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Saint Mary Magdalene

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

ON April 20, 2005, the day after his election to the See of Peter, Pope Benedict XVI stated, “At the beginning of his ministry in the Church of Rome which Peter bathed in his blood, Peter’s current Successor takes on as his primary task the duty to work tirelessly to rebuild the full and visible unity of all Christ’s followers. This is his ambition, his impelling duty.”

Christian unity is a divine and supernatural work that can only be obtained through prayer. “Praying for unity is not a matter reserved only to those who actually experience the lack of unity among Christians,” wrote Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Ut unum sint* (*That They May Be One*), published May 25, 1995. All must collaborate: “It was in order to reaffirm this duty,” John Paul II continued, “that I set before the faithful of the Catholic Church a model which I consider exemplary, the model of a Trappistine Sister, Blessed Maria Gabriella of Unity, whom I beatified on 25 January 1983. Sister Maria Gabriella, called by her vocation to be apart from the world, devoted her life to meditation and prayer centered on chapter seventeen of Saint John’s Gospel, and offered her life for Christian unity. This is truly the cornerstone of all prayer: the total and unconditional offering of one’s life to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The example of Sister Maria Gabriella is instructive; it helps us to understand that there are no special times, situations or places of prayer for unity. Christ’s prayer to the Father is offered as a model for everyone, always and everywhere” (no. 27).

I couldn’t put up with anything!

Maria Sagheddu was born on March 17, 1914 in Dorgali, a village on the eastern coast of Sardinia, the fifth in a family of eight children. Her father was a shepherd. Her mother, Catarina, saw to everything in the household. Gentle and yet firm, she led her family in a loving fear of God. Maria was a happy child, quick to ask for what she wanted, or criticize what she did not like. From early on, she was stubborn and impatient. One day, her mother asked her to throw out some potato peels. Maria turned a deaf ear. Her mother insisted firmly, then forced her daughter to obey. Annoyed, Maria came back a moment later with the peels she had not thrown away. She herself would later say, “When I was a child, I couldn’t put up with anything, not even the stones on the road!”

In 1919, Maria lost her father. Her first Communion brought no perceptible change in her behavior. Despite her amazingly lively nature, she was easily absorbed in reading, which, along with card playing, attracted her more than piety. One Sunday, her mother warned her, “The vesper bells are ringing—let’s get going, Maria.”—“I’m coming,” replied the little girl who, nevertheless, was not moving. A moment later, her mother insisted, “It’s already late, Maria,” and left, leaving the door half-open. Maria was unable to close her book, and vespers ended without her. The girl would not miss Sunday Mass, but since vespers were optional, she was glad to get out of attending them.

Alert and intelligent, Maria ranked among the best at school. She excelled most of all in arithmetic, and stood up to the teacher if she noticed some error or absent-mindedness. At the end of her primary studies, she had to leave school to help out at home where she showed herself serious and endowed with a great sense of duty. Her family’s poverty spurred her to give herself entirely to the housecleaning, washing the laundry in the river, making bread at night, and working in the fields. However, she did not like criticism, and only grudgingly obeyed. Around the age of fourteen, aware of her faults, she decided not to join Catholic Action which gathered the young people in the parish, because she did not feel ready to fulfill the demands of such a commitment.

In 1932, Maria was not yet seventeen when her sister Giovanna Antonia, one year younger than she, died. Maria was very attached to this frail and often sick sister, on whom she had lavished loving care. She then thought about the meaning she could give her own existence. A profound change took place in her life. At this time, she also became aware that religion is, above all, an encounter with Someone, Christ, Who leads us to the Father. In his encyclical *Deus Caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI writes, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a Person, which gives life a new horizon and a

decisive direction” (Introduction). Maria had not penetrated the mystery of this encounter, but its consequences were plainly apparent. Scorning her natural pride, she joined Catholic Action, volunteered to teach the catechism to young girls, spent long periods in prayer, and became gentle and considerate. At first, she taught catechism with a stick in hand. But one day the priest took away the stick and replaced it with a note that said: “Arm yourself with patience, not a stick.” Maria accepted the criticism and changed her ways.

“Wherever you want!”

Maria read in Saint Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life* that certain girls leave the world for the cloister. “Why not me?” she thought. For two years she gave the idea a great deal of thought, and refused some marriage proposals made to her. Finally, in 1935, she confided her plan to enter religious life to her priest, Don Meloni, who was in no hurry to give her a definitive answer. However, before leaving to serve in another parish, Don Meloni asked Maria where she wanted to be a nun. “Send me wherever you want,” she replied. Her desire was to belong to the Lord; where was not important. The priest directed her to the Trappist convent in Grottaferrata, near Rome. When she found out, Mrs. Sagheddu accepted it, but reproached her daughter for not having told her sooner.

In spite of the opposition of one of her brothers who thought that she was disgracing the family, Maria entered Grottaferrata on September 30, 1935. There, she found a new world that greatly impressed her. “When the grille opened in the parlor, and I saw new things and heard unfamiliar words,” she wrote to her mother, “it seemed paradise opening up ... If you heard the sisters sing, you would think you were hearing angels.” She took the name Maria Gabriella. She gradually got used to the life. “At the beginning of her religious life,” a sister would later write, “impatience, which was her dominant fault, had not yet disappeared. One day she became impatient with the Novice Mistress because a knife seemed to her to be too small and unsuitable for peeling. Another day she knocked on Mother Abbess’ door. No answer. She knocked again—still silence. And then again and again, six times in a row. She ended up banging her fist on the door and going away irritated. She did not like to waste her time!” The Sub-mistress of Novices pointed out to her in the refectory that she did not eat enough bread. Her immediate response exploded: “It’s not your job to point that out to me—I’ll eat what I want!” The two nuns went off angry... But these sallies should not make one forget the great qualities that made up the heart of her nature: complete honesty, unconditional devotion, a great promptness to humble herself and renounce her

views when she realized that others were right. She was ready to go anywhere she could be useful.

Sister Maria Gabriella’s only fear was that she would be sent away from the community. “If they send me away,” she confided one day, “I’ll take advantage of the dark of night when the cloister is unguarded, I’ll climb the wall, and I’ll get back into the convent.” But she was able to make the sisters appreciate her, and their votes allowed her to be clothed in the monastic habit, which took place on Easter Monday, April 13, 1936. She wrote to her mother: “Although I am a miserable and unworthy creature who has done nothing but offend JESUS, He has not rejected me, but has welcomed me into His Heart. He, my Creator, has deigned to call me His spouse... He has wanted to make me the object of His mercy. When I think about this, I am overwhelmed, seeing the great love of JESUS and my ingratitude and my failure to respond to His favor...” Sister Maria Gabriella maintained the great desire to sanctify herself by observing the Rule without drawing attention to herself. Several of her sisters testified that her life was completely ordinary. The same was true of her spiritual life: her prayer was entirely simple, without any particular consolations. One day when she was talking about it to the Mother Abbess, the Abbess asked her, “Would you like extraordinary gifts?”—“No! Extraordinary gifts are not necessary, if I can succeed without them... I will love my life, as dull as it may be.” Sister Maria Gabriella strove to maintain an intense state of recollection, and bore a serious mien that seemed excessive. Mother Abbess pointed out to her that it would be more agreeable to see her smile from time to time. Soon her face relaxed and the tension gave way to a sweet and serene expression, then to a smile that almost never left her.

Unity as God wants

On October 31, 1937, the Feast of Christ the King, Sister Maria Gabriella made her first monastic vows for three years. She wrote to her mother: “Now I am certain to live forever in the house of the Lord, and because of that, my joy is immense.” In January of the same year, there appeared for the first time at the convent of Grottaferrata the booklet for the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity,” published by Father Paul Couturier, a French priest and a great apostle for Unity. The author insistently asked that nuns pray for the realization of “the Unity of Christians, as God wants it, how He wants it.” An elderly nun had offered her life for this cause and died a month later.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, on the initiative of an Anglican minister, L.T. Wattson, a week of prayer had been established to obtain from God the return to Catholic unity of all the churches separated from Rome. This octave of prayer took place for the first

time from January 18 to 25, 1908, between the feast of the Chair of Saint Peter, at that time celebrated on the 18th, and the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul on the 25th. In 1909, Saint Pius X gave his blessing to this initiative, which soon saw tremendous growth. The following year, Wattson entered the Catholic Church. In 1916, Pope Benedict XV extended the practice of the octave of prayer to the universal Church. Later, with the aim of facilitating the participation of Protestants, the prayer took the form of asking for the reunification of Christians. Since then, many have united in this “Week of Prayer” to ask God for the unity that Christ wished for His disciples.

Without compromise

“The lack of unity among Christians is certainly a wound for the Church; not in the sense that she is deprived of her unity, but in that it hinders the complete fulfilment of her universality in history” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, August 6, 2000, no. 17). When the Catholic Church stresses the need for greater unity among Christians, she is not doubting the unity that Christ granted her from the beginning and that will always remain in her “as something she can never lose” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 820). Nor is she suggesting watering down the Revelation that Our Lord JESUS CHRIST entrusted to her: “Here it is not a question of altering the deposit of faith, changing the meaning of dogmas, eliminating essential words from them, accommodating truth to the preferences of a particular age, or suppressing certain articles of the Creed under the false pretext that they are no longer understood today. The unity willed by God can be attained only by the adherence of all to the content of revealed faith in its entirety. In matters of faith, compromise is in contradiction with God who is Truth. In the Body of Christ, *the way, and the truth, and the life* (Jn. 14 :6), who could consider legitimate a reconciliation brought about at the expense of the truth?” (*Ut unum sint*, no. 18).

In January 1938, a new booklet arrived at the convent in Grottaferrata for the Week of Unity. It spoke of the lives of Anglicans, Protestants, and Catholics that had been offered for unity. Profoundly moved, Sister Maria Gabriella went and humbly knelt before her Abbess to make her request: “Allow me to offer my life...” Surprised, the Abbess asked for some time to think about it. Later, Sister Maria Gabriella insisted, “It seems to me the Lord wants it—I feel driven, even when I don’t want to think about it.” The Abbess told her to speak to the chaplain about it, who gave her permission to make the offering. The young nun did not think it necessary to compose the offering in writing, but rather offered herself from the bottom of her heart. Sister Maria Gabriella passionately loved JESUS CHRIST—if He

had freely offered His life in sacrifice *to gather into one the children of God who are scattered* (Jn. 11 :52), she felt called to accompany Him, out of love, in His sacrifice. Her Abbess’ enthusiasm for ecumenism and the example of the gift that others had already made of their lives were enough for her to decide to make her own offering.

Shortly after her offering, Sister Maria Gabriella felt a pain in her shoulder. Her health deteriorated and after Easter she was taken to Rome for medical exams that revealed tuberculosis. The prospect of staying in the hospital made her suffer greatly: “I’ve cried so much that I can’t cry anymore,” she wrote to her Abbess... Sometimes I wonder if the Lord has abandoned me. Other times I think that He tests those He loves... I always end abandoning myself to the divine will.” A few days later, she added, “I have offered myself completely to my JESUS and I certainly do not want to go back on my word. I am weak, it is true, but the Lord, Who knows my frailty and the cause of my pain, will forgive me, I am sure.” She was plagued with thoughts against her Superiors, who seemed to lack heart in leaving her at the hospital. But she realized that this was also a temptation which she strove to drive away. At the beginning of May, she was “on the cross,” with no other consolation than that of knowing that she was suffering to fulfill the divine will.

A treasure not to be shared

Two weeks after she was hospitalized, she was transferred to a ward where the living conditions were less distressing. Nevertheless, she remained aware of her weaknesses: “For a long time, I have been aware that I am only a pygmy in the spiritual path, because I let myself to be blown about by every wind... I would like to be strong, strong as steel, but I am only a piece of straw.” However, the disease progressed and, since nothing could be done to stop it, the nun was granted permission to return to end her days at the convent. Sister Maria Gabriella was anguished by the thought that her presence in the community could spread the danger of contagion to her sisters, but on the other hand, she did not want to die away from her convent. Finally, she returned to Grottaferrata on May 29, and took all the necessary precautions there to avoid transmitting the disease to others. Yet she did not lose her sense of humor, and said one day to the nurse who was approaching a little too close to her: “The Lord has given me this treasure of my disease—I don’t want to share it with anyone... not even with you!” The Mother Abbess suggested she find a saying to help her in her most difficult moments. She chose “*Ecce ancilla Domini – Behold the handmaid of the Lord!*” Her abandonment into the hands of the Lord grew more and more: “Before, I used to think about my sins, but now I can’t recall anything specific. I am like a child. I have

abandoned myself, and ever since I am in great peace.” She desired neither to live nor to die, but to welcome what God sent : “ When I was at the hospital, ” she said, “ I couldn’t resign myself to the separation. Now, if for the good of the community, I had to leave again, I would do it without hesitation. ” Some hours were easier, and Sister Maria Gabriella welcomed them with simplicity. But she did not expect any mystical graces : “ God has not given me any, ” she said, “ because I am an open door to vainglory and pride. I do not desire consolations, they are not necessary ; grace alone suffices for everything. ” She drew powerful spiritual nourishment from the Gospel of Saint John. The little Bible she used shows pages completely yellowed from her intensive use of chapters 12 to 20 of St. John’s Gospel, and especially of chapter 17, JESUS’ prayer for His disciples’ unity.

The seal of credibility

One day, stretched out on her bed, a very weak Sister Maria Gabriella said to JESUS : “ Lord JESUS, I love You and I would like to love You very much, to love You for the whole world. ” The Christian unity for which the Trappistine offered herself is linked to evangelization : “ From its beginnings, the ecumenical movement has been closely connected with evangelization. Unity, in fact, is the seal of the credibility of missionary activity, and so the Second Vatican Council noted with regret that the scandal of division ‘damages the most sacred cause of preaching’. JESUS Himself, on the night before

His death, prayed *that they all may be one... so that the world may believe* (Jn 17 :21) ” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, December 3, 2007).

Sister Maria Gabriella’s last night was passed alternating between calm moments and ones of intense suffering. At one point she moaned, “ I can no more ! ” Mother Abbess asked her, “ Do you want to offer what is left of your life for Unity ? ” — “ Yes ! ” she replied clearly. Finally, after the vespers of that Good Shepherd Sunday, April 23, 1939, she breathed her last with a smile. By mistake, instead of tolling the death knell, a festive peal of bells rang, to which the bells of the parish church instantly responded in a concert of joy.

Sister Maria Gabriella’s example reminds us that all the faithful can work for the unity of Christians, first of all by conversion of heart : “ For although the Catholic Church has been endowed with all divinely revealed truth and with all means of grace, yet its members fail to live by them with all the fervor that they should, so that the radiance of the Church’s image is less clear in the eyes of our separated brethren and of the world at large, and the growth of God’s kingdom is delayed. All Catholics must therefore aim at Christian perfection and, each according to his station, play his part that the Church may daily be more purified and renewed. For the Church must bear in her own body the humility and dying of JESUS, until the day when Christ will present her to Himself in all her glory without spot or wrinkle ” (Vatican II, *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 4).

On August 19, 2005, in Cologne, Pope Benedict XVI concluded an ecumenical meeting with these words : “ I see good reason in this context for optimism in the fact that today a kind of ‘network’ of spiritual links is developing between Catholics and Christians from the different Churches and Ecclesial Communities : each individual commits himself to prayer, to the examination of his own life, to the purification of memory, to the openness of charity. The father of spiritual ecumenism, Paul Couturier, spoke in this regard of an ‘invisible cloister’ which unites within its walls those souls inflamed with love for Christ and His Church. I am convinced that if more and more people unite themselves interiorly to the Lord’s prayer *that all may be one* (Jn. 17 :21), then this prayer, made in the Name of JESUS, will not go unheard. ”

Let us ask the Blessed Virgin MARY, Mediatrix of all graces, to obtain this unity of Christians into one flock and under one Shepherd (cf. Jn. 10 :16), in order to accomplish the will of Her Divine Son.

Dom Antoine Marie
O.S.B.

P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it. – Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.

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