

Blessed Maria Maddalena Martinengo (1687-1737)



Among the Capuchin Poor Clares of Santa Maria della Neve in Brescia she was called “il facchino del monistero”, the monastery rouseabout. Devoted to burdensome chores and “always very ready to accept hardship”, she enjoyed no exemptions or privileges and was always ready and punctual in everything. She was sound and robust in face and limbs and until just before her death concealed from the most accurate observers her terrible penances and infirmities, as well as the outpouring of heavenly gifts. In fact, Sister Maria Maddelena, whom Leo XIII declared blessed on 3 June 1900, did not actually have a strong physical makeup. When she entered the Monastery at eighteen years old, she appeared to the Capuchin nuns to have a very delicate appearance, “like wax” with a small physique “to be kept under glass.”

Born in the Martinengo ducal palace in Brescia on 4 October 1687 after a difficult birth that five months later cost the life of her mother, the noble Margherita Secchi d’Aragona was baptised at home straightaway for fear that she might die. She received her mother’s name. The baptism ceremonies were supplied on 21 August 1691, at the baptism of her sister Cecilia, born to the second marriage of their father Francesco Leopoldo Martinengo, Count of Barco, to Elena Palazzi.

She was very intelligent and carefully educated. At the age of six she was entrusted to the Ursuline school. Her teacher, Isabella Marazzi, trained her in prayer and study. The Breviary was always her preferred reading and the rosary was never out of her hand. This is how those close to her remembered her. A very keen reader – she will later say of herself in her autobiography “I found all my contentment in reading” – she acquired an uncommon formation in Italian and Latin literature which her father’s valuable library was able to offer her in abundance.

Disposed by grace she remembered an event from her early childhood when, during a journey in a carriage drawn by six horses, she suddenly fell out. She would have been run over and crushed had not the touch of an invisible hand removed her from danger. Towards the age of eleven on 11 October 1698 she entered the monastery boarding school of the Augustinian nuns at Santa Maria degli Angeli. Two of the nuns were maternal aunts and there she continued her education.

Her first Holy Communion was dramatic for her. The Host had fallen to the floor, perhaps because of the intense emotion of the moment and she had to pick it up with her tongue. In her limbs she was struck by a “tremendous cold”, as if the Lord had judged her unworthy. Also under the influence of the saints’ lives she was reading, she then focused on tasks of mortification and meditation. However the aunts had become so envious and suffocating that in August 1699 Margherita asked her father to allow her to go to the Spirito Santo boarding school of the Benedictines. First, however, she had a vacation with her family for a few months in the beautiful mountains around Lago d’Iseo.

There she began to feel a discernable attraction to the enclosed contemplative life. She later recalled how she had fallen in love with the scene of those “uninhabited alpine regions, and the grottoes that were so beautiful that they seemed to call me to live there. Without a doubt I would

have run off to them, had the number of wolves not frightened me.” She had already attempted such an escape at Santa Maria degli Angeli. With two companions she tried to flee “to a hermitage to suffer there as much as she wanted.” However, the secret door of the monastery was locked and she couldn’t manage to budge it open. Her fiery adolescence recalls similar actions by other holy men and women when they were at her age.

In the monastery of Santo Spirito there were two other maternal aunts. They were not as jealous as the first two but were only concerned about her health and her future as a noble-woman in high society. She later recalled, “I was so bored that I would not have become a religious there for all the gold in the world.” Meanwhile her charismatic vocation gained focus. Her inner prayer filled her with fire. Her fragile adolescent psychology was not yet accustomed to the ways of the divine and in the end she could not resist and fell ill. The sisters, “unaware of what was happening in me, made me even worse with repeated medicines.” Only God who had wounded her could heal her.



She was thirteen years old, she wrote, “when I vowed my virginity to God.” She was then attacked by all kinds of temptations. They were terrible years. She felt overwhelmed. A sixteen years of age family projects and expectations already weighed upon her. Many suitors wanted her. Her father had promised her to the son of a Venetian senator. Even her brothers Nestore and Gianfrancesco were prompting her. They brought her books and love stories. Margherita was seduced by these things. She read them night and day. “Books from hell,” she will later recall. She loved to dress up with the most refined and showy clothes. One day, however, while crying over her misfortune before the Tabernacle, she felt certain that ultimately she would be clothed in the coarse natural wool of the Capuchin Poor Clares. This conviction was infused in her by a mysterious inner light and was inspired in her by the Mother of God in a vision, as she later told. And yet, “I knew nothing about the Capuchin Nuns.” She was eighteen.

At the conclusion of her education in Santo Spirito monastery she returned home. The year was 1704. How would she tell her father of her decision? While something inside her rejected the idea she repeated again and again that she wanted to become a Capuchin Nun. Everyone was openly hostile to the idea: her confessor, her teachers, her father and brothers, the servants at home. Just four days later, it was Christmas, she went to the Capuchin Poor Clare monastery of Santa Maria della Neve and presented herself with the words, “I want to become holy.” As was the custom at the time, the sisters had her spend a period of probation before being clothed in the habit. The probation took place in the city, in the Maggi College directed by the Ursulines.

With Lent over, Count Leopoldo arranged for her a fun tour of various Italian cities. He uncle Giambattista organised many meetings with eligible suitors in Venice. One of his sons fell in love with the young countess and asked her hand. Margherita was about to agree and would already have sent a note to her father in this regard, had a very loyal servant not advised her to first commend herself to the Lord in order “to receive some light.” Margherita passed the night in prayer. By morning she was completely

determined to follow her vocation: "I would have run the gauntlet to enter, so certain was I of doing the will of God."

She returned to Brescia. After a course of spiritual exercises in the Maggi College, on 8 September 1705 accompanied by a joyful procession of carriages came to the monastery of Santa Maria della Neve and crossed the threshold of the enclosure. She was clothed in the brown habit and took the new name of Maria Maddalena (Mary Magdalene). For her sensitive nature parting with her family was like a mortal wrench. In her autobiography she describes it this way, "O God! How upset I was. My three companions entered one by one. I then entered in fourth place. Being the last to enter I was tightly hugged by a lady whom I think the devil inspired to oppress me. I took that step with such violence that I truly believe that the separation of the soul from the body will not be any greater."

The novitiate year was under the direction of a rigid and eccentric novice mistress. Her sisters in the novitiate were envious. And so the year was a cross of trials and dryness, so much so that in the first report of the community Maria Maddalena was deemed unfit for Capuchin life and "would be the downfall of the monastery." However, when the mistress was changed, the sisters supported her unanimously in a later ballot. So on 8 September 1706 Maria Maddalena was definitively consecrated to God by religious profession.

Immersed in the day to day life of the burdensome work of a poor, eighteenth century monastery, her thirty two years in the enclosure may appear monotonous and with little respite except for the train of events in her inner life. Her life however was a magnificent panorama of spirituality, evident now from her marvellous writings which at the time of writing (2000) are awaiting a definitive and complete edition. Perhaps the words of one scholar about her spirituality summarise well the activity of her life in the monastery. The countess Margherita, now Sister Maria Maddalena, "became dish-washer, kitchen hand, porter, gardener, baker, sweeper, wardrobe keeper, laundress, wool weaver, shoe maker, cellarer, seamstress, chancellor or secretary, embroiderer, sacristy assistant, and without ever having the task of nurse, she nevertheless spontaneously undertook the lowliest and most burdensome of services. Then she was novice mistress, "rotara," vicar and abbess."

In 1708 a Jesuit priest gave a course of spiritual exercises that were markedly Jansenistic. These stirred up in her such an excessive fear of divine judgement that she fell into a swoon with a high fever. The sickness quickly appeared to be serious, even mortal. However, following the enlightened counsel of her confessor who heard her long, general confession punctuated with tears, Maria Maddalena experienced the gift of perfect reconciliation and full absolution of her sins, as well the healing of the sickness. Already the powerful action of God was at work within her with a force of love and sorrow that made her a "blood soaked bride."



All the great mystical gifts found in her a total availability. Her spiritual journey passed from affective prayer to infused contemplation. She herself tried to describe this point. "I followed my method of speaking with God, "

she wrote in her autobiography, “but because I was doing this with greater love and with more diligence, the Lord in his infinite goodness corresponded with me within with the sweetest words. While speaking in this way, I put my head to the floor. Immediately in the depth of my heart the Lord answered me: ‘Dear daughter, you love me, but without comparison I love you more.’ I said to him, ‘Lord, take my heart. I no longer want it.’ He, was pleased with the offering. And it seemed to me that on removing my heart that he put there his own - all on fire with love. And I, unable to suffer being alight and burning in this way, fainted from the ardour that sweetly consumed me.”

The fire of divine love continued to consume her. To extinguish this burning she inflicted unbelievable penances upon herself, which her humility kept hidden even from her doctors. Within the small living space such as that of a monastery these passed almost unobserved. The jealousy, resentment or curiosity of some sisters, the youthful tricks of the novices and furtive observation tactics devised by the sisters could not scratch the surface of her secret of love and suffering. We would call her disconcerting mortifications ‘baroque’: hundreds of needles piercing every part of her body, disciplines, cuts, the burning sensation of iron mesh, fire and sulphur – not to forget the mystical nights and the mysterious inner actions of the Spirit – all this passed-by almost in secret within an ordinary life.

It is difficult to exaggerate her disconcerting martyrdom, a “martyr afflicted with sorrow by the hand of love,” as she herself wrote. However her physical sufferings were surpassed by her spiritual and moral sufferings. Four sisters opposed her until her death. A confessor had her writings burnt as heretical. A monastery vicar forbade her to speak about spiritual things with her former novices. She bore it all. “It is necessary to act more heroically in the more difficult things.”

Her spiritual experience remains permanently in her numerous manuscripts that she began to write under obedience: her *Autobiografia, Commento alle Massime spirituali* of Fra Giovanni di San Sansone, reports for her spiritual directors; or continued to write at the insistence of her novices: *Avvertimenti spirituali, Spiegazione delle costituzioni cappuccino, Trattato sull’umiltà*; or felt inwardly compelled to write: the *Dialogi mistici*. These are writings dripping with supernatural experience that is Trinitarian and Christological, focused on the Cross, as well as Eucharistic and Marian. When these writings are published they will represent a high point of eighteenth century, feminine mystical literature.

Maria Maddalena was literally consumed by divine love. In 1737 when she resigned the ministry of abbess, her body was already exhausted. During her prolonged fainting spells, her sisters could finally discover in her martyred body the marks of her tremendous penances and wounds of various torments in the passion of the Lord.

The sunset was rapid and calm. She was glad when she knew that the end was near. To the sisters who were weeping, with maternal tenderness she put in their mouths some berries that she had in a little basket in front of her. She prayed some biblical verses. Then she was heard to whisper, “I am coming, I am coming, Lord!” Serenely, she breathed her last. It was 27 July 1737. She had just about completed thirty two years of religious life and nearly turned fifty years of age.

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