

14th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Mark 6:1-6

On Saturday the Church celebrated the memorial of St. Maria Goretti, a young girl martyred when she was only eleven years old. In *A.D.* 1902 she was alone sewing in the house that her family shared with another family. One of that family, a twenty-year old man named Allesandro, went into Maria's room and grabbed her and demanded that she give herself over to him. Maria fought the man, screaming for him to stop and crying that this was a mortal sin. Allesandro choked Maria, but still refusing to succumb to him, he stabbed her eleven times. She ran for the door but he caught her and stabbed her three more times. She was found by her mother and father and rushed to hospital. Twenty hours later she was dead. But just before she died she said these words: "I forgive Alessandro... and I want him with me in heaven forever".

Allesandro was captured shortly afterwards and was sentenced to thirty-years in prison. For years he remained unrepentant and even told of dreams in which Maria appeared to him and gave him lilies but which burned-up in his hands. After a visit from the Bishop, he began to consider what he had done and the everlasting consequences to his soul.

When he was finally released from prison, he visited Maria's mother and begged that she would forgive him. Maria's mother said to him that if her daughter had found the humility to forgive him then she must do the same. The next day Allesandro and Maria's mother attended Mass and received Holy Communion side-by-side.

In *A.D.* 1950, Maria's mother and Maria's brothers and sisters attended the canonisation of Maria; the first mother ever to see her own child declared a Saint. At that same ceremony was Allesandro. He would die in 1970, having prayed daily to Maria, the girl he killed. A writer said of Maria and her mother:

“[They] have become models for the only education that matters: how to live and how to die”.¹

In A.D. 1995 in Illinois in the United States, a man went on trial for drink driving. He drove his car into two people walking by the road and killed them both. The case was quickly settled as the man pleaded guilty and accepted his sentence. With him in the courtroom was his mother. At the end of the trial a woman walked up to the man’s mother. She introduced herself saying that she was the mother of one of the boys who had been killed. She said to her, “I just want you to know that I know you must be in great pain, and that I feel for you. I know your son didn’t mean to do it. I just wanted you to know that.” That grieving mother, in the midst of her own agony, made a choice to not be enslaved to anger and resentment and vengeance. Out of the depths of her despair she reached out to the mother of the man who had killed her son and who herself now suffered the imprisonment of her own son.

We all have the choice to make between anger and forgiveness. Forgiveness is never easy because it does not come from human strength but from divine strength. Often it feels that forgiveness is weakness or not taking the stand that we should, especially when we have been hurt by someone who doesn’t even feel the need to be forgiven. Sometimes it feels that if we forgive then we have let go some of our control because anger and resentment and vengeance can make us feel as though we are strong and in control. Forgiveness can make us feel vulnerable and maybe even as though the abuse continues. But love is vulnerable. Christ is vulnerable. He places Himself in our hands at every Mass. A lack of forgiveness or the lack of a desire to forgive is not a matter of strength but of enslavement. We make of ourselves slaves to the power of those who have hurt us. Forgiveness is freedom because we expose ourselves to the grace of the Holy Spirit and the courage that says that we will

¹ White, N. “St. Maria Goretti, Martyr of Purity” in Catholicism.org (21 October, 2004) (catholicism.org).

not be slaves any more. To do this is to have the strength of St. Paul who said, "I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me, and that is why I am quite content with my weaknesses, and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and the agonies I go through for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong" (*II Cor.* 12:9-10).

If the Holy Spirit is to do any good within us then we have to rid ourselves of all those things that fill us up and do not allow room for His grace to live. Then we make ourselves poor—spiritually poor—and we become rich, because He who is everything gives us everything in return.