

## *Introduction*

There is a mystery about Gerard Majella. He was born in an obscure Italian town nearly three centuries ago yet people know him and speak of him as though he were living next door. He was a young Redemptorist brother who died at the age of twenty nine. Yet his presence and prayer is felt in homes and hospitals from London to Los Angeles and from Munich to Melbourne. Wherever there is a baby in danger, a mother in need, a child who is sick, a family forlorn, the prayer of St Gerard may be heard. So why did God choose Gerard Majella for the awesome task of looking after the most vulnerable among his children?

The fact is we simply do not know why God chooses any particular person for the task he wants them to perform. From the time of Moses, people have raised objections to the suitability of those whom God has chosen. God chooses whoever he wills and he works miracles in those who are open to his action.

From the beginning of his life Gerard was so close to God that nothing surprised him and nothing was too much for him. He talked familiarly with God and he knew Jesus as his closest friend. He comes across as a happy saint. He loved with the love of Christ. And he showed a way that is open to everyone.

Three great devotions dominated his life. The first was to his crucified Lord revealing the total love of Jesus for us all. The second was to the abiding presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament through which the love of Jesus is ever present to us. And he followed Jesus in his love for Mary, the Mother of Jesus, enlisting her help and inspiration to know the will of God every moment of his life.

## *Early days*

Gerard was born in 1726 in Muro, a little town in Southern Italy. He was blessed with a mother, Benedetta, who showed him the overwhelming love of God which knows no bounds. He was happy because he was close to God.

Gerard was twelve years old when his father died and he became the family breadwinner. He was apprenticed to a local tailor and was bullied and beaten by the foreman. After four years' apprenticeship, and just when he might set up as a tailor on his own, he announced he was going as a servant to work for the local Bishop of Lacedonia. He was advised by his friends not to take the job. However, the angry outbursts and endless nagging which prevented other servants from staying more than a few weeks were nothing to Gerard. He was able to turn his hand to anything and worked there until the Bishop died three years later. As long as Gerard believed he was doing the will of God he would accept anything. Whether he was being bullied at the tailor's or taken for granted by the Bishop it didn't matter, he saw suffering as part of his following of Christ. "His Lordship wished me well," he would say. And already, Gerard was spending hours with Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament, the sign of his crucified and risen Lord.

In 1745, aged 19, Gerard returned to Muro where he established himself as a tailor in his own right. His business prospered but he didn't make much money. He gave practically everything away. He would set aside what was needed for his mother and sisters and then give the rest to the poor or as Mass offerings for the souls in purgatory. There was no sudden startling conversion for Gerard, it was just a steady growth in the love of God. Then during Lent of 1747 he resolved to be as completely like Christ as it were possible to be. He undertook most severe penances and actually sought out humiliation, pretending to be mad and happy to be laughed at in the streets.

He wanted to serve God totally and applied to join the Capuchin friars but was not accepted. At the age of twenty-one he tried the life of a hermit. He so wanted to be like Christ that he jumped at the chance to take centre stage for a Passion Play, a living tableau in Muro Cathedral.

## The origin of “The Mothers’ Saint”

*Two miracles in particular stand out as playing a significant part in confirming Gerard as patron saint of mothers-to-be. The first was singled out, detailed and accepted in the process of his canonisation. This took place in Senerchia where a woman was dying in childbirth. Her husband and family knew Gerard from his mission work and begged him to pray for them. He prayed and mother and baby lived.*

*The second miracle took place many years later, after Gerard’s death. Gerard had been well known in the town of Oliveto, some miles from Caposele, and he had made many friends. He went to Oliveto to pay a farewell visit to the Pirofalo family. As he was leaving his handkerchief fell to the floor. A young girl in the family hurried to return it to him. “Keep it,” said Gerard, “it may be useful to you some day.” Years later, that girl was expecting her first child and was dangerously ill. It was feared that neither mother nor baby could survive. Suddenly she remembered Gerard and the handkerchief. She cried out for it in prayer and no sooner was it brought than she began to get better. Her baby was born without further trouble. The story has come down to us from her grandson who recalled how his grandmother treasured the handkerchief as a precious relic.*



## *Wise counselor*

Where did he receive the learning and skill as a counselor? It can only be from his closeness to God. The Holy Spirit could work in him and through him to reach whoever God wished to reach. God works where he will.

To someone suffering depression Gerard wrote: "Keep up your heart and give yourself unreservedly to God; he will help you... Who but God can give you peace? Has the world ever satisfied the heart of man? Or the heart of a princess, or an Empress for that matter? In Jesus Christ is perfect happiness, perfect peace, every satisfaction, every good."

Fr. Francis Pepe, SJ, a papal representative, recommended Gerard to a local convent: "A chat with Br. Gerard is worth more than a whole course of Lenten sermons." Gerard's discourses to the Poor Clare convent were described as a "foretaste of heaven." Most of his words are lost to us now but we can get the occasional flavour: "It is in the silence of the cell that God speaks to the heart of the faithful soul."

In one of his letters he wrote: "I desire to love God, I desire to remain always with God, I desire to do everything for God." He spoke eloquently of the attributes of God, his wisdom and goodness; and of Christ and his mother. In more of his letters he shared the wisdom that God had given him: "Always act according to the will and the spirit of Jesus Christ, seek only God's glory, do God's will alone, suffer and find joy in following the example of Jesus Christ."

He wrote to a Mother Superior: "Give to others the best of everything, be ever conscious of the needs of your daughters, your sisters, loving each one, supplying their needs before your own, instilling confidence in God's love, showing kindness even when you least feel like it. Be firm and gentle, correct with mildness when you must correct, so peace remains. More is gained by mildness than severity. Humility and obedience are the hallmarks of Christ's follower and the will of God is the only support of our souls."

Through his prayer and contemplation Gerard came to know God

long as God wills it.” His aim in life was reaching fulfilment – to be conformed to Christ crucified. “I have desired only what he wished and so I die in peace.”

“I suffer much, my Jesus. But everything I give for you is little enough. You died on the cross for me. Oh! It is little indeed!”

Gerard died at Materdomini during the night of 15 October 1755.

## *Like the seed that dies*

Materdomini, where Gerard died, soon became a celebrated shrine and a center of pilgrimage. The wonders that accompanied Gerard’s life on earth did not cease with his death. Now united with Christ for ever he has continued to be a source of inspiration and consolation to people in every part of the world.

Gerard Majella has come to be known as Patron of Mothers and mothers-to-be. Stories continue to be told of miracles of life when hope seemed gone. He continues to be a source of happiness where life is longed for and countless favours have been granted by God through his powerful intercession.

The needs of babies, of mothers and fathers, of families, single parents, children and young people, are still with us. St. Gerard still answers our prayers.

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