

*On the way to  
Sanctity with  
M. Margherita De Brincat*



by  
**Fr. Pier Giuseppe Pesce, O.F.M.**



IVSTITIA FORTITVDO TEMPERANTIA

**The Heroic Virtues  
of the Venerable  
Mother Margherita De Brincat,  
Foundress  
of the  
Franciscan Sisters of the Heart of Jesus,  
as presented by her spiritual daughters**

(by Fr. Pier Giuseppe Pesce, O.F.M.)

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## Introduction

It is an essential condition, for the persons consecrated to God in religious life, to retain vivid memory of their Founders so that they can obtain from the historical and inspirational roots the life blood which allows them to imprint on their personal and community life the qualified mark of a genuine and dynamic fidelity, which enhances the development of continuity.

This need is much felt by the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart of Jesus. A witness to this, among others, are the numerous publications on the life and spirituality of the Venerable Servant of God Mother Margherita De Brincat (1862-1952), who continued lovingly and enhanced assiduously the project initiated by Fr. Joseph Diacono, and rightly so, she is considered (along with him) the Foundress of the Congregation.

Further and a significant sign of this awareness are the frequent initiatives undertaken by the Congregation to deepen among the Sisters the knowledge of their specific charism, as it was intended, lived and passed on by Mother Margherita.

In the meantime two events of extraordinary importance took place. On the April 12, 2013, a Special Congress of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints was held to discuss the Votes elaborated by the 9 Theological Consultors appointed to evaluate the heroic virtues practised by Mother Margherita. At the end of the discussion the final positive judgement was unanimous. On the January 27, 2014 this judgement was authoritatively and officially confirmed by Pope Francis. Thus, Mother Margherita has acquired the title of Venerable.

Comprehensibly, these occasions have further raised the Sisters' interest with regards to their Foundress.

This interest was actualized in the General Council's timely and laudable initiative: involving directly all the Sisters in the commitment of a profound study. For this purpose, each entity in which the Congregation is structured (Provinces, Regions, Communities dependent on the Superior General) was entrusted with the task of studying the spirituality of Mother Margherita, while examining her virtues: in what way and with what spirit she lived them and passed them on.

The sources which the Sisters referred to in carrying out this study are mainly two.

The first source is the numerous letters of Mother Margherita published in 2001 and which all the Sisters know well. To be correct, not always, explicit quotations of reference were included on each argument; but this has a justifying explanation: more than worrying about including literal quotations, the Sisters are interested in picking the content and the spirit about which Mother Margherita is writing. In spite of all this, to make clearer and more motivated what is being said, it seemed appropriate to include further additions.

The second source is the Votes of the Theologians. From this source, which includes numerous results emerging from the *Diocesan Investigation* for the Beatification celebrated in Gozo during the years 1988-2000, the Sisters have obtained information provided from persons (Sisters, but also laity) who have known well Mother Margherita and have been faithful in giving detailed testimonies.

The Sisters make frequent references also to their Constitutions to verify in what way and how much they implement the congregational charism passed down by Mother Margherita. These references are not listed here because the

General Chapter last July has updated the Constitutions, which have not yet been officially approved by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life. Yet, and without doubt, the new Constitutions are in perfect line with the congregational charism.

The fruit of this demanding study is put together in an integral summary. In order to avoid misunderstandings, it is better to make certain clarifications. Each group has worked autonomously and, therefore, a certain difference is noticed in the material gathered as well as in the way of presenting it. In the present summary all the collated material was put together and the presentation is an amalgamation of one systematic argument. Therefore, there are no references to individual groups, but whatever is referred to is attributed to the Sisters in general.

Keep in mind that the study carried out by the Sisters is focused on the virtues of Mother Margherita, while in no way it is exhaustive. The Sisters' attention concentrates mainly on the theological and the cardinal virtues; but, naturally, the Sisters did not neglect to take in consideration even other virtues which specify and describe more clearly the spirituality of Mother Margherita.

Last observation: the virtues, such as love and doing good, are strictly interconnected: as they form one spiritual organism. In the Christian prospective, the theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues. But, as it is evident, such behaviour may involve at the same time, the practice of more virtues. This explains and justifies why, here and there in the text, repetitions occur; in reality they are simply the confirmation of this strict interconnection.

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## The Theological Virtues

The Catechism of the Catholic Church presents the theological virtues like this: *“The theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues. They are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life. They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being. There are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity”* (no. 1813).

On its part, while sustaining that the Church is a community of faith, hope and charity (cf. LG 8), Vatican Council II highlights the intrinsic and inseparable connection among these virtues: faith *“arouses hope and works through charity”* (LG 41).

Regarding these essential theological conditions, we notice how the Sisters have learnt the personification of the theological virtues in the life of Mother Margherita and how they received the related message which she transmitted to them through her letters.





## Faith

Rightly so we are reminded that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hb 11,1). Also appropriate is to refer to Jesus’ certain meaningful statements: “*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock* (Mt 7,24); “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*” (Jn 20,29). These quotations, and similar ones, remind us of the realistic warning of the Apostle James, who according to him faith is alive if it is shown in deeds (cf. Jm 2,14ff.).

These biblical references will be helpful to frame what the Sisters said about Mother Margherita’s faith.

As an introduction, it is good to note that, in the Sisters’ compiled work, insights of general character on the virtue of faith are not lacking. We may summarize them in this way: faith is the source and the core of religious life. A person meets God through faith and acts in response to his plan. Faith opens the human comprehensive ability to the divine treasures, of knowing Christ and his love. A vision of faith helps the person to meet God in everything and in everyone. Faith is our deep conviction of God.

When the Sisters speak about Mother Margherita’s faith, their thought spontaneously highlights numerous concrete examples which show her faith being expressed throughout her long life and which is manifested in practising all the virtues. Hers was truly a ‘living and strong’ faith, which is clearly confirmed by her letters.

In fact, writing to one of her Sisters on December 3, 1931, she herself allows this fruitful and total impact of faith to be

evident: *“Oh! Holy faith! How many things do you teach to those who meditate with love!”* (L 147).

As it will commonly be highlighted, Mother Margherita dedicated many hours during the day and night to prayer and meditation, preferable at the feet of the tabernacle. And it was there, more than from books, that, together with the love for God – Trinity, her faith grew and got stronger, becoming her inspirational reference, her spiritual guide, her daily support.

To better understand this affirmation, it is good to keep in mind that the first thing she has learnt and deepened meditating assiduously in the light of faith, and from which everything else somehow is derived and depend, is an enlightened and profound knowledge of God, in as much as it is possible for a human being: knowledge of his unfathomable Trinitarian mystery, of his wise salvific project, of his loving and merciful attitudes towards humanity ...this may be seen in the numerous beautiful titles, rich with profound insights, showing an accurate and deep understanding which are found scattered throughout her letters and which did not go unnoticed by the Sisters: *“Such an Absolute All! Three and One”* (L 28); *“that Ocean of love, of infinite love, of eternal Love”* (L 37); *“our divine Redeemer and adorable Saviour”* (L 39), *“the good Prisoner”* (L 49) *“in that Paternal Bosom”* (L 52); *“the Giver of all good.. the most sweet Father, the most meek Master... our good God”* (L 109)...

This first and fundamental fact is grasped very well by the Sisters, when for example, they notice the way in which Mother Margherita spoke about God, showing that she had great faith in Him, who not only filled her heart with marvel and love, but also moulded her whole life. And to confirm this, significant references are made.

Unquestionably, the significant and providential contribution, given by Mother Margherita to the rich meaning of the congregational charism, is acknowledged with filial gratitude. It is a contribution which she continued to offer during all her life with her personal example and with the thoughts expressed with maternal insistence in her letters, as well as with the courageous and desired initiatives taken during the long years of her service to the Congregation as Superior General. In particular, we recall her expressed desire to put at the center of our life the love and the devotion to the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus, the encouragement to commit ourselves to make the “Love” (a word which for her was another name for Jesus) be loved by everyone and everywhere, the encouragement to sacrifice ourselves generously “as victims” to make reparation for the many offenses made to God, the urge to imprint on the apostolic zeal the openness to the missionary activity, the recall to assimilate the important and meaningful points of the Franciscan spirituality...

Another argument which the Sisters capture with great attention and justified sensibility is the unconditional trust which Mother Margherita had in the “divine Providence”; a trust which she insistently instilled not only in the Sisters, but also in others (among whom, her spiritual directors), certain that the help of God would never fail. For this reason, and as a logical consequence, it was natural and serene abandoning of herself totally and constantly, but especially in critical moments and in difficult situations (personal or community, material or spiritual..), to the holy will of God and she never got tired of encouraging the Sisters and others to do the same.

With regards to this, numerous and worth remembering are the quotations taken from her letters. We choose some. In a long letter written to Sr. Pacifica Xuereb, on April 16, 1922, Mother Margherita writes: *"Oh! what tranquility our soul enjoys by*

*abandoning herself to the care of our Good Jesus. And why not? If He takes care of the birds of the air and the insects of the earth, how can He not help or comfort his beloved Brides?!”* (L 80). On September 21, 1927 writing from Regalbuto (Sicily), to Mgr. Antonio Galea (her spiritual director), after having bitterly confessed that she should be in a mission land and expressed the urgency to have more Sisters there, she concludes: *“We do well to leave everything to his Divine Providence, whose help never fails those who trust in his goodness”* (L 20). Writing on January 28, 1930 to the newly professed Sr. Giuditta Zammit, among the fervent exhortations and recommendations, there is included: *“Always seek the company of Jesus in his tabernacle; from there draw all the help, comfort and light you need, and always persevere with indestructible trust, and abandon yourself totally to his dear paternal care”* (L 128). Writing on October 7, 1941 to Mgr. Alfonso Agius (her spiritual director), from Marsalforn (Gozo), where she was staying because of her poor health, she confesses how she feels like being in a “hard exile” and adds, *“May the most Holy of the Good Jesus three times holy be done, loved and adored!!”* (L 42).

This confident abandonment in God and in his Will has met tangible feed backs of every kind, even on an economical level. A significant confirmation of this happened at the “Adoration House” in Valletta (Malta), recently opened and deprived of basic supplies, where Mother Margherita was the Superior. In a letter written on May 7, 1924 to some Sisters, she confides: *“Divine Providence manifests in a sensible way the care He has for his daughters, who entrust themselves tenderly to Him”* (L 68). Probably she refers also to some providential episodes mentioned by the Sisters: the unexpected arrival of a candidate who with her dowry, a labourer who asked to be paid immediately for his work done, could be paid: the inexplicable appearance of a one pound note in the book which Mother Margherita had in her hand which

allowed the cook to provide what was necessary; the mysterious visit of a stranger who left a sum of money needed for the expenditure of the day...

To understand deeply the confident abandonment which Mother Margherita had in God becomes clear when she confided to Mgr. Antonio Galea on May 17, 1923: *“At present I cannot speak more clearly, for I feel crushed under a weight on one side and on the other side I feel like a little child, accompanied by a Father whose presence make me forget every distress”* (L 25). Feeling “small small” in front of God is an eloquent and moving image at the same time; she remembers and makes her own with truth and humility, the behavior of small children, who aware of not being able to provide for themselves, wait for everything with trust from their parents’ caring love.

Feeling small before God is a belief well rooted in her spirit, which she repeats at other times (cf. L 111, 123); and, therefore, she instills it even in her Sisters (cf. L 144). Spontaneously she thinks of Jesus’ words: God reveals Himself to the little children (cf. Mt 11, 25) and to them belongs the Kingdom of God (cf. Mt 18,3). Anyway, this belief has nothing to do with behaving like ‘a child’, which Mother Margherita warns us about (cf. L 143): this does not refer to psychological childhood, but to spiritual maturity.

In fact, Mother Margherita knew well that on our own, especially on a spiritual level, nothing good can be done. On April 16, 1922, in her mentioned letter to Sr. Pacifica Xuereb, she claims: *“I think that you are at peace and faithfully trust in the care of Divine Providence, without which we can never do any good whatsoever. Therefore never cease exercising yourself in this beautiful practice of total abandonment in God, our Father”* (L 80).

On this background of an enlightened and courageous faith it is not surprising to hear Mother Margherita repeating, and encouraging the Sisters to do the same, her unconditional and generous “Fiat” regarding the will of God, which does not always correspond to our personal wishes and expectations. This word, which echoes the answer of Mary of Nazareth to the angel at the Annunciation (cf. Lc 1,34ff.), occurs several times in her letters, especially during very critical times and in difficult moments. Rightly so the Sisters pay the due attention to it. As we can see from some quotations. On May 5, 1922, Mother Margherita wrote to a Sister: *“It is now necessary to abandon ourselves to every disposition of divine providence! Yes, let us always repeat the dear Fiat. However, courageously and joyfully, not in tears and sighs. Do you understand? Diffidence in ourselves and boundless confidence in divine goodness; and that is enough! Have you understood?”* (L 143). On January 28, 1930, she wrote to Sr. Giuditta Zammit saying: *“Come on, repeat with strong disposition the sweet Fiat without if, without but”* (L 128).



But, as always and in everything, she was the one to live in this spiritual unconditional abandonment in God. To mention at least one instance, in the letter written on June 23, 1917 sent from Corfù to Mgr. Anton Galea after having spoken about her present situation, she concludes: *“The other spiritual things are getting on moderately well according to the actual circumstances of work, sickness, lack of food etc. Eh! Patience, and always the dear Fiat!”* (L 3).

Writing to Mgr. Alfonso Agius on March 30, 1942, she mentions her precarious health conditions which restrict her to a very secluded life and concludes: *“The dearest Fiat applies me constantly in sweet abandonment, without feeling”* (L 49).

## Hope

Faith, reminds us the Council, “*arouses hope*” (cf. LG 41). This strict link is implicitly shown by the Sisters when, for example, they observe that hope helps us to live on a personal level the doctrinal principles and the inspirational values which faith transmits and teaches. In short, hope draws from faith, and it is nourished from it: it hopes because it believes; it hopes what it believes.

This comment explains and justifies, because, speaking of hope in the life of Mother Margherita, the Sisters often refer hope to many things which have already been highlighted when speaking of faith. This is the case, in particular, of the unshakeable hope with which she abandoned herself totally to God and to his will. In fact, this is exactly a fundamental characteristic of the Christian hope: to wait with serene trust and sure certainty that as much, rooted in faith and in harmony with it, we hope to find punctual and complete fulfillment because God is faithful to his word (revealer of his project) and to his promises (which He commits Himself to fulfill).

Keeping in mind this concrete connection between faith and hope, as well as with the other Christian virtues, we may integrate a little what has been said on hope with interesting details which attracted the Sisters’ attention.

In her letters, writing about difficult situations, Mother Margherita brings about realistically the subject on courage; and, with one of her typical and repeated expression, affirms that courage has to be “strong strong”.

For example, writing on August 1, 1922 to a Sister experiencing a period of discouragement, Mother Margherita

encourages her heartily: “*We should do our best, leaving everything to divine providence without any fear. Have courage, then, be strong, strong*” (L 144). And, after having invited her to intensify her love for Jesus, to accept the unavoidable sacrifices and to abandon herself to the divine providence, she continues: “*Come on, courage, strong, strong. Aren't we the brides of the King of heaven? Why do we doubt? Why do we lack confidence in his paternal assistance? Oh! How ungrateful we are!*” On July 19, 1942, in the middle of World War II which left serious consequences even on Malta, she encourages Mgr. Alfonso Agius telling him: “*Strong, strong, courage, dear Father, in such a dark exile, as harsh as ever before, we abandon ourselves totally in that paternal Bosom where we can find whatever our poor soul can desire and need*” (L 52).

Certainly, Mother Margherita was the first one to commit herself to put into practice the courage which she instilled in others. Writing from Rome to Mgr. Antonio Galea on October 11, 1929, after having mentioned the hardships suffered, she adds: “*Always Fiat. Thanks to our good Jesus, courage and resignation are never lacking*” (L 16).

In fact, Mother Margherita's life is marked by many and not common acts of courage.

No doubt, the most extraordinary episode, which remains unforgettable impressed in the historical memory of the Sisters, because it was crucial for its future, is the one which occurred during the first years of the Congregation. In fact, because of the burdensome due debts and which he did not succeed to pay, Fr. Joseph Diacono decided to put an end to the project initiated by him and to send all the Sisters home. Mother Margherita was at B'Kara (Malta) and while she was praying she felt the inspiration to go quickly to the Mother House in Gozo and there, amongst the



surprise of everyone, she spontaneously said, that with the help of God she would assume the responsibility of the Congregation and take charge of the present problems. Disappointed, Fr. Diacono expressed his strong doubt, humanly very clear: among the rest he pointed out that Mother Margherita was still very young and she did not have such experience. But she, with humility and firmness confirmed her availability, confident in God's help. At the end she succeeded to convince Fr. Diacono and thus the Congregation was saved.

There is a series of courageous and foreseen initiatives carried out or promoted by Mother Margherita regarding the development of the Congregation. While Fr. Diacono thought of limiting the presence of the Sisters only to the Maltese Islands, she had wider horizons. When the Bishop of Malta asked her to send some Sisters to Corfù to take care of the Maltese migrants, overcoming the understandable uncertainty and initial resistance of her Council, she did not hesitate to accept the proposal. It is through her merits that the first houses in Italy were opened, in Sicily (Regalbuto and Troina) and in Rome. Also influential was her acting in promoting the opening of the Congregation's missionary activity, by sending the first Sisters to Ethiopia.

Christian hope, while instilling the necessary courage to face life's situations not always easy, makes use of her beneficial and multiple influence even and more so, on a spiritual level. And Mother Margherita was fully aware of this.

In her humility, she was convinced to be a poor sinner, she felt as an ungrateful person towards God for not having reciprocated to the many benefits she has received from Him; but, at the same time, she nourished a consuming desire to be freed from her spiritual misery. For this she did not find a more secure

remedy, than together with the commitment of reparation, to trust in God and to his unlimited merciful love.

Comprehensibly, with regards to this, she confided more openly especially in her spiritual directors. In the already mentioned letter of May 17, 1923 to Mgr. Antonio Galea she confesses: *“Dear Father, the thought of the accurate account I have to give for the souls of others, frightens me enough, when that of my distressed and ungrateful soul is already very exacting. What can I do but abandon myself totally to the paternal care of divine providence!! I need help, courage so that I may promptly thrust myself into that Ocean of divine Love... (L 25).* In the letter written on April 8, 1941 to Mgr. Alfonso Agius she affirms: *“What should I reply to your letter? I humiliate myself, not only in the abyss of my wretchedness, but also of my ingratitude and bad correspondence towards such a Prodigal Master! Oh, Father, Father how ashamed I feel in front of such holy, such profound Goodness etc.; such Divine Majesty! How necessary I feel it is for me to hide, to annihilate myself to seek profound silence...therefore, dear Father, recommend me always more heartily to the Good God so that He will hold me closer to his Heart, from where I cannot escape because of my dense ingratitude” (L 37).*

But sometimes she was also open with the Sisters. For example to one of them she writes on April 14, 1946: *“I am old in age and a child in virtue. Believe me, my dear... you asked me how I am being consumed by the flames of this sweet Love. I reply that I feel full of self-love...believe me, my dearest. However I do not want to scandalize you, because I want to hope, that at the end, our good Jesus will grant me the grace to annihilate myself; eh! Then I shall hide myself in a secret corner of the most Blessed ( I am ashamed to say), Sacred Heart” (L 151).*

Mother Margherita's heart breaking anxiety, as evident in these and other similar statements, was motivated by her ardent desire to grow always more in the mystic communion with Jesus, her "Love", of whom she considers herself to be the beloved bride. It was a desire which led her beyond the time here on earth, but which made her yearn to the complete and definite communion in heaven. In fact, this is the essential aim of her Christian hope: it is an eschatological hope, towards which the providential help of God prepares and orientates.

Many times in her letters Mother Margherita defines her earthly life as an exile, a "hard exile" (cf. L 42, 52, 75, 114). She lives this awareness in an attitude of enlightened balance: an ardent wish to reach the goal soon, for example, in a letter to certain Sisters written on December 14, 1945 from the Mother House (Gozo): *"How can I show you my frail old body?( evidently she is referring to her unsteady writing) Eh! My exile is so long! But, I hope that it will not be much longer...However I am happy to stay here: as long as it pleases our most sweet Spouse Jesus"* (L 75).

This process of spiritual preparation and confident waiting encouraged Mother Margherita to remind herself and her Sisters the need to be vigilant: while not worrying about the definite meeting with Jesus, we need to be always ready. In an undated later written to some Sisters, she writes: *"Meanwhile, all of you, my dears, see that you are always more generous with our amiable Spouse, so that we may attain the predetermined goal of our perfection. All of us should be on the alert for he will come like a thief to snatch us away; and as long as we are always ready no one will frighten us, rather, he will be expected and desired"* (L 77).

At the same time, the eschatological approach became for Mother Margherita a further stimulus to accept generously sacrifices and sufferings in union with Christ who first was cruelly crucified and then gloriously risen. Writing to a Community one Holy Thursday, she urges the Sisters: *“In these holy days we can see our amiable Jesus filled with shame. He was obedient till death and death on a cross. What else do we need to crush our pride to death or should I better call it Reverend Self-Love?! Ah! Let us understand it well: without dying to self, one cannot rise again. Therefore let us die with our good Jesus, so that we may rise to a new life with Him... Let us love him purely and that is enough. I also wish you to experience sufferings so that you may resemble the most sweet crucified Jesus, the Beloved of our souls, so that we will then be glorious forever, in heaven above with Him. Amen! Amen!”* (L 79).



## Charity

Knowing that charity is the greatest commandment proclaimed by Jesus (cf. Mt 22,34ff.), the Sisters refer unanimously to charity as the virtue that reigned supreme in Mother Margherita's mind, heart and behaviour, as shown in these statements: Christ was always at the center of her interior life; she lived fully her consecration loving, serving, adoring and honoring the Lord; she made a dwelling and a house for God with her undivided heart; she had an intimate union with God who was the foundation of her life; her greatest desire, on which her life rotated was: "Let us love the Love"... In fact the passionate insistence with which Mother Margherita spoke about love in her letters, and the heartfelt insistence with which she instilled it in her Sisters, are an eloquent and impressive testimony of this.

Rightly so the Sisters note that this passionate and dynamic centrality depended on the theological-inspirational understanding which Mother Margherita had of God-Trinity. It is a meaning which acknowledges fully the definition of the apostle John: God is Love (cf. 1 Jn 4,16). In fact, even for her, God is Love made man; this word Love for her summarizes the unfathomable depth of his nature and illumines the mysterious wisdom of her behaviour. This does not exclude that very often, when talking about Love, Mother Margherita refers especially to Jesus. This is well justified: in fact, as the apostle Paul affirms, Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God (cf. Col 1,15); therefore, Jesus proclaims, who sees Him sees the Father (cf. Jn 14,8ff.).

To illustrate this fundamental factual data the Sisters refer to several concrete elements, which together, produce enlightening signs, revealers and authors of this centrality in the life of Mother Margherita.

Naturally, and it could not be otherwise, her symbolic expression, which makes like a constant inspirational refrain to her urgent invitations and recurring references: Let us love the Love, is referred to without exception.

In relation to Jesus, Mother Margherita points out her radical persuasion that He is the Love on a series of reasons which have, so to say, their climax in two events: Jesus is the Love because He died for us on the cross and because He remained present for us in the sacrament of the Eucharist. These two justifications, which testify in a sublime manner that Jesus is the Love who gives Himself, for her, are confirmed in the icon of the Heart, the universal symbol of love. In fact, in her letters the reference to Christ Crucified and to the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus often occurs.

Captured by this awareness, Mother Margherita urges overwhelmingly the need to allow oneself to be fully pervaded by the Love and to correspond as much as possible with it: love is repaid with love, she repeats several times in her letters (cf. L 78, 122, 155, 161, 172...).

As the Sisters remember, Mother Margherita undertook the commitment to correspond to the Love in the exciting manner of spousal love: a love which is complete, unique, permanent; a love which leads to the full communion and to the sharing of life. In fact, as it is already shown in previous quotations, she considered herself and the Sisters as Jesus' privileged brides, chosen freely by Him without personal merits. Therefore, it is more deeply understood why it has been stressed by the Sisters that Mother Margherita was a woman "in love"; also, a more meaningful significance is her repeated expression that one has to love with a "pure love", that is without compromising it with other loves.

This spousal vision finds an eloquent response in her ardent wish to be able to achieve the experience of the apostle Paul: it is not I who lives, but Christ lives in me (cf. Gal 2,20). In respect to this, we read what she confides to a Sister on May 5, 1907: *“And where can one find a more ardent, more capable fire to consume every imperfection if not in the most Holy Tabernacle?!... And where will it be most in our power if not when it is in our heart?... And when will it be easier if not when it takes possession of our heart?... And the Sweet and Sole Beloved of our heart, Jesus, how can He not possess and consume our soul entirely, if we are so close and united? Oh! Yes, yes, let us yield all our faculties, all our anxieties!... Let us die like doves wounded by the divine hunter!... Oh! Then how precious such a life would be, when it becomes life and death together, life in Him and death to self... Oh! Happy state!... Oh! happy life!... it is not I that live but Christ who lives in me!... such a soul may say this by right!... but when, when o my dearest, shall we be able to repeat such a line?... Slowly... slowly... slowly... however it is not impossible: because everything will be easy for those who want”* (L 140).

On this enlightened background, which summarizes the inspirational and practical understanding which Mother Margherita had of Love, the Sisters then move on to several references as examples.

The first thing to put in evidence is to discover the source from which Mother Margherita nourished constantly, at the same time, her experienced knowledge of the love and her personal response of a bride in love. The Sisters, in agreement and rightly so, identify this in prayer.

It was mentioned that Mother Margherita dedicated all the time she could spare to prayer, preferably (until her health allowed it) at the feet of the tabernacle or in the “hole” (as it was called)

found behind the altar: she was, in the most meaningful sense of the word, a Eucharistic soul who found her joy in being able to stay in company of the Spouse who made Himself “Prisoner of Love”, as she loved to call Jesus in the Eucharist.

The constant and prolonged contact with the Eucharistic Jesus, as the Sisters highlighted occasionally, has molded Mother Margherita’s spirituality in her peculiar characteristics: it made her an ardent contemplative, a generous person of reparation, a zealous apostle.

The contemplative dimension is noticed by the Sisters even from the way those who knew her saw, and described Mother Margherita as immersed in prayer: she remained for a long time without moving, seemed like a cherub, often she had tears running down her face ... But more so, this element is evident in her letters, which the Sisters know very well.

Understandably, Mother Margherita is more open (but not much ...) about this intense mystical experience, with her spiritual directors. From what she confides in these letters, it appears quite clearly that she lived her relationship of love with Jesus in different significant moods. For example, from the many possibilities, we read when she wrote in an undated letter to Mgr. Alfonso Agius: *“I feel confused and stop with the pen in my hand without knowing what to say. I go near the Prisoner King and kneel at his feet: I weep bitterly, as if sensing my offences and those of all who afflict his sensitive Heart! Then I remain for about an hour or more, as if dead. At other times, I hear a call (not with my ears) and I repeat: dear Spouse, dear Spouse with so many sighs, etc, it seems my heart want to burst! At other times I feel arid, as if there is neither Jesus nor anything else. And so the days pass in these conflicts. I am only afraid that I do not correspond either to joy or to tears. However, I try to spend as*



*much time as possible in recollection, and stay for two hours near Jesus, besides those spent with the Community, and after an act of adoration, I stay close to Him and according to the attraction of his presence, I let Him take me wherever He wants” (L 63).*

That being so, it is not surprising that Mother Margherita felt as imperative the need to transmit even to others her contemplative ardor and her tireless search of loving intimacy with Jesus: She does this with heartfelt exhortations, which also reveal her personal experience. So she does with Mgr. Alfonso Agius, as we read in the letter dated 8<sup>th</sup> April 1941: *“Ah! Let us immerse ourselves in the Ocean of Love, of Infinite Love, of Eternal Love!!! Isn’t it enough, eh?! Another word: let us hide, annihilate and immolate ourselves in those eternal flames!!! In that Heart that contains all the fire of Divine Love!!!... Do you understand? I hope you understand the way I speak to you now... Oh! hidden secrets..., Oh! silence!” (L 37).*

She does as much, and still more often, with the Sisters. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1925, writing to a Community, she expresses herself thus: *“I want, I desire and I yearn for souls, souls... Give me souls who truly and purely love the Lord and eternal God, and I shall be happy, very happy... Oh! let us love, let us love this perfect eternal Father, who loves us infinitely though we are nothing except his poor, wretched creatures!... What does He expect of us if not love?! Love, love He demands from the holy tabernacle! He demands love through his many inspirations! What does He want? He wants to be known and loved, loved, loved!! (L 72).* Close to Christmas 1945, writing to a Community, she expresses her hope that her exile here on earth will not last much longer; but she adds: *“However I am happy to remain here as long as this pleases our Sweet Spouse Jesus; Jesus who is Prisoner for our love in all the Tabernacles of the world... What love! What excessive love! After He became a Child, He humbled*

*Himself becoming food for us! How mad we should be for his Love! Let us live, let us live a life of the most pure love...He came to bring fire on earth and He does not want anything else but that it be enkindled” (L 75).*

Mother Margherita recalls many times that hers and the Sisters’ Spouse is a Crucified Spouse, who has given his life for our sins. This awareness roused in her great interest. For example, she felt strongly the need to bear patiently and generously all that does not please our spoiled nature: tiredness, sacrifice, renunciation, sufferings ... all this she lived, and often presented it in a special perspective related to the contemplative component, which the Sisters promptly implemented and remembered: the reparation for the offences that Jesus continually receives. It is a commitment which involves the immolation of oneself which, somehow, transforms us into sacrificial victims.

Naturally, Mother Margherita knew well that, first of all, one has to make reparation for the personal faults of which, she in her humility, felt burdened with. At the same time, she was so much aware of this truth that she considered reparation a significant component of the congregational charism. To give an example, writing to a Sister on March 27, 1938, besides the rest, she reminds her that “*we are victims and apostles of souls*” (L 148).

Hence her frequent recalls, her insistent recommendations, her maternal encouragement, as may have already been noticed from these few examples. Thus she writes to a Junior, close to her Perpetual Profession, on June 11, 1924: “*Strong, strong courage and be united with the Sweet Crucified Spouse so that you may console Him, make reparation, in a word, He can find His rest in you...*”(L 69). On March 8, 1930 she reminds Sr. Pacifica Xuereb: “*We should make reparation; and therefore we suffer what our Sweet Spouse sends us*” (L 91). On December 9, 1938, with an

evident reference to the Eucharist, she urges a Sister thus: *“Let Him make of us living hosts...small hosts, so small that they are hardly noticed or sought, to annihilate them”* (L 109). In an undated letter, sent to a Junior close to her Perpetual Profession, she reminds her that from that day on she should be *“totally sacrificed for love”*; and then she adds: *“together let us offer ourselves to the merciful love to obtain mercy for all the ungrateful world”* (L 155).

From these quotations emerges clearly that for Mother Margherita sacrificing ourselves as victims in the reparation commitment has an objective apostolic dimension.

At this point, it becomes spontaneously clear that for Mother Margherita everything is strictly related to the love, in a double perspective. Jesus-Love calls for acceptance and participation: invites for contemplative intimacy, urges to cooperate to His salvific mission with the sacrificing reparation and with apostolic zeal. And Mother Margherita enters wholeheartedly in this dynamism of love. In fact, what has been said with regards to contemplation and reparation, applies also for the apostolic commitment in its multiple forms.

As has been recalled when talking about faith, the Sisters all attribute to Mother Margherita the historical and providential merit of having opened for the Congregation wider apostolic horizons from the operative as well as territorial and missionary point of view. And, as it is logical to expect, they relate this merit to her valuable guide of her spirituality: the Love.

Indeed, Mother Margherita often makes a significant addition to her distinctive expression *“Let us love the Love”*. According to her, Love is not loved because it is not known. She trembles at the thought that souls have cost Jesus’ blood. (cf. L 13,

57, 132, 152...) That is why, she feels imperative the wish to make Him known so that He will be loved by everyone and everywhere.

And comprehensibly, she passed on this ardent wish to her Sisters, reminding them that the apostolate is an integral element of the specific religious vocation in the Congregation. To have an idea, let us read what she has written to a group of newly professed on March 17, 1922: *“Yes, offer yourself totally to our Lord Jesus who is offering you the most fertile mission in order to win souls, souls, souls! Our Sweet Jesus offers us fields to work in and to cultivate; yes, let us do all that is possible to be generous with Him in corresponding to His loving calls! ... Ah! You, dearest daughters, who have recently united yourself to Him through the holy Vows, unite yourself evermore to Him, so that you can correspond generously and faithfully to such a greatly desired Spouse!!! Ask Him for flames, flames of pure love, of zeal for his greater glory and for the salvation of souls, souls, souls! Oh! how many souls await our works, our words and above all, our prayers!...(L 66).*

What has been said should highlight the principal features about Christ in Mother Margherita’s spirituality, but this doesn’t exhaust her knowledge, her commitment and her talk on the fundamental argument of Love. And the Sisters paid the due attention to this. In particular, highlighted are the two complimentary and related elements, which are inspirationally motivated in these repeated words: *let us love in deeds and in truth* (cf. L 64, 78, 116...); *love is repaid with love* (cf. L 78, 122, 155...); *do everything with love, in love, for love* (cf. L 105, 114, 137...).

The first element has an overall meaning and it refers to the need of being faithful to the duties related to the religious life, to

accept generously the sacrifices and the renunciations which make a part of the common experience, to bear serenely the sufferings and sicknesses. The second element has a more specific meaning and it refers to the fraternal charity which should reign among the Sisters and in the Communities.

With regards to these real concerns the Sisters realize that they have in Mother Margherita an exemplary model who inspires them. At the same time, they also recognize her persistent calls and her fervent exhortations. We may give an idea of this by including some quotations.

On November 4, 1920 Mother Margherita encourages a Sister to accept a transfer: *“Have courage and keep moving forward, for our good Jesus does not let Himself be surpassed in generosity. If you are constant and faithful, He will help you in all the circumstances and necessities you encounter. Let us love the Love, means let us suffer for the Love... That is to say we shall be always happy and ready in every occasion to mortify our self-love to Love, wood that is suitable to be consumed, etc.”* (L 141). Writing on April 2, 1933 to Sr. Dionisia Thomis, the Novices’ Formator in Rome, she urges her thus: *“Yes, my dear, do your utmost so that they [the novices] may learn how to meditate profoundly on the Holy Passion and Death of our sweet Crucified Spouse, and also to penetrate deeply into the true meaning of pure love, etc. etc. Thus they will learn true and deep humility, perfect obedience, etc. How immensely He has loved us! How privileged we are, having been chosen from among thousands and thousands of others worthier than us... (L 116). On August 7, 1944 she exhorts the Community in Rome with these words: *“ Ah! Dearest daughters, yes, yes love is shown through sacrifice. So, rejoice, for you can make Him happy in such a hard trial through your generosity”* (L 74).*

On this overall background there is also a specific reference to the need of fraternal charity, which in religious life lived in community, can be practised in various ways. It is an important need as a principle, but often it is a problem on an existential level.

Mother Margherita has an exemplary attitude also with regards to this: as it is clear in her letters, she nurtured maternal love for all the Sisters and she followed them with great interest of concern and encouragement. To give an example, close to terminating her office as Superior General, on April 13, 1923, she wrote to a Community: *“I will never fail, even when I am in a different situation, to exhort you to be small and docile, and yielding and to love and help one another. Yes, my dearest, yes, let us always help one another to carry each other’s burden so that the Lord will deign to unite us in perfect fraternal charity and in pure love, while mortifying the evil and malicious human self, etc. Have you understood?”* (L 67).

As the Sisters remember, Mother Margherita insisted on this argument when, as Superior General, she visited the Communities, leaving in writing her recommendations. We present a passage with regards to a specific problem:

*“I beseech you, then, out of charity, to avoid referring to each other the Sisters’ weaknesses, which sometimes you suspect, or which sometimes are mentioned to you. Be cautious and confidential on this very delicate point which can cause great harm and disagreements... We are all fragile, easy to fall, subject to mistakes; therefore let us seek to cover defects which we notice in those around us”* (V 17).



## The Cardinal Virtues

When introducing the subject on the “human virtues”, the Catechism of the Catholic Church says this: “*Four virtues play a pivotal role and accordingly are called "cardinal"; all the others are grouped around them. They are: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance*” (no. 1805).

These virtues are called “human” because they are founded on human nature and, therefore, are common to all. Human virtues are standard moral qualities of human beings and are related to the construction of the personality of each individual.

At the same time, it is agreed that in the Christian perspective all the virtues (theological and moral, Christian and human) are practised under the influence of divine grace. Mother Margherita was well aware of this truth, as it is evident in one of her letters sent on January 7, 1930 to one of the Sisters: “*Eh! My dear daughter, my exhortations are always the same... Be small, small, let the sweet Jesus act in you as He pleases. Be careful not to hinder his actions but follow them generously and faithfully, without a but or an if! Do you agree?* (L 146).

Like the theological virtues, the cardinal virtues are put in order, they have a logical connection. Prudence is mentioned first because it is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; then comes justice which [disposes](#) one to respect the rights of others; on its part, fortitude instills the necessary courage to face the difficulties and obstacles that are encountered often when making decisions; finally temperance **is the virtue which moderates in us the inordinate desires and** ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable.

Regarding these essential prerequisites, we see how the Sisters have noticed the practice of these virtues in the life of Mother Margherita and in her writings.





## Prudence

The Sisters record in the life of Mother Margherita significant episodes in which they identify the exemplary practice of the virtue of prudence as a wise discernment and sure guide in her plans of action.

In their view, Fr. Joseph Diacono chose her as the secretary of the new Institute, although she was still very young, because he considered her as a mature and worthy person to undertake that important and delicate office, which among other qualities requires the ability to act with due reflection. Facts justify this.

Rightly so it has been revealed that this ability of wise discernment, nourished and exercised in the light of faith, Mother Margherita showed it through her examples during the long years of her service to the Congregation as Superior General as well as a Council Member. As a matter of fact, the choices she made and carried out were well considered and planned ahead and their outcome prove this: the increasing number of vocations, the growth of charitable and apostolic activities, the spreading beyond the Maltese islands, the missionary openness...

As much relevant, is the reference to Mother Margherita's personal behaviour with the Sisters, as it results from her letters. She nourished for them a maternal affection which urged her to show interest in them; and with tender and delicate concern she did not hesitate to counsel them and encourage them. On their part, the Sisters reciprocated with love and filial confidence, with esteem and respect, with trust and gratitude.

The hundred letters written by Mother Margherita and which the Sisters jealously preserve reveal this intense and constant relationship. And in these letters, rich of reminders and

exhortations of various kinds, we also find the recommendations to act with prudence, with due attention and thoughtfulness. For example, in the letter dated August 6, 1824, addressed to Sr. Pacifica Xuereb, appointed as Superior of the Community in Troina (Sicily), she writes: *“I rejoice in the new mission assigned to you. Be careful to be prudent in this office but at the same time work with a seraphic and evangelical spirit”* (L 85). In the letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1939, addressed to Sr. Luisa Busuttill, Superior of the Community in Rome, she regrets the negative behaviour of some Sisters and adds: *“We need to pray earnestly for them, poor things, because at times they find themselves in danger where they least expect it! Therefore, always, everywhere and with everybody we need to be serious and prudent, and fearful rather than courageous”* (L 110). In an undated letter to the young Sister, Sr. Rosaria Sotera she recommends: *“I feel that you should be a small, small saint; therefore you should be careful to correspond faithfully to the inspirations of the good Jesus. Have you understood?... Do you understand me?”* (L 125).



This remarkable quality of an enlightened councilor is reaffirmed by Sr. Pacifica Xuereb in one of her writings: *“She had a good word for every one of us, so much so that all of us trusted her and she gave us good advices, spiritual advices which instilled a certain peace in the heart of those who approached her”*.

It is also recalled that from the other 60 letters kept by her two spiritual directors, Mgr. Antonio Galea and Mgr. Alfonso Agius, that Mother Margherita often asked for their advices, which she held in high regards, to understand better how to live her spiritual life to remain always faithful to God.

## Justice

The virtue of justice, as we know, disposes one to respect the rights of others; a common need expressed with the words: give to others what belongs to them. And the first person whose rights are to be respected is God. We know the answer Jesus gave to the Pharisees regarding the problem of what to render to Caesar: give also to God what is God's (Cf. Mt 22,15ff.).

It is with particular sensibility to this aspect of the problem that the Sisters speak of the virtue of justice in the life of Mother Margherita. It is an important emphasis because it helps to pick up better and fully her constant reference to the will of God. In fact doing the will of God for her was an absolute need which cannot be compromised: it is accepted and fulfilled without an if and without a but, even when it does not correspond to the personal expectations, and it demands sacrifices and renunciation.

Talking about her faith, there emerges the reasons why Mother Margherita takes advantage to instill this availability to the Sisters: in particular, the correspondence to the love with which God takes care of us, and the confident abandonment to his providence. The reference to justice completes appropriately the reasons which demand this need.

With regard to this, it is advisable to keep in mind the titles which Mother Margherita uses to express her understanding of God-Trinity. To those expressions already mentioned when talking about faith, sign of her ardent and penetrating mysticism, Mother Margherita adds others: God is Creator and Lord, but also Master. Certainly, God is a meek Master (cf. L 109) and good (cf. L 137), but also absolute: to Him therefore, we owe complete submission. In an undated letter, already mentioned, written to Sr. Rosaria Sotera we read: "*My dear daughter, our good Jesus*

*chooses whom He wants, He is the Absolute Master of his creatures; but woe to them if they are not faithful in corresponding to his plans”* (L 125). It is expected that for Mother Margherita this does not refer to a slave’s correspondence, dictated by fear or by interest, it refers to filial correspondence, inspired by an illuminated and grateful love. Rather, it is in this double “justice-love” which frames and includes Mother Margherita’s recurring call to generous and persevering fidelity.

As regards to what refers to justice in interpersonal relationship, collating news from the Sisters who knew Mother Margherita, it is ascertained that she treated all the Sisters with love, without making any undeserved preferences, and when she was in charge of the Congregation she always made decisions after having prayed for a long time and consulted her Council, and which she considered as just and appropriate.



## Fortitude

We have already noted the phrase which Mother Margherita repeated constantly to herself and to the others; strong, strong courage. And it is not surprising, talking about her strong courage in facing many difficult situations, the Sisters compare her to a strong and perfect woman of whom the Book of Proverbs speaks (cf. Pro 31,10ff.). As a matter of fact, certain significant episodes regarding this, are repeated with understandable admiration.

For example, it has been recalled the courage with which Mother Margherita declared to Fr. Joseph Diacono that she was ready, with the help of God, to assume the responsibility of the Congregation which he wanted to abandon. Likewise the Sisters remember the courage with which she opened the first mission in Corfù, although she knew of the great inconveniences and difficulties also economical which the Sisters had to face; inconveniences and difficulties which she often referred to several times in her letters from Corfù to Mgr. Antonio Galea. A similar situation took place when opening the “Adoration House” in Valletta (Malta), so much desired by Mother Margherita who succeeded to overcome the comprehensible uncertainties and initial resistance by her Council.

With the same admiration the Sisters highlight Mother Margherita’s courage in accepting the sufferings and the limitations caused by her ill-health, which worsened during the last years of her life. Rather, it has been noted, that it was when she could not do anything anymore and depended on the Sisters even for her personal needs that she gave admirable example of her strong serenity and patience.

And rightly so the Sisters asked from where she received her courage and strength to face the toil and difficulties of various

kinds which have filled her whole life. And, as it has been anticipated, it was not difficult to find the answer: Mother Margherita drew the courage and the strength especially from prayer. To give an example, in the letter dated 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1923 to Mgr. Antonio Galea, after having confessed that although she was on holy retreat she felt “*entirely immersed in thoughts about my office*”, she adds: “*Eh! Dear Father, the thought of the accurate account I have to give for souls of others, frightens me enough when that of my distressed and ungrateful soul is already very exacting. What can I do but abandon myself totally to the paternal care of Divine Providence!! I need help, courage so that I may promptly thrust myself into that Ocean of Divine Love. In the Paternal Bosom where we find strength, light and comfort, in order to advance and move forward*” (L 25).

As always, the Sisters note that Mother Margherita sought to pass on to others her strong courage which sustained her in the various events of her life. We read, for example, how in a letter dated 5<sup>th</sup> May, 1922 she encourages a Sister: “*It is now necessary to abandon ourselves to every disposition of divine providence! Yes, let us always repeat the dear Fiat. However, courageously and joyfully, not in tears and sighs. Do you understand? Diffidence in ourselves and boundless confidence in divine Goodness; and that is enough! Have you understood? It is necessary to struggle against our nature and the devil who does nothing else but inspire diffidence and discouragement with his suggestions, etc. etc... Therefore, have courage and do not behave like a child, but abandon yourself totally to the sweet Spouse as a strong Bride; and that is enough. I do not want to hear any more about your tears; that is, I do not want you to cry any more for these things, but for the offences our sweet Jesus receives. And in secret, never showing that you are hurt or discouraged. When you feel thus, go immediately near the good Jesus, a Prisoner of love and you will come out encouraged and*

*strengthened; however this depends on your dispositions and on your correspondence. Be therefore, generous in abandoning yourself, and constant in trust, and you can be sure that you will be granted whatever you need!!! Try and see” ... (L 143).*



## Temperance

We may start this subject with a relevant quotation from the apostle Paul referred to by the Sisters: *“But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him”* (1 Cor 1, 27-29). In fact, these words find an ample and challenging application place in exercising the virtue of temperance. Also, they find an exemplary confirmation in Mother Margherita.

Knowing her life well, the Sisters justly record that Mother Margherita had understood, exercised and recommended the practice of this virtue on a two complimentary levels: corporal mortification and control, secondly one of her typical expressions, of her “spoilt nature”.

With regards the corporal mortification, an eloquent context is outlined. Mother Margherita not only fasted frequently, but it was her daily habit to mortify austere herself regarding food: she hardly ate any meat, she served herself last satisfying herself with what was left, collecting the left over pieces of bread and eating them...Also, she wore the cilice on her body and often used the discipline.

As much serious and permanent was her commitment in keeping under strict control, till overcoming the dangerous influence, all that (sentiments, tendencies, desires, attractions...) caused by the spoilt nature. A precious indicator to pick up this commitment is found in her letters, knowing that when she asked others, she was the first one to put it in practice. We can prove this with some examples.



In the letter dated 5<sup>th</sup> December 1924 addressed to the Community of Troina (Sicily) we read: *“We should struggle against our spoilt nature; we should always sacrifice ourselves and die to our satisfactions. We should never yield to our human reasoning; neither to the demands of our flesh... our heart and our thoughts must always be raised high and never dwell on these base things... let us always look as far up as we can with the Divine Grace, far beyond Etna, further up, further up”* (L 71). In the letter written on the same day to Sr. Pacifica Xuereb we read, *“Let us always act contrary to nature, always struggling against our human self and then it is enough: we shall have a continuous and long lasting occupation... have you understood? Take courage and keep going forward”* (L 86).

In another undated letter to the same Sister we read: *“Thanks to the good Jesus, we are all in good health, happy, struggling against our self-love... What do you think? Always the same struggle, without rest and without relief... We always have to go against the grain. Is this not true? What do you do in order to win? How do you cope in the fight? At times I am a loser, and at times I am a winner. I must always be patient and humble”* (L 102). Writing to Sr. Geltrude Gatt on January 11, 1934, she exhorts her: *“Therefore let us avail ourselves of all opportunities which enrich us with holy virtues; while always abasing our pride first of all, our greatest enemy who lies dormant; then total detachment from all earthly things, above all from vanity, not only in us, but also in things and in persons who approach us, as we say on our Holy Clothing and Profession day: “The world is crucified for us and we are crucified for the world”. It means that the world leaves no repercussions on us”* (L 126).

A further confirmation of how Mother Margherita lived the virtue of temperance is recorded in a passage obtained from one of the writings of Mother Nazarena Gouder, who knew her very well:

*“Mother Margherita was a mistress of herself. Never did she show a sign of impatience, or the least resentment, but she behaved in the same way with every one, be it with those who showed certain respect towards her, as well as with those Sisters who tormented her. On the contrary, with the latter Mother showed greater gentleness, and when she received some kind of disrespect from any of the Sisters she would humble herself more, finding an excuse to defend her, spoke well of her, excusing her and sympathizing with her”.*

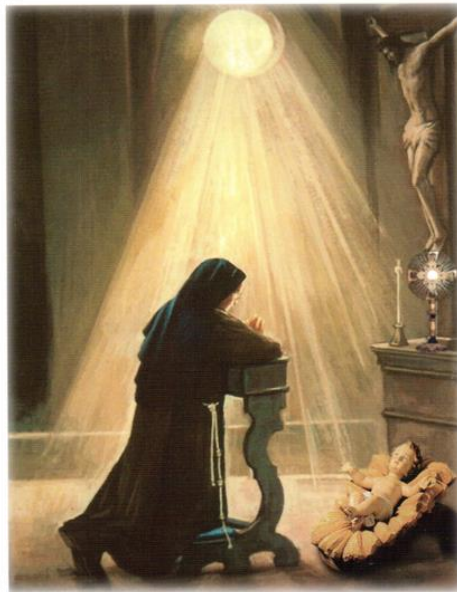
To understand more deeply her personal behaviour and her frequent exhortations to the Sisters, the link between the commitment of reparation, which is a qualifying element of spirituality, and the congregational charism, of which we have already spoken, is valid and applicable.



## The Other Virtues

We now gather a short presentation of some virtues which have contributed to highlight the spirituality of Mother Margherita and to which the Sisters draw the due attention.

### Prayer



We note, especially, the reference to prayer because it is the expression of the virtue of religion which, in turn is an integral component of the cardinal virtue of justice.

We have already spoken many times of the place and importance of prayer in the life of Mother Margherita. Here we integrate this presentation calling to mind certain fundamental Christological themes of her prayer which did not go unnoticed by the Sisters' attention.

In perfect harmony with the Franciscan spirituality, Mother Margherita was especially attracted to focus her prayerful meditation on the mystery of love manifested by Jesus in Bethlehem, in the Christmas event, and on Calvary, in the Passion

event. These events were for her the most overwhelming revelation of a God who for love became man and for love He gave Himself in humility, in poverty, in suffering, in death...

From what she writes in her letters, it is evident that these events were profoundly rooted in her mind and in her heart and which influenced her life deeply. And this explains why very often and passionately she urged the Sisters to do the same. We may testify this with two examples.

In an undated letter, written close to Christmas to the Novices in Rome, she strongly urges them: *“Few words to all of you. In these holy days, we do not speak of anything else except of Love, of Love, Love. And why not? If a God has become man for love??? An Infinite Being, in his Greatness, in his Majesty etc. etc. deprives Himself of everything and becomes a little Child... and why? Out of love for ungrateful humanity... What else can we say? It is better to stop in the profound silence of adoration... Then to love, love and love... Love is repaid with love. Therefore, my dearest, let us love through deeds and in truth and that is enough... One learns how to love in front of the God Child! Therefore I leave you in the company of such a sweet model while wishing you to become an exact and perfect copy...”* (L 78).

In an undated letter, sent on Holy Thursday to a Community, she writes: *“In these holy days we even see our Amiable Jesus filled with shame. He was obedient till death and death on the cross. What else do we need to crush our pride to death or should I call it our Rev. Self-Love?! Ah! let us understand it well: without dying to self, one cannot rise again. Therefore, let us die with our Good Jesus, so that we may rise to a new life with Him... Let us love Him purely and that is enough”* (L 79).

The centrality of Christmas and of Calvary in the spirituality of Mother Margherita explains also, as it has been said, her preference for the Eucharist and her devotion to the Sacred Heart. For her these are an irresistible reminder of the mystery of love shown by Jesus during those two events in which his earthly life is captured. That is why she never got tired of writing about them in her letters urging the Sisters to linger at the feet of the tabernacle and to kindle their love in the ardent fire of the Heart of Jesus.

## Humility

It is on this Christological background that now we can consider the other most decisive virtues identified by the Sisters in Mother Margherita: humility, poverty, obedience. They are important virtues for two reasons: they are all significant components of the Franciscan spirituality; poverty and obedience, also, are taken as vows (together with chastity) in the Religious Profession of the evangelical counsels.

The intense prayer life lead Mother Margherita to a progressive experiential knowledge of God; at the same time, the awareness of his infinite transcendence, the sovereign majesty of God and of his supreme holiness kept her constantly in state of profound and painful humility.

The Sisters paid great attention to this virtue of Mother Margherita and they could see its practice in her familiar attitudes free from any form of pretentious behaviour. Among the rest, she never applied to herself the historical merit of having saved the Congregation from termination already decided by Fr. Joseph Diacono.

But references and particular episodes are not lacking. For example, in the event already mentioned, Mother Nazarena Gouder refers to Mother Margherita who behaved in a more humble manner with the Sisters who opposed her, seeking gently to excuse them. Another example, even more significant, takes us back to what is verified in the General Chapter of May 1923. Contradicting the request of the Bishop of Malta, who presided over it, the Chapter Members re-elected Mother Margherita as Superior General; the Bishop did not accept this election causing a great confusion; at that point Mother Margherita knelt down humbly before the Bishop asking for pardon in the name of the

Sisters, to whom then she invited not to think of her any more. And so it happened.

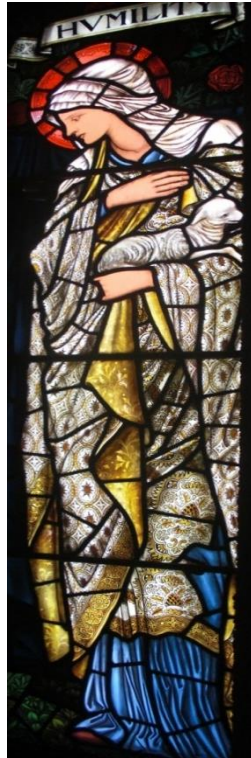
Mother Margherita's humility had its roots in the persuasion, already mentioned, that she was a poor sinner, ungrateful to God for the many benefits received and merited his punishments. It was a conviction which is often evident in her letters and which enhanced in her, as already mentioned, the yearning need of reparation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that she urges the Sisters to practise and grow in humility. In the letter dated 20<sup>th</sup> November 1926, sent to Sr. Pacifica Xuereb, she addresses directly a group of young Sisters urging them warmly: *"How are you? Are you humble? Have you learnt the important lesson of humility? Sr. Salvina, do you remember last year when we were reading the book on humility; therefore let us always study the same lesson to learn it well till the very end. We greet you all and embrace you in the most sacred heart. Let us always pray, as we have said in order to obtain true humility; let us learn how to be small, small and simple like innocent children, not ignorant and proud. Have we understood?"* (L 90).

In another undated letter she writes: *"Thanks to the good Jesus, we are all in good health, happy, struggling against our self-love... What do you think? Always the same struggle, without rest and without relief... We always have to go against the grain. Is this not true? What do you do in order to win? How do you cope in the fight? At times I am a loser, and at times I am a winner. I must always be patient and humble"* (L 102).

Similar is the recommendation made on April 2, 1933 to Sr. Dionisia Thomis. Novices' Mistress in Rome:

*“Yes, my dear, do your utmost so that they may learn to meditate profoundly on the holy Passion and Death of our most sweet Crucified Spouse and also to penetrate deeply into the true meaning of pure love, etc. etc. thus they will learn true and deep humility, perfect obedience, etc.” (L 116).*





## Poverty

Similar to humility is the virtue of poverty. This is a combination present in Mother Margherita when she calls for the Sisters' attention on the Christological mysteries of which we have already spoken: Christmas and Calvary. The fact that she often uses the adjective "poor" in the light of humility deserves to be highlighted. For example, she expresses her joyful surprise because the "Adoration House" in Valletta (Malta) was given "*to the poor Franciscans*" (cf. L 87); also, she confesses her sad surprise for the little correspondence to the love which God has for the "*poor creatures*" (cf. L 71).

Being one of the important virtues of the Franciscan spirituality, the Sisters could not let go unheeded the poverty witnessed by Mother Margherita in her daily life: she dressed poorly, she contented herself with the bare necessity, she did not seek commodity, she had no expectations... To give an example, finding herself in 1933 at 'Maria Bambina' Convent at Xaghra (Gozo), she expressed her joy for the poverty which reigned there (cf. L 115).

Rightly so the Sisters link the exercise of this virtue, so much instilled by Mother Margherita in the Christological context of which we have already spoken, to the faithful and unconditional abandonment of herself to God's paternal care, which has already been mentioned. And among the examples given, a particular emphasis is given to the courage with which Mother Margherita accepted to open the house of Corfù in absolute poverty.



***St. Francis and Lady Poverty***

## Obedience

Talking about humility, Mother Margherita insisted repeatedly on the necessity of fighting against self-pride (cf. L 126); also she exhorts about detachment (cf. L 143), which is a component of the evangelical poverty. These reminders are important because only the person who is interiorly humble and spiritually poor can be willing to be obedient which demands the renunciation to the personal independent decisions.

In fact, talking about obedience with regards to Mother Margherita, the Sisters often associate the subject of humility and of poverty, together with that of love. It is a relevant and justified link because we often find it present in her letters (cf. L 81, 105, 116).

Keeping in mind this context, it is natural that the Sisters see in Mother Margherita a model even in the virtue of obedience, referring to specific facts, which are mentioned in her letters.

In this regard, we may outline this context. Mother Margherita has been obedient firstly to God: it is enough to think about the Fiat spread everywhere in her letters and applied first of all and especially by herself. She was obedient to the ecclesial authority, like when she accepted the proposal by the Bishop of Malta to open a mission in Corfù and when she accepted the “Adoration House” in Valletta (Malta) (cf. L 24). She was obedient to her Superiors, like when in September 1951 she accepted to go to a “too comfortable” house that of St. Joseph’s Institute, Hamrun (Malta) for a period of convalescence (cf. L 104). She was obedient to her spiritual director, Mons. Antonio Galea, like when following his intervention she overcame her resistance to accept the new election as Superior General in 1917 (cf L 2ff.)...

## Conclusion

The presentation of Mother Margherita's virtues elaborated in the previous pages shows in a comprehensive and uniform summary how her present spiritual daughters see and admire their Mother Foundress towards whom they nurture love, veneration and gratitude.

Considered in their complexity, the Sisters' presentations, from where this summary has been obtained, offer the captivating image of Mother Margherita, a woman who has lived without reserves and with a laudable perseverance the divine gift of her vocation in practising all the virtues carried out in the light of faith, in the anxiety of hope, in the zeal of charity.

Thus, from what the Sisters have presented, Mother Margherita is a person who in practising the virtues has reached a radiant realization of herself in a harmonious spiritual, moral and human unity: truly she seems like a splendid mosaic made of many pieces.

For a good reason, it may be certain that these truths, although not exhaustive, turn out to be in full agreement with the authoritative laudatory judgement expressed by the Theological Consultants with regards to Mother Margherita; a judgement which has been officially ratified, with the seal of the supreme ecclesial authority, by Pope Francis with the proclamation of the heroic practice of the theological and moral virtues by Mother Margherita.

Therefore, two relevant observations made by the Sisters can be understood well, and can serve to formulate an interesting open conclusion on her life.

The first observation refers to the teachings on the practice of the virtues (exhortations, reminders, advices, encouragements...) scattered everywhere in Mother Margherita's letters to the Sisters. The present Sisters feel intimately requested and personally affected by these teachings and, therefore, they consider them as being addressed even to them.

The second observation refers to the unity of the virtues which shine in the life of Mother Margherita. The present Sisters capture in the testimony of her life a maternal invitation and an urgent incentive to see in their Mother a model to look forward to in giving authenticity to their consecrated life in fidelity to the congregational charism.

Finally, they claim, that Mother Margherita, through her writings and example, is repeating to them the words of our Father St. Francis to his friars: I did my part; the Lord will teach you how to do yours.

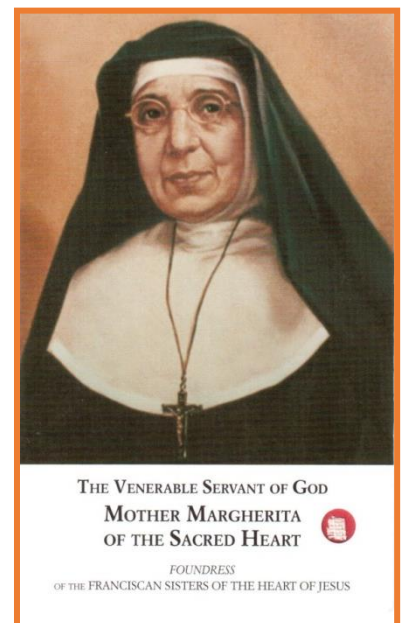
Naturally, what Mother Margherita still repeats to her spiritual daughters today may have many precious repercussions for everybody.

### **Prayer**

Most Holy Trinity, I adore you, I bless you, I praise you and thank you for the gifts and graces bestowed upon the Venerable Servant of God, Mother Margherita of the Sacred Heart.

I humbly ask you to show through her, the power of your love and the greatness of your mercy, by granting me, through her intercession, the grace which I so much desire. Amen.

*Glory be to the Father ...*



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# Franciscan Sisters of the Heart of Jesus



FIDES SPES CARITAS PRVDENTIA IVS