

Blessed are the Pure of Heart, for they shall see God!

Blessed Margaret of Castello and the Eucharist

Blessed Margaret of Castello lived in the early 1300's in a town of Italy called Citta di Castello or Castello for short. She was left at a shrine there by her parents in the year 1307. Blessed Margaret was born of wealthy and noble parents but she herself was blind and severely deformed, having a hunchback and one limb much shorter than the other. Out of pride and shame, the parents hid her for twenty years in some of the most inhumane ways. Their patience at an end, they finally sought a miraculous cure for little Margaret at a nearby shrine. When the miracle was not forthcoming, they abandoned her at the age of 20 years old... blind, crippled and friendless.

Blessed Margaret was already very holy and devout by the time she was abandoned, but grew very quickly to become a prodigy of holiness in the town of Castello.

She sought to purify her sinless conscience from even the shadows of imperfection by going to confession every day and by receiving Holy Communion as often as she was allowed. During the last years of her life, she revealed to her confessor that whenever she attended Mass she could see Christ Incarnate at the altar. Her confessor sought to give this statement a spiritual meaning.

"Do you mean, Margaret, that you are conscious in some special way of the Divine Presence?"

"No," replied Margaret. "That is not what I mean. I see our Lord."

"But how is that possible, when you are blind?"

"I do not know," was the unperturbed reply.

The confessor was silent for a moment pondering her statement. Then he said: "Margaret, do you see the crucifix, the missal, the candles on the altar?"

"No, Father."

"Do you see the priest or the altar itself?"

"No, Father."

"There you are!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "You do not actually see our dear Savior; apparently in some way you sense His Presence."

This I can readily understand. There are a number of well-authenticated cases of some—"he was about to say "saints," but he knew Margaret would vehemently protest that she was not a saint—"of some good people having such a gift."

Margaret remained silent.

"Isn't my explanation correct, Margaret?"

"Father," she replied with the utmost tranquility, "you have commanded me to reveal to you in confession the innermost secrets of my heart. Since I am obliged to speak, I must repeat what I have said before: from the Consecration until the Communion I do not see the priest, the crucifix, the missal, or anything else. But I do see Christ our Lord."

Now the confessor was not only a theologian but he had had long experience in directing souls;

as a result, he was skilled in distinguishing between genuine mystical phenomena and hallucinations. For many months it had been his duty as Margaret's confessor to subject her to severe, searching tests in order to learn chiefly the state of her soul, because he saw that she had reached exalted heights of spirituality. As it was important to clarify her assertion, he began his approach from another quarter.

"Tell me, Margaret, what does our Lord look like when you see Him during the Mass?"

"Oh, Father," she exclaimed in dismay, "you are asking me to describe Infinite Beauty!"

But despite her protests, her consuming love of God impelled her to begin, with all the fervor of her soul, her canticle of love. As the Dominican theologian critically listened to her glowing attempt to describe Divine Beauty? He had the feeling that the gross material world of the present was fading away and becoming shadowy and unreal, while the veils of eternity were being removed one by one, affording him glimpses of distant supernatural glories. The last shadow of doubt fled from his mind, and with awe he



recalled the words: "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God."

As the year 1320 began, Margaret's closest friends realized that she was not going to remain much longer in their company. Her twisted little body was obviously losing the fight in its efforts to keep body and soul united. The signs were unmistakable. Margaret was by now so transformed that she had completely forgotten self and thought only of God and His glory.

Theologians teach that when a person's love of God becomes absolutely purified of all selfishness and reaches its maximum intensity, the physical body can no longer hold the soul fettered to it. Margaret's soul had now reached that stage, and every day saw her spirit struggling more and more determinedly to free itself. In her ecstasies, God had evidently revealed something of Himself to her. What she had been permitted to see of the infinite perfections of Eternal Beauty had inflamed the soul of Margaret to such a degree of intense love that it was reacting on her wasted body like a violent fever.

The very violence of the conflict aggravated her illness, but although she suffered greatly, no word of complaint, no expression of pain, ever crossed her lips. But the serene look on her face and the smile always hovering about her lips deceived none of her intimate friends. Margaret herself recognized the approach of death with a joyful tranquility; her long exile from God was coming to a close. She requested her dear friend Lady Gregoria to send word to the Dominican friars so that, as a daughter of St. Dominic, she might receive the Last Sacraments from a son of St. Dominic.

Quickly the news spread through the town: "Little Margaret is dying!"

Her fellow sisters hurried to the house in which she was dying to pray for their companion in her last hours. Men and women gathered outside the house and anxiously awaited news of their friend. Some were speaking with subdued

voices, recalling instances of her unfailing kindness, her invincible patience, her remarkable courage. Others were kneeling in the street praying, as unashamed tears coursed down their cheeks.

Presently they heard from far off a faint murmur that grew ever louder and finally resolved itself into men's voices chanting the Gradual Psalms. In the distance a procession of Dominican friars came into sight. They formed the escort to the Prior, who was bringing the Blessed Sacrament to the dying girl.

The medieval biographer confesses that it is beyond his power to describe the supreme love and devotion with which Margaret received the last rites of the Church. After Margaret had been anointed, the priest held up the Sacred Host before the dying girl. In accordance with the Dominican rite, he solemnly asked her:

"Do you believe that This is the Christ, the Savior of the world?"

Margaret, her face radiant with love, fervently answered: "Yes, I believe it."

The priest then placed the Host upon her tongue, saying:

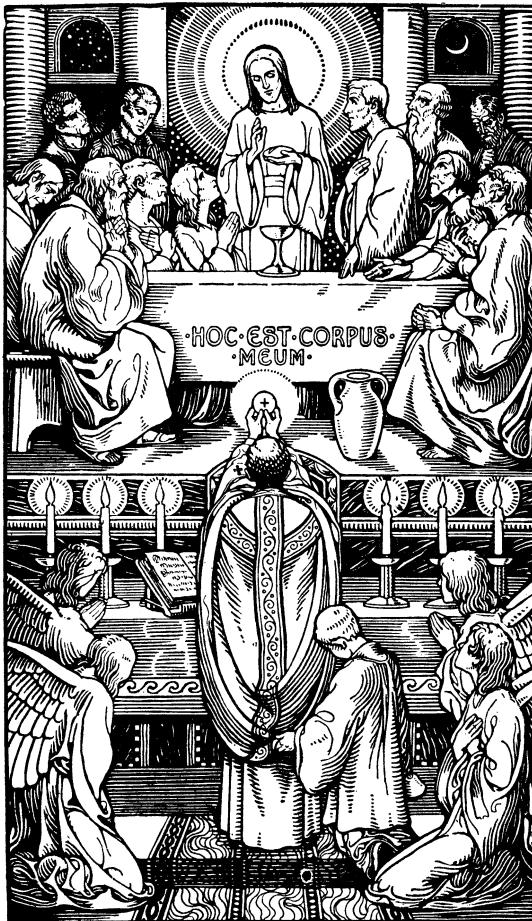
"May the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ preserve you until life everlasting!"

The friars and her fellow sisters began the prayers for the dying, but Margaret did not hear them. She was rapt in loving contemplation of the God who had come to her in the Holy Eucharist. She could not bear to be separated again from Him Whom she loved so completely; she longed to be dissolved and to be with her Eternal Love forever. Flesh

and blood could no longer hold so ardent a soul, and Margaret's spirit, freed at last from its shackles, soared aloft to her God.

The date was the Second Sunday after Easter, April 13, 1320.

Margaret was 33 years of age. Her body remains incorrupt to this day. ♣



(source: The Life of Bld. Margaret of Castello by Fr. William R. Bonniwell, O.P., TAN pub.)