

# The Story of Maria Goretti

## *(Re-told for children)*

This is the true story of a young girl who lived over a hundred years ago in a small village near Rome in Italy. She was the eldest daughter of Assunta and Luigi Goretti who were poor agricultural workers, uneducated, yet with a great Christian faith. This is the story of Maria Goretti.

Assunta, Maria's mother, was herself orphaned as a young child and had to work in the fields for a living. (Going to school for poor people was almost impossible because children were needed to supplement the family's income). Assunta married Luigi when she was nineteen years old and he was twenty-five. Altogether they had seven children, but their eldest child Antonio, died when he was still a baby. Maria was the oldest girl in the family and was born on 16 October 1890. She had an older brother Angelo, two younger brothers, Alessandro and Mariano, and two little sisters, Ersilio and Teresa.

Poverty, and the fact that the school was so far away, meant that the Goretti children couldn't go to school. But their parents brought them up in the faith, teaching them to pray and to see God in all of creation. I'm sure that when out in the fields they would say the angelus when they heard the bell ring.

This young family was very happy despite their lack of worldly riches. The parents loved each other dearly and they loved their little children. Unfortunately, their little farm could not support the growing Goretti family and, after moving a couple of times, they settled on an estate owned by the Count Mazzoleni, in a place not far from the town of Nettuna near Rome.

The land was not good, consisting of uncultivated marshland infested by mosquitoes, which carry the disease malaria in their poison. To make things more difficult for the Goretti family, they were obliged to live in half of an old cheese dairy and to share this tiny hovel with another family. This family was a father and his teenage son, Alessandro, a sullen lad whose mother had died in a mental home when he was only a young boy.

The situation had many difficulties for the Goretti family: Assunta had to do all the cooking, cleaning and housework for the Serenellis as well as for her own family. The building had two floors and the farm animals lived downstairs, while the two families lived together upstairs. But there was another problem for Assunta. The two men in the Serenelli family had become coarsened by the lack of a mother in their home. The father often used to get drunk.

Alessandro, the son, was a moody, lonely lad who had lived a very different life from Maria's family. He had not been taught how to pray and was jealous of the Goretti family's happiness. Even so, he would sometimes sit with them when Maria's father led his family in saying the rosary each evening and at times he would join in with the prayer.

Towards the end of March 1901, Luigi, Maria's father, became ill with malaria and died. Now Assunta was left alone with six children, including a three-month-old baby, to feed and care for. Assunta said later that the Serenellis never gave them a word of condolence when her husband died. Now she had to do all her husband's work in the fields and Maria, who was only ten years old, had to take over all the housework.

Every day Maria got up at dawn. She prayed by her bedside. She prayed as she cooked breakfast. She did the housework; washing the dirty clothes at the fountain, cooking lunch with vegetables from the garden, cleaning the rooms and shopping. In the evening she mended the clothes and talked to her mother. Finally she said her prayers and went to sleep.

The Serenellis were quite happy to let Maria do all the work in the house and, instead of being kindly towards this little girl, Mr Serenelli criticised the way she did it, finding fault with her

cooking. At one point he locked the larder door so that no-one could get any food out unless he himself was hungry. Eventually Maria's mother had to ask Count Mazzoleni to let her have a second key because her family was close to starving!

Maria was always very modest in her behaviour and her dress, even in the heat of summer. She wanted to take on as much of her mother's burden as possible, trying to make up for the loss of her father.

More and more, Maria wanted to make her First Communion. She begged for permission, but she was only ten years old and at the time children had to be twelve. Besides, she could not read and the only instructions she had received were from her parents and listening to the homilies at mass. There was no money for a dress, but Maria was sure that God would provide for her. A woman who lived nearby helped her to learn her catechism and a priest came to give the children instruction once a week. Maria begged so much that eventually she was given permission to receive her First Communion. As she expected, God provided all she needed: a dress, a veil, white shoes and a candle were all given to her by her neighbours.



Maria Goretta, 2002 pencil drawing by Helen Hull Hitchcock, director of Women for Faith & Family, [www.wf-f.org](http://www.wf-f.org)

“After this,” the child told her mother, “I’ll get better and better.” She offered up all the prayers and graces of her First Communion for the repose of the soul of her father. The Goretta’s were too poor to have a mass said for him otherwise.

One day, shortly after her First Communion, she had gone to the well as usual, to fetch water. While she was filling her jug, she overheard a young man and one of the girls who had made her First Communion with her, telling obscene jokes. Maria was shocked that the girl had forgotten her Communion so easily. She complained to her mother who sensibly told her to let it go in one ear and out the other, never to get involved in such jokes herself and to trust herself in all dangers to Our Lady.

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While everyday life went on as usual, Maria was faced with a frightening situation in the house. Alessandro Serenelli was beginning to see Maria in a different light. He started to pester her and to force himself into her company in a way that was upsetting to her. Then one day in 1902 Alessandro returned home early from the work in the fields. He told Maria that he wanted to have sex with her. She refused. A few days later the same thing happened again, but this time he grabbed her. She struggled free and he threatened to kill her if she told anyone what he had done. Maria was so afraid that she locked herself in the bedroom and didn’t dare to go into the kitchen, even to prepare the soup for lunch. This got her into trouble with her mother but she didn’t say a word about the incidents because she was too frightened. Her mother never for a moment suspected that her eleven-year-old daughter was in danger.

On the afternoon of 5 July 1902, while everyone was harvesting the beans in the threshing hall, Alessandro made his final attack on Maria. Making an excuse, he left the threshing machine and entered the house. He ran into the storeroom and took up a sharp metal tool about ten inches long.

This was a punch, a needle-like blade with wooden handle. Coming out into the kitchen, he called to Maria to come in. She was sitting on the top step mending a shirt, whilst she watched her baby sister Teresa who had fallen asleep. When Maria refused to go into the kitchen Alessandro grabbed her arm and pulled her off the stairs. She took hold of the banister but she was not strong enough to withstand him and, despite her cries for help, no one heard the little girl because of the loud noise which the threshing machine made.

Alessandro had counted on this noise. Pulling her into the kitchen, he kicked the door shut. He demanded that she have sex with him. She said, “No, God doesn’t want this. If you do this you will go to hell”. He threatened her with the blade but she continued to refuse. She would not give her consent to him so in a frenzy he began to attack her. She called for her mother, and then she said, “I’m dying. God help me.”

Amazingly, she was able to crawl towards the door calling to Alessandro’s father who was asleep at the bottom of the stairs, “Giovanni, come up! Alessandro is trying to kill me.” Alessandro panicked, and, grabbing her round the throat, stabbed her in the back in the region of her heart. He threw the punch behind a piece of furniture and went into his own room. Locking the door and lying on the bed, he pretended to be asleep.

By this time baby Teresa had woken up and was crying loudly. Eventually the sound of her crying reached the ears of her mother, who hurried to find out what had happened.

The wounded child was carried by her mother and the next-door neighbours and laid on her bed. Removing her dress they found that Maria was covered in blood from the many stab wounds she had received. When they asked her what had happened she told them. “It was Alessandro. He wanted me to do something bad but I said, ‘No, Alessandro, you’ll go to hell!’ He hit me. He wounded me all over.”

The police and the ambulance were sent for and Alessandro was rushed to jail. He was never seen in the area again. The local doctor came, but he could do little. The horse-drawn ambulance did not arrive until an hour later. The neighbours watched as the little girl was carried out with her weeping mother and their next-door neighbour. The country roads were rough and, although the journey to the hospital was only eight miles, it took four hours to get there. On the way they passed Alessandro, running handcuffed between two horses.

The doctors decided to operate to try to save Maria’s life. No anaesthetic could be given to her because she was so weak from loss of blood. The operation took two hours but she had so many injuries – fourteen stab wounds and many other lacerations – that it was not successful. Still Maria did not die. After the operation Maria was taken to a ward where she asked to be put near to a picture of Our Lady. During all this time she kept on saying, “Poor Alessandro. He’s going to go to hell. Poor Alessandro.”

At last the parish priest of Nettuno came to see her. He spoke to her of Christ’s death and how he forgave his murderers and he asked Maria if she forgave Alessandro. Maria seemed tremendously relieved and said that she forgave him with all her heart. She wanted him to be with her in heaven. She repeated this over and over with a little nod of her head. She forgave Alessandro completely for what he had done to her. She held nothing against him. In fact she hoped that he would be freed from prison.

Maria died at quarter to four in the afternoon of 6 July 1902. She was just under twelve years old when her life was snatched away so brutally. Her funeral was enormous with people arriving from all over the area, rich and poor alike.

After his arrest, Alessandro would not admit that he had done anything wrong. It was not until the evidence against him was overwhelming that he pleaded guilty of the charge. He showed no remorse for his crime and was sentenced to thirty years in prison. For many years he remained unrepentant, blaming everyone, except himself, for his terrible crime.

He lived in prison with this attitude for many years, but then something happened which changed Alessandro's life. One night, when he had been in prison for eight years, Alessandro had a dream. He said that in the dream he was in a garden. Then he saw Maria. She was wearing a white dress and was picking lilies. When she had collected a large bunch of them, she offered them to Alessandro. He took them and, in his arms, they slowly began to glow like candle flames. It was then, he said, that he knew absolutely that she had forgiven him. And this forgiveness changed his life.

By this time many people were praying that Maria would be beatified, the first stage of being acknowledged as a saint by the Church. The local bishop went to visit Alessandro in prison. The bishop spoke to him about the mercy of God and how Jesus Christ had died for the forgiveness of all our sins. He also said that Maria had forgiven Alessandro. After the visit, Alessandro wrote a letter saying that he was deeply sorry for what he had done; he had taken the life of an innocent girl whose only aim had been to protect her chastity. He wrote, "I publicly renounce the evil I have done and beg the pardon of God and of her injured family. Only one hope encourages me – that I may one day obtain God's pardon as so many others have."

From then on Alessandro became a model prisoner and was released after twenty-six years, with Assunta's permission. He had to work hard for nine years as a builder in Sardinia before he could afford to return to Italy. The first thing he did when he returned was to visit Maria's tomb. Then he went to see Assunta to ask her forgiveness. Assunta answered at once that she forgave him. At the Midnight Mass of Christmas 1937 Assunta led Alessandro to the altar to receive Communion with her. As you can imagine, many of the people made a commotion and so Alessandro turned to them and said, "I have committed a great sin and I ask your forgiveness."

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Later Alessandro was to say this about Maria's death, "I knew I was breaking the law of God. I killed her because she refused. She had never encouraged me in any way – not by a word or a smile. The fault was all my own." Alessandro went to work as a gardener in an isolated monastery. He stayed there until he died in 1968 aged eighty-two. His last words were, "I am going to be with Maria."

When Maria was canonised on 24 June 1950, half a million people attended and the ceremony had to take place in the open air. Both the president and the prime minister of Italy were present. Also there was Assunta, the first time in the Church's history that a mother was present at the canonisation of her child. But the most incredible thing is the fact that Alessandro Serenelli was there with Assunta and her family, a witness that love, the love of a Christian for her enemy – forgiveness – is stronger than death.

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This is not only Maria's story; it is also the story of Alessandro Serenelli. When we read this story we can see clearly shown, how Christian love saves everyone, even the hardest of hearts. It is for this reason that Maria was made patron saint of youth, inspiring young people like you to be holy and to value the gift of chastity which you have been given. But equally as important is the fact that Maria chose to centre her life on Jesus Christ. She forgave her enemy just as Jesus did when He was dying on the cross saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

*St. Maria Goretti, pray for us.*