

**FUNERAL ORATION
ON THE DEATH OF THE FOUNDRRESS AND SUPERIOR
OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE
ADORERS OF MOST PRECIOUS BLOOD
OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST**

What distressing, diverse, contrasting sentiments stir my poor heart at the celebration of this most sad rite which fills the soul with affliction, grief and anguish. When I turn to look at that bier, when I remember that mortal body in its most peaceful sleep, I find myself repeating within my heart: the strong woman, the untiring laborer of our times, the mirror of Christian virtues, the ornament of the Church, the foundress of the Congregation of the Adorers of the Most Precious Blood - Oh, with what sorrow I say it - Maria De Mattias is dead! Oh, what a gloomy, harsh and bitter death has taken her from us, taken her from the world. Yes, has taken her. ... Closed are the eyes of that most pure dove; blanched those lips full of sweetness and mildness. How immediately every countenance revealed a depth of sorrow and anguish; how we all deplored the death of a woman whom we should never have lost, or lost only in extreme old age. I seem to see her still, courageous - and full of God - going from classroom to classroom, talking with her dear daughters, planning with them the good that was to be done. O God, what a crushing blow.

Guided, though, by the clear light of faith, I turn to him who in mercy metes out abundant rewards to those who serve him faithfully, and tears of sorrow give way to those of Christian tenderness, and I become aware of these words: "No, Maria De Mattias is not dead. She lives, and she will live for all eternity in the company of the blessed, in the kingdom of heavenly bliss, victor over the world and even over death. She lives, and she will live in the memory of humankind and, as I hope, will live also in the annals of the Church.

She lives and will live forever because God wanted her to be wholly his and she wanted to belong entirely to him. And so, instead of lamenting her death, we should rejoice and adore the designs of God who calls his loved ones to himself as he wills and when he wills, to reward them with the crown of immortal glory. Yes, let us truly rejoice.

So that we may experience the fullness of joy, let me show you, in just praise of her, how God prepared his servant to become the eminently worthy foundress of the Congregation of the Adorers of the Most Precious Blood, and how she corresponded with this call.

You will see very clearly that I am presenting only facts, but it is precisely these that challenge your attention. Let us begin.

When God selects anyone and wishes to use this person for works pertaining to his glory, he usually prepares the way and dispenses those gifts of nature and of grace necessary for the attainment of the end. And so he designed to establish an institute of religious women in his Church who would concern themselves with their own sex, in this way providing one among other means that could contribute to the desired reform. For this purpose he singled out Maria De Mattias, and it was most important that he grant her particular protection and favor her in advance with special aptitudes for such a noble and difficult position. Consequently he gave her a heart that was sensitive and open to the impressions of grace, a ready and energetic spirit and a character of angelic purity. He

even made use of feminine weaknesses to draw her wholly to himself and help her acquire true and solid virtue. In fact, see how at the age of eight she took delight in Scripture stories her father told her, and how she was moved when she heard that Abel, Isaac, Jacob and others were figures of Jesus Christ. She never tired of listening, and when at her request her father repeated the story, she felt her heart throb with love for Jesus. Once she heard someone speak about the Paschal Lamb and asked what it meant. When she understood that it was the figure of Jesus Christ who, like an innocent lamb was led to Calvary and there died crucified, giving his blood and life for our salvation, she could not restrain tears of tenderness, and her heart retained the impression like wax.

But God, who was forming this favored soul, filled her heart with a dislike for the world, even before she had experienced it. Thus it was that he inclined the mind of her parents to take her along to a gathering at which the regional Delegate and outstanding people of the village were present. Young Maria stayed there and also partook of the sumptuous meal with them. Upon returning home, though, instead of being elated about this, she was gripped by a penetrating melancholy. Retiring to her room, she began to sigh and say to herself: "Why do I feel like this? What did I do? If I went, I did so because they took me along. I was obedient." But the interior rebukes followed one another and allowed her no peace. She did not know whence they came, nor why, nor what they were intended to mean.

She received some comfort in turning to Mary most holy, but the distress which had become exceedingly acute did not cease, so much so that she decided to ask her father not to take her along anymore to such gatherings.

All this, however, was of little moment, for God wanted her to be detached not only from the world, but also from herself. Unawares she had taken a liking to vanity. Following the example of her peers, she began adorning herself so that she might not be among the lesser. She was safeguarded, however, by simplicity and modesty. All the same, she spent hours before the mirror dressing her hair. As there was a picture of Mary most holy in a devout attitude near the mirror, she often turned her eyes from the mirror to that picture, and in her heart she heard the words: "Come to me!" At first she paid no attention to them; then, by gazing often on the picture, she felt rapt with delight and she shed warm tears of tenderness, and thus the gentle picture remained so vividly impressed on her soul that often she would leave the mirror and kneel before the picture. When she did leave it, she felt herself drawn to return to it.

But the holy Virgin, who was pleased with the good will of her daughter on whom heaven's dew had already fallen, took it upon herself to instruct her in the secret of her heart where she gave her instructions, reproving her for her vanity and showing her Jesus, her divine Son, and the desire he has of being loved by souls redeemed by the shedding of his most precious blood. She pondered on this a long time in painful amazement or as though in a trance, and while she gazed on the gentle picture with tear filled eyes, she suddenly felt the presence of a protective shield in her heart. This shield was the most holy name of Mary.

Maria cherished this name in her heart; she kept it on her lips, and it was through this holy name that she experienced new interior strength. Although as a child she had manifested an ardent and fiery temper, she now recognized that she had acquired a certain gravity and exterior composure, and also a certain strength of heart that she could

not explain. And so by degrees grace began molding that soul which was destined to form numerous religious and instruct many other women whom God would send to her.

That is not all, however. As the heart of the servant of God had become inflamed with an impelling desire to love God, she yearned to know what she had to do to please him, and with fervent entreaties she asked for this grace. The most Holy Virgin showed her Calvary and the cross and invited her to ascend. At that sight she became frightened and trembled.- "Oh ! I am too weak!", she exclaimed. "I can't do that. I don't have the strength," and she tried to evade the invitation. But Jesus always encouraged her with infinite kindness and so gradually he won her over. The greatest difficulty she encountered was having to deny herself even legitimate pleasures and of appearing singular in the eyes of the world, for she wanted to keep everything concealed in her heart. In this also the divine Mother came to her aid and told her: "No, do not fear; I will help you." Then and there she felt herself held lightly, like a child, in trustworthy arms, and in that instant she made a total offering of herself to God, abandoning herself entirely into his hands. It was then that she became conscious of a complete change of heart. Filled with courage, she was disposed to listen to the voice of the Beloved, who favored her with the amazing disclosure of his gracious kindness. When he then invited her to follow him, she felt drawn by an irresistible power.

So that she might know in what way he wanted her to serve him, God so disposed that the Venerable del Bufalo should come to Vallecorsa to preach a mission. When Maria saw the zeal of the unwearying laborer and the fatiguing toil he took upon himself for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, she was seized by an impelling desire to devote herself, too, to working for the salvation of the neighbor, a desire that kept increasing at the reflection that many, many souls were being eternally lost.

As the most gracious God wanted to let her know more explicitly that he was calling her to do this good not by herself alone, but along with others, he let her see, as though in a dream vision, a group of religious who were all absorbed in God, and she heard it said: "These are your companions"- companions whom she later recognized among her sisters.

The moment, however, which God had designated for beginning the undertaking, had not arrived. Furthermore, God wanted to perfect her virtue and prepare her to carry out his will. As it is a grace to know how to suffer for God out of love, God purified her with sufferings of mind and spirit which became all the more painful when they involved also her soul.

She began to fear she was living in mortal sin and could give herself no peace. She wept and sighed and was thrust into extreme anguish. She was reassured in this regard, and although she preserved peace in the depth of her heart, the torment increased, and she felt there was no hope for her because of her infidelities. Finally calm was restored, soon to be followed, however, by a new attack. She was troubled with thoughts of hypocrisy and deceit, and she feared to be doing good for the sake of mere appearance and pretence. This, too, came to an end, but then she found herself in the grip of despair because she felt all she did was wrong. In the midst of these torments she had to engage in a conflict with hell. The devil tried to persuade her that it was impossible for her to continue in the life she had assumed and that in the end she would fall under his dominion.

Finally, after three years of continuous struggling which had become a veritable agony, Maria carried off a complete victory. She paid no more attention to the spiritual

turmoil, but trusted completely in the Lord to whom she had already given herself unconditionally, as also to his most holy Mother.

And here who can fail to admire the working of grace that with such mastery clears away all obstacles to a soul's spiritual growth and, by planting virtues within it, strengthens it in the crucible of tribulation and perfects it? But what will you say when I reveal also those gifts of nature which the most gracious God was pleased to add to those of his grace so that nothing would be lacking to make of her an excellent foundress, a woman able to govern numerous communities and many daughters dispersed here and there in various towns to promote the glory of God? You may find this hard to believe. Yet you need only recall what she said, what she did, and you will find a woman of talent and genius, of charity and sweetness, strong and kind, wise and alert, joyous, friendly and lively, compassionate, affectionate and loving; simple as a dove, prudent as a serpent, accurate in judgment; sensible, just in her principles. In a word, you will find in her a mingling of qualities that will delight and charm you. If at first glance she did not appear to be such a gifted person; that was because she loved to conceal herself from the eyes of all and even from herself. And yet sometimes these very things became evident as does the light at mid-day.

After this exposition, what remains to be seen except the faithful correspondence of the Servant of God with the divine call? It is certain that a plenitude of grace bestowed with such prodigality on this generous soul could not remain without effect. Venerable Gaspar del Bufalo assured her that God did not want her in the seclusion of a cloister, as she desired, but to become a saint in the world. She learned from her director that God was calling her to found a new institute of Adorers of the Most Precious Blood and, to do good to persons of her own sex by means of teaching and works of piety. When she was sure of this beyond the shadow of doubt, she abandoned herself into the hands of God and, giving herself to prayer, waited for a favorable occasion to begin. Now she was twenty-nine years old; the year was 1834 when Bishop Lais of Ferentino offered her a school in Acuto or St. Stefano. Since the latter was too near her home, she decided to choose the former.

When arrangements were completed, she prepared herself for the departure. The riding horses were ready. Maria attended mass, received communion, and took some food. Her father accompanied her to the outskirts of the village. There he bade her a final farewell, for he was never to see her again during this poor exile. And he wept. Maria mustered her courage, for she was deeply moved by this grievous separation; she asked for the blessing and with a great, generous and intrepid spirit she mounted the horse and began the journey. Her father's eyes followed her, and when he could no longer see her, he returned home and burst into a flood of tears, for he felt he had lost a treasure in losing the daughter he loved so tenderly and upon whom he had built his hopes for his old age.

Meanwhile Maria continued her journey and God soon let her taste the sufferings of the ministry. An overhanging thorn branch forcefully struck her eye and it began to swell. She continued the journey in pain, but by the next morning her eye was healed.

When she arrived in Ferentino she described the plan of the new foundation to the bishop and he approved it. But, O God! Whatever could she do? The house was small and inconvenient, poorly constructed and lacking even what was necessary.

The town was poor, the means scarce. There were no willing moneyed benefactors. The school was overcrowded with pupils. What was she to do? Everybody would have been dismayed and would have abandoned the undertaking. Not Maria.

She knew full well that the works of God are the fruit of prayer and tears and sufferings; she also knew that they are like the grain of mustard seed and want to grow in their own little way and therefore, rather than getting appalled, she thanked God and blessed the Lord. She opened the school and helped herself as well as she knew how.

At any rate, she did not lose sight of her plan and was as busy as she could be. Although her spirit was willing, her constitution could not bear the strain and she became gravely ill. They feared she would die and that all negotiations would come to an end. Shortly afterwards, though, she recovered and resumed her toilsome work.

Among her students she noticed some girls who seemed apt for the undertaking. She accepted them as boarders and they became the first stones of the spiritual edifice. As the first house was not suitable she tried a few others, and finally, after many difficulties had been overcome, the Monastery of the Adorers of the Precious Blood became a reality. With what means? Those furnished by Providence. And how? With sole confidence in God.

She declared: "The Work is God's and he will take care of it." Meanwhile other girls presented themselves to her and asked to be admitted. Maria accepted them with a kindness all her own, instructed them, comforted and encouraged them, and placed them under the direction of the Blessed Virgin. In an admirable manner she formed their hearts, leading them to the love of the crucified Lord. Then she sent them to the schools she opened, and they had astonishing success. It was a marvel not noticed at first, but that is what it actually was. Pastors were attracted to this Institute, the city commissions preferred it to others. The Adorers of the Divine Blood were in demand, and Maria was most willing to satisfy all as far as possible.

She opened 56 schools, and now more than 200 young women are wearing the habit of the institute. Maria suffered when she saw so many poor children without educators and would have wished to relieve the needs of all in order to draw souls to God. She had no other concern than to see that Jesus and most holy Mary were being loved.

And for this reason - if you let your thoughts go back to Acuto a little while - you will always find her engaged in work, always in action; and if you turn your gaze on the entire institute, you will see that she bore the official burden all alone. The direction of the institute was entirely in her hands and she had to be responsible for everything: the religious, the schools, regular observance, the good works, even temporal concerns.

Nor was this a trifling burden, especially for a woman. Nevertheless she carried the cross willingly, reflecting that it is an honor to serve the Lord amid suffering. Yet more, always prompt in obeying, she embraced it all with vigorous energy and surprising persistence.

See her in the act. Observe how hard she works to open, organize and promote the schools; how in the missioning of the sisters she endeavors to keep them calm and contented, not only regarding their position, but also in regard to their companions and the privations they will have to encounter. She gives herself no rest. How many and various are the sufferings she has to endure! She suffers for her sisters who are in pain and makes all their troubles her own. For herself she reserves the bitter and gives others all the sweetness she can.

She is wholly sold to the glory of God and the neighbors' well-being; she no longer thinks of herself; her days are consecrated to God and she wants to live only to please him.

And here I will not tell you about the abstinence (renunciations?) she cleverly concealed from others, nor of her mortifications ... of her poor clothing, contenting herself with wearing the same clothing in winter as in summer, even in the severest inclemency of the season. I will tell you only of the frequent and sometimes disastrous journeys on horseback or on foot, making her way through ice and snow, during dashing rains over the worst roads, which at times were packed with dangers. Talking about these I will say that a number of times she was in danger of losing her life, which was saved only by God's special protection.

I will tell you that sometimes she lost the way and was compelled to spend the night in the woods without having even a morsel of bread to relieve her fast, or not partaking of any so that she could receive holy communion the next morning as soon as she arrived at her destination. I will tell you that one time she was surprised by high fever and chills, so much so that she was no longer able to continue on horseback. She was compelled to dismount and, supported by two of her religious, she continued the journey with difficulty. (But I will tell you - and what I am relating some of you know better than I do, and perhaps one or the other was even her companions.) These were things that had become ordinary and so nothing was made of them anymore. But neither few nor insignificant were these new sufferings and tribulations that our Maria endured willingly for love of her God whenever she went to open and visit the schools, to console her sisters who anxiously awaited her to discuss the Lord's work with her: sufferings and tribulations borne in failing health and extreme weakness up to the point of not being able to stand up, and doing herself violence not to show it. Added to this was the long and continuous correspondence protracted far into the night to further the good of the institute, the schools and the religious until her arm became weary. Now, just tell me whether or not she responded faithfully to her vocation!

Yet there was something over and above this in Maria. Such love toward God and neighbor burned in her heart that, unable to keep it confined in her bosom, she was constrained to manifest it externally. Hear her, in fact, how she speaks of God in her private talks. Read her letters, and you will find them vibrant with the spirit of Jesus Christ. Listen to her when she is speaking in the schools to two, to three hundred women gathered there to hear the word of God.

Like an angel she spoke, with simplicity, it is true, but totally possessed by the love of God. The themes she presented were mostly the passion of Jesus Christ, Mary most holy or some eternal truth. She entered into these in such wise that her listeners were moved to tears and sought a confessor to wash themselves in the blood of the immaculate Lamb. And take note that she did not speak at random but methodically, just as if she were presenting thoughts she had memorized. Yet in reality they were deeply ingrained reflections flowing freely from her heart, and one would almost be inclined to say that she had the gift of the word.

More. It was not rarely either that she spoke, but occasionally as often as three times a day; nor just for a few moments, but frequently for the duration of an hour and even longer. She never wearied of speaking and found her whole contentment in talking about God. She did get tired and was troubled with a weakness in the chest, and she

would feel like keeping still, but charity would not consent to this and she urged herself on. Having resumed her talk, she no longer felt the discomfort. Scarcely had she finished when she was assailed anew by extreme weakness. She suffered, but was ready to suffer still more. Consumed by her labors, she was happy to give also her blood and her life for God.

And now, having said all this, what more can one desire? Oh, how many more things I could say yet to present her to you as a strong woman of immense worth. But time is lacking. Leaving everything to the judgment of the Church, I will only say that four years have gone by since she experienced a vivid sensation in her heart when thinking of the Sorrowful Mother Mary and at times she felt a fire burning in her breast that she could not moderate. Always up and around, she endured weakness and fevers and realized that she had not much longer to live. She set out for Rome the last time, and when leaving Acuto and her convent, she felt that God demanded nothing further of her and that she would not return again.

She set about finishing everything she could, but her strength abandoned her and she was forced to remain in bed. Already then she was disposed to die.

Her spirit was perfectly calm and no word was heard in her intense suffering except an exclamation of love repeated with much affection: "O my God!" and nothing more. She wanted neither to live nor to die; she wanted only what God wanted. She no longer concerned herself about other things, satisfied only to please God. A distressing restlessness troubled her and this she supported in peace. She regretted not to be doing anything for God and desired to suffer more.

As long as breathing difficulties, coughing, fever or her ulcerated tongue did not impede her speaking, she continued to give salutary reminders; she gave some directives and dealt with matters pertaining to the institute.

From the schools outside of Rome her anxious sisters came in to see their tender mother for the last time and to receive her blessing. They found her health considerably impaired and wept in view of their bitter loss. It was so utterly painful for them to leave her. In the fervent hope of seeing them again in heaven, Maria disposed them for the separation with serenity and had them return to their assigned places.

Often she washed herself in the blood of the divine Lamb, nourished herself each morning with the food of angels, enduring, if possible, the thirst she felt, and in the intimacy of her heart she renewed the offering of herself to God.

She thanked her daughters for all the assistance they had given her during the course of her illness and left them, as souvenirs, the few small objects she had with her. She wanted to die perfectly poor just as she had lived voluntarily as a poor person.

Among the blessings she received there was also one sent her by the Holy Father. With the utmost resignation she awaited the last hour. The new day was beginning to dawn. At 2:15 after midnight, on August 20 1866, while the prayers of the Church were being recited, Maria fell asleep in her Lord.

O blessed soul, go; go now to your rest. Go to receive the reward God has prepared for you for your faithful service. But from heaven, where I trust you have already gone, remember me. Look once again upon your daughters, and pray that the institute you founded gain ever new strength and flower with good and zealous religious. Oh, yes I told you this when you were still alive. You are to obtain this from God, and may this be the fruit of your trials, sufferings and toilsome labors.

[Final note: In someone else's handwriting was added: "Composed and written by the Servant of God, D. Giovanni Merlini. To this I certify Nov. 22, 1873. Rizzoli, Director General." He (Merlini) did not give the homily because at the last moment the Cardinal Vicar arrived to celebrate the funeral rites.]