

MARIA DE MATTIAS – PREACHER
MARIA DE MATTIAS – WOMAN OF THE WORD
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I. MARIA DE MATTIAS

St. Maria De Mattias, was born in Vallecorsa, on February 4, 1805, and baptized on the same day.

As a child, Maria was an eye witness to brutal crimes in Vallecorsa (Frosinone), her home town, where the bandits killed and sowed desperation in many families.

Her meeting with St. Gaspar del Bufalo, the founder of the Missionaries of the Most Precious Blood, was a new launching pad for Maria. She discovered that Christ's Blood was total love given for and to humanity. Feelings of pure and passionate rapture filled her and for the first time Maria was aware of being in love with the Crucified and Risen Jesus.

Maria's love for Jesus, which would color every moment of her daily life from then on, was transformed into an ardent desire to commit herself to Jesus through the choice of total consecration to Him.

On March 1, 1834 at the age of 29, Maria left Vallecorsa to go to Acuto (Frosinone) a small, isolated town in the mountains. Here she had been hired by the town council as a teacher to open a school for the poor girls. In Acuto on March 4, 1834, she founded the Congregation of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ. The spirituality of the Blood of Christ was the central inspiration for Maria's personal life and that of the Congregation.

Maria did not hold back any energy in working for her "dear neighbor." There were so many various kinds of poverty: material poverty, sickness, violence, illiteracy, moral degradation, lack of religious instruction, etc. Her daily efforts were to take on the burden of these needs by working especially in the area of education of girls and women through the school, retreats for young and married women and in preaching in church.

With the passing of years Maria's frequent travels, hard work and deprivations took a toll on her already delicate health. Aware that she was coming to the end of her life, she joyfully prepared for her encounter with the Lord.

Maria De Mattias died in Rome on August 20, 1866. The news passed quickly by word of mouth: "The saint has died."

II. Woman of prayer

There is no doubt that Maria was a woman of prayer. She was so deeply rooted in God's loving presence, that her whole life WAS PRAYER. From the testimonies of the first sisters for the process of beatification and canonization, we know that Maria used every free moment to be in the chapel with her beloved Jesus. Her soul was longing for these moments of intimacy, where she just opened her inmost being with all the troubles, weaknesses, misunderstandings, contradictions... She was like a chalice, emptying herself and opening her heart to receive God's unconditional love. Nobody can understand Maria's life without prayer.

Some testimonies:

- "As regards her prayer, I am not afraid to state that the Servant of God prayed continually, and when she had some spare time she immediately ran to be before the Blessed Sacrament, and this was in addition to the prayers in community. Her composure in prayer was such that she seemed an angel, and we were edified and called back to recollection just by watching her." (Thecla Colonna)
- "One could understand that she was consciously in God's presence, by her continual speaking about Him, and by her demeanor of always being recollected; one could say that her day was a continuous prayer." (Maria Filomena Flavoni)
- "Her love toward Jesus was revealed by the constant union of her heart and mind with him in prayer, in action and in whatever she did." (Eugenia Pirilli)
- "In those time when she was free from duties of her office she always went to church, and it seems that I can still see her in the position she usually took behind one of the columns with her hands together and immobile like a statue. She would remain there like that for up to three hours. That was generally her position when she prayed." (Caterina Pavoni)

It was just natural that it was Maria's deep longing, that also her sisters would cultivate a deep prayer life; and in school, she instructed the girls and the women who came to listen to her how to pray. Her favorite meditation was the Passion of Christ.

III. Woman of faith

Looking at Maria as a woman of prayer, is only natural that she was a woman of faith.

- "She was endowed with such a deep faith that it was commonly said among the sisters that she discovered God's presence in everything." (Caterina Pavoni)
- "She was endowed with a deep faith which shone forth in all her words and actions to such a point that, just by seeing her, one was aware of being in the presence of a holy woman. She desired that this faith which animated her be spread throughout the entire world, and I think that she would have given her blood for this." (Giacinta Palombi)
- "She was filled with the spirit of faith, as she made manifest by her words, her actions and her whole being in life." (Nazarena Longo)
- "She had great fervor and zeal for the spreading of the faith and the conversion of pagans and heretics and for all the world to be one flock only under the leadership of one shepherd, because Jesus Christ had shed his blood for everyone." (Luisa Abri)

IV. Woman of hope

- "In addition to faith, the Servant of God had a very strong hope which was not founded, however, on her merits, but specifically on those of the most Precious Blood of Our Lord." (Caterina Pavoni)
- "This disposition of her soul to hope and trust in the Lord's goodness made her fit to instill similar feelings in others; thus, it is that when anyone of us was experiencing spiritual difficulties she gladly went to her...to instill courage and comfort in the sisters, even if this were inconvenient for her." (Rosa De Sanctis)
- "She placed all her hope in God; when she began the construction work without any money, she said she trusted always in the Lord. She used to say, "This is God's work, not mine." (Nazarena Vecchini)

V. Woman of charity

We came to know that Maria was a woman of prayer, a woman of faith, a woman of hope. Needless to say: She was a woman of charity. Under the Cross, glancing at Jesus, she was moved by God's unconditional mercy and love. As we saw earlier on, it was there that she opened her whole inmost being to let this love flow into her heart and flow through her over into the hearts of all the sisters, the children, women, men, priests, bishops... Flow into the whole universe as a Benedictine nun from Switzerland is expressing it in her Mystery Play on the life of Maria De Mattias. In the preface to the 1857 Constitution, Maria declares: "...Our congregation itself must become "a living image of that divine charity with which this blood was shed, and of which it was and is sign, expression, measure and pledge." (LC 2)

To Biagio Valentini, C.PP.S. the moderator general of that time, Maria writes: "I have received your very esteemed letter in which you inform me that three girls are arriving from Rome to join our Institute... I think that Your Reverence has acquainted them with the spirit of this holy work, which is all charity. We have carved this word in our minds and in our hearts. I repeat: CHARITY! CHARITY toward God and our dear neighbor."

VI. Maria's preaching

Maria preached! A preaching woman was more than unusual for that period of time in the history of the Church!!! Maria talked first to her sisters, but also to the children, to women and men who crowded the class rooms, the chapels, the churches...

Why did Maria preach, and how did she experience it?

MARIA PREACHED BECAUSE SHE WAS A MYSTIC!

Maria preached, because the chalice of her heart was overflowing with God's tender love, and she felt called to share with others what she has received. She felt deeply responsible for so many "poor souls who don't know Jesus Christ, who never hear the healing message that God loves them tenderly. She felt a deep concern for life in all its dimensions – fullness of life! Because Maria's heart was so inflamed by Jesus' love, she was yearning to see Jesus Christ loved by others.

To Father Merlini in Albano she writes: After this (when she had opened her heart for God's love), I am filled with such tender love toward my neighbor that I would wish to run far and wide calling all souls to love Jesus."

Maria was a courageous woman, but she was also full of fear. In another letter to Father Merlini, she writes: She had written to her guide that she was being troubled by fears because of her having to speak about God in public to women, men, priests, religious, and so on. She is writing amid tears... How is it possible for a woman, who ought to lead a hidden life in imitation of the most holy Virgin...to live like this? Oh, God, what a delusion! So the thought suggests itself. She cannot repent of having spoken about God...

We can see how full Maria's heart was, when we hear what she is writing in the same letter: "Scarcely ever did she find it possible to ponder over the various points before talking about them, but while engaged in giving information, she peacefully said what came from her heart, always with feelings of love toward Jesus Christ and the souls redeemed by Him."

And in another letter, Maria continues: Every morning and evening I find myself surrounded by a throng of women and girls; I endure heat and cold on account of the crowding of the people, and I cannot disengage myself because they want to hear the doctrine of Jesus Christ, and they desire to go to confession. This morning I wrote to the Bishop for two Confessors... That soul is suffering because it would wish to remain hidden and withdraw from the sight of all, but she forces herself with peace and resignation, prompted by the love of Jesus and souls which cost Him Blood; yet always harassed by fear. Bless me, and bless these other daughters of mine."

Why did Maria attract so many?

We will come to understand it, listening once more to the testimonies of the first sisters:

- When the Servant of God spoke of God, of his love for us, of the passion of Jesus Christ, etc., her face became so red that it seemed she had been working hard, she broke out in perspiration even in the winter and she would have to wipe her face with a handkerchief as though it were summertime. Her eyes would sparkle when she spoke about God or the Blood of Jesus, and from her fervor one could tell she was filled with love for her God. (Maria Anna Palombi)

- The fervor with which she passionately exhorted the people, taught Christian doctrine to the girls and boys, counseled the doubtful, and comforted those in difficulties showed how concerned she was for their spiritual WELFARE. Her way of doing it was so fine and effective that she left the people consoled. (Luisa Abri)
- “I can tell you from having heard from the sisters and from the inhabitants of Vallerotonda that one time, when the Venerable had gone to that town to open a school, the people didn’t know that she was the foundress and they thought she was a simple teacher. She began to speak about God publicly in the place that was to become the school. Little by little so many people began to gather there that it was necessary to send the proper authorities to secure that there wouldn’t be some mishap. All kinds of people went to listen to her, even the priests. And everyone was taken up by her exhortations and became so enthusiastic that they asked her for keepsakes. In fact, one guy begged her over and over to let him draw her portrait. But she responded to him, “If you want to give me a wonderful gift, paint me a picture of Our Lady of Good Counsel.” Later on in her testimony Celestina Palombi says a short, but significant word: “it was enough to hear her speak to note that she burned with the love of God.”

Maria preached as a woman – while preaching, she was totally herself. Her exhortation was “a song of lived experience,, everyday life experiences. We find the warp and woof in which they are originally woven: the Absolute and the creature, the Infinite and the human person, Love and the painful opening up to love, strength and weakness, wide open horizons and limited restrictions of daily life. A song of lived experience!” (ASC Fire II, S. 11) Even though Maria was a Mystic, she was a woman down to earth, and this is probably what made her preaching so attractive to many – simple people in the villages of the Ciocciara. She was one who shared with them their daily life, who was able to embrace them, who experienced the cold and the heat, sun, wind, rain, one who could understand their conflicts, burdens, their sin. She was an extraordinary woman, but just one of them!

A woman who preached was clearly suspicious to some people, especially to the clergy.

- “I remember having heard told by the sisters living with the Foundress, that upon hearing that the Superior often preached to the people here in our little convent

church in Acuto, and having received a complaint that a woman dared to preach in public, the Bishop of Anagni sent two religious priests to Acuto to secretly check out what was happening and to report back to him. Those religious priests, having heard her, reported to the Bishop that he should permit her to continue her apostolate, that our Foundress was always a model of all the virtues which she exercised in a truly extraordinary way and that we were amazed at what we saw in her and what we knew she did. (Angela Costantini)

What did Maria preach?

This was the center of her message! She has learned it on the lap of her father Giovanni De Mattias and from St. Gaspar during one of his sermons in the Parish Church of Vallecorsa. Gaspar talked about the Lamb of God, Jesus, who has given his whole life, all his blood drop by drop to show how tenderly God is loving every human being, the whole universe. The center of Maria's preaching was LOVE! The blood, shed on the Cross was for her a sign, expression, measure and pledge of the Divine Love.

As a little girl, Maria saw much bloodshed in her town. She did not understand all the hatred around her. In Jesus bloodshed on the Cross, she discovered an answer to her burning questions. Besides this, devotion to the Precious Blood was widespread during this time. We see it, because different communities with the spirituality of Precious Blood have been founded in the second half of the 19th century.

Maria preached of God's love! She was conscious though that she had to break her message down to the real life of the people. We can see it in how she instructed her sisters.

- "So that sisters would understand the importance and true meaning of the words so they could impress them better on the minds and hearts of the girls... Because she was interested first of all that we were well instructed in Christian doctrine and not only that we learned the truths of the faith from her, but also the way we should teach, she taught us herself." (Caterina Pavoni)
- "She was all attentive about the teaching of the basic truths of the faith, both to us religious. So that we would learn it in a way to be able to then communicate it to the

boys and girls, and to the children so that the way it was presented would be attractive and easily understandable so they would want to listen... We were very happy with the methods of the Venerable. The effect the Venerables's teaching had, especially in the early days of the Institute, was amazing, and we marveled at how, with little formal education, we carried out our duties quite well even in the schools, and we gathered abundant and effective fruits." (Giacinta Palombi)

The unique goal of Maria's preaching was: "To see in the present times that beautiful order of things that the great Son of God came to establish on earth by His Divine Blood. This is what I want and what I hope for from his infinite goodness." (13. November 1838, MDM an Bischof Vincenzo Annovazzi, Anagni)

VII. A message for us

What can we learn from Maria's preaching?

- The message has to be relevant to our lives! We cannot preach one way and live something differently!
- Our message, like the message of Maria De Mattias has to be embedded in today's socio-cultural and ecclesial reality. We need to know it and to deal with it and in doing so to be attentive to hear not only the voices we want to hear. Those who think differently might be true prophets. We need to see the reality in which we live in the light of God's love and then respond to it. Our message cannot only be empty words. And we must try to speak a language, which can be understood by those who listen to us.
- Maria was one of the simple people of Acuto and the other towns in which she came to open schools and to preach. We must come down from our pedestals, say yes to the reality of our own life and yes to the reality which surrounds us. We must become one with the people among whom we live and with whom we share the ups and downs of daily life. Immersed in our socio-cultural reality we then will have the right to talk, to preach, to share the good news of our spirituality...
- We must cultivate a culture of dialogue – to give and to receive.

- If Maria would live today, she certainly would use modern technology to announce the message of love; I can't imagine, she wouldn't; she was such a courageous woman and her heart was burning to spread this message of LOVE.

VIII. Conclusion

Let me conclude this reflection with the words from Mathew 7:21-25.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.

It was Maria's deepest desire to do the will of God, always, in every second of her life. She didn't use empty words: LORD, LORD... and she has built her house on the rock. The congregation of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ is a proof of it.

For personal and communal reflection

- * Maria was a woman of prayer!
Can I say: I am a woman/a man of prayer?
Maria was using every free moment to be in the chapel with her beloved Jesus. Her soul was longing for these moments of intimacy, where she just opened her inmost being with all the troubles, weaknesses, misunderstandings, contradictions... She was like a chalice, emptying herself and opening her heart for God's unconditional love. Nobody can understand Maria's life without prayer.
How do I cultivate my personal relationship with Jesus? What helps me to come in touch with my inmost being – God's loving presence within me?
- * Maria was one who shared with the people their daily life, she was able to embrace others, she experienced the cold and the heat, sun, wind, rain, one who could understand their conflicts, burdens, their sin.
What are my experiences with people? While I try to be close to them, what are the joys, the pains, the difficulties...?

- * Like Maria, we must cultivate a culture of dialogue – to give and to receive! As a woman or man of the Precious Blood, I'm used to give: in homilies, during prayer days, retreats, exercising the reconciliation ministry, working with the poor... What are the gifts, I'm receiving from the people?