



# Saving a Saint

**A Study of the Representation of Maria Goretti (1890-1902): a Saint, a Martyr, a Virgin, a Child**

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## Introduction

Promoting the cult of a saint is not an uncomplicated matter. It is a process that consists of many layers. Put simply, it starts with a life, sometimes a wholly virtuous life, and it ends with a death, just to begin again in the remembrance of the people and in the elevation to the glory of the altars. Sometimes the aspect of the holy individuals' lives that receives more attention and provides them with visibility for sainthood is in direct connection with their deaths. This becomes the core around which the story is built. In the core lies the virtue, and it corresponds to an ideal that when mediated is received in different ways depending on the moral sentiments of an individual, on the time, and on the context. Saints as embodied ideals demonstrate how piety can be acted out, however, sometimes these ideals and the circumstances that surround them become difficult to emulate or admire when their logic is partially or wholly affected by what some would perceive as oversimplifications. This can occur in stories where feminine virtue is associated with sexual purity and infliction of violence. In the case of Saint Maria Goretti, a subject so sensitive and complicated as sexual violence has in reference to her been poorly discussed in her official representation, as well as in the hagiographic material written about her. This has not contributed to giving a more comprehensive and wholesome portrayal of the subject.

Maria Goretti was an Italian girl born at Corinaldo in the province of Ancona the 16th of October 1890. Because of poverty, Goretti, her parents and her five siblings migrated to Le Ferriere di Conca in the Pontine Marshes of Italy. Her father Luigi Goretti, a farmworker, entered into partnership with Giovanni Serenelli and had to share the house where he and his family lived, with his new partner and his son Alessandro Serenelli.<sup>1</sup> Maria Goretti died the 6th of July 1902 after being stabbed numerous times in an attempted rape by Alessandro Serenelli who was twice her age.<sup>2</sup> She forgave her killer before she died, and he was sent to prison for thirty years. The legend states that he remained unrepentant for several years until Goretti one day appeared to him in a dream holding flowers and offering them to him. When Serenelli was released three years early, he visited Maria Goretti's mother Assunta Goretti and asked for her forgiveness. When Goretti was beatified in 1947, Serenelli appeared on the balcony of St. Peter's together with Assunta and two of Goretti's brothers. In the address given by pope Pius XII on the day of her beatification, the Pope criticised the entertainment industry, the fashion industry, and the press, for corrupting the chastity of youth, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> *Pocket Dictionary of Saints* 1983, s.v. "Maria Goretti"; *The Saints: A Concise Biographical Dictionary* 1958, s.v. "Mary Goretti".

<sup>2</sup> *Pocket Dictionary of Saints* 1983, s.v. "Maria Goretti"; Woodward 1996, p. 123.

the military for conscripting women.<sup>3</sup> Maria Goretti was canonised for purity in 1950 by Pope Pius XII, in what is said to have been the largest crowd that at that time had ever assembled for a canonisation.<sup>4</sup>

Saint Maria Goretti is not a peripheral saint, there are many books written about her and two Italian produced movies released with 54 years of difference. The many websites that exist in her honour with the aim of spreading devotion to her, as well as the existence of many schools that bear her name can be seen as testimonies to the diffusion of her cult.<sup>5</sup>

The *Basilica Madonna delle Grazie e Santa Maria Goretti*, is the basilica that houses Saint Maria Goretti's remains. The website of the basilica contains information about the pilgrimages that are organised from Nettuno to Le Ferriere, in honour of the saint, and visits places that have a connection to Goretti. Among these places is *La Tenda del Perdono*, which is the place where Maria Goretti took her last breath. A noteworthy feature of the website is that it provides its visitors with a live streaming video of the glass-sided casket inside of which lies a wax statue of Goretti that preserves her skeletal remains.<sup>6</sup>

To promote the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, proclaimed by pope Francis and announced in March 2015, the reliquary of Saint Maria Goretti was taken on a tour to the U.S.A.<sup>7</sup> It is possible to contend that the American Catholic audience was not unfamiliar with Saint Maria Goretti, since most of the hagiographic literature on the saint was written in the mid-twentieth-century for a North American audience. These books extoll specific moral virtues, with the purpose of edifying the reader. The historian Robert Orsi includes these books in what is referred to as devotional print, which according to him was viewed by Catholics as a medium of presence of the supernatural. This kind of material played an essential role in the religious formation which aimed at making the children aware of knowing themselves as being members of the communion of saints. The production of devotional print in the mid-twentieth-century U.S.A. was also the result of the religious and moral antagonism between Catholicism and "pagan civilisation", with its commercialised entertainment and consumerism which Catholics deemed to be exploitative of the young.<sup>8</sup>

The aim of this study is to examine how Maria Goretti has been portrayed in the Catholic tradition. I will thus analyse her official representation which can be found in the papal discourse about her. However, I will also analyse the devotional discourse by doing a

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<sup>3</sup> Woodward 1996, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Woodward 1996, p. 123; *Pocket Dictionary of Saints* 1983, s.v. "Maria Goretti".

<sup>5</sup> See for example: [www.mariagoretti.com](http://www.mariagoretti.com), [www.mariagoretti.org](http://www.mariagoretti.org), [www.santamariagoretti.it](http://www.santamariagoretti.it), [www.papaboys.org](http://www.papaboys.org), [www.gorettischool.org](http://www.gorettischool.org), [www.escolasantamariagoretti.com](http://www.escolasantamariagoretti.com).

<sup>6</sup> *Website of the basilica that houses the remains of St. Maria Goretti*, <http://www.santuaronettuno.it/il-pellegrinaggio-a-piedi-per-la-citta-di-nettuno> [Accessed 2018-02-23].

<sup>7</sup> *Website with information on St. Maria Goretti and the tour of her reliquary to the U.S.A.* [www.mariagoretti.com](http://www.mariagoretti.com) [Accessed 2018-02-26].

<sup>8</sup> Orsi 2016, pp. 114, 115, 123.

detailed reading of the hagiographic literature that has been written about Saint Maria Goretti. Therefore, it becomes necessary to identify what themes are discussed in the discourse about Maria Goretti and which aspects of her figure have been emphasised. Maria Goretti is a declared saint. Hence, it is relevant to establish wherein her holiness lies.

A part of this study will focus on the aspects of her representation that can be considered problematic because of the claim that it is preferable to choose to be killed rather than to be raped. Some of these aspects have already been identified in previous studies on Maria Goretti while others have not. I will also seek to determine those things in her representation that need to be considered in her future representation, as well as make a suggestion of how Saint Maria Goretti could be represented in her continued veneration. It is therefore necessary to include the discourse that treats her story from a critical point of view. Included in this discourse are ethical, psychological, and feminist perspectives. This discourse takes its point of departure in the view that rape is a wrongful action that causes injury to the victim, and stands against the idea that a girl who is submitted to an assault with intent to commit rape, in order not to sin against her chastity is supposed to choose to be killed by the assailant if that choice exists. This premise is based on and results in misconceptions about sex, and rape and its aftermath. Thus, it misses the complexity and multifariousness of the subject of sexual violence.

The questions I seek to answer are: How is Maria Goretti portrayed in the papal discourse and in the devotional discourse? What themes are discussed in the papal discourse and in the devotional discourse about Maria Goretti and which aspects of her figure have been emphasised? Wherein lies Maria Goretti's holiness? What is taught in the the devotional discourse/Catholic edificational biographies? Which parts of her representation have been considered problematic, and which parts are seen as in need of more attention? How could Saint Maria Goretti be represented in her continued veneration?

The material that I have chosen to answer these questions consists first and foremost of two hagiographical books about Maria Goretti that aim at the edification of the reader and that constitute the devotional discourse of this study, as well as of her official representation which can be found in the papal discourse about Saint Maria Goretti.

What is meant by papal discourse is the transcriptions of papal utterances in which Goretti has been mentioned and that are available to the public on the website of the Holy See. The papal discourse about Maria Goretti that will be analysed in this study consists of homilies, discourses, Angelus, messages and a letter. Maria Goretti was both beatified and canonised under the papacy of Pope Pius XII (1876-1958)<sup>9</sup>, it is thus reasonable to start with

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<sup>9</sup> Cavallin 2006, p. 139.

him. Pope Pius XII offers two discourses of great importance that provide insight into the reasons given for her veneration. Maria Goretti was nonetheless mentioned publicly on more occasions by Pope John Paul II (1920-2005)<sup>10</sup>. His utterances about Maria Goretti consist of three homilies, one message, one discourse, and one Angelus. There are three popes in between the papacy of Pius XII and John Paul II. Searching their names in reference to Maria Goretti on the website of the Holy See showed that two of them mentioned Goretti, however, these utterances are very short. I have thus chosen not to include them in this study. Pope Benedict XVI's (1927-)<sup>11</sup> utterances about Goretti, that are available to the public, are also short. I will nonetheless include one of these which can be found in the transcription from a general audience from the 7th of July 2010. Pope Francis (1936-)<sup>12</sup> also mentions Goretti very briefly in an Angelus from the 3rd of July 2016, however, I have decided to complement his discourse about Goretti by incorporating a letter that he wrote in 2016 to the Rector of the Shrine of Nettuno, and a message that he sent to the bishops of the dioceses of Albano and Latina to which Saint Maria Goretti is a patroness. The letter and the message can be accessed digitally through the websites of the Shrine and the dioceses respectively. Four of the transcriptions used in this study were found translated into English, the rest are written in Italian as are Pope Francis' letter and message.

Two reasons can be given for the choice of analysing Pope Benedict XVI's and Pope Francis' utterances. The first one is the existence of an article written by journalist Orazio La Rocca, published in the Italian newspaper *larepubblica.it* the 25th of February 2014, that alleges, amongst other things, that Pope Benedict XVI conceived the idea of proclaiming Saint Maria Goretti protector of women victims of violence, and that this could have been put forward as a request to Pope Francis. I have incorporated this article into my analysis, since its prospect of proclamation contributes to the discussion of Maria Goretti's future representation. The second reason is that the figure of Goretti has been significant to Pope Francis' message of mercy.

Although it would be interesting, and although it would broaden our understanding of Maria Goretti, this study does not focus on the influence of social or historical circumstances on the papal discourse about Maria Goretti. Such a study could be seen as a complement to the one at hand, or vice versa.

In connection with Maria Goretti's canonisation several books with the purpose of telling her story, edifying the reader, and spreading her cult were published. Two of these

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<sup>10</sup> Cavallin 2006, p. 273.

<sup>11</sup> Cavallin 2006, p. 396.

<sup>12</sup> *The Holy See*, "Biography of the Holy Father Francis", <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/biography/documents/papa-francesco-biografia-bergoglio.html> [Accessed 2018-03-01].

books are: *St. Maria Goretti*, by Marie Cecilia Buehrle (1950), and *St. Maria Goretti: In garments all red*, by Fr. Godfrey Poage, C.P. (1950). These books will constitute the devotional discourse of this study. Given the fact that they more than half a century after their first publication are still being republished, it is possible to count them among the classics on Saint Maria Goretti written in English.

Marie Cecilia Buehrle's book is one of the most cited works written about the saint, especially in studies of Maria Goretti written from a feminist perspective. The information available about Marie Cecilia Buehrle on the web is scarce. What can be known about her, however, is that she has written several books about important figures of the Catholic Church. Fr. Godfrey Poage (1920-2001) was a North American Passionist priest who from 1957-1970 worked in the Pontifical Office for Priestly and Religious Vocations, and at one point also served as its director. He worked personally with Pius XII, John XXIII, and Paul VI.<sup>13</sup> Both Buehrle's and Poage's books are devotional portrayals of Maria Goretti and her life, and they both stylistically read like a novel. The books contain a *nihil obstat* which is the favourable judgment of a censor, as well as an *imprimatur* which is the official permission by a Church authority to print the book and indicates that nothing offensive to faith or morals has been discovered in the book.<sup>14</sup> But they are nonetheless written in the form of a novel, filled with details and dialogues that may give the reader the sensation of having a more complete picture of Maria Goretti than the one provided in the papal discourse. In my analysis of these narratives, I will refer to the characters by their first name as is done by the authors.

I use a thematic narrative analysis as method in which I'm concerned with content in terms of themes,<sup>15</sup> and with the ways in which characters are represented. Considering that the main question of this study is to examine how Maria Goretti has been portrayed in the Catholic tradition, focus will be placed on the descriptions of her character. The inclusion of descriptions of other characters is based on the judgment of how they contribute in the identifying of themes, and how they disclose interactions. Narratives always involve a Tale, a Teller, and an Addressee, and they are typically recountings of things spatiotemporally distant.<sup>16</sup> Both the devotional discourse and the papal discourse fit into this definition of narratives.

Throughout the study I will use material that will make a theological, ethical, and psychological contribution, and also provide an understanding of the genre of hagiography. John Kitchen's *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender* (1998), Karen A. Winstead's *Virgin*

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<sup>13</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> Matt Stefon, "imprimatur", in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2008, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/imprimatur> [Accessed 2018-02-20].

<sup>15</sup> Kohler Riessman 1993, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Toolan 2001, pp. 1, 2.

*Martyrs* (1997), and Barbara Newman's *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ* (1995), are three of the works that will be used to understand the role that suffering and the incorporation of biblical motifs has in the genre of hagiography. Marina Warner's *Alone of all Her Sex* (1976), and Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg's *Forgetful of Their Sex* (1998), will make a theological contribution, as will *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The *Catechism* will be used to better understand the importance that the papal discourse and the devotional discourse place on the virtues of *chastity* and *charity*. Kenneth L. Woodward's *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (1996), examines Maria Goretti's case and gives insight into the saint-making apparatus. His work will thus be of use in the discussion of Maria Goretti's holiness. To gain an understanding of the genre of hagiography and its function, as well as the context of Buehrle's and Poage's books, I will turn to Hippolyte Delehaye's *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography* (1974), and to Robert A. Orsi's *History and Presence* (2016).

Important to my discussion of the representation of Maria Goretti are books that treat the subject of sexual violence and sexual consent from a psychological and ethical perspective. These are Marie M. Fortune's *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited* (2005), and Alan Wertheimer's *Consent To Sexual Relations* (2003). Marie M. Fortune, ordained minister, theologian, ethicist and founder of the Faith Trust Institute, examines the Christian tradition as it relates to sexual violence. She explores the collective ethical thinking in culture, how we decide what is acceptable and unacceptable, and how common values are communicated and enforced among us. In reference to Maria Goretti, Fortune discusses the confusion that arises between sexual violence and sexual activity in the story of Goretti. Political scientist and ethicist Alan Wertheimer's study of sexual consent, besides offering an extensive exposition on the subject of consent also gives important insight into the subject of sexual violence and the psychology of the perpetrator. His discussion on the latter is useful in this study's treatment of Goretti's assailant, Alessandro Serenelli.

Many studies have been done on the figure of Maria Goretti from a feminist perspective. Counted among these are the scholar of religion Sheila A. Redmond's *Christian "Virtues" and Recovery from Child Sexual Abuse* (1989), the anthropologist Kathleen Z. Young's *The Imperishable Virginity of Saint Maria Goretti* (1989), and the theologian Eileen J. Stenzel's *Rape and the Politics of Sainthood* (1996). Sheila A. Redmond examines whether there are Christian teachings that are hindrances in the process of recovery of children victims of sexual abuse. She criticises what she considers are negative teachings to these victims' recovery, in the story of Maria Goretti. Examining the legend of the modern virgin martyr

Maria Goretti, Kathleen Z. Young states that Goretti's sainthood and idealisation are used to regulate Catholic women's lives and condone violence against them. According to her, it is through the handing on of stories of virgin martyrs that the institutionalisation of violence and male dominance in the Catholic Church is accomplished. She considers this as one facet of the social control of women. Furthermore, Young claims that there is a connection between the concern for female chastity and patrilineal inheritance. Eileen J. Stenzel proposes a feminist reinterpretation of the sainthood of Maria Goretti. She does this with a framework she calls a *feminist pastoral theology*. She views Goretti's story as a pastoral testimony to the priesthood of women. This reinterpretation draws parallels between Jesus and Goretti and portrays her as his representative. It has its starting point in the view that the stories of the saints contain authoritative papal teaching, and in the redemptive imagery that has been used in the portrayal of Goretti's fidelity, with the forgiveness of her assailant. Thus, Goretti becomes a representative for Jesus in the ongoing work of redemption. Having determined the relevance of these sources to my discussion, Redmond and Stenzel (although to different extents) will be referred to in this study.

A difference between these studies and mine is that I will not be looking into aspects of power. Moreover, my analysis of the official representation of Maria Goretti will not only focus on what has been said about her by Pope Pius XII, the pope that canonised her. As already mentioned, the utterances about Maria Goretti made by Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis are also included in the papal discourse. My study will contribute with a more detailed analysis of the discourse about Maria Goretti at the official level as well as the devotional level. Uncovering the themes that are discussed in the discourse about Maria Goretti will contribute to a better understanding of her representation, and to a certain degree to a reconsideration of what she represents. I also seek to offer some insight into the genre of hagiography, especially as it is exemplified in the chosen hagiographical books written by Marie Cecilia Buehrle and Fr. Godfrey Poage. The critical discussion that consists of psychological, ethical, and feminist perspectives on sexual violence, and that is partially based on the fact that we cannot know exactly what happened in the moment of Maria Goretti's assault, is done with the purpose of discerning the problematic aspects of her representation, as well as with the wish to contribute to a constructive dialogue about her future representation.

The first chapter of this study consists of the papal discourse about Maria Goretti. I analyse how she has been portrayed by the popes, and the themes that have been given emphasis in their discourse about the Saint. The chapter ends with a summary. With the papal discourse as basis and with the help of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, I will discuss

wherein Maria Goretti's holiness lies. This will be done in chapter two. Chapter three consists of the analysis of the devotional discourse. It starts with a discussion of the hagiographical genre and situates the chosen books within a context. The first book to be analysed is Marie Cecilia Buehrle's and the second one is Fr. Godfrey Poage's. Because of the order, the comparisons between them will mostly be done in Poage's part. Unlike Poage's narrative, Buehrle's does not end with Goretti's death. However, since analysing Maria Goretti's portrayal is the main focus, I will not include the chapters in Buehrle's narrative that come after Goretti's death. Throughout this analysis, I will be narrating the narratives so as to give a detailed insight into their content, and discover the recurrent themes and the depictions of Goretti. I will also make smaller interpretations, although the observation of certain themes, the interpretations, and the analysis will mostly be done in the subchapter entitled *Summary and Analysis of the Catholic Edificational Biographies*. In chapter four, I will discuss Maria Goretti's representation based on the findings in the previous chapters. I will try to identify those things in her representation that can give rise to problematic interpretations and images. I will do this with the help of material that provides psychological and ethical insights. Cecilia Marie Fortune's study on Maria Goretti is very important to this discussion. I will also suggest what the official representation and the devotional discourse need to make a comprehensive and wholesome representation of Maria Goretti. In the end, I will propose another way Maria Goretti could be represented. Chapter five is the conclusion of the study.

# 1. The Official Representation: Papal Discourse about Maria Goretti

## 1.1 Pope Pius XII

In a discourse delivered by Pope Pius XII the 7th of April 1947, to the pilgrims that had been arriving to Rome for the beatification of Maria Goretti, the Pope highlighted the strength of Maria Goretti, a strength that was to be seen as the fruit of virginity. Strength, that is both the protector and the fruit of virginity, the strength whose seed every Christian receives in baptism and that if nurtured at home can lead to a manifold of virtues, is the theme of this discourse. In response to those who fail to see the value of virginity and consider it a result of the ignorance and the ingenuity of the passionless little souls, Pope Pius XII speaks of the strength that is required to maintain it and compares Goretti to Saint Agnes, both possessors of this strength.<sup>17</sup>

He refers to Goretti as "a heroine" who knew that which was befalling her and did not think about her own suffering but at the hideousness of the sin which she resolutely rejected. He underscores that Goretti's reaction in the moment of her assault was not an instinctive reaction caused by her sense of modesty, but a conscious reaction that originated from her love of Christ and her will not to violate God's law at whatever price.<sup>18</sup> This claim reinforces the idea that the reason why Goretti defended herself in the moment of the assault was because she did not want to commit a sin.

Pope Pius XII considers the immoral dangers that the youth are exposed to in society and the changes that have occurred in the lives of women, and holds Goretti up as an example of the pure of heart. Noticing these dangers, he denounces those in society who have armed the arm of the killer of a child. The conclusion that can be drawn from this, considering its position in the discourse, is that Pope Pius XII uses the expression "armed the arm of a killer" as a metaphor for the moral degradation in society that leads to the pollution of the souls and of the virgin hearts. He also praises the role of the Christian family, referring to the poorer ones like the one Goretti was brought up in where the children are raised in the fear of God and whose living conditions allow them to grow in the grace of Christ. He continues by saying that these children since very early on are accustomed to being content with little, and to

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<sup>17</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Pellegrini Affluiti a Roma per la Beatificazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, April 7, 1947, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1947/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_spe\\_19470428\\_beata-maria-goretti.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1947/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19470428_beata-maria-goretti.html) [Accessed 2017-06-29].

<sup>18</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Pellegrini Affluiti a Roma per la Beatificazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, April 7, 1947.

being helpful at home and in the factory. Continuing to portray Maria Goretti's piety, the Pope makes reference to the distances she had to travel on foot in order to receive the Catechetical instruction she needed to prepare herself for her First Holy Communion.<sup>19</sup>

In the discourse on the day of Maria Goretti's canonisation, the 24th of June 1950, the theme of purity assumes greater importance. Pope Pius XII calls Maria Goretti "the little and sweet martyr of purity", and acknowledging the large crowd present at St. Peter's Square he rhetorically asks them why Maria Goretti has won their hearts in such a rapid manner. The answer to this question lies in his claim that the supernatural perfume of Christian purity emits an irresistible, promising and reassuring charm.<sup>20</sup>

The Pope describes the canonisation of Goretti as a sacred rite and as a popular welcome to purity, which is what according to him shines through the most in the martyrdom of Maria Goretti. In Goretti's purity, he explains, was the most elemental and significant affirmation of the perfect dominion of the soul over matter. Pope Pius XII also mentions Goretti's forgiveness of her killer, and he calls this a heroic pardon. Turning to the Saint, he says that on her virginal face lies the force of love and the constancy of the fidelity to the divine Spouse. "You are", he says to her: "blood Spouse, so as to portray on yourself his [Christ's] image".<sup>21</sup> This description by the Pope carries symbolism that refers to Goretti's sacrifice unto blood in her fidelity to Christ by avoidance of sin. Goretti is thus blood Spouse of Christ, the divine Spouse. Goretti as a blood Spouse, even though she is not a nun, puts her in the same tradition as the brides of Christ, dedicating her life to Him. However, she is a bride that has sacrificed herself in order to remain faithful to Christ, or in other words, to the Catholic Church's teachings on God's law. Moreover, the Pope's description of her as portraying on herself the image of Christ is a clear allusion to her imitating Christ in the act of sacrificing herself. She followed Christ's example, in her case, not to commit a sin. Furthermore, it is possible to conclude that the Pope is also comparing Goretti to Christ in the mentioning of her heroic pardon.

Pope Pius XII speaks about the two-sidedness of martyrdom, one side being the iniquity that leads to its existence, and he recognises that behind Goretti's martyrdom lies a scandal that in the first half of the 20th century seems to be unprecedented. It is possible from this

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<sup>19</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Pellegrini Affluiti a Roma per la Beatificazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, April 7, 1947.

<sup>20</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Fedeli Convenuti a Roma per la Canonizzazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, June 24, 1950, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1950/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_spe\\_19500624\\_santa-maria-goretti.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1950/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19500624_santa-maria-goretti.html) [Accessed 2017-06-29].

<sup>21</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Fedeli Convenuti a Roma per la Canonizzazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, June 24, 1950.

statement to arrive at the conclusion that Pope Pius XII, although very briefly and without going into detail, is expressing recognition of the incident that led to Maria Goretti's death.<sup>22</sup>

As in the above mentioned discourse from 1947, Pope Pius XII criticizes the bad influences in society, calling them a "conspiracy of immorality" that tries to undermine the family, affecting primarily childhood. He addresses the parents, advising them to keep their children away from surroundings that train them in impiety and moral perversion. But he also addresses the youth asking them if they are determined to resist any attempt against their purity. The discourse ends with a prayer asking for Saint Maria Goretti's intercession, and during which the Pope, speaking for himself and those who accompany him in this prayer, does not fail to express his admiration of her heroism as well as the wish to emulate her in the fervour of her faith and in the incorruptible virginity of her morals.<sup>23</sup> The last part of the prayer encapsulates the main arguments Pope Pius XII has been concerned with:

"To you the fathers and the mothers turn to, so that you may assist them on their educational mission. In you through our hands the whole of childhood and of youth find refuge, in order to be protected from every contamination and to be able to gait down the road of life in the serenity and in the joy of the pure of heart. So be it".<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Pope Pius XII proposes Goretti's purity and her Christian upbringing as examples to emulate. As is clear from this quote, the Saint is to be sought by parents in their endeavour to give their children a Christian upbringing so that they be able to stand against the contaminations of society and remain pure.

## 1.2 Pope John Paul II

Pope John Paul II continues along the same lines as Pope Pius XII by highlighting the themes of purity and of Christian instruction. In a discourse that Pope John Paul II gave to the Catholic Action of Senigallia the 18th of October 1980, in honour of the 90th anniversary of Saint Maria Goretti's birth, the Pope implies that the Saint's strength originated amongst

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<sup>22</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Fedeli Convenuti a Roma per la Canonizzazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, June 24, 1950.

<sup>23</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Fedeli Convenuti a Roma per la Canonizzazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, June 24, 1950.

<sup>24</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Fedeli Convenuti a Roma per la Canonizzazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, June 24, 1950. "A te i padri e le madri ricorrono, affinché tu li assista nella loro missione educativa. In te per le Nostre mani trova rifugio la fanciullezza e la gioventù tutta, affinché sia protetta da ogni contaminazione e possa incedere per il cammino della vita nella serenità e nella letizia dei puri di cuore. Così sia."

other things in the Catechetical teaching she had the fortune to receive in her own home. In this discourse the Pope says that the parents of Maria Goretti, who according to him had received a Catechetical instruction, had also given her the best schooling.<sup>25</sup>

In a message to the Bishop of Albano for the first centenary of Goretti's death, Pope John Paul II praises Goretti's family environment which according to him contributed to her steadfast trust in God's love, and in which God showed his special love for the lowly. He expresses the Church's recognition of the family as the first and fundamental place for the sanctification of its members and admonishes the parents to dedicate their Christian intelligence to their children.<sup>26</sup> In addition to exalting the importance of a Christian instruction and the role of the parents, he emphasises that poverty is not a hindrance to a good Christian upbringing.

Pope John Paul II refers to Goretti as a "martyr of chastity", while claiming that her message was twofold. According to the Pope, Goretti's message was about personal dignity that stands against any kind of oppression and violence, and about the consecration of one's own energies, even the physical ones, to the Lord and the Church in obedience to God's law. He admonishes the youth to take care of their baptismal identity, of which chastity is of main importance.<sup>27</sup>

In a homily in which he addresses the youth on the day that Saint Maria Goretti's remains were transferred, the 27th of September 1986, Pope John Paul II makes an exposition on the concept of chastity. Observing chastity is depicted as promoting the defence of one's own human dignity, whilst impurity is to be seen as an offence against this dignity. The Pope clarifies that human sexuality is not bad, but what is bad is the lack of respect for the body's dignity. The fruit of chastity is the interior harmony of the person, which is the capacity to achieve a generous and disinterested love through the freedom of the spirit and a greater sensibility for the value of the divine and transcendent good. Its goal is the emergence of the moral force as well as the total conquest of the human dignity. Pope John Paul II does not fail to underscore that purity can be lived out in different ways depending on one's vocation in life.<sup>28</sup> The purity that the Pope is referring to here is clearly the moral purity that is gained when chastity is being rightly observed.

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<sup>25</sup> John Paul II, *Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II all'Azione Cattolica di Senigallia*, October 18, 1980, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1980/october/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19801018\\_azione-cattolica.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1980/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19801018_azione-cattolica.html) [Accessed 2017-06-29].

<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *Message of John Paul II to the Bishop of Albano for the Centenary of the Death of St. Maria Goretti*, July 8, 2002, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/july/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20020708\\_santa-maria-goretti.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/july/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020708_santa-maria-goretti.html) [Accessed 2017-06-29].

<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, *Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II all'Azione Cattolica di Senigallia*, October 18, 1980.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, *Visita alla Parrocchia del <<Corpus Domini>> per la Traslazione delle Spoglie di Santa Maria Goretti. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 27, 1986, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1986/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19860927\\_parrocchia-corporis-domini.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1986/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19860927_parrocchia-corporis-domini.html) [Accessed 2017-06-29].

Like Pope Pius XII, Pope John Paul II also emphasises that Maria Goretti made a conscious decision in the moment of her assault. In a homily from 1991, Pope John Paul II says that with the guidance of The Holy Spirit, Maria knew how to choose and she chose death when she in no other way could defend her virginal purity.<sup>29</sup> Noticeable in this statement is that Goretti's death is depicted as something she could decide on and eventually chose.

The Pope continues by saying that the calling to sanctity of every baptised is encouraged by Goretti's example. Maria Goretti's sacrifice reminds every baptised that they are called to offer themselves to God.<sup>30</sup> According to him, Goretti had understood Saint Paul's teaching on the body of Christ in which the body of the human is said to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. Goretti thus lived these teachings heroically facing their extreme consequences.<sup>31</sup>

Pope John Paul II states that Goretti loved the purity that God loves and demands.<sup>32</sup> In the many occasions Pope John Paul II addresses the youth in his homilies and in his discourses in connection with Maria Goretti, he advises them to fight against sin and the slavery to the material realities through prayer, and to not be afraid to go against the current and the idols of this world. In addition to this, he wants them to value chastity.<sup>33</sup> The youth is encouraged to turn to this Saint that because of her youth will understand their problems.<sup>34</sup> They are to follow the example of this "athlete of God", honouring their purity, innocence and their sense of modesty.<sup>35</sup>

In the Angelus from the 6th of July 2003, that concluded the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Goretti's death, Pope John Paul II continues to stress the importance of chastity, and he reminds the youth what "this fragile but christianly mature girl" can teach them.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John Paul II, *Visita Pastorale a Latina. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 29, 1991, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1991/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19910929\\_messa-latina.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1991/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19910929_messa-latina.html) [Accessed 2017-06-29].

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, *Visita Pastorale a Latina. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 29, 1991.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, *Visita alla Parrocchia del <<Corpus Domini>> per la Traslazione delle Spoglie di Santa Maria Goretti. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 27, 1986.

<sup>32</sup> John Paul II, *Visita alla Parrocchia del <<Corpus Domini>> per la Traslazione delle Spoglie di Santa Maria Goretti. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 27, 1986.

<sup>33</sup> John Paul II, *Visita Pastorale a Latina. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 29, 1991; *Message of John Paul II to the Bishop of Albano for the Centenary of the Death of St. Maria Goretti*, July 8, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> John Paul II, *Visita alla Parrocchia del <<Corpus Domini>> per la Traslazione delle Spoglie di Santa Maria Goretti. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 27, 1986.

<sup>35</sup> John Paul II, *Visita alla Parrocchia di Santa Maria Goretti. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, January 31, 1988, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19880131\\_parrocchia-maria-goretti.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19880131_parrocchia-maria-goretti.html) [Accessed 2017-06-29].

<sup>36</sup> John Paul II, *Angelus/Regina Caeli*, July 6, 2003, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/2003/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_ang\\_20030706.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_20030706.html) [Accessed 2017-06-29].

”Marietta, as she was lovingly called, reminds the youth of the third millennium that true happiness demands courage and a spirit of sacrifice, refusing every compromise with evil and having the disposition to pay personally, even with death, faithful to God and his commandments”.<sup>37</sup>

Goretti’s Christian maturity is emphasised, and it is this moral maturity guided by the Holy Spirit that gives her the discernment to choose death rather than committing a sin.

According to the Pope, purity of heart and purity of body go together because chastity is the custodian of authentic love.<sup>38</sup> Like Pope Pius XII, Pope John Paul II does not give a detailed account of the incident that led to Maria Goretti’s death. However, he briefly mentions that she was brutally stabbed. Discussing the subject of forgiveness, Pope John Paul II states that Goretti’s ability to forgive her murderer, Alessandro Serenelli, and her desire to meet him one day in heaven, is a spiritual and social message relevant in our time. He is referring to the appeal for pardon that marked the Great Jubilee of the year 2000. According to him, Goretti has been placed among the best-loved saints of the 20th century because of her ability to forgive her murderer.<sup>39</sup>

In a rhetorical question, Pope John Paul II asks who Goretti was afraid of in the moment of her assault, when she cried for help but it did not come. From the answer he gives, it is possible to draw the conclusion that Goretti was afraid of her assailant, however, she was first and foremost afraid of those with him that can make the body and the soul perish.<sup>40</sup> The emphasis on forgiveness should not come as a surprise since it is a teaching of main importance to the Christian faith, but one could also see the idea of an eleven-year-old forgiving her own killer, as a contributing factor to this emphasis.

The Pope concludes that her supplication was answered on the day of her canonisation, when she was elevated by Pope Pius XII to the glory of the altars. That is how she was saved from ruin and delivered from a bad situation.<sup>41</sup> Goretti’s deliverance was according to this view given to her posthumously.

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<sup>37</sup> John Paul II, *Angelus/Regina Caeli*, July 6, 2003.

<sup>38</sup> John Paul II, *Angelus/Regina Caeli*, July 6, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> John Paul II, *Message of John Paul II to the Bishop of Albano for the Centenary of the Death of St. Maria Goretti*, July 8, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> John Paul II, *Visita Pastorale a Latina. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 29, 1991.

<sup>41</sup> John Paul II, *Visita Pastorale a Latina. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 29, 1991.

### 1.3 Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis

Maria Goretti was mentioned by Pope Benedict XVI at a general audience on the 7th of July 2010. After first having spoken about freedom and how it cannot be detached from truth, which is God, Pope Benedict XVI reminds the audience that the previous day had been the liturgical memorial of Saint Maria Goretti. He refers to her as a virgin, a martyr, and a girl who despite her young age was able to show strength and courage against evil. He ends the discourse by invoking Goretti for the young people, so that she may help them to always choose good, even when it is to their cost; for the sick people, so that she may sustain them in bearing their daily suffering; and for the newlyweds, so that their love may always be faithful and full of reciprocal respect.<sup>42</sup> According to this, Saint Maria Goretti can be invoked by many and not only the young.

Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have not made lengthy public utterances about Maria Goretti, but this does not imply that she has not been important to the two latest popes. In an article published in the Italian newspaper *la Repubblica*, the 25th of February 2014, Italian journalist Orazio La Rocca states that Saint Maria Goretti could soon be proclaimed protector of women victims of violence. The source of his information is a biography of the Saint written by Ugo De Angelis, a consultant of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. According to La Rocca, the author of the book writes that the idea of proclaiming Goretti protector of women victims of violence was conceived by Pope Benedict XVI during the last months preceding his papacy. Accordingly, Pope Benedict XVI was very touched by Goretti's story when he visited what had been her home in Le Ferriere di Conca.<sup>43</sup>

The article states that the person in charge of putting forward the request of this idea to Pope Francis is Monsignor Alejandro Cifres, Director of the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who sees in Goretti's sacrifice a relevant and profound moral significance. The significance and the relevance of the sacrifice lie in the fact that she was a very young girl, innocent victim of a blind violence that despises and uses women and the vulnerability of childhood. Cifres also interprets her sacrifice as an example of courage and dignity.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Benedict XVI, *General Audience. John Duns Scotus*, July 7, 2010, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20100707.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100707.html) [Accessed 2017-07-10].

<sup>43</sup> Orazio La Rocca, "Santa Maria Goretti, l'idea dei due papi: Protettrice delle donne vittime di violenza", *La Repubblica* February 25, 2014, [http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/02/25/news/santa\\_maria\\_goretti\\_rattinger-79615136/](http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/02/25/news/santa_maria_goretti_rattinger-79615136/) [Accessed 2017-07-04].

<sup>44</sup> La Rocca, *La Repubblica* February 25, 2014.

Proclaiming Saint Maria Goretti a protector of women victims of violence could result in a shift of emphasis on what she symbolises. With more focus put on the violent circumstances that led to her death, condemnation against sexual violence, especially that which is directed against minors, would gain more attention. Even if the most accepted belief is that her assailant did not have intercourse with her, it is important to highlight that the violence of which Maria Goretti was a victim is associated with sex

In connection with the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (8th of December 2015-20th November 2016),<sup>45</sup> Pope Francis recognised the centrality of the figure of Saint Maria Goretti. In preparation for this extraordinary jubilee and preceding the Pope's visit to the United States, the major relics of Saint Maria Goretti were taken on a pilgrimage to this country. The pilgrimage that took place from September to November 2015 was named the Pilgrimage of Mercy. The name of the pilgrimage makes reference to the virtue that was to be exalted, which was the virtue of charity.<sup>46</sup>

According to *aleteia.org*, a Catholic news and information website, Pope Francis was given a relic of Maria Goretti by the Rector of the Shrine of Nettuno the 13th of December 2016. After having been reminded by the Rector that the Blessed Paul VI and Pope John Paul II had visited the Shrine, Pope Francis is said to have expressed his wish to visit the Shrine as well.<sup>47</sup> In a letter that the Pope wrote to the Rector a few days later, referring to the gift, he writes that having the constant reminder of Saint Maria Goretti by his side will do him good. In this letter, he mentions that Saint Maria Goretti's poor and humble existence has taken care of the weaknesses and the difficulties of every brother to gain for them the redemption. This has made her "a Saint, and a great Saint!"<sup>48</sup> The emphasis in this letter is put on mercy.

By reason of the imminence of Goretti's liturgical day, Pope Francis sent a message to the dioceses of Albano and Latina where he amongst other things encourages them to continue to work on being testimonies of forgiveness like the Saint they venerate. Pope Francis recalls Goretti's forgiveness of her killer and her concern for the eternal destiny of his soul. It is in forgiving her killer that she, according to Pope Francis, made the supreme choice

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<sup>45</sup> Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus. Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, April 11, 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html) [Accessed 2017-07-12].

<sup>46</sup> *Website with information on St. Maria Goretti and the tour of her reliquary to the U.S.A.*, [www.mariagoretti.com](http://www.mariagoretti.com) [Accessed 2017-07-10].

<sup>47</sup> Gelsomino Del Guercio, "Santa Maria Goretti 'conquista' Papa Francesco: Il suo ricordo mi fa tanto bene", *Aleteia* January 12, 2017, <https://it.aleteia.org/2017/01/12/santa-maria-goretti-conquista-papa-francesco-il-suo-ricordo-mi-fa-tanto-bene/> [Accessed 2017-06-30].

<sup>48</sup> Francis, *Letter to the Rector of the Shrine*, December 29, 2016, <http://www.santuarionettuno.it/news/115-papa-francesco-scrive-al-rettore-del-santuario> [Accessed 2017-07-17].

of her life.<sup>49</sup> He makes reference to *Misericordiae Vultus*, the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, and states that: "Pardoning offences becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves".<sup>50</sup>

The Pope also underscores that it is her offering of forgiveness to her killer that sets him on the path to conversion. The subject of Goretti's piety is also touched upon. Here, Pope Francis retells the testimony given by a woman, a testimony that gives the impression that Goretti waited with eagerness to receive Communion. Following this he writes that without the Eucharist Goretti would not have had the force to make the decision that ended in her death. He mentions the poverty that Goretti grew up in as something that makes people feel closer to her, and directs attention to the families that today as well as yesterday are suffering because of poverty. The Pope also makes mention of how Goretti took care of her siblings and the domestic chores while her mother had to work.<sup>51</sup>

In the context of an Angelus from the 3rd of July 2016, Pope Francis reminds the audience of the coming celebration of Saint Maria Goretti's memory, and he refers to her as "the young martyr who forgave her murderer before she died".<sup>52</sup> It is clear that the virtue that Pope Francis wishes to extol is the virtue of mercy.

Although Orazio La Rocca's article was written in 2014, and although these examples demonstrate that Pope Francis started using the figure of Maria Goretti as an example of forgiveness and mercy, this does not necessarily mean that the prospect of proclaiming Maria Goretti protector of women victims of violence has been lost. The proclamation is still conceivable if we take into consideration that the idea exists and that certain processes within the Catholic Church can be arguably quite slow.

## 1.4 Summary

As a martyr of purity and of chastity, Saint Maria Goretti is presented as someone to be emulated. Not only is she an example to the youth, but her life story and the Christian upbringing in her family nucleus is portrayed as an example for parents to follow in the education of their children. Goretti's piety was nurtured in her home, and it can be seen in the

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<sup>49</sup> Francis, *Message to the Bishops of Albano and Latina for the feast of St. Maria Goretti*, June 20, 2016, <http://www.diocesi.latina.it/latina/allegati/934/Messaggio%20papa%20Francesco%20a%20Crocata-Semeraro.pdf> [Accessed 2017-07-17].

<sup>50</sup> Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus. Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, 9. April 11, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Francis, *Message to the Bishops of Albano and Latina for the feast of St. Maria Goretti*, June 20, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Francis, *Angelus/Regina Caeli*, July 3, 2016, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20160703.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20160703.html) [Accessed 2017-07-10].

distances she walked in order to receive a Catechetical instruction. Her humble upbringing is not portrayed as a hindrance to piety, it is rather praised and in the case of Pope Francis it is used as a reminder of people who live in poverty. Pope Pius XII makes reference to children of poor families who are humble and have many responsibilities because of their circumstances. The living conditions of these children appear to make them more conscious of God and of his grace. In a similar manner, Pope Francis mentions Goretti's helpfulness at home and the responsibilities she had to take upon herself as her mother had to work and provide for the family.

The important role of the parents in the upbringing and the sanctification of their children is stressed by Pope Pius XII and Pope John Paul II. Although it has not occurred in the context of Saint Maria Goretti, Pope Francis has declared on several occasions the parents' right in the education of their children,<sup>53</sup> stating his accord with *Gravissimum Educationis*, the Second Vatican Council's declaration on Christian education.<sup>54</sup> In a Christian upbringing children ought to be taught of the virtue of chastity which will give them the strength to resist the temptations of immorality in society. Both Pope Pius XII and Pope John Paul II agree that this strength is nurtured at home.

To Pope Pius XII, purity is that which is most present in the martyrdom of Maria Goretti. He states that purity is the dominion of the soul over matter. Goretti's strength is seen as both the protector and the fruit of virginity. Pope Pius XII mentions the incorruptible virginity of her morals, which suggests that the purity he is referring to is a moral purity. The goal of chastity, according to Pope John Paul II, is the emergence of the moral force as well as the total conquest of the human dignity. To him Maria Goretti is a martyr of chastity. Chastity is part of the baptismal identity of every Christian, and observing it is depicted as promoting the defence of one's own human dignity. Impurity, on the contrary, is considered an offence against this dignity. Pope Benedict XVI also mentions Maria Goretti's strength, although very briefly. It was this strength that allowed her to stand against evil.

When denouncing those who arm the arm of a killer, Pope Pius XII makes reference to Goretti being a child. According to him the morals of this child have an incorruptible virginity. Furthermore, Pope John Paul II describes her as possessing a moral maturity.

All the popes underscore that Maria Goretti was conscious of the decision she was taking in the moment of her assault. Pope Pius XII says that it was not an instinctive reaction

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example: Francis, *Discorso del Santo Padre Francesco alla Delegazione dell'Ufficio Internazionale Cattolico dell'Infanzia (BICE)*, April 11, 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2014/april/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140411\\_ufficio-cattolico-infanzia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2014/april/documents/papa-francesco_20140411_ufficio-cattolico-infanzia.html) [Accessed 2017-07-10].

<sup>54</sup> See: Paul VI, *Gravissimum Educationis*, 3. October 28, 1965, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_gravissimum-educationis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html) [Accessed 2017-06-29].

but a conscious one. Goretti knew what she was doing which was protecting her chastity, thus protecting herself from committing sin. Pope John Paul II points out that it was with the guidance of the Holy Spirit that she knew how to choose and chose death when she in no other way could defend her virginal purity. This suggests that Goretti would have survived, had she not fought Serenelli.

Pope John Paul II holds her up as an example to the youth so that they may learn from her spirit of sacrifice. Like her, they should be able to pay with death if necessary in their refusal to compromise with evil. Pope Benedict XVI speaks of the sacrificial spirit that is required, and says that she is to be invoked by the youth so that they be able to choose good even when it is at their cost. According to Pope Francis, it is from the Eucharist that Maria Goretti received the force to make the decision that ended in her death. It is possible to arrive at the conclusion that by choosing to resist her assailant both spiritually and physically in order to protect her chastity, and dying as a result of this, she is choosing not to stray from the path of God. Goretti is thus conscious of not wanting to sin against God. The violence that led to Goretti's death is not delved upon in the papal discourse, but the iniquity that leads to its existence is condemned.

Saint Maria Goretti is to be invoked by parents in their endeavour to give their children a Christian education that will capacitate them to resist the contaminations of society and remain pure. Being a young saint, the youth is to turn to her because she will understand their problems.

The theme of forgiveness is emphasised. Pope John Paul II depicts her ability to forgive her killer as a social message. In addition to putting emphasis on mercy, Pope Francis also points out that her ability to forgive her killer is what put him on the path to conversion. Goretti has thus responsibility in the salvation of Serenelli's soul. Pope Francis' emphasis on mercy is also a social message since it points towards a better society that is merciful and caring of its neighbour.

The references to the bad influences in society that can result in arming the arm of a killer, and the statement that it was those in society that make the body and the soul perish that Goretti was afraid of, are a critique of the immoralities in society since these immoralities produce people like Serenelli. These references also uplift the value of chastity, the virtue of which Goretti is an example and the way to which is nurtured at home. The path towards sanctity begins at home and its foundations are to be found in the Christian upbringing.

If the idea of proclaiming Saint Maria Goretti protector of women victims of violence is realised, this would be a significant step in broadening the spectrum of her representation and in placing more focus on the violence of which she became a victim.

In the papal discourse, Goretti is portrayed as pious, responsible, and merciful. She is depicted as a martyr of purity and of chastity. She has a moral purity and a moral maturity, and she possesses a strength that is the protector and the fruit of her virginity. This strength is what allows her to stand against evil and to make a conscious decision to die rather than to sin. Significant attention is given to the theme of the parents' importance in the upbringing of their children, especially in instilling Christian values in them. The theme of poverty is also touched upon. Poverty is not portrayed as a hindrance to a Christian education and to the growth of piety. In connection with poverty a reference is made to children who have to take upon themselves many responsibilities, either in their homes or as providers. Forgiveness is emphasised in the mentioning of Goretti's forgiveness of her assailant, and a concern for his salvation on her part is implied. The theme of the immoral dangers in society that are to be avoided at all costs is very much underscored. The violence that Goretti became a victim of is mentioned, however, it is not delved upon.

## 2. Maria Goretti's Holiness

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1992, *chastity* is a moral virtue that comes under the virtue of *temperance*, which seeks to permeate the passions and the appetites of the senses with reason. It is considered a gift from God and called one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit.<sup>55</sup> All the baptised are called to chastity and it can be lived according to one's state of life. Married people in conjugal chastity, the unmarried in continence, and some live it by professing virginity or consecrated celibacy.<sup>56</sup> Chastity is one of the requirements for the purification of the heart. Purity of heart, or in other words, moral purity, is a prerequisite for holiness. It is the pure in heart that will see God face to face and be like him.<sup>57</sup>

In the present exposition on chastity in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, significant focus is put on the integrity of the person. The moral virtue of chastity involves the integrity of the person and the integrality of the gift. A person that is chaste maintains the integrity of the powers of life and love placed in him, and it is this integrity that ensures the unity of the person in his bodily and spiritual being.<sup>58</sup> Chastity involves working in self-mastery, which is a training in human freedom. Man should govern his passions and not become a slave to them. This is how he gains dignity. To practice chastity is to follow and imitate Christ, and it is a promise of immortality.<sup>59</sup> Integrity has to do with the complete and uncorrupted condition of a person.<sup>60</sup> Purity of heart, the prerequisite for holiness, requires an uncorrupted condition.

The relation between chastity and purity is underscored in *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, which is the catechism that was used in the time of Pope Pius XII. Although not the sole explanation, it is possible to contend that there is a connection between this catechism's accentuation on purity and the emphasis Pope Pius XII places on purity in the discourse about Maria Goretti. According to the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, the cultivation of continence and chastity cleanses the faithful from all defilement of the flesh and of the spirit,

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<sup>55</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 2013), 2345, 2341, 1832.

<sup>56</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2348, 2349, 2350.

<sup>57</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2532, 2518, 2519.

<sup>58</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2337, 2338.

<sup>59</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2339, 2347.

<sup>60</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* 1989, vol. 7 s.v. "Integrity".

perfecting his or her sanctification in the fear of God.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, it also makes reference to a purity of both flesh and spirit that alludes to the wholeness and uncorruptedness of the person. To Pope Pius XII, Maria Goretti is an example of the pure of heart, she is the "little and sweet martyr of purity" in whose purity was the most elemental and significant affirmation of the perfect dominion of the soul over matter.<sup>62</sup>

What can be evidenced in the papal discourse about Maria Goretti is that she is a saint because she was murdered for not wanting to sin against God. More precisely, she is a saint for the reason that she did not want to sin against God by transgressing an important teaching of the Catholic faith, which is the preservation of the virtue of chastity. In becoming a witness to this teaching she became a martyr. As Kenneth L. Woodward has rightfully observed, Maria Goretti died in defence of a Christian virtue, which has become an expansion of the grounds on which someone can be declared a martyr. Furthermore, he argues that because Goretti died for a Christian virtue, technically she did not die for her faith.<sup>63</sup> This is a quite confusing statement, since having conviction and practising a virtue is to act in accordance with one's faith. Goretti did not die at the hands of persecutors of her faith, but according to the official representation of her, she did die for having conviction in something that pertained to her faith.

While proclaiming Maria Goretti a Saint the 24th of June 1950, Pope Pius XII stated that although purity was that which shined through the most in Goretti's martyrdom, with purity and through purity other virtues also triumphed. He mentions Goretti's love and obedience towards her parents, her daily toil, her poverty which was sustained by her hope in divine providence, her piety, and her desire for the Eucharist. Lastly, he sums to this her heroic pardon of her killer, something he describes as the "crown of charity".<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, purity gives birth to other virtues, however, it is Maria Goretti's martyrdom for purity and her forgiveness of her killer that stand as the pillars of her holiness.

Maria Goretti's forgiveness of her assailant is a proper act of the theological virtue of charity, the virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbour as ourselves for the love of God. Furthermore, Goretti showed her assailant mercy which is one of the fruits of charity.<sup>65</sup> In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, forgiving is counted

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<sup>61</sup> *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, p. 260, <http://www.saintsbooks.net/books/The%20Roman%20Catechism.pdf> [Accessed 2017-12-02].

<sup>62</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Fedeli Convenuti a Roma per la Canonizzazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, June 24, 1950.

<sup>63</sup> Woodward 1996, p. 123.

<sup>64</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Fedeli Convenuti a Roma per la Canonizzazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, June 24, 1950.

<sup>65</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1822, 1829.

among the spiritual works of mercy. When persons forgive, their hearts are open to God's merciful love.<sup>66</sup>

As can be noticed in the papal discourse about Maria Goretti, attention has been given to her forgiveness of her assailant. This act stands as an important element in her sainthood. Yet, expressions like "the little and sweet martyr of purity",<sup>67</sup> "martyr of chastity",<sup>68</sup> and "a virgin martyr",<sup>69</sup> tend to overshadow the significance of this aspect of her holiness. However, Pope Francis' reference to Goretti as "the young martyr who forgave her murderer before she died",<sup>70</sup> although being a longer epithet, discloses the significance of this aspect.

The papal discourse about Maria Goretti shows that the popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis do not deviate from the reasons given for the canonisation of Maria Goretti by their predecessor Pope Pius XII in the canonisation ceremony. Nevertheless, what is different in Pope Francis' utterances on Goretti is that the act of forgiving – something that he refers to as the supreme choice of her life<sup>71</sup> – is more accentuated than self-sacrifice in defence of virginal purity. It is necessary to consider the fact that the material accessible to the public in which Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis pronounce themselves on Maria Goretti is scarce.

Pope Francis' accentuation on Goretti's forgiveness of her assailant is evidence that a shift of focus is occurring in her official representation. It is thus on the virtue of charity that attention is more explicitly being given. However, it is possible to contend that in the statement that without the Eucharist Goretti would not have had the force to make the decision that ended in her death, lies the belief that Goretti died to protect her chastity, as well as a possible approval of such an act.

In the words of Pope Pius XII, Goretti's forgiveness of her assailant is indeed a "heroic pardon".<sup>72</sup> The picture of an eleven-year-old girl forgiving her killer, is not a picture that leaves its recipient unaffected. Goretti granted forgiveness to her killer when she was on her deathbed, long before his repentance. In my opinion, there is much dignity in the charitable act of giving Serenelli this unmerited forgiveness. It is possible to consider this act as a sign of great spiritual force.

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<sup>66</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2447, 2840.

<sup>67</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Fedeli Convenuti a Roma per la Canonizzazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, June 24, 1950.

<sup>68</sup> John Paul II, *Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II all' Azione Cattolica di Senigallia*, October 18, 1980,

<sup>69</sup> Benedict XVI, *General Audience. John Duns Scotus*, July 7, 2010.

<sup>70</sup> Francis, *Angelus*, July 3, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Francis, *Message to the Bishops of Albano and Latina for the Feast of St. Maria Goretti*, June 20, 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Fedeli Convenuti a Roma per la Canonizzazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, June 24, 1950.

This aspect of Goretti's holiness has received attention by feminist theologian Eileen J. Stenzel. In her article *Rape and the Politics of Sainthood*, Stenzel presents Goretti as a challenge to the Catholic Church's opposition to women's ordination on the grounds that women cannot represent Christ on earth. Stenzel proposes a feminist reinterpretation of the sainthood of Maria Goretti. She does this with a framework she calls a "feminist pastoral theology", and she bases her argument on the redemptive imagery used to convey the story of Goretti's fidelity. Stenzel's orthodox feminist reinterpretation draws parallels between Jesus and Goretti, and portrays Goretti as his representative. It has its starting point in the view that the stories of the saints contain authoritative papal teaching. Stenzel writes that: "Sin and evil are located in the disobedience of a world that has turned from its obligation to live in accord with God's intent as conveyed in church teaching". It is through Goretti's act of obedience even unto death, that grace and redemption (Alessandro Serenelli's conversion) came into that world. Thus, Goretti becomes a representative for Jesus in the ongoing work of redemption. In this orthodox feminist reinterpretation, Goretti's story is viewed as a pastoral testimony to the priesthood of women.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, Stenzel's second reinterpretation sees the priesthood of women as the affirmation of the rejection of the anti-feminist pastoral intent of Goretti's canonisation, and asserts that: "A true canonization of Maria Goretti could rise from a refusal to accept her as anything other than a martyr to violence nurtured by a church which was willing to sacrifice the powerless in the name of its own patriarchal interests."<sup>74</sup>

Stenzel's article is densely ideological, but it does testify to the impact of the story of Maria Goretti, to the different meanings that can be derived from it, and to the need of a reevaluation. Ugo de Angelis' alleged statement, previously mentioned,<sup>75</sup> is in accord with Stenzel's desire that Goretti be connected with a victimisation caused by violence. A difference, however, is that Stenzel seems to propagate for a "re-canonisation" of Maria Goretti, whilst de Angelis refers to the prospect of a proclamation of Maria Goretti as protector of women victims of violence.

The question of the relationship of papal infallibility to canonisation is a controversial one. Some argue that the canonisation of a saint cannot be considered infallible according to the criterias defined by the Vatican I Constitution *Pastor Aeternus*, which states that it is when the pope is making a solemn decree on matters of faith and morals that infallibility applies.<sup>76</sup> Canonisation not being directly connected to faith and morals would hence not be infallible.

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<sup>73</sup> Stenzel 1996, pp. 224, 225, 228.

<sup>74</sup> Stenzel 1996, p. 229.

<sup>75</sup> See p. 15.

<sup>76</sup> Pius IX, *Pastor Aeternus*, 4, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-ix/it/documents/constitutio-dogmatica-pastor-aeternus-18-iulii-1870.html> [Accessed 2017-12-05].

In his work on the origins of papal infallibility in the medieval church, Donald S. Prudlo makes a thorough exposition on Saint Thomas Aquinas' discussion on the papal infallibility of the pope in relation to the canonisation of saints. Prudlo writes that Saint Thomas would say that the canonisation of a saint involves a declaration that materially relates to a dogma of the church. Against the argument that canonisation relies on fallible human testimony, Saint Thomas makes a creative solution that rests on the notion that the pope is unable to err, the reason being that the canonisation process involves a thorough investigation, it is confirmed by the testimony of miracles, and that the pope is led by the Holy Spirit. According to Prudlo, Saint Thomas argued that: "Each canonization was infallible considered in itself, because no damnable error can exist in the church, but since it cannot be absolutely derived from the scriptures, the doctrine of the infallibility of the pope in canonization is a matter of pious belief only".<sup>77</sup> It would thus not be pious for a Catholic to believe that the pope can err in the proclamation of a saint.

The canonisation of a saint is irrevocable. This has been proved by the case of Italian journalist Giordano Bruno Guerri who in his book *Poor Assassin, Poor Saint: the True Story of Maria Goretti*, sought to attack Goretti, amongst other things by claiming that Goretti in the end had given in to Serenelli's demand. Furthermore, he also sought to attack the church by questioning the integrity of the saint-making process. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints responded by appointing a commission of nine scholars who later published a book that attacked the credibility of Guerri's book. Woodward notices that the congregation at no time even considered reopening the case, because to do so would have put the congregation in the untenable position of second-guessing an infallible declaration by a pope.<sup>78</sup>

In view of this, it is not a matter of reopening Saint Maria Goretti's dossier or of a re-canonisation, but instead, of reevaluating the way in which she is being represented. Was her death truly something she could decide on? And was the preservation of her virginity the only reason she fought Serenelli's attack? These are questions worth considering.

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<sup>77</sup> Prudlo 2015, pp. 128, 129.

<sup>78</sup> Woodward 1996, p. 124.

### 3. The Devotional Discourse/ Catholic Edificational Biographies: the Genre, the Aim, the Context

The books chosen for this study are: *St. Maria Goretti*, by Marie Cecilia Buehrle (1950), and *St. Maria Goretti: In garments all red* (1950), by Fr. Godfrey Poage, C.P. In trying to situate these books within a literary genre, it is important to identify their purpose. Both books were published in the year of Maria Goretti's canonisation. Both are narratives about Goretti's life, and their intention is to inspire devotion to the Saint and depict her life, her character, and her choices as exemplary and worthy of emulation.

There is an element of fiction in these narratives. As Hippolyte Delehaye explains it, the ancient usage of the term *legend* can be bestowed upon all hagiographic narratives. According to him, the legend in its primitive meaning is "the history that has to be read, *legenda*, on the feast of a saint". The legend is part of the process of development of the hagiographic literature, it is the anonymous creator called the people. As basis or pretext the legend presupposes a historical fact that may either be developed or disfigured by popular imagination. The hagiographic literature is both popular in its origins and in its aim, but it is religious in its character and has also as its purpose the edification of the reader.<sup>79</sup>

The other part of the development of the hagiographic literature is played by the editor who has to follow a sometimes difficult track of information, but giving his production in the end a deliberate and durable character.<sup>80</sup> The aim of the hagiographical texts is to establish the case of sainthood, to depict the saint's life as exemplary and to inspire others to follow such a life.<sup>81</sup> However, those who wrote about the lives of the saints did not write them with the aim of producing biographies in the modern sense.<sup>82</sup>

The scope of hagiography includes, amongst other, the genres of *Lives of the saints*, and *Martyrologies*. The origins of Christian hagiography were collections of the stories of the sufferings of the martyrs. The authors focused on the deaths of the martyrs and not on their lives.<sup>83</sup> Buehrle's and Poage's narratives are not solely depictions of Goretti's martyrdom, the authors have also tried to make a depiction of her life. Their narratives can be viewed as examples of a 20th century expression of hagiography. They resemble hagiographies in that they are portrayals of the life of a saint depicting her exemplary life, with the purpose of

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<sup>79</sup> Delehaye 1974 [1905], pp. 10, 11, 9, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Delehaye 1974 [1905], p. 11.

<sup>81</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Christian Literature* 2010, vol. 1 s.v. "Biography and Autobiography".

<sup>82</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Christian Literature* 2010, vol. 1 s.v. "Hagiography".

<sup>83</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Christian Literature* 2010, vol. 1 s.v. "Hagiography".

inspiring devotion to her and edifying the faithful, but they lack the strong presence of miracles. Maria Cecilia Buehrle does write of the favours Maria Goretti obtained for others one month after her beatification, but this account is placed at the end of the book, separate from the story and written in the form of factual information.

However, Poage's and Buehrle's job resembles that of the editor of the hagiographies. In order to create a narrative about Goretti's life and death, both of them have tried to follow a track of information that took them to the cities where Goretti once lived and where her legend was created. In the beginning of their books both authors make mention of conversations they had the opportunity to have with acquaintances of Maria Goretti. In the case of Marie Cecilia Buehrle, she got to spend some time with Goretti's mother and sister, among others. It is thus tempting to call their works biographies.

Biographies are presumed to be the products of research. The author submerges into the milieu of their subjects either by interviews, conversations, letters, historical documents, etc.<sup>84</sup> Like biographies Poage's and Buehrle's narratives are fact-driven, and they are created to capture and preserve the lives of individuals. However, they are not only biographies, because they have the strong presence of hagiography with the said aim, to inspire devotion and to edify the reader. Like the biographies, these narratives are portrayals of someone's life, they are fact-driven since they involve research, but they also involve fiction. According to Buehrle, her story of Maria Goretti will contain stark facts, but it will require the constructive help of the imagination so as to illumine the fundamental truth.<sup>85</sup> Stylistically these narratives read like a novel.

All this considered, Buehrle's and Poage's narratives belong to the genre of hagiography, but I have chosen to call these books *Catholic edificational biographies*, a term that I consider better displays the origin, the aim and the content of these sorts of books.

Starting with the question of the real presence of Christ in the Host, historian Robert Orsi studies how Catholics came to be the people of real presence, not only in their Eucharistic theology but also in their devotional practices. According to Orsi, Catholics throughout the modern era treated printed things as media of presence of the supernatural.<sup>86</sup>

Choosing the mid-20th century U.S.A. as the context of his study, Orsi explains the religious and moral antagonism between Catholics and what they, for a period of time, came to call "pagan civilization". Catholic educators believed that non-Catholics were failing to protect their children and their nation from what Catholics considered was evil print, since they did not understand the power of good and evil contained in the acts of looking and

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<sup>84</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Christian Literature* 2010, vol. 1 s.v. "Biography and Autobiography".

<sup>85</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 22.

<sup>86</sup> Orsi 2016, pp. 9, 122, 114.

reading. Included in this print that was considered evil were comics, which adolescents saw as a medium of rebellion and teachers as bad influences to the imaginations of young people.<sup>87</sup>

In a well crafted list that Orsi makes of the devotional print available to young American Catholics of the mid-20th century, comic books of saints, colouring books with metaphysical, devotional and moral content, and books such as the ones being studied here can be found.<sup>88</sup> What could be concluded is that from a Catholic perspective, these Catholic edificational biographies should be seen as vehicles of presence of the good. However, it is important to consider that Catholics are not a homogeneous group which implies that the reactions to the story of Maria Goretti can be very different, even amongst the people of real presence.

### **3.1 St. Maria Goretti, by Marie Cecilia Buehrle**

Marie Cecilia Buehrle portrays Maria Goretti's piety as a trait Goretti has had since she was an infant. When narrating the story of her baptism, Buehrle writes that while being rocked in the arms of her godmother, her godmother notices that it is an unnecessary action because the infant is not crying. The priest, presumably astonished at the infants behaviour, comments: "As though she knew all about what was happening to her".<sup>89</sup>

Maria Goretti is described as a very beautiful girl, she has light chestnut hair, fair skin, long lashes and vivacious eyes, and she has the features and the grace of a patrician child. Her neighbours attest to this beauty and comment amongst each other that she seems to be unaware of it.<sup>90</sup>

Already at six years old she is described as being very responsible, often looking after her two little brothers and begging her mother, whom she always obeyed, to let her help her with the domestic chores. Buehrle portrays her many times as being very intelligent, as having too much understanding and as possessing the intelligence of a grown girl. On several occasions it is stressed that Maria has a character ranging far beyond her years, and she is said to be as good as she is lovely. Even her neighbours confess that she has a good character, telling her mother that her daughter is an angel.<sup>91</sup>

Buehrle writes that Maria never remains from her home longer than necessary, and when addressed she answers modestly and then goes directly on her way without stopping

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<sup>87</sup> Orsi 2016, pp. 115, 152, 154.

<sup>88</sup> Orsi 2016, pp. 131, 132.

<sup>89</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 39, 40.

<sup>90</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 51, 52, 53, 58, 60.

<sup>91</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 47, 65, 51, 52, 61.

with anyone. Assunta, Maria's mother, marvels at how eager Maria is to return home and at how much she loves her home that is a bleak and unlovely dairy barn<sup>92</sup>

Maria is not portrayed as being interested in socialising with children her age, and she appears determined to avoid sins. On one occasion some boys are trying to get her attention, but she ignores them while passing right between them. On another occasion, when she is drawing water, she is stunned by an indecent conversation that a boy is having with her acquaintance Annetta, and although Maria does not pay further attention the words force themselves upon her. Writing that the words forced themselves upon Maria gives the impression that she is avoiding the sins of her surroundings and is not engaging in them. Maria later tells her mother that she would rather die than to take part in such conversations.<sup>93</sup> The knowledge that Annetta had recently made her First Holy Communion together with her, can be given as another reason to why she was stunned. Having recently made her First Holy Communion, Annetta's character is expected to have changed for the better and she is supposed to possess the knowledge of what is sin and what is not.

Buehrle sketches the bravery that Maria possesses, in a quite dramatic episode when Maria is on her way to mow grass with her mother who confesses to her that she is always in dread of the snakes. Maria decides to walk in front of her mother and tells her not to worry, because she is not a bit afraid. When a viper touches Maria's ankle she chases it to kill it, however, it manages to get away. Almost instantly she gets another chance when she spots a large black snake in the grass. This time, she aims at the snake's head and strikes a forceful blow that paralyses it.<sup>94</sup> This narrative, besides being proof of Maria's bravery should be seen as a sign of her imminent triumph over evil.

Buehrle writes that the pain caused by the death of her father at the age of ten became a source of strength to Maria. His death fashioned her character deepening her faith and preparing her for the sudden responsibility placed upon her.<sup>95</sup> She is already at the age of ten growing into a young woman.

Buehrle depicts Assunta, Maria Goretti's mother, as an affectionate mother. The author writes that Assunta is saddened by the notion that her daughter Maria will not be able to go to school, and she is worried that she will be poor and stupid like her who cannot read nor write. To this her husband responds fervently: "Her mother has taught her to be obedient, to pray well, and to love God and His Holy Mother". Another reason given for her sadness is that she considers her daughter intelligent and as being a quick learner, since she not only teaches her

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<sup>92</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 59, 60.

<sup>93</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 58, 89, 90.

<sup>94</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 90.

<sup>95</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 69, 70.

siblings how to pray but also the Catechism which she knows by heart. At one point, Assunta is portrayed as having said that what she could give to her daughter was the lesson of loving God and to rather die than to offend Him. This is the most important lesson Assunta gives to her daughter, according to Buehrle.<sup>96</sup>

The role that Assunta has in the Christian upbringing of her children is emphasised by Buehrle. Assunta is portrayed as having the desire to teach her children what it means to be a good Christian. Because of this, she even permits the smaller ones to walk a long distance in order to get to mass. Buehrle writes that Assunta is her daughter's constant inspiration, but still Maria's spiritual life is not dependent upon that of her mother. Despite Maria's gentleness and docility, her personality has a virility, a touch of steel, Bruehle writes. The outward symbols of this virility are her quick step and her erect stature.<sup>97</sup>

Maria's First Holy Communion and her preparation for it is given considerable attention and meaning by the author. When Maria expresses to her mother that she wants Jesus, her mother is described as being hesitant at first. Assunta tells her about the obstacles, them being the lack of money for her communion attire, her illiteracy, her many domestic duties, and the hindrances to her receiving a Catechetical instruction. But it is the fear that her daughter will not be able to prepare herself worthily that is given as the main reason for Assunta's hesitation. Maria insists with eagerness, and in the end the situation resolves itself and she receives the Catechetical instruction that she needs in order to do her First Holy Communion. From the time that she decides to prepare herself for Holy Communion, it becomes a veritable preoccupation that dominates both her and her mother's thinking. During the preparation, Maria begins to withdraw into the depths of recollection and she starts doing her domestic duties more lovingly.<sup>98</sup>

According to Buehrle, Maria starts to grow after her First Holy Communion. It is a growth of character and of spirit that is implied. Her obedience becomes, if possible, more instantaneous, and her solicitude for her family grows deeper. Her neighbours also seem to see a change in her but it is a physical one. Buehrle writes that they notice that Maria is growing very tall, and they say that nobody would believe that she is not even twelve years old.<sup>99</sup> Since this comes after the portrayal of how her character has changed after her First Holy Communion, this judgment of her physical appearance could be interpreted as being a symbol of her outstanding morals that are higher than what is expected of an eleven-year-old.

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<sup>96</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 47, 49, 85, 48.

<sup>97</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 83, 84.

<sup>98</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 81, 82.

<sup>99</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 96.

Thus, After her First Holy Communion she possesses a moral maturity, a Christian piousness, that the author has made an effort to depict as being an inherent part of Maria's character since the beginning of her portrayal. However, these character traits grow more after her First Holy Communion. Her unprotesting adoption of the domestic responsibilities and her motherly side can be counted into this moral maturity.

Alessandro Serenelli is described as someone who lives quietly within himself and as appearing to be good. He does not use bad language, he goes to mass and joins the family when they pray the Rosary. Buehrle's initial portrayal of Alessandro has the function of giving the impression that there is something inside of Alessandro that is not as it should. In her short depiction of his childhood, she writes that he was too shy to mix with other children. He did not have an easy childhood, losing his mother to what appears to have been a mental health condition. On one occasion his teacher expresses concern for what might be brooding inside of him, and she laments the fact that he has no mother.<sup>100</sup>

Alessandro is described as being susceptible to bad influences. It appears that he first encounters these influences when working for the sailors. In an episode, Assunta is appalled by the discovery of shameful pictures hung on the walls of Alessandro's room. She puts the blame on his father, Giovanni, for facilitating his son's access to such indecent papers, something that the reader is supposed to do as well.<sup>101</sup>

It is while praying the Rosary that Alessandro notices Maria's beauty for the first time. Buehrle writes that Maria rejects Alessandro's advances and does not understand his words of flattery at first. Neither does she understand how someone whom she had considered a brother could menace her with death and with something worse than death. What the author refers to as worse than death is the sin against chastity. From Maria's rejection, Alessandro concludes that flattery will never succeed with her.<sup>102</sup> This realisation functions as a prelude to and as a reason for his attack on Maria. The impression is given that it is because of her rejection that violence becomes an option for Alessandro. Some of the culpability is placed on her for his refusal to understand a "no" and turning to violence.

Buehrle writes that Maria does not tell her mother of Alessandro's advances because of shame and because of fear of the consequences, among which are starvation and destitution for her and her family. When it comes to the possibility of being murdered, what seems to frighten Maria the most is the affliction it would cause her mother, and not so much her own fear of dying.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 61, 45.

<sup>101</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 43, 44, 45, 62.

<sup>102</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 56, 91, 92.

<sup>103</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 126, 93.

Buehrle tries to give a detailed rendition of the incident that led to Maria Goretti's death and of her reluctance to what was happening. While defending herself against Alessandro's assault, Maria screams: "No! No! No! What are you doing Alessandro? Do not touch me! It is a sin. You will go to hell!"<sup>104</sup> Maria uses these words as a defence, but it also creates the idea that she is concerned about Alessandro's salvation.

Buehrle depicts it as if when Maria is fighting her assailant, Alessandro feels something that is stronger than he. Something as alive as the grace of God hinders him from touching her for an instance. It is his powerlessness in the face of an eleven-year-old girl that causes him to grasp the dagger. Buehrle portrays it as if Maria had the chance to choose, when the dagger was ready to strike. She emphasises Maria's conscious decision which is to die rather than to sin. According to the author, Maria accepted the descent of Alessandro's dagger with indomitable courage.<sup>105</sup>

At one point, Buehrle writes that Alessandro seizes Maria by the throat, thus making reference to an earlier narrative in which Alessandro sees a violent picture in the front page of a newspaper.<sup>106</sup> This narrative functioned as a foretelling of what he would do to Maria, but it also gives further insight into what those things are that influence him.

In the narrative of the long distance Maria had to travel in an ambulance in order to get to the hospital, Buehrle succeeds in her effort to make the reader participate in the agony and the sadness of the story. As the adequately chosen title of the chapter indicates, "Via Crucis", Buehrle tries to give a very detailed account of Maria's suffering and of how people in her surroundings reacted to the brutal incident. It is the beginning of a detailed narrative of Maria's suffering that alludes to Christ's passion on his way to Mount Calvary.

While being severely hurt and carried to the ambulance, Maria is depicted as being very conscious of the pain of others, especially that of her mother. Maria is portrayed as bearing her pain and her suffering with bravery. When her wounds are being covered, she does not cry out with pain, and while being carried in the ambulance she tries to smile and forces herself to conceal from her mother every involuntary spasm of pain. The allusions to Christ's passion continue in the hospital narrative. Here, she asks for water numerous times but she is denied it, presumably because of medical reasons that, however, are not explained to the reader. Buehrle writes that Maria accepted the slow torture of her thirst with the same indomitable courage with which she had accepted the descent of Alessandro's dagger.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 105.

<sup>105</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 106, 119, 120.

<sup>106</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 107, 94.

<sup>107</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 113, 110, 114, 117, 119, 120.

When Maria is lying in the hospital bed, her mother Assunta realises that she had taught her daughter rather to die than to sin. When Maria is receiving the Viaticum she is asked by the Father if she wants to forgive her killer and show mercy like Jesus showed to the penitent thief crucified beside him, telling him that he would be with him in Paradise. To this Maria responds: "Yes; I too, for the love of Jesus, forgive him...and I want him to be with me in Paradise". This is how she, according to Buehrle, rises to the heroism of perfect charity.<sup>108</sup>

After the tragedy, Buehrle depicts Alessandro's father, Giovanni, wandering about the house lamenting and saying that he could not help it. The reasons that are given to this are that Alessandro did not have a mother and that he never listened to his father.<sup>109</sup> This underscores the importance of a mother and could also be seen as if the father is washing his hands and not taking responsibility for the upbringing he has given his son. Thus, this narrative has the function of conveying the responsibility of parents in the education of their children, but the importance of a mother stands out throughout the book. It is thanks to her mother Assunta and the Catechetical instruction Maria receives, that she is able to stand against sin. The absence of a mother, the lack of guidance from his father, and amongst other things the access to indecent papers, are portrayed as the reasons to Alessandro's immorality.

### **3.2 St. Maria Goretti: *In garments all red*, by Fr. Godfrey Poage, C.P.**

The author of this book starts by relating a conversation that he had with two of Maria Goretti's neighbours who confessed that Goretti was more religious than the rest of them.<sup>110</sup> Thus, he begins the book with an assertion of her piety.

At the age of six, Maria Goretti is described as being the favourite of her father. She is affectionate and sweet, although a temper could break out occasionally. As in Buehrle's narrative, Maria has chestnut hair and she is tall for her age. She is slender and graceful, and she appears to be older than she really is.<sup>111</sup>

Poage writes that it was Maria's pleasure to be helpful, obedient and obliging. According to him, Maria's lot in life was to be humble and the poorest, and he points out her unawareness of very likely being the richest in virtue and the most loved by Christ. Preceding this statement, Poage writes that Maria stood behind the other children during her First

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<sup>108</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 119, 124, 123.

<sup>109</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 118.

<sup>110</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], pp. xxiii, xxiv.

<sup>111</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 3, 26.

Communion.<sup>112</sup> This alludes to the parable of the workers in the vineyard in the Gospel of Matthew, that reads: "So the last shall be first, and the first last."<sup>113</sup> He begins the narrative of her piety by writing that Maria at almost the age of eleven has a great desire to do her First Holy Communion, even though it was not customary at that time to receive it before the age of twelve. The author states that the reason for this desire was that Divine grace was working within her soul giving her an insatiable hunger for the Holy Eucharist.<sup>114</sup>

As in Buehrle's case, her mother Assunta hesitates at first because of all the responsibilities Maria has at home, because of the lack of money for her Communion dress, and because Maria does not know how to read. Assunta also expresses concern that Maria will not be able to prepare herself well enough, though she is later put at ease by Dom Signori, the Archpriest of Nettuno and Maria's catechetical examiner. It is Maria's tenacity and constancy that enables her to prepare herself for her First Holy Communion. Poage writes that her First Communion was a triumph of her tenacious piety, and he contrasts this to the rigid piety of her mother.<sup>115</sup>

It is during a sermon, that Maria and the other children of her Communion class are taught to preserve their souls pure and innocent and to die rather than commit a mortal sin. Attention is drawn to the sentence "to die rather than commit a mortal sin", since it is italicized in the book. Assunta is portrayed as being the one who has taught Maria her prayers, which Maria knows by heart and passes on to her siblings.<sup>116</sup>

In contrast to her Holy Communion which is described as the happiest day of her life, the author narrates about how the hardships that Maria and her family had to face after the death of her father rapidly changes her from a "laughing girl to a quiet little woman, preoccupied with her responsibilities".<sup>117</sup>

One day when Maria goes to draw water from the public well, she overhears one of the village girls from her First Communion class telling an off- colour joke to a boy. It shocks her to see how this girl has forgotten Jesus so soon after her First Communion. It is portrayed as if she really does not want to stay and listen, and the only reason she does is because she has to wait for the bucket to be filled with water. Maria's mother warns her of repeating words like the ones she has overheard, and it surprises Maria that her mother could think that she would be capable of offending God in such a dreadful way. To this Maria responds: "Why, I would

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<sup>112</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], p. 26.

<sup>113</sup> Matt 20:16, The Bible: Authorized King James Version.

<sup>114</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], p. 20.

<sup>115</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 21, 22.

<sup>116</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 22, 26.

<sup>117</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 24, 25.

rather die...”.<sup>118</sup> Hearing those inappropriate words said by the girl is described as something Maria does involuntarily, however, the function of this narrative is to give the reader the knowledge of how far she is willing to go not to offend God.

Alessandro is described as a well built young man and as appearing to have a strength beyond his years. Having been in the company of sailors while working as a stevedore in his early adolescence is portrayed as having influenced him in a bad way. According to Poages portrayal, Alessandro and his father, Giovanni, show evil tendencies. Giovanni, who takes on the habit of drinking, does not take interest in his son who curses and swears on the least provocation, and who has no friends. It is not only his father’s disinterest and his bad example but also the absence of a mother in his life that are given as reasons to his bad character. This absence results in a void in his heart.<sup>119</sup>

Alessandro reads lurid magazines, but unlike the depiction in Buehrles book it is not his father who provides him with them, he buys them himself. These magazines darkened his manner, according to Poage. One day while cleaning Alessandro’s room, Assunta discovers that immodest pictures from the magazines are hung about his bed. She reasons that she is not responsible for his conduct and that it is up to his father, who was well aware of these things, to take action. Moreover, she does not want to start a quarrel and bring more trouble into the home.<sup>120</sup>

Poage portrays Alessandro’s advances towards Maria as a persecution, as a ”cat and mouse story”. Maria tries to avoid him but he follows her around the house. As in the case of Buehrle, Maria does not understand his advances at first but when she does she becomes very weary. Poage writes that while doing an examination of conscience, Maria feels that she has faltered. Maria lives in fright and is afraid of being alone with Alessandro. His persecution causes changes in her. The author describes her as blushing easily, something that her mother notices.<sup>121</sup> It could be taken as an insinuation that Maria has lost a part of her innocence due to the realisation of what it is that Alessandro wants.

It is interesting to stop at Poage’s portrayal of Maria’s feelings during this ”cat and mouse story”. According to the author, the thought that Alessandro might surprise her and overcome her, makes Maria feel very weak.<sup>122</sup> It is possible to reason that the weakness she is feeling is the possible inability to defend herself against Alessandro’s physical strength in the case of an assault. What complicates this conclusion is what the author writes after this description of Maria’s feelings. According to Poage, Maria hears a voice in prayer that

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<sup>118</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], p. 27.

<sup>119</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 13, 14, 15.

<sup>120</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 15, 16.

<sup>121</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 30, 31, 32, 29, 35.

<sup>122</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], p. 32.

reassures her and tells her that she is strong. Then he writes: "Who shall be able to overcome God living in her heart?"<sup>123</sup> This could be interpreted as a possible physical strength Maria will receive from God, that will enable her to defend herself against Alessandro in case he assaults her. However, it is possible that the weakness she is feeling is the fear of being tempted to yield or to willfully acquiesce to Alessandro's wishes. Her weakness would thus be a spiritual weakness that would enable her to sin. It would be an insinuation of the fear of being tempted. This insinuation continues in Poage's description of the violent incident that led to Maria's death. When Alessandro is pointing a knife towards Maria, she is described as being very frightened, but she also feels a supernatural energy that animates her and makes her understand that she will resist to the end if need be.<sup>124</sup> This generates the questions: What is it she is struggling to resist? Is it falling into the temptation of not continuing to make resistance and possibly keep her life? Is it resisting in the sense of having the physical strength to fight Alessandro's attack? Or is it struggling to resist falling into the temptation of wanting to have sex with him? The last option clearly implies that she could desire to have sex with Alessandro, while the first ones do not include this desire.

This episode can be further problematised if one observes the idea of an eleven-year-old girl feeling enticed by a situation of violent sexual coercion. There is an ambiguity in Poage's portrayal, but that the author wants to convey the picture of Maria feeling temptation is a hard thing to challenge.

The way in which Poage portrays the incident that led to Maria Goretti's death concurs with the idea that she fought Alessandro Serenelli in order to remain pure, and that she was concerned about the salvation of his soul. As in Buehrle's portrayal, Maria tells Alessandro to stop, that it is a sin and that if he does not stop he will go to hell. The awareness of what Maria is choosing is emphasised as Poage writes: "She must choose: death or life, heaven or hell, God or Satan, sin or martyrdom".<sup>125</sup>

In Poage's account of Maria's suffering, she admits to her mother that she is suffering, but she also tries to conceal the extent of her pain by making an effort to smile. Maria remains calm in spite of her intense pain, and she invokes the Blessed Virgin Mary. When Maria asks for water her request is denied, but she willingly accepts the sacrifice in remembrance of Jesus, Poage writes.<sup>126</sup>

Maria's last moments are depicted as very calm. While receiving the Holy Viaticum, she follows the priest's advice to pardon her assailant like Jesus had pardoned His murderers

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<sup>123</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], p. 32.

<sup>124</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], p. 37.

<sup>125</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], p. 37.

<sup>126</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 44, 45, 46.

when he died upon the Cross. Maria forgives Alessandro, without anguish, and says: "Yes, for the love of Jesus I too pardon him, and I want him to be with me in heaven". When Assunta asks her daughter why she had not told her about Alessandro's many advances, Maria tells her mother about him threatening her to death. Maria continues, and says: "And you see, he killed me anyway".<sup>127</sup> This part of the plot can lead to the conclusion that it is of no use for children to confide in their parents when receiving a threat.

### 3.3 Summary and Analysis of the Catholic Edificational Biographies

As can be observed in Buehrle's narrative of Maria's baptism, Maria displays a behaviour not expected from a baby. This is a common feature in stories of the lives of the saints. These type of accounts are concerned with establishing the holiness of an individual as soon as he or she is born, and sometimes even before their birth. They are also reminiscent of a *puer-senex*, which is a child with the wisdom of an adult.<sup>128</sup>

In the above analysed devotional literature, Maria Goretti is depicted as having a character far beyond her years, which means that there is a maturity in her that is not expected of an eleven-year-old child. Maria is portrayed as being intelligent, responsible, and loving. In the narratives, her outer beauty becomes a symbol of her inner beauty.<sup>129</sup> In Buehrle's portrayal, the increase of piety in Maria after her First Holy Communion is symbolised with a growth in height. In the narratives, the increase of Maria's piety makes her more prepared to make the right decision in the assault that is at hand. The growth of her maturity and piety is seen amongst other things in the way she adopts the domestic responsibilities and in her motherly sides. In Poage's narrative, the hardships that Maria and her family face after the death of her father are also given as reasons for her maturity and growth in character.<sup>130</sup>

Maria is portrayed in both narratives as having disinterest in socialising with children her age, especially if those contexts involve inappropriate conversations or behaviours. She avoids immoral environments in her determination to avoid sins. Part of this can be noticed in Buehrle's portrayal of Maria's home-lovingness, and when she writes that Maria never remains from home longer than necessary.<sup>131</sup> Whithin the confines of her home, Maria appears to be protected from the sins of her surroundings, if we disregard Alessandro's presence.

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<sup>127</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 47, 48.

<sup>128</sup> Kitchen 1998, pp. 26, 29.

<sup>129</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 51, 60 52, 47; Poage 2015 [1950], p. 26.

<sup>130</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 96; Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 24, 25.

<sup>131</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 59, 58, 89, 90, 60; Poage 2015 [1950], p. 27.

Jane Tibbets Schulenburg observes that the Church Fathers and later churchmen emphasise the seriousness of the commitment to virginity by the brides of Christ and the difficulties and dangers they might encounter. According to her, they attempt to instil fear among these women, and she takes St. Jerome's letter to Eustochium as an example. Here, St. Jerome provides admonitions as well as encouragements for the life of virginal perfection. Tibbets Schulenburg writes that in this letter St. Jerome warns the virgin of the dangers she faces when she leaves her protective environment and ventures outdoors.<sup>132</sup> Her exposition of the letter makes possible a reconnection to Goretti's home-lovingness as it is portrayed in the account of Marie Cecilia Buehrle.<sup>133</sup> As mentioned, Buehrle's emphasis on Maria Goretti's home-lovingness gives the impression of her home as a place where Maria can find protection from the possible threats of contamination to the soul that can be found outside of her home environment. Although Maria is not a cloistered nun, Buehrle's portrayal of her character alludes to that of a nun. Maria's demeanor conveys the impression that she has professed the religious vows in her pursuit of the perfect way, in which the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and enclosure are central.<sup>134</sup> In the portrayal of Maria Goretti, enclosure would certainly be taken somewhat loosely, but that gallivanting is not encouraged is apparent.

Maria's willingness to die rather than committing a sin is found in the form of a confession both in Buehrle's and in Poage's narratives. She confesses to her mother that she would rather die than to offend Jesus by taking part in inappropriate conversations. In Buehrle's narrative, this is described as the most important lesson Maria is given by her mother, but in Poage's it is depicted as something she is taught in Communion class.<sup>135</sup> Thus, in Poage's narrative this lesson is passed on to her directly by the church. Assunta's role in Maria's life is very much emphasised. It is she and the Catholic Church who are responsible for instilling in Maria the love of God.<sup>136</sup>

When Buehrle writes that although Assunta is her daughter's constant inspiration Maria's spiritual life is not dependent upon that of her mother,<sup>137</sup> she is setting Maria apart and endowing her character with spiritual independence. Being raised in a good family, by a good mother, Maria's goodness will exceed that of the ones around her. This is a much understandable feature in these sorts of narratives, the purpose of which is to sketch the life of a saint, someone who surpasses the average person in virtue. Maria is put somewhat higher, and the reader is supposed to aspire to that spiritual goodness she exemplifies. However, the

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<sup>132</sup> Tibbets Schulenburg 1998, p. 129.

<sup>133</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 59, 60.

<sup>134</sup> Lundberg 2015, p. 51.

<sup>135</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 90, 48; Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 27, 22.

<sup>136</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 49; Poage 2015 [1950], p. 26.

<sup>137</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 84.

setting and Maria's human characteristics in terms of what she feels and thinks make her someone the reader can identify with. It is possible to infer that this narrative also depicts a character who is immune to the sins around her and to the evil she eventually will encounter. This is not to imply that very saintly people cannot fall, but because it is known to the author that this story ends in sanctity, she can feel comfortable writing as she does.

Despite Maria's gentleness and docility, her personality has a virility, a touch of steel, Buehrle writes. The outward symbols of this virility are her quick step and her erect stature. Buehrle's depiction of Maria crushing the head of the snake,<sup>138</sup> besides having the function of demonstrating her bravery is a clear example of what John Kitchen calls the *biblical-hagiographic chain*. According to Kitchen, hagiography assumes a religious rationale for the nature and documentation of salvation. This rationale warrants the function of biblical stylisation and the continuous relation between Scripture and hagiography. In the stories of the lives of the saints, the saints can become succeeding embodiments of preceding biblical examples.<sup>139</sup> The scriptural passage that this narrative of Maria's bravery alludes to is Genesis 3:15, which by many Christians has been regarded as a prophecy of God's plan of redemption through Jesus Christ.

In both Buehrle's and Poage's narratives of the incident that leads to Maria's death, Maria is depicted as being infused with a supernatural strength. It is with this strength that she fights Alessandro.<sup>140</sup> One way to interpret this is that the origin of her strength is her virginal state. In one of the above mentioned discourses by Pope Pius XII, the Pope states that Goretta's strength was to be seen as the fruit of virginity.<sup>141</sup> According to Pope John Paul II, there is a moral force that comes with chastity.<sup>142</sup> In Buehrle's portrayal, this strength appears to repel Alessandro for an instance during the assault.<sup>143</sup> According to Marina Warner, the belief that virginity confers powers rests on two ideas. The first one is the Church Fathers' teaching of the virginal life as holy because it reduces the special penalties of the Fall in women. The second one is the idea that the virgin body is the supreme image of wholeness, and wholeness is equated with holiness.<sup>144</sup>

In both Buehrle's and Poage's accounts, the words of defence of Maria exhibit concern for Alessandro's salvation. Furthermore, both depict Maria as being conscious of what she is

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<sup>138</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 84, 90.

<sup>139</sup> Kitchen 1998, p. 34.

<sup>140</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 106; Poage 2015 [1950], p. 37.

<sup>141</sup> Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Pellegrini Affluiti a Roma per la Beatificazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, April 7, 1947.

<sup>142</sup> John Paul II, *Visita alla Parrocchia del <<Corpus Domini>> per la Traslazione delle Spoglie di Santa Maria Goretti. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 27, 1986.

<sup>143</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 106.

<sup>144</sup> Warner 1976, p. 72.

deciding which is to die rather than to sin.<sup>145</sup> However, there is an ambiguity in Poage's narrative concerning the nature of what it is Maria is struggling to resist. According to the author, Maria feels very weak at the thought that Alessandro might surprise her. As already stated, it is possible that the author is referring to a physical weakness, which means that Maria is afraid of not possessing enough physical strength to defend herself if Alessandro were to force himself on her. However, Poage could also be referring to a spiritual weakness based on the fear of being tempted to yield or to willfully acquiesce to Alessandro's advances and to his attack.<sup>146</sup> By Writing in a way that makes possible the interpretation of Maria being tempted, and by not emphasising that it is Alessandro's sin she is fighting against, the author makes the message of her choice more powerful. Goretti struggled to make the right choice.

In her analysis of virgin martyr legends, Karen A. Winstead writes that these legends never omitted the saint's passion, that is to say, their suffering. These accounts of suffering had according to Winstead the function of "submitting the saint into a single life of triumph through suffering alongside Christ and the male Martyrs".<sup>147</sup> It is thus possible to argue that the authors of these Catholic edificational biographies do the same when they include the narratives of the pain and the hardships brought about by the poverty Maria and her family had to face after her father's death,<sup>148</sup> the narrative of Alessandro's persecution of her,<sup>149</sup> the descriptions of how he murdered her,<sup>150</sup> and the narratives of the pain that her severely hurt body caused her during the last hours of her life.<sup>151</sup> Goretti's pardoning of her assailant, and her being denied water on her deathbed<sup>152</sup> are accounts where both authors explicitly compare her story and her actions to Christ's. These accounts are part of the biblical-hagiographic chain.

The narratives of suffering in the Catholic edificational biographies are understood against the background of the treasuring of Jesus' passion in the Christian tradition, that developed into the concept of *imitatio Christi*, fusion with the suffering physicality of Christ.<sup>153</sup> In her work on women's religious literature of the Middle Ages, Barbara Newman states that involuntary or voluntary suffering makes the sufferer a co-redeemer with Christ.<sup>154</sup> In addition to the dimension of redemption found in suffering, Roselyne Rey, in her erudite

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<sup>145</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 105, 106; Poage 2015 [1950], p. 37.

<sup>146</sup> Poage 2015 [1950], p. 32, 37.

<sup>147</sup> Winstead 1997, p. 3.

<sup>148</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 69, 70, 71; Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 24, 25.

<sup>149</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 92, 91, 95, 98; Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 30, 31, 36.

<sup>150</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 106; Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 37, 38.

<sup>151</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 110, 113, 114; Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 44, 45.

<sup>152</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 124, 106, 117, 119, 120; Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 47, 37, 38, 46.

<sup>153</sup> Bynum 1987, p. 207.

<sup>154</sup> Newman 1995, p. 121.

study on the history of pain argues that pain brought faithful believers closer to Christ.<sup>155</sup> Goretti is thus portrayed by Buehrle and Poage as a faithful whose following of Christ is expressed in the emulation of him, which in the end results in the triumph of sainthood.

As in the above mentioned homily and discourse by Pope John Paul II and Pope Pius XII respectively,<sup>156</sup> society is accountable for instilling bad influences into the youth, and it is thus the parents' responsibility to give their children a Christian education so that they be equipped to stand against these influences. Although the role of the mother is emphasised in both Buehrle's and Poage's books, the role of the father is also stressed. Giovanni, Alessandro's father, has culpability for what becomes of his son. The different upbringings that Maria and Alessandro receive result in two types of human beings, one moral and the other one immoral. Directing itself at parents and at the youth, this literature reminds parents of their responsibilities, it teaches the youth to avoid bad surroundings, and it teaches all the importance of chastity and forgiveness.

Maria represents the good Catholic. She keeps God's commandments and does not deviate from them even during hardships. How far she says she is willing to go for her love of God has the function of exalting the virtue of chastity, but the reader should also consider her forgiveness of her killer. The virtue of charity is exalted in both narratives.

In conclusion, Maria is described as being beautiful, obedient, responsible, pious and morally mature. Parents' responsibility in the education of their children is underscored by both authors. The theme of the importance of a Christian education, including a Catechetical instruction, is highlighted. According to the narratives, Maria's piety grows even more after her First Holy Communion. The themes of poverty and suffering are also present. The hardships that Maria Goretti and her family go through after the death of her father are portrayed as contributing to her moral maturity. The theme of the bad influences in society is also given importance since it results in people like Alessandro Serenelli, and the responsibility of the parents is to equip their children with values that help them stand against these influences. Maria is depicted as possessing an inner strength that is the cause of her piety and of her virginal state, and that is augmented by the grace of God in the moment of her assault. This strength helps her make the right decision. The theme of forgiveness and the theme of self-sacrifice rather than committing a sin are considerably emphasised.

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<sup>155</sup> Rey 1995, p. 49.

<sup>156</sup> See: John Paul II, *Visita Pastorale a Latina. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 29, 1991; Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Pellegrini Affluiti a Roma per la Beatificazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, April 7, 1947.

## 4. Discussion with the Representation of Maria Goretti

The official representation of Maria Goretti states that she died protecting her chastity, therein her virginity. It also emphasises the consciousness of her decision, which is that she chose to die rather than to sin. Behind this lies the assumption that Goretti must have been aware that fighting Serenelli's assault would result in her death, and that the contrary would result in her keeping her life and in having sinned. It is thus portrayed as if Goretti was consciously sacrificing her life. But it is not regarded as a suicide since she did not inflict the harm upon herself but was fighting against the harm that was being inflicted upon her. However, the depiction alludes to St. Jerome's explication of the subject of virginity, sexual assault and suicide. In her study of the cost of virginity, Jane Tibbets Schulenburg writes that according to St. Jerome it is not lawful to commit suicide during persecution, except when one's chastity is jeopardised.<sup>157</sup>

The questions that arise are: Why would the sin of losing her chastity through rape have pertained to Maria Goretti? And, who has agency for the sin? Continuing her study of the cost of virginity, Tibbets Schulenburg analyses St. Augustine's elaboration of the violation of captured virgins and their mental conditioning. This gives helpful insight into the relationship between sin, rape and chastity. According to St. Augustine, virtue, the condition of right living, controls the members of the body from its seat in the mind. It is through the exercise of a holy will that the body becomes holy, but if anyone else does something with the body and in the body that the other person cannot avoid without sin on his own part, no blame attaches to the one who suffers it if the will remains unshaken and steadfast.<sup>158</sup> "Holiness of the body is not lost while holiness of the soul remains, even though the body is forced to yield [...]"<sup>159</sup> As Tibbets Schulenburg notices, it is the corruption of the soul that precedes the corruption of the body, and in the case of rape the fine line between "guilt" and "innocence" rests within the conscience of the woman. Discussing suicide in response to sexual assault, Augustine writes that a woman has no reason to take this measure and perpetrate upon herself a sin of her own because of another's crime. As to commit suicide in order to avoid being subjected to rape, Tibbets Schulenburg writes that in Augustine's view such an action should be excused but not condoned.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Tibbetts Schulenburg 1998, p. 131.

<sup>158</sup> Tibbetts Schulenburg 1998, p. 131;

St. Augustine, *The City of God*, bk. 1, ch. 16, translated by George E. McCracken (London: William Heinemann LTD; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 75.

<sup>159</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, bk. 1, ch. 18, p. 83.

<sup>160</sup> Tibbetts Schulenburg 1998, p. 132.

Although Goretti did not take her own life per se, the official representation and the Catholic edificational biographies portray it as if she had the chance to choose between life and death. She was conscious of not wanting to sin against God. The portayal conveys the image that if a woman in an attempted rape has the opportunity to choose between being raped and live or not being raped and killed, she is supposed to choose the latter. According to the Catholic edificational biographies and to the papal discourse about Maria Goretti, she chose death. Maria Goretti died for the preservation of the virtue of chastity, an important teaching of the Catholic faith. This choice is what makes her a martyr and eventually a saint. However, it is also for being an example of charity that she is a saint.

There is a powerful message to be found in Maria Goretti's story that tends to be obscured by the emphasis put on her martyrdom being a martyrdom for chastity. This message is most apparent in the biblical-hagiographic chain deployed in the Catholic edificational biographies in their many allusions to Christ's passion. The eleven-year-old Maria bore her suffering with dignity and demonstrated great strength and dignity in the profound act of forgiving her assailant. Her forgiveness of her assailant, Alessandro Serenelli, makes her a co-redeemer with Christ in the sense that it opens a window for his conversion, as pointed out by Pope Francis,<sup>161</sup> which allows him to be a conscious partaker in Christ's redemption. This redemptive motif is very much in accord with the one Stenzel uses in her feminist orthodox reinterpretation of Maria Goretti's story although our purposes are different, since I have chosen to give attention to this motif with the intention of revealing the biblical-hagiographic chain and exposing the significance that the theme of forgiveness has in Maria Goretti's story. Stenzel, however, uses it to promote the priesthood of women.

Although the message of forgiveness is of significance and can, depending on the views of the individual, be regarded as an act worthy of admiration, it is necessary to consider that forgiveness cannot be forced nor hurried. Many factors can affect the outcome of a recovery and to what degree it is possible. Sheila A. Redmond makes an interesting point when she argues that the feelings of a child who has been abused must be accepted and allowed to run their natural course, and that a necessary component of resolving the trauma of an assault for adults who have been sexually abused as children is the articulation of rage, anger and hatred at having been used. With regard to this, she is critical of the negative results that the Christian emphasis on forgiveness can have on victims of abuse, when forgiveness is demanded too early on or when it is forced. To exemplify this, Redmond refers to the narrative of when Maria Goretti despite her enormous pain and immediately after the assault

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<sup>161</sup> See: Francis, "Message to the Bishops of Albano and Latina for the feast of St. Maria Goretti", June 20, 2016.

is repeatedly asked if she forgives her assailant.<sup>162</sup> However, in Buehrle's and Poage's narratives she is not immediately or repeatedly asked if she is willing to forgive her assailant. In their narratives, she is asked this once and it happens in the context of the viaticum which is the receiving of the Eucharist by a dying Catholic person, and which is part of the last sacraments of the Christian.<sup>163</sup>

A question that could be asked is whether boys and men are to position themselves in the role of Goretti as well, that is, if in the case they were under the threat of sexual violence and had the choice between life and death, would they also be expected to choose death? Goretti's story raises many questions and a strong reason for this is the consideration of death as an option, and as a preferable option. The picture of an eleven-year-old girl choosing death rather than losing her virginity can be perceived as uncomfortable and disturbing, to say the least. If one were to milder the emphasis that is placed on death in Goretti's story, death as a preferable option could instead be seen as an element whose function is to put stark emphasis on the importance of chastity. It is, however, difficult to contend that this could be the intended use of this theme.

Disregarding the idea of suicide as an excusable but not a condoned action in order to avoid being raped, one could ask why St. Augustine's position on the violation of chastity without the will's consent is not adopted when treating the question concerning chastity, rape, sin, and sacrifice in the discourse about Maria Goretti. This, from a Catholic theological perspective would function as a means to put emphasis on Goretti's unsulliedness and guiltlessness had her assailant succeeded in his attempt to rape her. St. Augustine's emphasis on the will's consent would also be a step in the direction of putting culpability on the assailant and open up the discussion that aims to give clarity on what constitutes a normal sexual approach and what does not. However, the importance placed on the will's consent can lead to problematic conclusions, one of them being that if a woman or a girl would feel arousal during an act of sexual violence this would indicate that she wanted to be sexually assaulted. This shows that the application of St. Augustine's concept of the will's consent needs to be complemented with expert insight on the subject of sexual violence and its many different forms, including into the discussion the experiences of victims of sexual violence.

The papal discourse and the Catholic edificational biographies' descriptions of the incident that led to Maria Goretti's death give rise to a clear confusion as to who it is that has agency for the sin if the defence of the assaulted is not successful. Much points to a guiltiness shared by both the victim and the assailant. However, the Catholic Church's stance on violence and rape seems to be putting more emphasis on the condemnation of the assailant.

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<sup>162</sup> Redmond 1989, p. 75.

<sup>163</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1524, 1525.

What can be said with certainty about the life of Maria Goretti is that she died because the man who wanted to have sex with her murdered her. The prevailing opinion is that she did not like what was being done to her by her assailant, so she fought his attack. Whether Alessandro Serenelli would have stabbed her if she would not have made any resistance, we cannot know. In his confessional letter to Bishop Baldini, Serenelli does write that he murdered Goretti because she did not give into his wishes.<sup>164</sup> However, this letter is written eight years after Goretti's death, thus it is a retrospective analysis in which he is trying to rationalise about the incident. This is not to say that not succeeding in having sex with Goretti was not one of the reasons he stabbed her, but in the absence of documents of a psychological evaluation of Serenelli it is a somewhat difficult task to say what exactly was happening in his psyche prior to and during the incident.

If Goretti would not have died she would not have been a martyr. If one supposes that she was risking her life uttering her words of defence as depicted in the Catholic edificational biographies, and that Serenelli would have responded to them positively by sparing her life, could she not have been called a confessor instead? She would have survived confessing her faith by defending a Christian virtue. It would have been an interesting outcome, although unfortunately not a probable one. What measures would have been taken if news would have travelled all the way to the Vatican that a young girl in Le Ferriere had hindered a man from raping her by confessing her faith in a virtue. According to Kenneth L. Woodward, confessors were those who were: "reverenced for their public witness of faith and their readiness to die for it".<sup>165</sup> Proclaiming Goretti a confessor would certainly stretch the meaning of the term since she would not have proclaimed her defence of chastity in public but only to Serenelli, and Christianity being the predominant religion, she would not have risked being killed by the majority for confessing her defence of this virtue. This is, however, an interesting line of thought.

Goretti died from an act of violence that included the assailant's intention to have sex with her. This is what makes it an attempted rape with the death of the victim as a result. Although the legend states that Serenelli did not succeed in raping her, her case should be analysed under the category of rape. Serenelli's assault on Maria Goretti was a violent assault with intent to commit rape, therefore he can be considered a rapist.

According to Alan Wertheimer: "rape is violence that is sexual in the straightforward sense that it targets the victim's sexual organs or, as in some cases, the perpetrator uses the victim's body in ways that involve his sexual organs [...]".<sup>166</sup> Marie M. Fortune argues that

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<sup>164</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 139.

<sup>165</sup> Woodward 1996, p. 54.

<sup>166</sup> Wertheimer 2003, p. 91.

sexual violence is, first and foremost, an act of violence, hatred, and aggression. Fortune sees Goretti as a victim of sexual violence. She considers rape to be a violent act because it uses sex to injure another person. There is harm of and injury to victims that may be psychological or physical.<sup>167</sup> However, it is important to be aware of the fact that not all violations against the sexual autonomy of an individual involve the use of threat or physical violence.<sup>168</sup> The use of physical violence per se is obvious in the case of Maria Goretti. It was her resistance against this sexual violence that threatened her virginity that led to her martyrdom, according to her legend.

Analysing the case of Goretti, Fortune makes an important contribution to the question of the confusion that results from the teaching that it is preferable that a girl die rather than commit the sin of losing her virginity because of rape. According to her, this gives rise to a confusion between sexual activity and sexual violence, which means that: "the attempted rape is seen as a sexual approach rather than as a violent attack, and the agency resides only with the young woman". This confusion generates the problematic ideas that sexuality involves a violent, aggressive attack by a stranger, that a female's technical virginity takes precedence over her life, and that women have no value except as sexual property. Moreover, women are not taught to resist male sexual aggression for the right reasons, which are that it is violent and aggressive, and because they have the right to maintain their bodily integrity. Fortune suggests that a more valuable teaching about the figure of Maria Goretti would be to distinguish between the act of which she almost became a victim, that is rape, and a sexual relationship based on consent and respect.<sup>169</sup>

Fortune stresses the importance of seeing rape as an act of violence. According to her, the view of rape as a "sexual" act resulted in the belief that men could not stop themselves from having sex with an unwilling partner when they experienced sexual arousal. Since men could not help it, this belief removed moral responsibility from the rapist and often placed moral responsibility on the victim.<sup>170</sup> It is important to consider this observation because it is reminiscent of the portrayal of Serenelli's agency. The assumption appears to be that Serenelli could not help it. The environmental factors, that is, the bad influences in society, the absence of a mother, and his father's bad example are given as motives to his assault on Goretti.<sup>171</sup> This logic is not free from problems. To only blame external factors can function as an easy way to explain sexual violence, and it diverts attention from other possible causes of a deeply troubled interior.

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<sup>167</sup> Fortune 2005, pp. 4, 6, 5.

<sup>168</sup> Wertheimer 2003, p. 92.

<sup>169</sup> Fortune 2005, pp. 24, 25.

<sup>170</sup> Fortune 2005, p. 30.

<sup>171</sup> See: Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 43, 44, 45, 62, 94, 118; Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 14, 15.

Fortune's emphasis on defining Serenelli's attack on Goretti as an act of violence shows the importance of making a clear distinction between sexual activity and sexual violence in the discourse about Maria Goretti. It also functions as a recognition of the violence of which she was a victim. Although rape can be seen as an act of violence, the rapist is seeking some psychic benefit from it, and there is an intrinsic relationship between rape and anger. According to Wertheimer, the psychic benefits that the rapist seeks are, among other, sexual satisfaction and the venting of anger. However, the sexual satisfaction that is being sought does not make rape a crime of passion. Wertheimer notices that rapists are often angry at women in general or at their particular victims, but that this is not incompatible with the view that rapists desire sex.<sup>172</sup>

In both Buehrle's and Poage's narratives, Maria rejects Alessandro's advances. Buehrle even states that Alessandro understood that words of flattery would not succeed with Maria.<sup>173</sup> Rejection is clearly portrayed as a motive for Alessandro Serenelli's assault on Maria Goretti. This conveys the picture that Goretti was partially guilty for Serenelli's attack on her. However, it is probably done unintentionally since the writer's purpose is to sketch the picture of how the evil begins to grow inside of Alessandro. Wertheimer writes that: "A man may be angry at a particular woman because she does not consent to having sexual relations with him, particularly when he believes that she should consent to do so".<sup>174</sup> This corroborates the idea that anger was a decisive factor in the assault of Maria Goretti.

In the official representation of Maria Goretti, there has been an absence of dialogue with the field of psychology. The future representation of Goretti, whether it is the official or the one in the Catholic edificational biographies, as well as studies about her would benefit from contemporary knowledge of child psychology, and the psychology of perpetrators of sexual violence and its victims. This, to avoid the confusion between sexual violence and a sexual approach that does not involve force or coercion and is consensual; to give a well elaborated insight into what is improper; to better understand the phenomenon of rape; and to better understand the victim, which is the protagonist of this story.

The Catholic edificational biographies analysed in this study unfortunately do not teach children to turn to someone when being persecuted or threatened. Maria Goretti clearly did not tell her mother of Serenelli's advances. Would her mother have known about them, one could expect that she would have taken measures and Goretti would not have been murdered. To write that Goretti told her mother of Serenelli's advances prior to the incident, in order to set an example for children, would probably be to deviate from the truth. However, I deem it

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<sup>172</sup> Wertheimer 2003, pp. 74, 75, 79.

<sup>173</sup> Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 91; Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 30, 32.

<sup>174</sup> Wertheimer 2003, p. 79.

necessary that future discourse on Maria Goretti teaches the youth the importance of confiding in trustworthy adults. In the case of the Catholic edificational biographies this should be done at least in the form of an *afterword*.

In both Buehrle's and Poage's narratives, there is a concern about Alessandro's salvation from Maria's part, noticed in the words that she utters when she is trying to defend herself against him. Maria does forgive her assailant and says that she wants him with her in Paradise.<sup>175</sup> However, this should not automatically lead to the assumption that his salvation was her main preoccupation in the moment of her assault. According to Mona Eliasson, verbal resistance in which the victim tries to appeal to and to persuade her assailant to stop what he is doing, is more common than physical resistance when the assailant is an acquaintance.<sup>176</sup> It is possible to consider Goretti begging Serenelli not to touch her because it was a sin and he would go to hell, as a verbal resistance said with the hope that he would stop what he was doing to her. Although Goretti knew Serenelli, she did use physical resistance as well, according to the official representation and the Catholic edificational biographies.

The official representation of Maria Goretti emphasises that she had time to choose and that she knew that death awaited her if she made resistance against Serenelli.<sup>177</sup> But how can we know with certainty that Goretti knew that physical resistance would result in her death? Perhaps she thought that Serenelli would stop his assault. And how do we know if in the case Serenelli was willing to spare her life if she acquiesced, that she in that moment would have been capable of understanding that by not making physical resistance she would have kept her life? If she would have understood this and if she would have had time to choose, are there any guarantees that Serenelli would have comprehended her signals of surrender in the state that he was? These are questions that can be speculated about, however, they also point us towards the awareness that it is not an unproblematic task to give meaning and draw conclusions of horrible and tragical deaths such as Maria Goretti's. Moreover, it shows that oversimplification can occur in the interpretation of Goretti's reaction, when her struggle against her assailant is presented as only being caused by her determination to remain pure.

Assuming that Serenelli would have let her live if she had not made resistance, we would thus have been left with a raped girl and not a virgin martyr. However, this does not mean that this raped girl wanted to be bereft of her virginity, nor that she wanted to be raped.

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<sup>175</sup> See: Buehrle 2013 [1950], pp. 105, 124; Poage 2015 [1950], pp. 37, 47.

On how the popes underscore Goretti's consideration for her assailant's salvation, see: John Paul II, *Message of John Paul II to the Bishop of Albano for the Centenary of the Death of St. Maria Goretti*, July 8, 2002; Francis, *Message to the Bishops of Albano and Latina for the Feast of St. Maria Goretti*, June 20, 2016.

<sup>176</sup> Eliasson 1997, pp. 207, 208.

<sup>177</sup> See: Pius XII, *Discorso di Sua Santità Pio XII ai Pellegrini Affluiti a Roma per la Beatificazione di Santa Maria Goretti*, April 7, 1947; John Paul II, *Visita Pastorale a Latina. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 29, 1991.

Silent submission and lack of physical resistance is not consent.<sup>178</sup> The reactions of victims of rape can differ. Some can become effectively paralysed by the event, while others may choose to submit in order not to risk further physical injury, or being killed.<sup>179</sup> A recent study from the Karolinska Institute showed that tonic immobility, i.e. an involuntary paralysis experienced by the victim during sexual assault, is common. 7 out of 10 women experienced extreme tonic immobility, and 8 out of 10 reported significant fear during the attack. Additionally, assaults that involved violence were twice as likely to be reported in the group that experienced tonic immobility.<sup>180</sup> The results of this study should be taken into consideration in the future representation of Maria Goretti. This, in turn, should lead to an acknowledgement of the different reactions of victims of sexual assault, otherwise, misconceptions about rape will continue to be present in her representation. Furthermore, to assume that the sole reason for Goretti's verbal and physical resistance was her unwillingness to commit sin, is to obscure the violent nature of rape, and it gives the picture that what she was trying to avoid was a non-violent sexual approach and not rape.

More emphasis should be put on acknowledging Goretti's reaction as being a normal reaction against what she was being submitted to, and that consciously or unconsciously she was defending her integrity. Goretti's body was not to be given to whomever wanted to have it. This would contribute to the process of making a more explicit condemnation of the act of sexual violence in reference to Maria Goretti, something that the papal discourse and the Catholic edificational biographies about her have not elaborated on enough.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church posits rape under the category of offences against chastity. Rape is seen as an offence against chastity because it injures justice and charity, and it wounds the respect, freedom, and physical and moral integrity to which every person has a right.<sup>181</sup> Although her legend maintains that she kept her virginity intact, Goretti was submitted to an attack that—without delving into other possible psychobiological explanations of what motivates rape—had sex as one of its aims. Thus, we still can contend that already in the act of forcing himself upon Goretti, Serenelli violated her bodily integrity. The writers of the Catholic edificational biographies, who possess an arguably significant amount of creative freedom in their portrayals of Maria Goretti, omit giving descriptions of groping in the narratives of her assault. Such descriptions might be considered superfluous,

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<sup>178</sup> Archard 1998, p. 85.

<sup>179</sup> Wertheimer 2003, p. 91.

<sup>180</sup> Anna Möller, et al., "Tonic immobility during sexual assault- A common reaction predicting post-traumatic stress disorder and severe depression", *Acta Obstetrica et Gynecologica Scandinavica*, vol. 96, issue 8 (August 2017), pp. 932-938, doi: 10.1111/aogs.13174.

<sup>181</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2356.

inappropriate, or even as not having occurred. Their omission might also be the result of a wish to convey a picture of unsulliedness.

Godfrey Poage's ambiguous portrayal of Maria Goretti's feelings during Serenelli's persecution of her, depending on the interpretation, leaves the reader with a disturbing picture of an eleven-year-old girl feeling enticed by an act of sexual violence. This idea is problematic and points to the necessity of a profound discussion on sexual deviations in the discourse about Maria Goretti. If the reader interprets the narrative of the assault as if that which Maria is struggling to resist is the desire to have sex with Alessandro, this could result in the view of Maria as an algolagnist which means that she would derive pleasure from a sexual activity involving pain.<sup>182</sup> Noticing the disturbing nature of these possible interpretations is not done with the intention to suggest that children are asexual beings, but more in an effort to shed light on how certain narratives with the purpose of fomenting devotion can give rise to problematic interpretations. Although one of the purposes of the Catholic edificational biographies is to instruct the audience on the path towards edifying their morality, they can also lead to confusions and problematic ideas that can challenge the intentions of the authors themselves and the grounds on which the conveyed teachings rest.

The many references in the Catholic edificational biographies to Maria Goretti's tallness and to her appearing older than she is,<sup>183</sup> although being symbols of her outstanding morals and growth of piety can also convey the image of Goretti as a woman and not a child. This detracts attention from the denunciation of the abuse of minors, which should be one of the main points of focus and which is one of the scandals that permeates the story of Maria Goretti.

Imagining Goretti as being an adult would not make her story less complicated for those who conceive that there is legitimacy in the virtue of chastity and that it should be practiced by every Christian, because it would still imply the idea that a dead woman is better than a woman who is unchaste, either through rape or by choice. What would then happen with Catholic women who sin against this virtue? Would the Catholic Church be better off if they were dead? The possibility of forgiveness, the Sacrament of Penance, the importance placed on the virtue of charity, and the Catholic Church's stance on sexual assault and violence speak against such an argument. It is, however, a conclusion that can easily be derived from the papal discourse and the Catholic edificational biographies about Maria Goretti. Given that the Catholic Church's emphasis on the preservation of chastity has as one of its bases the

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<sup>182</sup> Kolnai 2005, p. 194.

<sup>183</sup> See: Buehrle 2013 [1950], p. 96. Poage 2015 [1950], p. 26.

promotion of the human dignity,<sup>184</sup> the dialogue on chastity should with good reason include those whose human dignity has been violated through crimes of sexual violence. It is in their testimonies that part of Goretti's voice could be heard.

Pope Francis has on several occasions expressed the Catholic Church's stance on sexual abuse and violence perpetrated against children and women. The Pope states that: "sexual abuse is a horrible sin, completely opposed to and in contradiction to what Christ and the Church teach us".<sup>185</sup> In the final report from the Ordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family, the Catholic Church's condemnation of domestic violence and sexual abuse was reiterated, and its role of accompanying in those situations was explained. The Church sees the need for cooperation with law enforcement in the prevention and treatment in cases of domestic violence, to move against the perpetrators and adequately protect the victims. The report also states the Catholic Church's wish to promote the protection of children from sexual abuse. It's stance on these cases is that of "zero tolerance".<sup>186</sup> Pope Francis' predecessor, Pope John Paul II, in his *Letter to Women* addressed the history of violence against women in the area of sexuality, and he stated that: "the time has come to condemn vigorously the types of sexual violence which frequently have women for their object".<sup>187</sup> It is clear from these examples that the Catholic Church condemns sexual violence, sexual abuse, and acts of violence.

In the Catholic edificational biographies and in the papal discourse, as expressed by Pope Pius XII and Pope John Paul II, Goretti becomes a symbol of the woman who resists the temptation to sin against her chastity. Goretti is an example of the ideal young woman both in comportment and in the choices that she makes. To the youth, she becomes an example of the honouring of purity.

In light of the serious scandal of clerical sexual abuse, and in concordance with the Catholic Church's stance on sexual abuse and violence against women and children, I deem it necessary that the Catholic Church represents Maria Goretti in a different way. The condemnation of sexual abuse and violence needs to be done with the same conspicuousness in reference to Maria Goretti. Goretti's worth and dignity should not depend on the preservation of her virginity, especially considering that she was going to be bereft of it

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<sup>184</sup> See, for example: John Paul II, *Visita alla Parrocchia del <<Corpus Domini>> per la Traslazione delle Spoglie di Santa Maria Goretti. Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, September 27, 1986; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2339.

<sup>185</sup> Francis, *Audience with Members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors*, September 21, 2017, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/09/21/170921g.html> [Accessed 2018- 01-26].

<sup>186</sup> The Synod of Bishops, *The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis*, § 78, October 24, 2015, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20151026\\_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html) [Accessed 2018- 01- 25].

<sup>187</sup> John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, June 29, 1995, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_29061995\\_women.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html) [Accessed 2018-01-26].

through a non-consensual violent sexual act. More attention should be placed on the assailant and on the convergence of factors that enable these type of assaults.

It is very possible that Goretti's Christian morality and her understanding of the importance of chastity were reasons for her physical resistance in the moment of the assault. However, it is necessary to point out that her reaction was a normal response against what she was being submitted to, and that the reactions of the assaulted can differ. When Goretti's reaction is described as normal and not only as a reaction expected from a pious person then the eleven-year-old child, the person and not the saint comes to the surface. Perhaps in this way she would be more relatable and a source of solace to victims of sexual violence. As a way of showing respect to Maria Goretti's person, she should be saved from oversimplified conclusions, many of which have resulted from the fact that we cannot know exactly what happened in the moment of the assault nor what was going through Goretti's mind. There ought to be place for the word "perhaps" in relation to Maria Goretti. Perhaps she fought against Serenelli's attack because she did not want to sin by losing her chastity, or perhaps she also fought him because she was a terrified child that was feeling the physical and emotional pain of the attack.

In the hope of a more comprehensive and wholesome representation of Maria Goretti in the future, her dignity should not be associated with her virginal intactness, and the act of which she was a victim should in the discourse about her be complemented with knowledge of sexual violence, included the psychology of perpetrators, and of victims. The reason being not to give a skewed picture of sex in which, as noticed by Fortune, rape is seen as a sexual approach rather than as a violent attack. It is also necessary to give attention to the testimonies of victims of sexual violence, and to underscore that different reactions can be expected from the victims during a sexual assault. Not to do this could result, amongst other things, in the perpetuation of the prejudicial idea that a woman who does not fight her attacker wants to be raped and is thus a bad woman.

It is not possible to know for certain if Goretti knew that death awaited her if she made resistance against Serenelli. There are many psychological factors to consider when studying such atrocious incidents. Victims of sexual violence who might have reacted in different ways than Goretti need not be left feeling guilty or ashamed. These things need to be taken into consideration in order not to leave the recipients of Maria Goretti's story, especially the young ones, with poorly discussed answers to their questions. There needs to be a change in the way Goretti's official representation and the devotional discourse intellectualise about rape. The papal discourse, the devotional discourse, and the critical discourse about Maria Goretti need to be in dialogue with one another, amongst other things, because the people

who venerate Maria Goretti also exist in contexts where the critical discourse possesses validity.

Four years have passed since the publication of Orazio La Rocca's article in which he mentions the prospect of Saint Maria Goretti being proclaimed "protector of women victims of violence".<sup>188</sup> It is an interesting proposition because, as I mentioned earlier,<sup>189</sup> this could result in a shift of emphasis on what she symbolises. Directing more attention to the violent circumstances that led to her death would be a way to actualise and highlight the continued importance of the discourse which has as its aim the denunciation of sexual violence, especially that which is perpetrated against children. It is thus important not to forget that when speaking about Maria Goretti we are speaking about a child victim of sexual violence.

Pope Francis' recognition of the figure of Maria Goretti in connection with the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (2015), and his extolling of the virtue of charity in relation to the Saint, which was reiterated yet again in the year 2016 in the letter that he sent to the Rector of the Shrine of Nettuno, and in his message to the bishops of the dioceses of Albano and Latina, makes the expectation of his future usage of Goretti's figure an interesting one. It demonstrates the possibility of using Maria Goretti and her story in a different way, and it shows the dynamicity that exists in the veneration of the saints. A relevant question is whether in addition to the accentuation of Goretti's forgiveness of her assailant other aspects of her figure will become emphasised.

A new representation of Maria Goretti would propose her as a symbol of victims of sexual violence. Added to this is the acknowledgement that she was a child. In this way she could also become a symbol of the condemnation of the sexual abuse of minors. In recognising Goretti as a symbol of charity and mercy, the act of which she was a victim should not be forgotten. The recognition of her poverty in both the papal discourse and in the devotional discourse gives rise to the query as to why she does not stand as a symbol of this aspect of her life.

Saint Maria Goretti could be proclaimed protector of victims of sexual violence, in general, and children, in particular. She could also be proclaimed protector of children who live in poverty and are bereft of a large portion of their childhood having to take on certain responsibilities prematurely, one of them being to provide an income for their families or for themselves. Moreover, Saint Maria Goretti could continue to be a symbol of mercy and charity.

In the act of passing on a story rests great responsibility. In the aforementioned homily from 1991, Pope John Paul II, reminded his audience that what Goretti was first and foremost

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<sup>188</sup> La Rocca, *La Repubblica* February 25, 2014.

<sup>189</sup> See: p. 16.

afraid of in the moment of the assault were those who like her assailant can make the body and the soul perish. In the story of Maria Goretti, although her body is seen as unsullied because of not having been deflowered, we nonetheless have a perished body as the result of monstrous evil. A perished body, but a soul elevated to the glory of the altars. Even though there is rejoicing in the concept of a saved soul, this need not be a hindrance to a critical and meticulous reading of these edificational narratives, lest the evil deeds that lead to perish and the questions that are generated in the reception of the narratives become neglected. The endeavour of portraying a wholly saintly and virtuous individual can miss important aspects of reality, and the result of the legend, instead of being a promoter of goodness can also be a generator of unhealthy views.

## 5. Conclusion

Maria Goretti's martyrdom is described as a martyrdom for the virtue of chastity. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, chastity is part of the baptismal identity of every Christian, and it is one of the requirements for the purification of the heart which is a prerequisite for holiness. The cultivation of chastity also results in the purity of the flesh, thus there is a wholeness and an uncorrupted condition in the chaste person.

In the papal discourse, Goretti is described as possessing a strength that is to be seen as the protector as well as the fruit of her virginity. The wholeness that the state of virginity implies is equated with holiness which is what confers strength to the the virgin body. This aspect of the figure of Maria Goretti is emphasised in the papal discourse and in the devotional discourse. Goretti has a moral force, but the strength that Goretti has is to be regarded as the result of her Christian upbringing and her Catechetical instruction. The path towards sanctity begins at home, and its foundation is to be found in the Christian education.

The theme of the Parents' responsibility in the education of their children and in instilling Christian values in them so that they will be able to stand against any contamination of society, is very much emphasised in the papal discourse and in the Catholic edificational biographies. Goretti's upbringing is posited as the kind that gives rise to good human beings, thus it follows that Serenelli's upbringing and his susceptibility to the immoralities in society is the opposite of what is good and of what is to be aspired. The importance of avoiding the immoralities of society at all costs is another underscored theme.

Poverty is not portrayed as a hindrance to a Christian upbringing or to receiving a Catechetical instruction. In Pope Pius XII's reference to poor families, the humble conditions of poor children appears to make them more conscious to God and to his grace. The poverty that Goretti was raised in is a theme that Pope Francis uses to put attention on the problem of families that suffer because of poverty. The official representation of Maria Goretti presents her as a saint to whom parents can turn to, so that she may assist them in their educational mission, and whom the youth can have recourse to and invoke, so that she may help them to choose good ways.

The theme of the importance of chastity, virginity and its many benefits is present in both the official representation and in the Catholic edificational biographies. The strength that virginity confers, its augmentation by the grace of God in the moment of the assault, as well as the guidance of the Holy Spirit are what help Goretti to choose between death and sin. According to the official representation and the portrayal in the Catholic edificational biographies, Goretti chose to die rather than commit a sin. The implied sin being

loosing her chastity, which she would have lost as a consequence of being raped. In this way Gorette's death is depicted as something she had the power to decide on. The consciousness of her decision is notably stressed, thus there is a theme of self-sacrifice in the representation of Maria Gorette. Self-sacrifice in order not to compromise with evil is a lesson to be found in Gorette's story. In Buehrle's and in Poage's narratives, Gorette is taught the lesson of dying rather than committing a sin, by her mother and by the Catholic Church respectively.

Maria Gorette's act of forgiveness is a lauded theme in the papal discourse and in the Catholic edificational biographies. Gorette is portrayed as being concerned for the salvation of her assailant, and there is a redemptive aspect in the act of forgiving him that alludes to Christ's sacrifice on the cross for the redemption of humanity. In the Catholic edificational biographies, she is explicitly compared to Christ when she is asked by the priest if she wants to forgive her murderer and show him mercy like Christ had done with the penitent thief crucified beside him. In these works, Gorette's forgiveness of her assailant is part of the narrative of her suffering which is a prominent theme and which makes her a co-redeemer with Christ, as well as having the function of submitting her into a single life of triumph alongside of Him. Gorette's emulation of Christ results in the triumph of sainthood. The many allusions to the Bible in the narratives about Maria Gorette are a common feature in hagiographical works, and belong to the biblical-hagiographic chain in which hagiography assumes a religious rationale for the nature and documentation of salvation.

Establishing the holiness of the saintly individual from the moment of birth is another common feature in narratives of the lives of the saints. Gorette is portrayed as being pious since infancy, although her piety permeates the entire narratives and it is most noticeable in her comportment in different situations. Gorette is portrayed as being morally mature, as having a character not expected from a child her age. In the narratives, her outer beauty mirrors her inner beauty. There is an apparent connection between her physical appearance and her growth in piety in Buehrle's depiction of Gorette's growth in height after her First Holy Communion. Gorette is portrayed as an obedient and responsible child who never remains from home longer than necessary and who avoids immoral environments. The hardships that Gorette and her family experience after her father's demise are also depicted as reasons to her growth in maturity and piety.

As presence of the good, Maria Cecilia Buehrle's and Fr. Godfrey Poage's narratives have as one of their purposes the edification of the reader. They are not solely aimed at a young audience, but also at adults and parents. These narratives teach the importance that the Catholic Church places on the virtues of chastity and charity. They remind the parents of their responsibilities in the upbringing of their children, in imbuing them with Christian values, and

they underscore the importance of a Catechetical instruction. Moreover, these narratives teach the youth to honour their virginity, to be of good comportment, to be obedient to their parents and to God, to be good towards their neighbours, and to avoid that which can contaminate the body and the soul. As already stated, they also teach self-sacrifice so as to avoid sin.

Maria Goretti is a martyr of chastity because she preferred to be killed rather than to sin against God by loosing her chastity. By being a witness to the Catholic Church's teaching on the importance of the virtue of chastity, she becomes a virgin martyr. However, her forgiveness of her killer was also mentioned by Pope Pius XII in Goretti's canonisation ceremony the 24 of June 1950. The act of forgiving her assailant stands as an important element of her holiness, although it tends to be obscured by the importance placed on her martyrdom for chastity and purity. In relation to the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (2015), the centrality of the figure of Saint Maria Goretti was recognised by Pope Francis. Amongst the popes whose utterances about Maria Goretti have been analysed in this study, Pope Francis' are the ones that accentuate more Goretti's act of forgiveness rather than her self-sacrifice in defence of her virginal purity. This can be seen as an evidence that a shift of focus is occurring in the official representation of Maria Goretti. Attention is more explicitly put on the virtue of charity.

Italian journalist Orazio La Rocca's article about the prospect of proclaiming Saint Maria Goretti protector of women victims of violence, as an idea initiated by pope Benedict XVI, besides broadening the spectrum of what Goretti symbolises, this idea also draws attention to sexual violence, the act of which she was a victim. This is positive considering the absence of a thorough exposition on sexual violence in the Catholic edificational biographies and in the papal discourse.

There are aspects in Maria Goretti's representation that can be considered problematic. Since these aspects are not thoroughly discussed, they give rise to many questions and misconceptions of sex, sexual violence and of victims of sexual crimes. In light of the irrevocability and the definitive quality of canonisations, it is not a matter of re-canonising but of reevaluating the way in which Goretti is being portrayed.

The official representation and the Catholic edificational biographies convey the image that if a woman or a girl who is submitted to an attempted rape has the opportunity to choose between being raped or being murdered by the assailant, she is supposed to choose the latter. If the assaulted would loose her chastity through the act of rape, she would be guilty of committing sin. There is clearly a necessity of discussing this subject theologically as well as ethically. I have suggested that a theological contribution to the question concerning chastity, rape, sin and self-sacrifice can be done with St. Augustine's elaboration of the violation of

chastity without the will's consent. However, the importance placed on the will's consent can lead to problematic conclusions that have to do with the body's natural responses to stimulation. This suggests that the discussion on sexual violence needs to be complemented with expert insight on the subject of sexual violence and its many different forms, as well as including into the discussion the experiences of the victims.

The emphasis placed on the consciousness of Gorette's decision which was to die rather than to sin, assumes that Gorette was aware that fighting Serenelli would result in her death, and that her assailant would have spared her life if she would not have made resistance. However, we cannot know if Gorette was able to reason in such a horrific situation, neither can we know if Serenelli's mental state would have allowed him to understand her signals of surrender and if he would have responded to them either by not killing her and not raping her, or by raping her but not killing her. The accentuation on the consciousness of her decision also points to the assumption that she had time to choose, which disregards the possible confusions in the moment of an assault, the instinctive reactions, and the many ways the assaulted can respond to such situations.

To regard Gorette's resistance against her assailant as only being the result of her unwillingness to commit a sin or hinder her assailant from committing one, diverts attention from rape and gives the impression that what Gorette was resisting was a non-violent sexual approach and not rape. Marie M. Fortune's observation of the confusion that arises between sexual activity and sexual violence from the story of Maria Gorette is important to consider since this generates problematic ideas, one of them being that sexuality involves a violent and aggressive attack by a stranger. Additionally, a female's technical virginity is seen as more important than her life. Moreover, women are not taught to resist male aggression for the right reasons which are that they have the right to maintain their bodily integrity, and because it is violent and aggressive. Another confusion that arises when rape is seen as a normal sexual act is that men can't stop themselves from having sex with an unwilling partner when they experience sexual arousal. This moves moral responsibility from the rapist and places it on the victim. Fortune's observations are of main importance for the future representation of Maria Gorette.

In the official representation and in the Catholic edificational biographies, the assumption appears to be that Serenelli could not help attacking Gorette. Environmental factors are given as reasons for this, however, this points to the importance of complementing Gorette's representation with expert knowledge of sexual perpetrators. To portray Gorette's rejection of Serenelli's advances as a motive for his assault as is done in the Catholic edificational biographies by Buehrle and Poage, in addition to placing partial culpability on

Goretti does not contribute to the condemnation of sexual violence if the subject of sexual violence and rapists is not properly elaborated.

An unfortunate detail in the Catholic edificational biographies is that they do not teach children to turn to a trustworthy adult when being persecuted or threatened. Future representations of Maria Goretti should not disregard this detail.

The Catholic edificational biographies' references to Goretti's tallness and to her appearing older than she is are symbols of her outstanding morals and her growth in piety. However, they can make the reader forget that Goretti is a child and not a woman. This deemphasises a possible denunciation of sexual abuse against minors, in the Catholic edificational biographies. The ambiguous portrayal by Fr. Godfrey Poage of Goretti's feelings during Serenelli's persecution of her, if interpreted as if Goretti is feeling tempted to have sex with her assailant results in yet another disturbing picture in the narrative of the attack, which is that of an eleven-year-old feeling enticed by an act of sexual violence.

In the official representation the act of forgiving her assailant is recognised as admirable, important and exemplary. It is a heroic pardon that places Maria Goretti among the best-loved saints of the 20th century and that puts her assailant in the path to conversion. The authors of the analysed Catholic edificational biographies are good at conveying the picture of how courageously Goretti lived the last hours of her life. The eleven-year-old Maria Goretti bore her suffering with dignity and demonstrated great strength, humility and dignity in the profound act of forgiving her assailant. Although this act can be deemed worthy of admiration depending on individual views, it is necessary to keep in mind that forgiveness should not be forced nor hurried in victims of sexual crimes.

As a way to show respect to victims of sexual violence and to Maria Goretti's person, it is important that she is saved from oversimplified conclusions about the incident that led to her death. Many of these oversimplifications have resulted from the absence of expert contribution on all that pertains to the subject of rape, and from the fact that we cannot know exactly what happened in the moment of the assault. More emphasis should be put on acknowledging the normality of Goretti's reaction against what she was being submitted to. This needs to be considered, notwithstanding the possibility that she fought Serenelli's attack because of her Christian morality and her understanding of the importance of the virtue of chastity. When her reaction is not only regarded as a reaction expected from a pious person, then the child, the person, and not the Saint comes to the surface. In this way she could be more relatable and a source of solace to Catholic victims of sexual crimes.

Goretti's worth and dignity should not depend on the preservation of her virginity, especially if we take into consideration the fact that she was a child and that she was going to

be bereft of it through a non-consensual violent sexual act. More attention should be placed on the assailant as well as on the convergence of factors that enable these type of assaults. The papal discourse, the devotional discourse, and the critical discourse about Maria Goretti need to be in dialogue with each other because the venerators of Saint Maria Goretti also live in contexts where the critical discourse possesses validity.

Goretti is presented as an example of the ideal young woman both in comportment and in the choices that she makes. To the youth, she is held as an example of the importance of honouring their purity. In the Catholic edificational biographies and in the papal discourse of Pope Pius XII and Pope John Paul II, Goretti stands as a symbol of the good woman who resists the temptation to sin against her chastity. The Catholic Church clearly condemns sexual violence, sexual abuse and acts of violence perpetrated against women and children. Therefore, this condemnation needs to be done with the same conspicuousness in reference to Saint Maria Goretti. The prospect of proclaiming Goretti protector of women victims of violence could be an important step in this direction.

A wholesome and more comprehensive representation of Saint Maria Goretti should include expert knowledge of sexual violence, especially that which can be found within the field of psychology. It is also important to include into the dialogue the testimonies of victims of sexual violence. The notion of the different reactions of victims of sexual violence needs to be acknowledged, amongst other things, so as not to perpetuate the prejudicial idea that a woman who does not fight her attacker wants to be raped and is hence a bad woman.

How Saint Maria Goretti will be used and which aspects of her figure will be more accentuated in the future papal discourse about her is yet to be seen. A new representation of Maria Goretti would propose her as a symbol of victims of sexual violence, and I have argued that it is important to acknowledge that she was a child, so that she could also become a symbol of the condemnation of sexual abuse against minors. The act of which Goretti was a victim should not be overlooked when recognising her as a symbol of charity and mercy. Saint Maria Goretti could be proclaimed protector of children and adult victims of sexual violence. A new representation would also recognise the poverty of her existence. Thus, having experienced poverty herself, she could be proclaimed protector of children who live in poverty. Furthermore, Saint Maria Goretti could continue to be a symbol of mercy and charity.

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