

WHY BLESSED MARGARET OF CASTELLO?



I'm sure that this question has probably popped into your head at one time or another, my friend, and I believe that it is a worthy question since most people have never heard of her and therefore it deserves a worthy answer. In brief, it is because she is a most worthy saint and deserving of our veneration. As I mentioned previously, I was the assistant principal of a small Catholic school in Cincinnati and taught there for four years. During that time we always ate our lunches in silence unless it was a first or second-class feast when we permitted the students to talk. Some might say that this was a rather draconian way to run a school but it sure helped the teachers' nerves! On the other days, we usually played a cassette of either peaceful music or played a saint's story, typically from Regina Martyrum Productions. As an unsolicited plug for them, their selection is quite wide and the stories are remarkably well told and I highly recommend them. The one story that had the greatest impact on me was their story of Blessed Margaret of Castello, a 13th century Italian saint who was born deaf, blind, lame, and a

hunchback. Having been "born with a silver spoon in my mouth", I was awestruck at how this poor handicapped girl could be rejected by her own parents and yet still live a life of virtue and holiness. She was so despised by her parents that they even refused to give her a name!

When the inspiration to open up a pregnancy center took hold of me, she seemed the obvious choice for a namesake; hence the Blessed Margaret Family Help Center, Inc was born. Over the years however, it has become clear that she should also be a patroness of the homeless or for home-related issues. Later, I learned that she had struggled against sins of impurity her whole life, so you could make a case for her to be another patron or co-patron, along with Venerable Antonio Margil de Jesus, for those struggling against a pornography or masturbation hook. So here I have two saints chosen for different reasons and at different times, having lived at different times with different characteristics being somehow related. Hmm...it's interesting how God blends together things, which, in our eyes, appear completely unrelated. It isn't until after He has brought them together that we can understand how it should have been perfectly obvious their union was to begin with! In any case, as she was the namesake of the apostolate that got this book into print, here is a synopsis of her story. I'm sure you will be as affected by it just as I was.

THE LIFE OF BLESSED MARGARET OF CASTELLO, 1287-1320

The source of my information is a book written by Fr. William R. Bonniwell, O.P. in 1952 called The Life of Blessed Margaret of Castello. He got his information from a book with an anonymous author that was rewritten by a Canon of the Cathedral of Castello in 1345 so the original information was taken from contemporary sources but it had a rather circuitous path.

Blessed Margaret of Castello, also sometimes known as “Blessed Margaret of Metola”, was born in Metola, Italy in the Papal State of Massa Trabaria in 1287. Due to the fact that this was Renaissance Italy with its politically important families, the original biographer felt it necessary to omit the family name so we don’t even know “Little Margaret’s” last name. We do know, however, that her parents were named Parisio and Emilia.

MARGARET’S PARENTS

Her father was a very powerful soldier who held the office of “podesta”, or Captain of the People, which made him essentially the Military governor, so he was a very powerful man with the right of life or death over the populace. His personal traits were that he was monstrously proud, unscrupulous, indifferent to suffering, and very irreligious. Hardly the ideal starting point for raising holy children, eh?

Parisio definitely “wore the pants” in his family. His wife, Emilia, was weak and completely dominated by him. However, she at least had some semblance of a conscience because she did fight to get Margaret baptized and she did occasionally visit her.

MARGARET’S LIFE

Things started off very badly for Margaret. Being a proud soldier expecting the birth of his first-born son, Parisio was completely scandalized to learn that his handsome, strapping, new baby boy was actually a deformed, ugly hunchbacked, blind, and lame dwarf of a girl. Disappointed at the sight of this “thing” that Emilia had given birth to, his pride was sorely pricked by the embarrassment of having already laid on a huge birthday bash to celebrate the birth of his heir. So horrified were both Parisio and Emilia that they spread the rumor that the child had died at birth. They loathed her so much that they even refused to give her a name. She was given up to the care of a maidservant of the castle who was given permission to name her anything she wanted to – except Emilia. Somehow this woman recognized God’s grace in this little misshapen child because she was given the name Margaret, which means “pearl”. Of course the beauty of the pearl is hidden inside the oyster and only becomes known to those who take the trouble to pry open the oyster. So it was with Margaret. This “pearl” was hidden from public view but permitted the run of the castle until she was six years of age when she unfortunately ran into a guest who inquired her name and who her parents were. Having been raised in virtue by the anonymous maidservant, she honestly answered the questions and revealed the one secret that Parisio and Emilia dreaded to have made known. Once again, Parisio’s anger was enkindled.

He ordered Margaret to be removed from the castle and taken to a small chapel that was deep in the forest called St. Mary of the Fortress. Here she was walled up in a brick cell adjoining the chapel so that she could be permitted but one joy in her life - to live in the company of the Real Presence and to hear Mass. She could not physically leave the cell and her food and drink were passed in through an opening that faced into the chapel. She lived in this hideous state like a caged animal for 14 years until she was 20 years of age. (Every time I think of what Parisio did to her, I can only think of putting a zip tie around this monster's neck and strangling him!)

It goes without saying that her parents were not religious, but having heard that miracles were occurring at the nearby tomb of Fra Giacomo in Citta di Castello, they decided that since God had given them such a hideously deformed daughter, He owed them the miracle of restoring her health. They traveled there with Margaret awaiting the expected cure. But "God resisteth the proud" – especially when their desires don't suit His purpose and the miracle never came. Leaving her alone at Fra Giacomo's tomb in the morning, they abandoned her and simply road back to the castle. (Here again are thoughts of a zip tie around the neck again!) Of course, being blind and deaf, poor Margaret hadn't a clue what was going on. She waited the entire day in prayer. Finally, when darkness came she sought shelter in the Church. Cold, hungry, and alone, she was turned out as just another untrustworthy beggar who might steal something from the sanctuary. Finally, the poor of Castello befriended her and she became a homeless beggar alongside them.

As if these crosses weren't sufficient, further suffering awaited Little Margaret. Having justly earned a reputation for sanctity, a nearby convent desired that she should join them. Once again, the biographer omits information that would sully someone's reputation so we don't know which order made this invitation. Margaret's joy was immense – nothing made her happier than to be living her life for the Good God who made her. She strictly observed the Rule of the order. Unfortunately, no one else in the convent was doing so and they were downright embarrassed that this little pipsqueak was showing them up! Declaring her a disturber of the peace of the convent, they expelled her, so once again Little Margaret was homeless! (More zip ties!)

Calumniated by the worldly nuns, she had abuse heaped upon her by those who didn't know her and, once again, the poor of Castello befriended her. She would stay in one home after another in sort of a rotation amongst the townsfolk. Each household that made room for her was transformed by her presence and public opinion eventually turned around in her favor.

Her favorite church was Chiesa della Carita, which means "Church of Charity" and it was run by the Dominicans. It was their headquarters for the Order of Penance of St. Dominic, a lay women's organization that was the precursor for today's Third Order of St. Dominic. For those who don't know what a "Third Order" is, it is someone who wants to live a more perfect life but can't enter into the religious life for various reasons. In Castello it was primarily meant for widowed women but, after persistent appeals from women who knew Margaret, an exception was made to let this young maiden join their ranks.

These women were permitted to wear the Dominican religious habit that included a black cloak or mantella. This led to them being called the mantellata. The pictures included

here of Blessed Margaret as she now appears. Her habit and the mantella can plainly be seen. This was exactly the path to perfection that she had dreamed of and the day of her profession was one of the happiest of her short life.

HER SPIRITUAL LIFE

Little Margaret turned her whole self into observing the Rule. Daily prayer was part of that rule. In addition to the required ones, she said all 150 Psalms, the Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Office of Holy Cross. Remember that she had been blind from birth so she wasn't reading them from a missal! She had this knowledge infused in her in some miraculous way. She was given to long episodes of deep contemplation. Her conversation was constantly of God – unless she was speaking of the Blessed Virgin or St. Joseph. Her devotion to him was unusual for the time because the cult of his veneration was not widespread. Therefore, she was a pioneer in devotion to the Foster Father of Our Lord. She practiced the most austere penances, including lack of sleep and self-flagellation. Her life was filled with acts of charity to neighbor and it was never too late or too far to go to visit the sick and the dying. One key apostolate was the visiting of the jail and bringing relief to the prisoners.

MARGARET'S MIRACLES

A soul that reaches spiritual perfection is as united to God as is possible in this life and Margaret was certainly in this state of "Spiritual Marriage". In this state, it is not unusual for visible signs of that soul's closeness to God in order to bear witness to the world. Her life was no exception. Her biographer tells of several episodes of curing the sick. The most interesting one to me is that she, who had been born blind, restored sight to a blind woman, even though she herself was blind. She even stopped a raging house fire by throwing her cloak into the flames.

MARGARET'S BURIAL

Little Margaret died on the Second Sunday after Easter, April 13, 1320 at the young age of 33. The public wanted her buried in her favorite church, Chiesa della Carita, in Castello, knowing her to be a saint. The friars resisted and wanted her buried in the cemetery. Only after a miracle occurred where her left arm moved to touch a crippled mute girl and healed her, did the Dominicans relent to the wishes of the people. She still lies at rest in her beloved church. As you can see from these pictures, her body is still incorrupt.

Her story moves me every time I read it. I'm grateful for the inspiration she has been to me personally as well as the graces she has obtained for the Center. I marvel at her peace, joy, and charity in spite of having not even the basic joys that we would wish on any child – not even the love of her parents! Despite every natural reason for being bitter, angry, even suicidal, she had monumental love for the God Who made her as she was and a gentle charity for everyone around her, even her parents.

Blessed Margaret of Castello, pray for us!