

The project of the Servant of God
"The Lord, first of all!"

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Bosaro, in Polesine (Italy)

Maria Bolognesi was born in Bosaro, Rovigo, on the 21st of October 1924 and died on the 30th of January 1980; she spent her 55 years of earthy life in silence, without even making fuss around her and without publicising the gifts and mystic graces, which the infinite bounty of God plentifully poured on her.

Deeply united to Christ who wanted her to be "victim", Maria led a simple life, always willing to do the will of God, working in the world with selflessly and great love.

Her strong and delicate love led her to immerse herself in the heart of Christ, to draw directly from him the necessary vigour and enthusiasm with which she would approach many suffering, sick people in need of comfort, light, advise and, first of all, peace.

For all the people she met in many different ways or put close to her by Providence, Maria was, first of all, a loving "sister" and "mother". Her charitable action throughout the years, her goodness, her daily example of Christian charity, strongly pursued even if in sacrifice and incredible physical sufferance, did not pass unnoticed. Maria left us all these elements as a spiritual heritage, and they are now giving good results.

Choice of the local Church

Maria's characteristics are real and undeniable, as we can get from the fact that on the 21st of October 1992, twelve years after her death, Prelate Martin Gomiero, bishop of the Diocese of Adria (Ro), gave his permission to open the Canonical Diocesan proceedings in order to enquire into the figure of this humble creature, now recognised as "Servant of God".

It is not easy to synthesise her life, through the variety of situations and facts contained in her "Diaries", through her correspondence and through the witnesses gathered during 18 years (1980/1997): it was a life of little joys and many painful events and uncommon and extraordinary facts. However, the pain, even if intense to anguish, did not damage her faith and moral force and she is then a bright example of a "silent woman of charity" and of a "peculiar religious figure of the Italian Church in the XXth century", as declared by Father Tito M. Sartori - OSM, the Postulator of the Canonisation proceedings.

The presence of sacrifice in her life

Maria was born as an illegitimate child and was adopted six years later by Giovanni Bolognesi; she lived a very poor childhood and had to suffer countless humiliations all her life long.

She had to endure the pain of being an illegitimate child and of living in very poor and comfortless houses; she accepted with dignity to attend the primary school, even without a pen or a notebook; she did not oppose herself when she was forced by her parents to attend the school irregularly - from October to February - because they need her help at home; she did not abandon herself to despair neither when she was rejected twice consecutively nor when she had to leave school at the age of 9. She gravely tolerated many unfair jealousy scenes her adoptive father made to his wife; she felt grieved in her familiar relationships, but she never betrayed anything outside.

She was a docile, generous and obedient child; she always did all that she could in every occasion, sometimes with heavy consequences on her health, weaker and weaker, year after year, especially around the age of 20.

Within her family, she felt very close to her mother and took her place in the difficult task of taking care and educating her brothers; she also helped her father in the hard and exhausting work in the fields, bearing fatigues unsuitable to a young girl: everything caused her extreme sufferance, because she lived in privation and with little food to eat. However, she was deeply convinced that she had to find the right solutions to problems; she even gave herself up to fishing to find some food for her family and wherever she cast the little net or a fish-hook she always found the necessary fish to bring home for her family.

Consoled by this and other experiences of the divine Providence, Maria never got disheartened, even if she noticed that her body was giving clear signs of feebleness, weak health and various sicknesses, that the doctor tried to cure with rest, medicines and sometimes with specialistic and surgical operations. She was a fervent disciple of Christ, whom she devoted from the age of 5, renewing her engagement on the day of her First Communion; she never surrendered and fought every battle, persuaded that the Lord, at the right moment, would give her his helping hand.

This can be the clue to explain that extremely painful period of her life (June 1940 - January 1942) when she fell possessed by the Devil. She suffered a lot for this, but it is no business of ours to talk about that. There is a very enlightening statement of Prelate A. Balduin (Maria's last spiritual assistant): " These trials are not uncommon in the spiritual life, when a soul is making its way to the path of pure divine love". Due to this possession, Maria was judged very badly by the inhabitants of her village and by those who absolutely did not know her and knew only this sorrowful experience of the Servant of God and threw mud at her and her activities.

Her sole and real Consoler was Jesus who, in spring 1942, some months after her complete liberation from devil's possession, talked to her during an ecstatic vision she called "the dream". Postulator Father Tito Sartori affirms that it was exactly in that first meeting with Jesus that Maria was chosen "for an extraordinary mission of total abnegation to the others, remaining a lay figure and taking part in a peculiar way in Christ's Passion, sharing with him the role of victim".

Led by God

Obeying the Lord's voice, with her parents and the Priest of San Cassiano's permission, Maria moved to live with Piva family, and remained with them for some years, alleviating the poor domestic situation of her family.

That happened in November 1946 and lasted until about 1952/53 when Maria, due to her bad health, was forced to leave the village, her family and her first benefactors.

In 1947 Maria established a sort of infant school for the children of San Cassiano. She added power of observation to a remarkable sensitiveness and she noticed the pain of many mothers, troubled by the fact that they could not take care properly of their children because they had to work many hours in the fields to help and earn something for their families. For those children Maria became a "teacher" and for their mothers a "source of quiet".

Even without specific plans of work, Maria understood exactly the real problems of the people. It is

really surprising, because she did not have any theoretical experience and above all because the people in her village rumoured that she was probably "infatuated" or "maniac" and surely incomprehensible in her offering herself to others, even more when she decided to wear a long black dress to release from a vow. She forgave those slanderers and prayed God for those who caused her sufferance.

All the same, she forgave three unknown criminals whom, on the 5th of March 1948 hit her in her head and raged against her body in the open country. Maria was conscious of the value of her virginity and addressed herself to Jesus, declaring her availability to die in order to protect her integrity. Her prayer was accepted and the three criminals, after many cruelties, went away leaving her lying in the snow.

She felt peaceful inside, as if she had won a battle, even if she was exhausted and seriously injured. She told the girls of the catholic movement of Crespino in 1953 that "serving God as a virgin is a special grace" and that " the wings to fly above human things are simplicity and pureness". Maria was always ready to protect her integrity and firmly rejected any kind of proposal or flatter.

The Servant of God gave a clear example of heroic love when in 1951, she rescued a child fallen into a large ditch, although she could not swim. A few moments before diving, she implored Jesus full of anguish: " I am ready to die in the water". Jesus rescued the child! Maria, on the contrary, took all the consequences of her generosity and was forced to leave the country and her school to be cured in her breathing apparatus.

A life of donation

Maria was so urged to share with others joys and pains that she asked and obtained by Jesus the gift of accepting on her the burden of every suffering creature that applied to her.

Her pledge and great solidarity towards her brothers and parents did not pass unnoticed and the nuns of the infant school of Crespino asked her to help them in their everyday life. For them, as for her parents, Maria was a shoemaker and a carpenter: she really did everything she could. She even took upon herself the hard and tiring job of the yearly "begging" for firewood, leaving home very early in the morning and coming back late in the evening, sometimes accompanied by a child.

As a child of 10, Maria dedicated her life to prayers and to the other people's needs, as we can read in her Diary: " I will never get married, never... I will fight in the world loving everybody, helping everybody". Two years before, on the 22nd of May 1932, on her First Communion's day, she had already asked Jesus "many graces, above all the capability of loving everybody, also her enemies". This statement is absolutely not surprising, even if coming from a young girl, because Maria, as a child, let herself be guided by her "interior Teacher", with whom she often dialogued and who gave her consolation, trust and peace.

The Lord diffusely poured out his almighty love on this extremely humble creature, which always described herself as "a nothing, a mean".

Her life was a mixture of obedience, mildness and modesty: God shaped her to become an instrument of the divine mercy. God makes great things for the humble souls who answers their absolute "yes" to him, like Our Lady.

She answered "yes" to God, and God was present with his love in her heart: she had a difficult situation in her own family but, in spite of this, she was able to convey to everybody a real tender and generous love. She never gave up, she fought without rest, she brought back peace where it was in danger, and she taught to believe in Providence, being an example for adults and children.

Never a house for her own

Due to a sequence of diseases, Maria moved gradually to Rovigo to be cured better and lived with some generous people. In Rovigo she was welcomed by Wanda Guerrato's family, who gave her not only hospitality but also the possibility of curing a serious form of ophthalmia and supporting her

weakened body.

Since 1952, Maria had been living in practice permanently in Rovigo, where she carried on with her usual benefic action towards people in need, the poor ones and the sick ones; her charitable action could even spread and consolidate and her function of attention and love, once bounded to her familiar, local and parochial space, could then address to a wider reality. Maria was always present where Jesus and her spiritual director told her to be.

After Mrs. Wanda's death, in 1955, a third family, the Mantovani's family, welcomed Maria. Leaving with them let Maria be even more incisive in the development of her "mission": she met admirable people she called "collaborators" or "benefactors", who helped her in the various situations of the human pains.

Chosen by God

We cannot forget that Maria's great obedience was a direct consequence of her love for God.

We shall remember that the Blessed Virgin is a model of pure, generous and heroic love; Prelate Martino Gomiero writes in fact that the love of Our Lady to God "was not a vague sentiment, but a promise of total obedience, even to sacrifice".

On the basis of this statement, we can say that the Lord is a presence of love in every soul who answers an absolute "yes" to him. When God asks some souls to follow him closer on the Via Crucis, he usually rewards them on earth with special graces, among the others the "divine intimacy".

That happened to Maria Bolognesi, too: she had the unusual privilege to receive from God in the course of 13 years - 1942/55 - not only his precious "gems", but also two concrete "gifts" we can call without exaltation "rings". According to Father Tito Sartori's definition, the first one is an "engagement ring" and the second one is a "mystical wedding ring".

The first ring, formed by five small pearls - a clear representation of the five sores of Jesus - that Maria received during the night between the 1st and 2nd of April 1942, was removed by Jesus on the 2nd of April 1955; some days later - on the 8th of April - Jesus gave her a second solid gold ring, in which is incised his painful face.

But we have to go on gradually and explain the meaning of the word "gems". These "gems", or the goods that Jesus gave Maria during 11 years, are: the crown of thorns (2/1/1944), a wound in the ribs (7/4/1944), the flagellation (20/7/1951), a wound in the right hand (25/1/1954), the wounds in the foot (25-28/8/1954), the wound in the left hand (2/4/1955).

Father Tito Sartori states: "the progression in conceding these gifts aims at verifying the loyalty of the beloved". Maria, "Servant of God", gives many demonstrations of her loyalty, overcoming and keeping away any Satan's attractions, who offers her goods, affections and prestige.

After receiving Jesus' gems, that is to say the signs of the divine stigmata, it is celebrated the "mystical wedding" on the 8th of April 1955, on the Good Friday, in the darkness of a small room in the "Pensione Villa Pia" in San Giovanni Rotondo (Fg). Reading through the Diary of the "Servant of God" we find the explanation to the event on the lips of the divine Teacher who - during an apparition - explains her the meaning of the second ring carrying the image of Jesus: "Maria - I told you - this little ring is formed by five small pearls as five are my sores. One day it will be mine again. Now my five sores are carved in your body, this is the ring with Ecce Homo".

With respect to this, Father Tito Sartori remarks that "Jesus has already incised in the body of his beloved the signs of their common calling to be victim; now they can exchange their nuptial parts: Jesus is a victim for her and Maria offers herself as a victim for us in full communion with him!" It is important to underline that this extraordinary event took place in San Giovanni Rotondo, where Padre Pio has been living the same martyrdom of love for many years.

As Maria is a "spiritual daughter" of the stigmatised Padre Pio, it is easy to read in these events a special attention on the part of Jesus towards Maria, who clearly perceives the moral and spiritual support of this minister of God, "crucified without a cross".

Their silent "meeting" took place on the 9th of April 1955, on the Good Saturday, in the little church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. She entered the church and, during her meditation in front of the tabernacle, met Padre Pio's glance. Later, without talking, she went out of the church to return to Rovigo.

Padre Pio and Maria Bolognesi were two obedient souls to God's project and were always supported by faith in spite of all the difficulties and the mystery they lived in and they can be seen as "lights" chosen by God for our salvation.

For her, the "last ones"

Her diary and her correspondence let us know a hard reality of orphans, children with physical or mental diseases, fathers without a job and mothers sheltered in sanatorium, young and old ill people without hope, dying people who needed someone to close their eyes and say a word of hope in God's mercy, couples assailed by the doubt of a separation or a of difficult motherhood, destitute young people who needed a moral support or a concrete collaboration to find a job, a long endless row of poor fellows helped by Maria with great modesty, reservedness and discretion.

She worked with the greatest care to help the priests, the nuns, the religious people, and the missionaries in far countries such as Japan, Brazil and Argentina. To each of them, Maria gave all that she could according to their needs and she specially supported them offering God her continuous prayers and her pains.

To better understand Maria's behaviour, we can report some statements of her second spiritual director, Prelate R. Barbieri. In a letter of 27/11/51 we can read: " my dear Maria, now you know your duty, what you have to do, what God expects from you. There are many souls who recommend themselves to you and trust in your prayers" and in another one of 7/11/51: "you are right, but endure everything for God's love. Try to correct, if you can, and to contrast others people's mistakes with your positive example. Use always charity and goodness with everybody: your presence, your behaviour and your prayers will be helpful for everybody. God often allows us to find ourselves among bad people in order to allow them to become better...".

Obedient to this exhortation, Maria submitted to everything and accepted pains, sickness, moral and physical sufferings and changed frequently her homeplace.

When she arrived in Rovigo, she took upon herself other duties. Firstly, she turned her attention to the patients of the sanatorium, who wrote her grateful letters to thank her for her "visits", for her discrete interest and for her tender and persuasive words that gave them calm and peace.

She gave serenity to a very ill mother taking care of her child in order to avoid putting him in an orphanage. Maria found an adoptive family for this child and she never stopped taking trouble for many other orphan children searching for help and collaboration with those - like her - wanted to serve God with a complete freedom of action and choice.

During the decade 1950/60, she met the "servant of God" Don Olinto Marella in San Lazzaro di Savena (Bo) and mother Nina from Carpi, both of them founders of institutes destined to welcome children, orphans, young indigent people in need of urgent help to be introduced in real life and in the society.

Maria tried and solved many different cases: she faced trips, wrote letters and used the telephone: no obstacle could stop her action. To solve any painful situation, she came into contact with priests and civil authorities, such as the Major or the Governor. She asked and paid attention to the technical advises friends and benefactors gave her. Quickly they noticed Maria's extraordinary moral greatness and trusted completely in her, favouring her in her charitable activity and being at her disposal, according to the characteristics of each single situation. In this way Maria could spread her action and function even far from Rovigo, driving the car. At the beginning she drove the car of some benefactors, then she received a car as a gift from her unknown dad, whom she finally met on his way to conversion.

Angel of charity

It is difficult to follow Maria in her frequent changing of place, above all during the years 1958/68. In that period she was literally "wing-footed" and moved quickly in Northern and Central Italy, without complaining or surrendering to physical tiredness. She had a firm will because her hearth was addressed to fulfil God's will and to her neighbours' needs, where she perceived Jesus' suffering image.

In the meantime, her pains and mystical experiences carried on but, as soon as possible, she began again to "walk" among people, with energy, enthusiasm and passion.

She had an immense will to devote herself to the others and could even face the hard venture, at least for a woman, to build a structure to welcome and assist the convalescents leaving the hospital. This "project of love" began on the 27th of November 1969: since the beginning, the realisation of this work was full of difficulties. She had to solve a lot of problems, to remove many obstacles and even to have recourse to the law.

It was such a hard period for her that it can be considered a real "calvary".

In December 1971, when the project was only partially finished, Maria was injured by a strong infarct. Until 1980, the year of her death, Maria was forced to stay at home more and more.

Nevertheless, she always did her best to help her "friends", the poor and ill ones, using the resources she had: a pen, some paper, a telephone, and some short meetings in her small flat on the second floor of the unfinished "convalescent home".

The first floor of the building remained incomplete, causing her a great moral pain and she wrote in a letter to a friend: "Jesus kept secret to me that I had to be the first sick person".

However, she never threw the sponge: in the empty rooms of the first floor she began to pile up clothes for her poors: winter, summer and spring clothes in a corner, clothes for infants and children in a seat-locker: clothes for everybody of every age.

Maria carefully checked every package, just before the expedition or the delivery by hands of some faithful collaborators, sorting quintals of clothes.

The servant of God died in 1980 in her house in Rovigo, in 49 G.Tasso Road. This house has become now a centre of studies dedicated to her and carries on the task of promoting her Canonisation.

We end with a reflection of the Postulator: "Maria Bolognesi, a humble and simple soul, reminds everybody that God chooses the "poor" and "fool" ones in order to upset the "strong" and the "wise" ones".