

Maria Orsola Bussone

"How Beautiful to Love God"

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Maria Orsola Bussone grew and flourished in a parish community. A girl like so many others, she encountered God and threw herself into witnessing to the beauty of loving Him. Maria Orsola was called suddenly by God to the next life. Her process of beatification began in 1996, and Maria Orsola was declared venerable by the Church in 2015.

"I would be willing to give my life so that other young people can understand how beautiful it is to love God." , said sixteen-year-old Maria Orsola Bussone to her parish priest. Her words were repeated years later in 1998 by St. John Paul II, during a meeting in Turin, Italy, with 60,000 youth, in pointing to her as a model for making of one's own life a gift. Born October 2, 1954, in Vallo Torinese, Italy, into a close-knit and serene family, her father was a craftsman and her mother a seamstress. She shared a deep spiritual rapport with her brother, Giorgio, who was three years younger.

Milestones

Maria Orsola's first training ground as a Christian was in her family, but two particular events marked her spiritual journey profoundly during her later years of middle school.

The first was a 1966 parish retreat entitled, "*The Glory of God.*" The message fascinated her so much that it became a constant motto for her life down to the smallest of actions: "*All to give glory to God*". She later wrote in her diary: "*On a Sunday morning I was absorbed in getting ready to go to a meeting. At a certain point, however, I realized that I was not doing things for God. So, I tried instead to do things well, even down to how I dressed myself and prepared, so it would serve to give glory to God*" (October 1969).

A second moment in 1967 – again at the parish priest's invitation – was the first major meeting of the Parish Movement of the Focolare Movement, in Rome. Maria Orsola participated with her family and 44 others from her region. The spirituality of the Focolare is able to inspire paths of personal and community renewal also in parishes. It is a path of renewal that effectively contributes to implementing the novelty of the Second Vatican Council as well as the pastoral guidelines of bishops. Parishes are able to grow in openness towards a more concrete and vibrant apostolate with other parish communities and youth groups and also through meetings among priests, seminarians, religious and diocesan collaborators.

Fruitful Communion

Theologian Karl Rahner wrote: *"I believe that in a spirituality for the future, the element of fraternal spiritual communion, of a spirituality lived together, can play a more decisive role. Slowly but surely, we must continue along this path"*¹. Rahner's intuition is clearly visible in Maria Orsola's own journey undertaken in contact with friends from her parish and a group of peers. Together with her family and community, she was like fertile ground in making her own this charism of unity. She drew strength from this charism and it gave a soul to the activities of the parish in which there was a constant, joyful and enthusiastic search to build Church communion.

Mary Orsola's journey is difficult to envision without her active, evangelical involvement in the parish community and in broader ecclesial experiences. At age 13, she encountered this new charism in the Church, a communitarian, collective spirituality allowing her to penetrate more deeply into the life of the Gospel being lived. In speaking at one point about parish communities, she said: *"We really need this as young people. We feel the need to have a family in which everyone loves one another and understands each other's struggles. I'm not talking about our natural families, of course. I am talking about a spiritual family where our difficulties find answers and each one is helped by the other to live the Word of Life and to love Jesus crucified and forsaken."*

Bearing Witness to God

It is within this parish reality that various groups are born, with the aim of helping one another live the Gospel and grow in mutual love that allows us to experience the presence of Jesus where two or more united in his name (cf. Mt 18:20). In April 1968, Maria Orsola participated in the first European Congress of Gen (youth of the Focolare Movement) in Rocca di Papa (Rome). Chiara Lubich's message touched her deeply and she felt the need to thank her. She wrote: *"I understood that the key to joy is the cross, it is Jesus Forsaken. Chiara, you know that I want to love, to always love first without expecting anything. I want to let God use me as He wants and to do all my part. This is the only thing of value in life, so that all young people can know what true happiness is and may love God."*

Discovering the measure of Jesus' love – to the point of experiencing the abandonment of the Father on the cross – gave Maria Orsola a universal gaze that opened her heart wide in bearing witness to Jesus and bringing Him to others, especially to young people. For her, the mission of a Christian was to *"give God to others"*. She made this her life program and carried it out by example, by her words and through various parish activities.

Music, too, especially expressed this commitment. As a member of the music group, Maria Orsola was solo vocalist. In writing to her friend, Maria, she said: *"We continue to travel to different places in order to give this God-Love that we have discovered to others..."* (April 1969). And on another occasion, referring to the group she said: *"When we sang the song, 'Stay with us', there is a line that says: 'We will take you to our brothers and sisters along the road'. There, I understood nothing should stop me anymore, not even human respect. This means bringing Him even to my class and among my classmates without fear of being judged. If we give them God in the purest sense – because God is not fake – then one day they will thank us for having made this 'ALL' [God] known to them"* (Diary, December 1969).

In the midst of normality

Maria Orsola was a girl like any other. She loved music, sports, the ocean and mountains, her friends and falling in love. She also had moments of sadness, anger and failures. But her relationship with God helped her to keep going in the face of mistakes and start again with renewed enthusiasm. In writing once to her friend, Enrica, she said: "*Certainly, it is hard to start again. But it's enough to have a little faith in God who is Love, in the love that God continually nurtures in us. Even if we make mistakes, even if we don't love God for days on end, even if we are cowards or are petty, God loves us in an extraordinary way*" (April 1970).

"*But I can start again,*" she said in the late afternoon of July 10, 1970, at a youth 'Word of Life' meeting, during a parish school camp in Treportì (Venice) Italy. She had realized, in fact, that she had not loved enough. Then, a few hours later, Maria Orsola was electrocuted by a faulty hair dryer while drying her hair before going to mass. She was just 16 years old.

In May 1996, the diocesan phase of her cause for beatification began. On that occasion, the Archbishop of Turin, Cardinal Saldarini, spoke of her normality, faithfulness and joyful example, affirming among other things: "If Maria Orsola is proclaimed blessed, she will be one of the prominent examples, I believe, of parish holiness for our times today." Nineteen years later, on March 18, 2015, she was declared Venerable by Pope Francis.

Sanctification in a parish

Maria Orsola testifies that it is possible to sanctify oneself in the reality of a parish animated by a strong spirituality. Her legacy was taken up not only by her peers of that time, but still continues today in the faces and hearts of many, bringing together generations of adults and young people with the same shared ideals.

"*Following Maria Orsola's example is easy and challenging at the same time. She had written a program on a piece of paper found next to her cot at the campsite during her last summer there. Three points, three steps upwards, that seem also to have been steps towards Heaven: Seeing Jesus in others, giving God to others, and doing God's will. It could be said that holiness passes through this journey, also for a sixteen-year-old girl in love with life*"².

¹ K. Rahner, *Elementi di spiritualità nella Chiesa del futuro*, in *Problemi e prospettive di spiritualità*, edited by T. Goffi - B. Secondin, Queriniana, Brescia 1983, pp. 440-441.

² Gianni Bianco, *Evviva la vita*, San Paolo, Turin 2006, p. 193.