

“At the sight of the crowds, [Jesus’s] heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest’” (Mt 9:36-38).

This reading from Matthew is a particular favorite for ordinations. Jesus wants to call shepherds who have a deep love of people and are willing to lay down their lives in service to help the troubled and abandoned grow in holiness. The call to be a laborer in the vineyard goes beyond priests and religious. God often uses the sanctity and the purity of the young to help build the Kingdom of God. “Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it” (Mk 10:15).

On a hot summer’s day, a young neighbor filled with lust stopped by and was so taken by Maria Goretti’s beauty that he would stop at nothing. No one heard Maria’s cry for help, but the young man definitely heard her rebuke. “No, God does not wish it. It is a sin. You will go to hell for it.”ⁱ The young man had a knife and lashed out at her with deadly force.

Although taken to a hospital, Maria would not recover from the violence. She forgave her murderer and received the sacraments of the church to prepare for eternity. Maria had a Christ like love. Christ died for the sins of humanity suffering on the cross. Maria’s last 24 hours were very painful, but like Jesus, she offered her suffering up for the salvation of sinners.

Her assailant was unrepentant. He was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to 30 years in prison. And there he might have rotted were it not for the extraordinary love in the heart of the young girl who reached out to him from beyond the grave. Maria came to him in a vision and offered him flowers that she had gathered. She explained about the last day of her life and how she had forgiven him. His mortal sin could have easily sent him beyond prison to hell. But that does not take into account, the deep and abiding love that God has for all sinners and the forgiveness Maria Goretti had for her assailant.

Upon release from jail, the reformed killer went to Maria’s home on Christmas evening in 1934. He begged forgiveness on his knees from Maria’s mother. “She forgave him asking how she could not when Maria had done so already on her death bed.”ⁱⁱ

When Jesus hung on the cross, the good thief asked for forgiveness and Jesus responded with mercy. “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:43). It is difficult in the midst of our own suffering to look out for the welfare of others. Often times we respond in anger or hurt when we are not feeling well. We would like our suffering to end as quickly as that of the good thief on the cross with the promise of paradise.

What a pure heart Maria Goretti had to look beyond her own suffering and respond in mercy to the young man who had no love in his heart. Hearts and mind are converted by courageous acts of faith. What a tragic loss of such a pure soul at a young age. Maria was a martyr for chastity. With her new and eternal life, she became even more loving as she was united in death with our triune God. Life does not end with death. From beyond the grave Maria reached out with greater mercy and compassion. She is an example to all of us, how with the help of God, all things are possible.

As you hold onto hurts in your own life, offer a prayer to Saint Maria Goretti that she may enlighten your mind and heart to forgive those who have hurt you deeply. Pure love is a powerful force to help the unrepentant so that they may come to know and love God as well. “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest” (Mt 9:37-38).

ⁱ franciscanmedia.org/saint-maria-goretti/

ⁱⁱ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alessandro_Serenelli