by a profound appeal for pardon in the context of the celebration of God's mercy. The divine indulgence for human shortcomings is a demanding model of behaviour for all believers. Forgiveness, in the Church's opinion, does not mean moral relativism or permissiveness. On the contrary, it demands the full recognition of one's sin and the assumption of one's responsibilities as a condition for rediscovering true peace and for confidently resuming the journey to evangelical perfection.

May humanity start out with determination on the way of mercy and forgiveness! Maria Goretti's murderer recognized the sin he had committed. He asked forgiveness of God and of the martyr's family, conscientiously expiated his crime and lived the rest of his life in this spiritual frame of mind.

The saint's mother, for her part, pardoned him on behalf of the family in the hall of the tribunal where his trial was taking place. We do not know whether it was the mother who taught her daughter to forgive or the martyr's forgiveness on her death-bed that determined her mother's conduct. Yet it is certain that the spirit of forgiveness motivated relations within the whole Goretti family, and for this reason could be so naturally expressed by both the martyr and her mother.

5. Those who were acquainted with little Maria said on the day of her funeral: "A saint has died!". The devotion to her has continued to spread on every continent, giving rise to admiration and a thirst for God everywhere. In Maria Goretti shines out the radical choice of the Gospel, unhindered, indeed strengthened by the inevitable sacrifice that faithful adherence to Christ demands.

I am especially holding up this saint as an example to young people who are the hope of the Church and of humanity. As we are now so close to the 17th World Youth Day, I would like to remind young people of what I wrote in the Message I addressed to them in preparation for this longed-for ecclesial event: "In the heart of the night we can feel frightened and insecure, and we impatiently await the coming of the light of dawn. Dear young people, it is up to you to be the watchmen of the morning (cf. Is 21,11-12) who announce the coming of the sun who is the Risen Christ!" (n. 3).

Walking in the footsteps of the divine Teacher always means standing up for him and committing oneself to follow him wherever he goes (cf. Apoc 14,4). However, on this path, young people know that they are not alone. St Maria Goretti and the many adolescents who down through centuries paid the price of martyrdom for their allegiance to the Gospel, are beside them, to instil in their hearts the strength to

remain firm in fidelity. Thus they will be able to become watchmen of a radiant dawn, illumined by hope. May the Blessed Virgin, Queen of Martyrs, intercede for them!

In raising this prayer, I am united in spirit with everyone who will be taking part in the Jubilee celebrations during this centenary year, and I send a special Apostolic Blessing, the pledge of an abundance of heavenly favours, to you, Venerable Diocesan Bishop, to the worthy Passionist Fathers in charge of the Shrine at Nettuno, to the devotees of St Maria Goretti and especially to the young people.

From the Vatican, 6 July 2002

JOHN PAUL II