

Blessed Margaret of Castello, Part I: Blessings in Disguise

This is the first in a series of talks about Bl. Margaret of Castello, delivered at the meeting of the Idaho Lay Dominicans, Bl. Margaret of Castello Chapter, at St. John's Cathedral in Boise, Idaho on Sunday, October 15, 2006. by Anita Moore, J.D., O.P.L.

There are those who think of all of the Middle Ages as Dark Ages; and that if there were Dark Ages, the 13th Century must be dark indeed. Not the darkest: the Black Death and the Great Schism still lay ahead, though not in the distant future. But the 13th Century had trials enough of its own, and the people of that time were busy enough on a variety of fronts.

In 1215, King John of England signed Magna Carta at Runnymede, laying the foundation for constitutional law in Britain and in America. Also in 1215, the Venetian merchant and explorer Marco Polo landed in China, and the Fourth Lateran Council assembled, which defined the doctrine of transubstantiation. In 1252, Birger Jarl founded the city of Stockholm, Sweden. Dante Alighieri, the great medieval Florentine poet, was born in 1265. In 1269, Petrus Peregrinus of France wrote the earliest known treatise on the properties of magnets. The first Habsburg, Rudolf I, ascended the throne of the Holy Roman Empire in 1273 at Aachen, in the cathedral that Charlemagne had begun nearly five centuries earlier. In 1297, Edward I of England captured the Stone of Scone, upon which Scottish kings were crowned, and carried it back to Westminster, where it would remain for the next seven centuries.

In the 13th Century, despite the wealth and temporal power of the Catholic Church, Christendom was beset by armed enemies bent on subjugation and extermination. Then, as now, jihad raged in the Middle East. The Crusades, which began in the 11th Century, raged hotly in the 13th Century, then faltered: by the end of the century, all the ground that had been gained in the Holy Land had been lost. On the other hand, Muslim rule continued to recede in Europe, and particularly on the Iberian Peninsula: Muslim Granada was subjugated in 1236, and Alfonso III finally completed the Portuguese Reconquista in 1249.

Another dire threat to Christian Europe gathered on the eastern horizon in the 13th Century. In 1206, Genghis Kahn founded the Mongol Empire, destined to rule China and become the largest contiguous empire in history. Under the leadership of his son, Ogotai Khan, the Mongols invaded Russia in the 1230s, then pressed on into Eastern Europe. Only Ogotai's death in 1241 prevented the Mongols from advancing further west and possibly reducing all of Europe to slavery.

Sharpest of all the swords pointed at the heart of the Church were those wielded by her own children. The Cathar heresy, of which the Albigensians were a sect, spread throughout Europe, plagued the Church throughout the Middle Ages, and were quite active as the century began. But amid the trials of the 1200s, God raised up some of His greatest spiritual warriors, including several Doctors of the Church. We will never know, this side of Paradise, who they all were: many labored in obscurity, their sanctity hidden from earthly sight. Those we have been permitted

to know about from the 13th Century include St. Francis of Assisi; St. Clare of Assisi; St. Albertus Magnus and his protégé, St. Thomas Aquinas; St. Anthony of Padua; St. Bonaventure; and of course, Holy Father Dominic, who founded the Order of Preachers in 1206 to turn back the daggers of heresy from the heart of the Church, and to rescue souls from the nets and snares of error.

Very late into the century – in 1287, the year Pope Honorius IV died, leaving the See of Peter vacant for ten months – another warrior entered the field of battle. She was a most unlikely warrior, lacking everything a warrior is supposed to have: size, strength, magnificence. But though small, she was mighty, and in every way a witness to the truth of God's Word: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD (Isaiah 55:8). And again: "By the mouth of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger." (Psalm 8:2). And again: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

In 1287, in the castle of Metola in the Papal State of Massa Trabaria in Italy, a child was born to Parisio, Captain of the People of Massa Trabaria, and his wife Emilia. Parisio came of a noble and influential family whose name is lost to us today. As Captain of the People, he had the governance of the state outside the capital city, and was the commander in chief of the armies in time of war. He was the commander of the castle of Metola, a strategically critical stronghold which he had regained, to national acclaim, after it had been in enemy hands for nearly a

quarter of a century. He was a capable general but, like the unrighteous judge in Jesus' parable about the persistent widow, neither feared God nor regarded man. He was selfish, merciless, cruel, and devoid of any affection for people, except to the extent they were useful to him at the moment. He was overjoyed, however, at the prospect of having a son to follow in his footsteps and carry on the family name, and had not stinted in his preparations to celebrate the child's arrival.

But all celebrations and plans for celebrations stopped together when the child actually appeared in the light of day. In the first place, the child was a girl. But what was worse, in what her parents considered a cruel blow of fate – on them – she was severely deformed. She was a dwarf; she had one leg shorter than the other; she was hunchbacked; and, it would soon be discovered that she was completely blind. Instead of evoking pity and an increase in parental love and solicitude, the very sight of her filled her parents with disgust.

Their first order of business, then, was not their daughter's physical or even spiritual well-being, but to envelop the child in a shroud of strict secrecy. This led to a conflict between her parents and the local priest, Father Capellano, over her need to be baptized. Whereas Fr. Capellano insisted on her being baptized, her parents' priority lay in hiding her existence. Custom dictated that all children be baptized in the cathedral of the diocese: this meant the risk of exposing the baby to public view, and therefore the parents to ridicule. As far as Parisio and Emilia were concerned, this dwarfed the danger of her dying without the Sacrament of Baptism. Eventually,

however, Father Capellano succeeded in persuading Emilia to have the baby baptized; so a trustworthy maid was given the task of taking her to the cathedral. Since the child's name was a matter of complete indifference to her parents (beyond the awful possibility of her being given her mother's name), the maid chose the name Margaret, meaning "pearl."

As the years passed, it became clear that although Margaret had no physical assets, her intellect was sharp and clear. She was also a gregarious child and, having the freedom of the castle, whose ways she knew well, in spite of her blindness, made regular visits to everyone, and was well loved – except by her parents, who refused to see her. She was also a devout child, and visited the chapel every day to pray. Her freedom was not unrestricted, however: she had to stay away from her parents' quarters; and, in the interest of secrecy, she was made to keep to her room whenever there were visitors.

This procedure, however, was not foolproof. One day, when Margaret was six, she accidentally met a visitor and revealed her identity as the daughter of the lord and lady of the castle. This prompted an outbreak of parental fear, lest their ugly secret be discovered, as well as determination that such an appalling incident never again be repeated. After thinking the matter over, Parisio hit upon the brilliant scheme of walling Margaret up in a tiny cell at the local parish church in the forest a quarter of a mile from the castle. He rationalized this on the grounds that Margaret might hurt herself wandering through the castle, and that it would be a great

privilege for the devout little girl to be able to pray day and night without let or hindrance. Despite his wife's weak protests, this plan was carried out. Thus were little Margaret's friendly disposition and piety turned against her.

At least some of Parisio's underlings, though unwilling to break openly with their lord, were outraged at this treatment of his helpless, pathetic daughter. But Fr. Capellano apparently had a true grasp of the reality of Margaret's situation. It was true that she suffered excruciating agonies on account of her deformities and her family's treatment of her; but he saw that, child, though she was, she realized that these were a sure path to sanctity. She understood that her trials kept her close to God, and she had been able to be cheerful and friendly precisely because they made her more certain of being able to reach Him in the end. She wept bitterly indeed over her torments; but even Fr. Capellano was stunned by the real reason why. In his book *The Life of Blessed Margaret of Castello*, Fr. William Bonniwell, O.P. puts the following words into the priest's mouth:

She said, "Father, when they brought me here this morning, I did not understand – because of my sins – why God let this happen to me. But now He has made it clear. Jesus was rejected even by His own people, and God is letting me be treated the same so that I can follow our dear Lord more closely. And oh! Father, I am not good enough to be so near to God!" And she was so overcome by the thought of God's love for her that she could not continue....

When Winston Churchill was voted out of office in 1945, his wife told him that it must be a blessing in disguise. He responded wryly that at the moment, the blessing was quite effectively disguised. No blessing could have been more effectively

disguised than the agonies of Little Margaret. But just six years into her story, we learn that what looks to us like God's cruelty in allowing us to endure pain is really His Mercy. What would have happened to Little Margaret if she had been physically beautiful? Worse still, suppose she had been born a boy, and her father had been allowed the fulfillment of his dreams of grooming his child to succeed him? Would she ever have learned to see the real beauty that may lie behind physical ugliness? or would her parents have imparted to her their own spiritual blindness? Would she have had any regard for the sufferings of others? or would her father's cruelty and selfishness have been indelibly imprinted on her character? How much of her father's vicious nature would have been bequeathed to her, to the eternal ruin of her soul? And how much worse would the already cruel world of the 13th Century have been, were it not for the graces that Little Margaret's sufferings drew down upon it?

We can draw two lessons from Little Margaret's early years. The first is the hideousness of ingratitude. There is no good thing that we deserve on our own merit, just as Little Margaret's parents were far from deserving of their blessed daughter. Yet how often have we received great gifts that we, like they, do not even come close to appreciating? We ought to thank God even for our trials, as Little Margaret did, because they keep us close to Him.

And so we come to Little Margaret's second lesson: God wills all things to our good, and the good that is His primary care is our eternal fate. God is not the author of evil, though He permits us to endure it so that He may bring a greater good out of

it. There are times when the only way He can ensure our salvation is by allowing us to be unhappy in this life. This is why we are beyond the bounds of our competency when we try to judge God, or lash out at Him because He permits evil. We may suffer cruelly, like Little Margaret; but we cannot know in this life the even greater evils that this suffering averts, not only for ourselves but for the world.

Let us therefore ask Little Margaret to obtain for us an increase in fortitude, so that we may endure our trials with the same good cheer with which she bore hers, and the wisdom to follow her example and give thanks even for our crosses.