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Witnessing Maria Goretti: Testimonial Practices for a Silent Martyr

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M.T.S., Harvard Divinity School, 2005
B.A., Wellesley College, 2003

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Abstract

Witnessing Maria Goretti: Testimonial Practices for a Silent Martyr
By J. Cayenne Claassen-Luttner

This dissertation examines diverse forms of devotion to the twentieth-century Roman Catholic martyr and saint, Maria Goretti. The analysis begins by recognizing that the narrative of Goretti as a "martyr to chastity"—the narrative that was used in Goretti's canonization process and that was widely accepted through the mid-twentieth century—is ethically untenable. The dissertation argues that the case of Maria Goretti is a turning point in the history of Roman Catholic martyrdom: she is a new kind of martyr and calls for a new examination of what it means for a victim of unjust violence to be a martyr. Chapter One brings early Christian structures of martyrdom into conversation with late twentieth-century victim testimonies. Goretti is located in between, as a martyr who bears witness to the inherent insufficiency of victim testimony. Chapter Two discusses the documentation of Goretti's martyrdom, particularly in her case for canonization, and calls into question the process of transforming testimony into evidence. Chapter Three analyzes displays of Goretti's relics, in the context of Christian theologies of martyred flesh as a form of revelation. Chapter Four analyzes some of the ways devotees of Goretti have publically performed her narrative and their devotion to her. The chapter argues that these diverse performances, including films, plays, pilgrimages, and liturgies, are experiments in constructing new forms of relationship between the saint and the devotional community. The dissertation closes by reflecting on what it means for the contemporary Roman Catholic Church to inherit this saint and this troubling narrative—asking what moral responsibility incurs in that inheritance.

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Introduction

Maria Goretti was killed just as the twentieth-century began. By some counts, that made her the first martyr of the new century and, at least according to John Paul II, her death "heralded what was to be known as the century of martyrs."[1] When she died at the age of eleven, though, Maria Goretti was impoverished, illiterate, and fatherless. The Goretti family had migrated from the region of *Le Marche* to work as sharecroppers in the Pontine Marshes southwest of Rome. The family shared a house and farmland with two other migrant laborers: the father and son Giovanni and Alessandro Serenelli.

Luigi Goretti, Maria's father, had contracted malaria shortly after the migration. Before he died, he begged his wife to take the children and leave that unhealthy place.[2] But the family was trapped by poverty. In fact, Luigi's death left the family increasingly vulnerable to and dependant upon on the two Serenelli men.

The Goretti family was now headed by a woman with six young children. Assunta Goretti, Maria's mother, had to take on her late husband's work, so joined the men working in the fields. With this displacement, Maria Goretti took her mother's place in the household labor structure. At the age of nine, then, Maria Goretti became responsible for the "women's work," caring for her younger siblings and doing the cooking and mending for both the Goretti and Serenelli families.

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[1] John Paul II, "Maria Goretti: Example for Young People," letter to the bishop of Albano, in *L'Osservatore Romano,* weekly English edition, July 17, 2002.

[2] In hagiographical writing about Goretti this terrain is frequently characterized by "mud and miasma" and mosquitoes. See for example, Armando Gualandi, *S. Maria Goretti* (Milan: Paoline, 1979), 184.

Maria Goretti found comfort in her religious devotion, especially prayer to the Virgin Mary and the sacrament of the Eucharist—although she had few opportunities to attend Mass between her First Communion and her death. Goretti's precarious social and financial position hindered her participation in the church. Goretti was baptized as an infant, thus formally entering the Roman Catholic Church, yet she could not engage in the rite of First Communion and participate as an adult member of the church until she had some basic catechetical training. Goretti's parents were not able to teach her, and because Maria could not read she could not teach herself from books. Maria's mother, worried about the expense of the accoutrements necessary for properly presenting a girl for her first Communion: a white dress and veil, jewelry, shoes. Moreover, children were not normally accepted to Communion until they were twelve—an age Goretti never reached. Nevertheless, Goretti overcame all these obstacles, studying with a literate family friend, and first taking the Eucharist at the age of ten.[3]

The following year Goretti was murdered by Alessandro Serenelli, someone she had been taught to respect and care for as a brother. One summer day, as their families were working outside, Serenelli gagged Goretti, pulled her into the shared house, and attempted to rape her. In the course of the assault, Serenelli stabbed her repeatedly, then left her for dead on the kitchen floor. Goretti was found in this state and taken to a hospital in Nettuno, where she underwent surgery and received last rites. The priest asked Goretti if she would forgive her attacker, and she responded in the affirmative.

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[3] The date of her First Communion is not certain and is a point of contention between Giordano Bruno Guerri and the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The alternate suggestion is that Goretti first received the Eucharist a few weeks before her murder. Commissione di Studio Istituita dalla Congregazione per le Cause dei Santi, *A Proposito di Maria Goretti: Santitá e Canonizzazioni* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1985), 65-72.

After hours of physical pain, and slipping into a delirium in which she relived the attack, Goretti died.

Interpreting the Story

These basic facts about Maria Goretti's short life are generally accepted. It is their vast range of possible interpretations, though, that interests me here. I have provided this basic account of Goretti's life and murder to situate the reader who might otherwise get lost among the various (often competing) representations and narratives I refer to throughout this project. My focus is not on Goretti herself, but on how she has become the object of devotion. This project is an analysis of how the cult of Maria Goretti constructs her as a martyr and performs her testimony.

Martyrdom is always a matter of interpretation but Maria Goretti's death particularly stretches the boundaries of what is meant by martyrdom. Even in the 1950's, at the height of her cult, Goretti's devotees could acknowledge that there are multiple possible ways to narrate her death. A hagiography written for an American audience, and published shortly after her canonization, begins by conceding that, "it does sound odd, at least to our ears, to find set about our altars…an eleven-year-old, poverty-stricken peasant girl, stabbed to death in an obscure *crime passionnel* that less than fifty years ago headlined the sensational Italian newspapers."[4] The sense that this is an "odd" martyrdom has motivated my focus on Goretti and many of my questions in this project. Why—and how—did this particular murder become meaningful for Roman Catholics around the world? And how can it continue to be meaningful?

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[4] C.E. Maguire, *Saint Maria Goretti: Martyr of Purity* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1950), 15.

How could one girl, who never invented anything, never wrote anything, and was never photographed, be remembered and retold in such disparate ways? How could the same girl be tabloid-fodder immediately after her death, and later become "the polar star of [a] generation"?[5] In the 1940s the leader of the Italian Communist Youth Federation (FGCI) commended Goretti for her "morality…and her spirit of sacrifice" and as model whom communist girls ought to imitate.[6] Yet in 1950s America, Goretti was upheld as an anti-communist saint. One devotional essay declares that Goretti would have been appalled by communism—if only she had been aware of its existence.[7] Goretti's fervent devotees insist that her message has always been clear and strong—in the words of one priest, "our heroic saint's inspiring witness thunders through the ages."[8] Yet, four years after that statement was published, the Benedictine oblate Kathleen Norris unflatteringly compared Goretti to Marilyn Monroe.

> Their lives, their deaths, have been appropriated, squeezed for every drop of meaning by those who've not necessarily had their best interests at heart…each in her own way has become a perfect cipher, a blank page on which others write to suit their own purposes. Both have been so consistently ill-used that they make us cry out, "Enough, already; let her rest in peace."[9]

Considering the array of contradictory messages attributed to Goretti, there is something to Norris's depiction of Goretti as a blank page. The violent drama of her death, and her

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[5] Cardinal James Francis Stafford, homily given at the Sanctuary of Fatima, Fatima, Portugal, July 12, 2006. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/tribunals/apost_penit/documents/rc_trib_appen_doc_20060712_stafford-fatima_en.html (accessed January 12, 2012).

[6] These comments by Enrico Berlinguer in 1945 are mentioned in several places. See for instance, Stephen Gundle, *I communisti Italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca* (Florence: Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, 1995), 52 and Fabrizio Contessa, *Santa Maria Goretti* (Milan: San Paolo Edizione, 2001), 6.

[7] Helen Walker Homan, *Letters to the Martyrs* (New York: David McKay, 1951), 39.

[8] Richard J. Rego, *'No! No! It is a Sin!' A Message to the Young Adults of Today from Saint Maria Goretti, Patroness of Youth* (St. Paul: The Leaflet Missal Company, 1992), 17.

[9] Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 223.

silence at its center, make the narrative of Goretti's death especially multivalent. Her silence is troubling and has, at times, been "ill-used." Goretti's silence, though, is not a nothingness.

The same multivalence that Norris sees as cipher-like is what gives the narrative of Goretti's death the flexibility to evolve with her devotional communities. If Goretti's narrative were fixed with the interpretations assigned at the time of her beatification, then her cult would have long ago died out. Advocates of Goretti's cult rarely admit it,[10] but her popularity did diminish significantly in the late twentieth century, which is not surprising to anyone familiar with that time period—especially among Goretti's devotees. From its beginning, Gorettian devotion was framed in opposition to liberalizing cultural trends. In beatifying Goretti, Pope Pius XII expressed the hope that she could help reverse the "radical transformations [that] have upset the life of our young girls and women."[11] This period of cultural tumult that so horrified Pius was 1902-1947, well before the sexual revolution that would upset later pontiffs. In the decades since Goretti's beatification, "woman" certainly did not, as Pius had hoped, return to "the retirement and reserve that formerly characterized her life."[12]

Although diminished, Goretti's cult did not die along with Pius's hope of returning to nineteenth-century gender norms. I think it would have been another sad

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[10] John Paul II, for instance, politely ignored the obvious diminishment of Goretti's popularity, asserting in 2002 that Goretti was "among the best-loved saints of the 20th century" and that "devotion to her has continued to spread on every continent." John Paul II, "Maria Goretti: Example for Young People."

[11] Pius XII, "La Celestiale Figura della Beata Goretti" (homily given in Rome, April 28, 1947), in *Discorsi e radiomessagi di sua santitá Pio XII, 2 Marzo 1947-1° Marzo 1948*, ed. Angelo Belardetti (Rome, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1948). The translation here is from Godfrey Poage, *In Garments All Red: The Life Story of Maria Goretti* (Boston: The Daughters of St. Paul, 1977), 14.

[12] Pius XII in Poage, 14.

abuse to let her memory die as a sacrifice to those archaic values. Instead, Gorettian devotion today is peculiarly dynamic. For her story to be meaningful in a contemporary context it needs to evolve—to adapt to the changes in our understanding and valuation of women, girls, sexuality and sexual violence. The following chapters will trace several mutations in the representation of Goretti. Some of these efforts are unfruitful, and sometimes even more destructive than earlier representations. Among the various attempts to narrate, represent, manifest, perform or otherwise bear witness to Goretti's martyrdom, there are a few efforts with life-giving potential—and that might even suggest new models of martyrdom and witnessing.

The (Im)morality of the Old Story

Traditionally Maria Goretti's martyrdom has been narrated in terms of a single heroic act in which Goretti chose death over sin. Goretti was presented as an exemplar, particularly as a model of purity and chastity for women and young people. As I show in the following chapters, there are other ways to understand Goretti's death, and this traditional narrative is falling out of favor. Nonetheless, there are places where the narrative of Goretti's heroism can still be heard. Pope Benedict XVI still speaks of Maria Goretti's morally-motivated self-sacrifice. He has thus called on the saint on behalf of young Catholics, "that she may help you to choose good always, even when it is to your cost."[13]

The traditional heroic narrative of Goretti's martyrdom depends on two assumptions that I reject as both false and destructive. These assumptions are a) that

[13] Italics in the original. Benedict XVI, General Audience (Rome, July 7, 2010).

Goretti's "choice" to be killed was the morally better option, and b) that this choice was within her control.

The narrative of Goretti's heroic chastity assumes that dying was the better option. One hagiographic text explains the rigorous morality of Goretti's choice.

> She could have rationalized that 'what two consenting adults do together is their business, as long as nobody gets hurt.' She knew that, having been forced against her will, little or no personal guilt would have been her's [sic]."[14]

In some versions of the story, the claim is even stronger: that death was Goretti's only morally licit option.

The effusive hagiographies of Goretti from the early and mid-twentieth century do not understand this as a case of rape. The quote above admits of no tension in the conjunction of "consenting" and being "forced against her will." Pius XII uses typical language when he frames Goretti's choice. Goretti, he says, "desired but one thing: fidelity to Christ at any price, even at the cost of her life. Not for anything in the world would she violate the Divine Law."[15] In this traditional narrative, Serenelli presented her with two alternatives: she could either die or she could live and "violate the Divine Law" by consenting to sex.

I have always found this claim absurd. In part, this is due to a tremendous shift in the cultural and legal definitions of rape that occurred in a very short period of time. When my mother was being educated in a Catholic high school, Pius' words were troubling but coherent. A generation later I am the beneficiary of a feminist movement that succeeded in rendering Pius's words nonsensical. It seems obvious now that this was a case of attempted rape. When someone is held at gunpoint and told to choose between

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[14] Rego, 14.
[15] Pius XII, "Celestiale Beata," using the translation from Poage, 13.

death and sexual intercourse, the event is an attempted rape, not a test of chastity. It is a violation against Goretti, not a violation by Goretti against God. And since it is certainly not a sin to be raped, it is absurd to speak of the risk that Goretti might "violate the Divine Law," however she responded to Serenelli's demand. One of the most dramatic changes brought about by the women's movement may be precisely this shift in the understanding of rape; it is no longer taken for granted that rape is worse than death and that any chaste woman or girl would fight to the death before "consenting" to rape.

The second problematic premise of the heroic narrative is that it frames the story as though Goretti had a choice between two clear alternatives. The traditional story depicts a standoff, between a young girl who has been silenced by a handkerchief shoved in her mouth, and an assailant who is larger, stronger and armed with a weapon. If we are to suspend disbelief and follow the logic of the story, we must ignore the power imbalance of this situation. The story would have us imagine, rather, that it is the girl who controls what will happen next. The assailant has offered her two choices, and she will make a rational decision between them. We are asked to trust that these are real alternatives and that the attacker will abide by her preference. We are to believe that the girl *knows* that these are real alternatives and that these are the only two possible sequences of events. We are to believe not only that an eleven-year-old girl could meaningfully consent to sex in this situation, but that she is entirely confident that she will escape violence if she gives this consent. We are also asked to believe that she has no fear of being raped, and need have no such fear. The story further requires us to imagine that the girl's only possible reason for declining consent is a deep commitment to the moral norm that prohibits nonmarital sex.

The real horror of this story is the implicit denial that rape exists. These heroic narratives of Goretti's martyrdom presume that somehow it is not possible to rape a good girl. Perhaps in this regard the story is even more destructive than the story of the virgin martyr Agnes. In that narrative of a saintly woman threatened with rape, Agnes is saved only by some dramatic acts of divine intervention. The Goretti story does not depend on any such miracles. Yet the narrative denies the possibility that Serenelli might rape Maria Goretti. The traditional narrative of Goretti's heroic choice is supposed to occur within the natural order, which is envisioned as a world where girls have control of whether they are raped or not. Or perhaps it is a world where it would be impossible for any man to rape any Christian girl who is good enough, pure enough, and has a strong enough will. In effect, the story creates a world in which rape does not actually exist. The Goretti story suggests that a woman or child threatened with rape always has the option of dying instead—and ought to take that option. If a woman survives by "consenting" to the assault, it would prove that she had the choice to live—and since she had a choice, it was never rape at all.

It was not long ago that this understanding of rape was built into the American practice of criminal law. Rape victims had to prove that they had physically resisted the assault. If they didn't fight back, it wasn't rape. At times, American courts have even required evidence of "utmost resistance" by the victim as the minimum standard of nonconsent.[16] As recently as 1994, Pennsylvania's criminal rape statute held that unless

[16] Susan Estrich, *Real Rape* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987), 29-30.

there was physical evidence of violence, there was no rape. Joan Chittister termed this "the St. Maria Goretti Law."[17]

The Story of Maria Goretti's Silence

The story of Maria Goretti's martyrdom can be read as a story about her silencing, in ways both violent and subtle. Goretti was most likely targeted for sexual violence precisely because of her vulnerability, but much of Serenelli's violence against her was also aimed at preventing her from disclosing what he did to her. Maria Goretti's silence is also one of the most realistic aspects of her hagiographies—the imposition of silence, the ease with which this can be accomplished, and the need to be heard precisely because she has been silenced—literally gagged.

A number of late-twentieth-century and more recent discourses of liberation have focused on the need to give voice to the voiceless (the oppressed or the othered), who can be liberated or can liberate themselves by making their interests heard. These themes can be found in discourses of feminism, Marxism, Holocaust survival, trauma theory, and liberation theology, as well as in discourses specific to the rape-crisis movement. These activist movements are well intentioned in their valorization of the voice or voices of the oppressed. However, these discourses can be critiqued—internally—for their assumptions about what counts as the authentic voice of the oppressed. Gayatri Spivak most famously expressed such a critique in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She warns of the harm that can come from the unselfconscious efforts to give voice by "the first-world

[17] Joan Chittister, "One, Two, Three Strikes, You're Out in the Ol' Boys' Game," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 17, 1994: 12.

intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves."[18]

Following Spivak's warning, I will not pretend to disclose the authentic voice of Maria Goretti. However, attention to the multiple ways in which Goretti was silenced (albeit not absolutely) can shed light on the question of what it would mean for the subaltern to speak—and which of the words spoken count as this hoped-for and liberating speech. In this project I will analyze the cult of Maria Goretti—the practices and discourses that construct and reproduce devotional narratives of her martyrdom, and in so doing, I will trouble the distinction between silence and testimony. Goretti's was not an absolute muteness, but the records of her speech are so minimal and indirect that they should cause us to question what *counts* as testimony, or successful testimony. What speech is enough or authentic enough to be really distinguishable from silence—or worse, forced speech against oneself?

In the story of Maria Goretti's martyrdom, the assault begins verbally, with words that Maria is said not to understand. These are words that she has been told not to hear and certainly not to repeat. Her mother has scolded her not to listen when people say dirty things, to simply forget them and not let them enter her mind. "My puppy, whenever you hear bad words, let it go in one ear and out the other.' 'Mama,' she replied, 'I would rather bite my tongue than speak an unclean word.'" After this conversation, "How could she tell Assunta what Alessandro had proposed?"[19]

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[18] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), 292.

[19] Pietro DiDonato, *The Penitent* (New York: Hawthorne, 1962), 31.

Next the violence is heightened with threats. In the Apostolic process for Goretti's beatification, Assunta Goretti formally testified to a deathbed conversation with her daughter. Assunta reported that when Goretti was in the hospital, a doctor approached Assunta and urged her to ask her daughter if Serenelli had ever before "said anything." Assunta never specifies what is meant by this vague phrase, but in the story that follows it becomes apparent that they are speaking of previous attempts by Serenelli to sexually assault Maria Goretti.[20] According to the transcript of her testimony, Assunta faced Goretti and asked the question as she had been instructed.

> "*Marietta*, did he say anything to you any other time?" And she: "*Mamma mia*, two other times." And I: "*Madonna mia* help me! Why did you not say anything to your *mamma*?" To which she: "I never told *mamma* about it because he said he would kill me" and she added: "he killed me all the same."[21]

Goretti explains that she never told anyone about Serenelli's harassment because she believed his threat that he would kill her if she ever reported what he had done. Her silence did not save her, but she had good reasons for thinking that speaking would not help.

In several hagiographies Maria worries about the effect her words would have on her mother. She does not want to worry her mother, and she fears causing strain between the two families. It is also entirely plausible that if she had told her mother, Assunta

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[20] Immediately after the brief conversation I quote below, Assunta took aside the unnamed doctor to ask if Serenelli had succeeded in "dishonoring" Goretti on the previous occasions. The doctor replied that no, she is "just as she was when she was born." Giovanni Alberti, *Assunta Goretti: 'la Mamma di una Figlia Santa'* (Nettuno, Italy: Santuario Madonna delle Grazie e S. Maria Goretti, 2007), 391.

[21] Assunta Goretti. Interview by Joseph Stella, Pius Costanzi, Josephus Salvatori, Session XXI, October 29, 1938. *Copia Publica Transumpti Processus Apostolica auctoritote constructi in Curia Ecclesiastica Albanensi, super fama sanctitactis vitae, virtutibus, martyrio, causa martyris et signis seu miraculis in specia Servae Dei Mariae Goretti*, Albano Laziale, Italy: 1940, response to question XII. 164; A photocopy of the transcript of this interview is published in Alberti, *Assunta Goretti*, 390.

might not have done anything.[22] She did not have the economic means to protect her daughter; the Goretti family could not afford to live and work independently of the Serenellis. Another explanation for Goretti's silence, sometimes mentioned in the hagiographic texts, is that she was "ashamed of it all."[23]

Finally, murder is the last method of silencing that Serenelli inflicted on Goretti. According to several authors, Serenelli stabbed her and left her for dead. She then tried to escape, but her screams for help only brought Alessandro, who stabbed her and kicked her and again left her for dead. She was still alive at this point, but no longer screaming. Perhaps Goretti hoped that if she acted dead and remained silent for a time she would live to have the opportunity to speak later.

Goretti's death was not only a murder, but also a violent and gendered silencing of someone whose capacity for public testimony was already limited. The crime of Goretti's murder was not totally effaced; her wounded body was found before she died, and she lived long enough to identify her assailant. Serenelli was arrested for murder and attempted rape and he was convicted and punished for the crime. Somehow, despite being threatened, gagged, and murdered—all violent attempts to silence this child who was already structurally limited in her capacity to testify—Goretti came to be recognized as a martyr.

Witnessing Out of Silence

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[22] For a discussion of this possibility see Brian McNeil, "Maria Goretti—a Saint for Today?," *New Blackfriars* 81, 958 (December 2000), 502-503.

[23] James Morelli, *Teen-ager's Saint: Saint Maria Goretti*, ed. William Peil (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Grail Publications, 1954), 38.

If we define testimony as direct access to a victim's experience, or her own words about her experience, then we have no hope of recovering the testimony of Maria Goretti. In the second chapter I will analyze the words attributed to Goretti that have been preserved in the historic records of her cult. There are a few such words, although they were not written or dictated by Goretti herself. Yet these words are not original, spontaneous, or specific to her experience and thoughts. I argue that the mere existence of words attributed to her does not necessarily constitute testimony.

However, Goretti's eleven years of life have been followed by eleven decades of cult: the collective attempts of a community to remember and make sense of her death in the context of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Roman Catholicism. Goretti's death and cult span a period in which the Church is struggling to become modern, resisting changing gender norms, and simultaneously identifying models of holiness for this new context.

I do not wish to treat Goretti as an emptiness, a cipher, whose violent death can mean anything. And I certainly do not embrace all interpretations of Goretti's martyrdom as meaningful or testimonial in a liberating sense. Yet it is with a sense of hope that I analyze Goretti's cult. I see it as a laboratory of testimony whose experiments are not always (or often) successful, but nonetheless exemplify a range of possibilities.

An Outline of the Project

In this project I look to Goretti's cult—this cacophony of responses to her silence—to imagine how it might be possible to bear witness, meaningfully, and

ethically, to victims who have been violently silenced. Read carefully, the texts and practices of Goretti's cult illustrate the following:

1. Testimony cannot function without someone, some sort of community, to receive it and interpret it sympathetically *as* testimony. This insight is likewise central to most Roman Catholic conceptions of martyrdom: a death cannot be a martyrdom unless there is someone to witness it.
2. In as much as there is a moral "ought" to testimony, it is in the responsibility of the community to bear witness, not the obligation of victims to "speak out."

In Chapter One I situate this project within discourses of Roman Catholic martyrdom, particularly in the twentieth century, and in conversation with the genre of survivor testimony. The following chapters analyze the cult of Maria Goretti as a community receiving her testimony and creating her as a witness.

In Chapter Two I look at the development of Goretti's cult in its most official manifestations. Within the formal processes of beatification and canonization Goretti's value as a witness/martyr and moral exemplar was evaluated according to an explicitly legalistic model of testimony.

Chapter Three shifts from the institutional church's documentation of Goretti to the shrines where Goretti's body is physically presented and represented. Here I consider both the ways that Goretti's body is read as communicating her martyrdom and holiness, and ways that devotees have created her as a martyr—in wood, stone, and wax.

Chapter Four compares a variety of devotional practices and performances of the Goretti story. I look at how relationships between devotees and Maria Goretti are enacted in liturgical and creative performances.

Chapter 1:
Changing Concepts of Martyrological Witness

From the beginning, the cult of St. Maria Goretti has aimed to present Goretti as a contemporary example of an ancient type of martyr. In working for the canonization and legitimization of Goretti's martyrdom, devotees de-emphasize her particularity in order to depict her as seamlessly continuous with the tradition of Christian martyrdom. Padre Mauro dell'Immacolata, the postulator for Goretti's cause for beatification, published a description of Goretti's canonization process. In this text Mauro recounts that the group promoting Goretti's cause aimed to "prove" the "thesis" that "Goretti was a true martyr, not dissimilar from the Virgin Martyrs of the first centuries of the Church: Agnes, Cecilia, Lucia, Agatha, ect."[24] Goretti's canonization was predicated on her martyrdom being like those ancient martyrdoms.

In fact, Goretti is frequently presented as moving Christian time backwards, as if she were a third- or fourth-century saint transported into the confusion of the twentieth century in order to help sanctify the contemporary world. By 1929 Goretti had already been dubbed "La novella Agnese del Secolo XX" in publications by the Passionists—the

[24] Mauro dell'Immaculata, *Una storia vissuta, la canonizzazione di Maria Goretti* (Rome: Coletti, 1961), 46: "*La tesi da noi sostenuta voleva provare che la Goretti era una vera martire, non dissimile dale Vergini Martiri dei primi secoli della Chiesa, Agnese, Cecilia, Lucia, Agata, ecc. Martire, infatti, vuol dire testimonio, e il Martirio e' una testimonianza di amore eroico fino all'effusione del sangue che la creatura da' al Creatore, ripetendo col fatto: piuttosto morire che peccare…La Marietta nostra si era lasciata crivellare di ferrite proprio per questo, per essere fedele al Signore, per non offenderlo col peccato*."

religious order sponsoring her cause. Pius XII and John Paul II adopted this title as well, calling Goretti "the little Saint Agnes of the Twentieth Century."[25]

There are some obvious similarities in the narratives of St. Maria Goretti and St. Agnes of Rome. Agnes and Maria Goretti were Christian girls around the age of twelve who were the victims of attempted rape, which they successfully resisted. Both girls were subsequently killed by stabbing.[26] However, the two martyrdoms are similar only in these evocative particularities. I n structure, Goretti's martyrdom is quite new.

Martyrdom as Trial: The Juridical Model of Martyrdom

The Greek "*martus*" predates Christianity. The word is generally translated to English as "witness" but particularly suggested a witness in a trial. Where it appears in the New Testament, the word references a juridical context—whether literally or metaphorically.[27] When Christians began using *martus* to refer specifically to fellow Christians who were killed because they refuse to apostatize, the word still retained this juridical resonance. Martyrdom narratives were trial records. The earliest *acta* are set within the context of the imperial Roman judicial system. In these second- and third-century martyrdom narratives, the Christian martyr is a defendant who is called before a court and interrogated by an unjust and pagan magistrate. The martyr testifies to his faith

[25] Aurelio della Passione, *La Novella Agnese del Secolo XX: La Beata Maria Goretti Martire della Purezza* (Rome: Coletti, 1929); John Paul II, "Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II durante la benedizione del monumento in onore di Santa Maria Goretti" (Discourse given at the Piazza Santa Maria Goretti, Latina, Italy, September 29, 1991).

[26] Prudentius, "Passio Agnetis" in *Prudence, Tome IV*, tr. M. Lavarenne (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1963).

[27] Alison Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (New York: Cambridge University, 2004), 11, 13-14.

in this public space, where his confession is witnessed by Christians and non-Christians alike. Torture and execution follow, as integral parts of the juridical spectacle.

These early martyrdoms have a consistent structure including the following three elements:

1. A verbal confession and a death perceived as punishment for the confession
2. Torture and death test the confession
3. An audience witnesses the whole process

These three components, part of the Roman legal framework in which the majority of the recorded martyrdoms occurred, become integrated in the development of a distinctively Christian concept of martyrdom.

1. The Coupling of Confession and Death

Traditional martyrdom narratives, known as *acta*, often depict the soon-to-be martyr giving a speech affirming her faith or condemning some evil. This speech is then followed by a lengthy description of the gruesome execution—during which the martyr-in-process makes more eloquent assertions.

The third-century St. Perpetua, for example, was a *martus* both in the technical legal sense and this new Christian sense. The narrative of her martyrdom begins with the arrest of Felicitas, Perpetua and other "young catechumens." Later, Perpetua is taken to a judicial "hearing" before "Hilarianus the governor."[28] So far as the hagiography is concerned, Hilarianus asks her only one question: "are you a Christian?" Perpetua responds in the affirmative. Her concise Latin answer, "Christiana sum," is the legally

[28] Herbert Musurillo, trans., "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas," in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 113.

and religiously definitive confession.[29] Perpetua's conviction and subsequent execution, then, are directly linked to this basic confession of faith.

From a Christian perspective, the (anticipated) punishment proves Perpetua's commitment to this testimony. Thus, the death of Perpetua and her confession of Christian faith constitute a single event in which the spoken testimony is conclusively "ratified by death."[30]

2. Death and Torture Test the Confession

"The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp" explains the use of torture in these legal proceedings against Christians. According to the text's Christian author, "The purpose was that, if possible, the tyrant might persuade them to deny the faith by constant torment." [31] In these early martyrdom narratives, whatever the actual charges, the trial hinges on the Christian's confession of faith.[32] The narrative of martyrdom is based on the understanding that the violence suffered by the martyrs is motivated by "hatred of the faith" and a desire to force Christians to apostatize. It may be fair to question whether this is an accurate historical description of Roman magistrates and policy-makers.[33] However, the narrative of martyrdom requires that Polycarp be killed *because* he is a Christian. If Polycarp were executed in punishment for a crime unrelated to his faith, then the death would not be a Christian martyrdom. Instead, we would have the story of

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[29] Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas," 114.

[30] Theofried Bameister, "Martyrdom and Persecution in Early Christianity," in *Martyrdom Today*, ed. Johannes-Baptist Metz and Exward Schillebeeckx, *Concilium* 163 (1983): 4.

[31] Musurillo, "Martyrdom of St. Polycarp," 5.

[32] Herbert Musurillo, preface to *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), Lxii and 67.

[33] Musurillo argues that persecution of Christians was not always religiously motivated. He notes that that in "The Martyrs of Lyons," Christians are arrested after being "falsely accused…of Oedipean marriages and dinners in the manner of Thyestes" i.e. incest and murder.

a devout Christian man who committed a crime and was justly (albeit extremely) punished.

As Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish*, the spectacle of public torture and execution is itself discursive. The writhing and bleeding bodies designated as criminal demonstrate what the sovereign is willing and able to do to his subjects. Moreover, if the torture produces a forced confession, then the criminal/victim's voice becomes another medium for expressing this power.[34] Ancient, medieval and even contemporary states have justified their use of torture by arguing that it is a way of eliciting (and testing) truth. However, torture can also create truth by exacting false confessions. In such cases, the victim of torture (the designated criminal) is told what to say, and then is compelled to write or vocalize this imposed truth. S/he may even come to believe s/he is a criminal.

This latter, truth-creating function of torture is what the Christian writers of the *acta* perceive and fear in their trials. The pagan judges are not interested in learning whether or not the defendants are Christians. Rather, the torture is supposedly aimed at creating a different reality—by forcing the Christians to renounce their God and their own most central beliefs, the torture produces a failed Christian. In renouncing the faith, the victim of torture becomes something other than a Christian: an apostate.

The hagiographers of Perpetua and Polycarp depict pagan judges, guards, executioners, and mobs, who aim to coax or force Christians to speak words against the Christian faith. In contrast, the goal of each Christian witness is to hold firm to her testimony, even through torture and death. Thus, the martyr's spoken testimony is completed by death. This is how the living witnesses became differentiated from the

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[34] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University, 1985), 27 and elsewhere.

witnesses who had died testifying: "They were indeed martyrs, whom Christ has deigned to take up in their hour of confession, putting his seal on their witness by death: but we are simple, humble confessors."[35] The living confessors continue to witness and continue to risk future challenges to their testimony. Only the deceased martyrs had conclusively won the contest.

Colloquially, we often speak of martyrdom as a "test of faith." This judicial structure of martyrdom, though, is not a test of inner faith so much as a test of external acts and speech in fidelity to that faith. Polycarp's trial does not test the doctrines of Christianity. Nor is it a test of Polycarp's intellectual understanding of Christian doctrines and practices. What is being tested is Polycarp's ability to resist apostasy.

3. The Audience

In *An Exhortation to Martyrdom* Origen stresses the externality of martyrdom. He most forcefully prioritizes appearance in this peculiar piece of advice: "One might say that it is better to honour God with our lips and have our heart far from Him, than to honour Him in our heart, and not confess Him with our mouth unto salvation."[36] With this emphasis on speech rather than belief, Origen indicates that the appearance of martyrdom matters—perhaps even more than the experience of the individual martyr matters. Here Origen urges potential martyrs to be aware of the audience witnessing the martyrdom, and to perform their martyrdoms with this audience in mind. Someone must be able to perceive the deaths as martyrdom. Thus it is not adequate to describe martyrdom as dying in reference to the faith. Rather, martyrdom is centrally about witness; it is dying that bears witness in reference to Christianity.

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[35] Musurillo, "The Martyrs of Lyons," 83.

[36] Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, tr. John J. O'Meara (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1954), 145.

The combination of a public testimony and death becomes something greater than the sum of its parts. In the final chapter of *On the Theology of Death* Karl Rahner even suggests that martyrdom is a perfect speech act. Martyrdom is "absolute testimony." A sacrament, such as the Eucharist, mysteriously, even scandalously, unites a physical signifier with a spiritual signified. Rahner suggests that martyrdom is the opposite—"more" than a sacrament. Christian martyrdom has a "revelatory quality" in which the outward sign perfectly coincides with its inward nature.[37]

Stretching the Relationship between Martyrdom and Legal Testimony

Even after *martyr* becomes a specialized word uniting juridical testimony and Christian death, Latin martyrdom narratives continue to play with multiple forms and senses of the vernacular *testimonium*. After all, these second and third century Christian martyrs who formally testified as Christians could not testify to the same knowledge possessed by the biblical *martures*. They could no longer testify as eyewitnesses to the historical life of Jesus. In *Les origines du culte des martyrs,* Hippolyte Delehaye notes that Christians of the second generation were no longer "witnesses" in precisely the same way as their predecessors.[38] From this second generation onward, martyrs are "indirect witnesses" whose attempts at empirical testimony are only "hearsay." Such a martyr, Delehaye says, simply has no direct experience of the mortal life of Christ. A martyr might testify *on behalf of* the Christian God, but the only empirical content of this

[37] Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, tr. Charles Henkey (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 107-110.

[38] Hippolyte Delehaye, *Le origins du culte des martyres* (Brussels: Bollandistes, 1912), 26-27.

testimony is her own experiences and beliefs. In a strict sense, Delehaye concludes, "this is not a testimony, properly speaking."[39]

These early martyrdom accounts already reveal a dynamism in the concept of martyrdom—a word that is still in the process of being defined. "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas" is a particularly complicated text that layers several meanings of being a witness, bearing witness, and witnessing an event. The text begins by directly addressing its reader and proclaiming its goal:

> *…that which we have heard and have touched with our hands we proclaim also to you*, *so that* those of *you* that were witnesses may recall the glory of the Lord and those that now learn of it through hearing *may have fellowship* with the holy martyrs and, through them, *with* the Lord *Christ Jesus*…[40]

In narrating these martyrdoms, then, the text frames itself as involved in the function of testimony, participating in the witnessing of the martyrs. Here the text affirms its authority to "proclaim" or give witness based on the narrator's real, historical, and sensory experience of the martyrdoms s/he transcribes. Rather than claiming to be an eyewitness, this narrator claims to have witnessed the martyrdoms by having "heard" and having "touched with our hands."

The text addresses itself to two kinds of readers. The first category is readers who "were witnesses" and will now use this text to be reminded of "the glory" they have already experienced. The second category of readers are those who are only now witnessing the martyrdoms, now "learning" of them, "through hearing" this text. This new reader, though, is addressed in the hopes that s/he will hear more than the bare historical facts. The text aims to make a new witness out of this reader who is too late to

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[39] Delahaye, 27.

[40] Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas," 107, 109. Italics in the original.

be present for the martyrdoms. The text itself will bring the reader into "fellowship" with the now-dead martyrs so that their martyrological testimony to Christ will now act on the reader. Additionally, parts of "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas" claim to be written by Saint Perpetua herself, "in the way that she herself wrote it down."[41] Thus, this text plays several roles at once. It is the martyr's own testimony, a record of the martyrological testimony, and also a witness borne to God, to diverse readers.

In contrast to these early martyrdoms, accounts of Maria Goretti's death lack most of the features that made Perpetua so easily identifiable as a witness/martyr. The death of Maria Goretti occurs outside of any juridical framework. She never spoke publicly and never gave formal testimony to her faith.[42] It is not clear that Goretti made any explicit declaration of faith or of her Christian identity that precipitated the attack on her. There are no pagans or magistrates she must face. No one demands that she renounce her Christianity or participate in idolatry. In fact, Goretti's killer does not ask her about her beliefs at all. It would have been unnecessary; Goretti's assailant knew she was a Christian. Like Goretti and almost everyone they had ever met, Serenelli was a baptized, church-going, rosary-praying Roman Catholic.[43] It is difficult to argue, then, that Goretti's death is directly a punishment for anything she said or believed. Hers does not seem to be a case of martyrdom *in odium fidei*, caused by hatred of the Christian faith itself.

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[41] Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas," 109.

[42] Guerri argues that Goretti was so terribly shy that she was virtually unable to speak to people outside her family, even to the point of being unable to answer the questions of the *arciprete* on the occasion of her Confirmation. Giordano Bruno Guerri, *Povera Santa Povero Assassino* (Milan: Mondadori, 1985), 70-71, 80.

[43] Aurelio, 41.

Furthermore, whatever it is that Goretti does bear witness to through her death, her ordeal was largely un-witnessed. The trials, sentencing and executions of Agnes and Perpetua take place in public with crowds of witnesses to their confessions and executions. The assault on Maria Goretti takes place entirely in a private, domestic context—behind a locked door in her kitchen—and with no third party witness.

These aspects of Goretti's narrative not only differentiate hers from the martyrdoms of Agnes or other early Christian martyrs, they mark a significant shift from *any* previous martyrdom. Unlike every martyr before her, Goretti was not a martyr "for the faith."[44] Rather, Goretti's status as a martyr depended on a thirteenth-century text that justified a broader definition of martyrdom.[45] Thomas Aquinas had suggested that martyrdom as a form of witnessing "for Christ's sake" need not be limited to literal confessions of faith in Christ.[46] The *Summa Theologiae*'s article on the cause(s) of martyrdom includes arguments that a martyr does not need to testify "by words" and that a valid martyrdom might center on a Christian virtue other than faith. Goretti's cause became a practical test of this dormant possibility. These arguments from the *Summa* were evidently confirmed with Goretti's canonization as a martyr. Since then, this text has been widely cited as the acknowledged definition of martyrdom.[47] And so, Goretti was termed a "martyr of chastity"—a new kind of martyr.[48]

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[44] Kenneth Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 123; Thomas Schubeck, "A Love that Does Justice," in *Martyrdom Today*, ed. Johannes-Baptist Metz and Exward Schillebeeckx, *Concilium* 163 (1983): 12.

[45] Schubeck, 11.

[46] Aquinas, SS. Question 124, Article 5.

[47] See, for instance, Lawrence Cunningham, Cristina Traina and James Sherman.

[48] Woodward, 123.

In part, this article from the *Summa* asserts that "all virtuous deeds, inasmuch as they are referred to God, are professions of the faith whereby we come to know that God requires these works of us, and rewards us for them: and in this way they can be the cause of martyrdom." This new standard of martyrological witness requires only that the potential martyr accept death for a virtue *in reference* to God or "for doing any good work, or for avoiding any sin, for Christ's sake...." This new Thomistic definition hinges on what it means for an act to *refer* to God. Leonardo Boff, joining with other liberationists in arguing for a further expansion of martyrdom, argues for a very broad reading of what refers or bears witness to God. Anything that is good and any act that is virtuous references God "by its ontic structure." If we recognize God as the creator of everything, then everything can be seen as referencing God.[49]

Goretti's martyrdom has been presented as being "to" or "for" the virtue of chastity.[50] Liberationists might be disappointed with the apparent preference for this virtue as the one that expands the Roman Catholic Church's definition of martyrdom. Nevertheless, this case establishes a precedent that could be used to include deaths related to politically and socially progressive acts of virtue. Thus, after citing Goretti's precedent, Rahner argues, "…why should not someone like Bishop Romero, who died while fighting for justice in society, a struggle he waged out of the depths of his

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[49] Leonardo Boff, "Martyrdom: An Attempt at Systematic Reflection," in *Martyrdom Today*, ed. Johannes-Baptist Metz and Exward Schillebeeckx, *Concilium* 163 (1983): 15.

[50] This claim requires significant analysis as it is may sound archaic to contemporary readers while it also conflicts with traditional accounts of chastity, as in Augustine's *De civitate Dei*. In Chapter Five I will return to this question, but for the time being I will accept the association between Goretti's martyrdom and the Christian virtue of chastity for heuristic purposes.

conviction as a Christian—why should he not be a martyr?"[51] If there can be such a thing as a martyr for chastity, surely there can be martyrs for justice and martyrs for other virtues that are more central to the Gospel message.

At the same time that Goretti's case expands the accepted definition of Roman Catholic martyrdom it also invites the question: What does Goretti's death have to do with martyrdom as it was understood in the first centuries of Christianity? In what sense does Maria Goretti's death "witness" at all? It is clear that her death does not fit easily into the juridical structure of the early martyrdoms. Neither does it fit with contemporary discourses about bearing witness, which generally focus on testimony as a text written or spoken by a victim of violence. By this standard, Goretti's death is distinctive precisely for the *absence* of testimony. If we read the story seeking to find the young girl's personal experience of her suffering, phrased in her own original words, then this story will present us with a vacuum in place of such privileged victim testimony. Goretti was illiterate and so she left no written testimony. During her lifetime she had extremely little social importance; she certainly had no followers to memorize or transcribe her teachings. Moreover, the fatal assault on Goretti in the privacy of her own home, and Goretti's words and acts of resistance, were largely unwitnessed.[52] One of Goretti's hagiographies, *Maria Goretti: Martyr of Purity* describes this failure on the part of the would-be witnesses:

> …the witnesses were all unseeing: a two-year-old sister asleep on a quilt; the boy's father dozing at the foot of the long, outdoor staircase, with a heavy closed

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[51] Karl Rahner, "Dimensions of Martyrdom: A Plea for the Broadening of a Classical Concept," in *Martyrdom Today*, ed. Johannes-Baptist Metz and Exward Schillebeeckx, *Concilium* 163 (1983): 10.

[52] The failure of the potential witnesses is significant in light of Deuteronomy 22:24-27 and the implicit assumption that rape is impossible in a densely populated area because the victim need only "cry for help" in order to be saved.

> door between; Maria's mother and brothers threshing beans in the fields forty yards away, with the noise of the ox-carts to drown the child's cry.[53]

No one was able or willing to see the sexual harassment that Goretti had been enduring for weeks, and on the day of her murder, no one was able or willing to see the violence occurring just out of sight.

Oddly, *Maria Goretti: Martyr of Purity* follows these observations on the peculiarly private and domestic setting of Goretti's assault, with the assertion that these divergences from the traditional context of martyrdom are unimportant. The hagiography claims that "such circumstances are merely incidental, and do not alter the essential likeness between Maria and her Third Century sisters."[54]

I read these wildly differing circumstances as a significant reason to reconsider what it means for a martyr to be a *witness*. Texts produced by the cult of Maria Goretti thematize precisely the absence of victim testimony at the same time that they insist upon Goretti as a witness. Yet there is more to say about Goretti's witness than just pointing out the cruel irony that this silenced child is referred to using the words "martyr" and "witness." In contemporary martyrdom, and most obviously in the cult of Maria Goretti the sense in which a martyr is a *witness* has become something different—more subtle and complex—than it was when the term was first applied to Christians who were killed because they verbally confessed their faith in a juridical context.

The question of how a martyr bears witness is not primarily historical, but has practical implications for several different social justice movements. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, for instance, use martyrdom as a central category for thinking of

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[53] C.E. Maguire, *Saint Maria Goretti: Martyr of Purity* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1950), 17.

[54] Maguire, 17.

suffering, poverty and violence, and for making victimhood both meaningful and powerfully transformative.[55] Likewise, in "Dimensions of Martyrdom" Karl Rahner insists that, "A legitimate 'political theology,' a theology of liberation, should concern itself with this enlargement of the concept [of martyrdom]."[56] This broadened concept of martyrdom, though, also stretches our understanding of what it means to bear witness. By analyzing this new model of martyrological witness I hope to reveal dimensions of the testimonial process that have been neglected in contemporary discourses about testimony.

Broadening Testimony while Recognizing its Limitations

Several philosophers of testimony have insisted that our multiple concepts of testimony, like Christian concepts of *martus*, begin with a judicial framework and so always carry at least a resonance of trials and law. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, explores the overlapping legal, empirical, and theological meanings of testimony (*témoignage*), but claims that "testimony is an eminently juridical concept."[57] Some key elements of juridical testimony hold true for other uses of testimony.[58] In particular, Ricoeur assumes that all occasions of testimony take place within an adversarial, trial-like context. Likewise, Ricoeur reads testimony as "quasi-empirical" evidence trying to "prove" some proposition. If it cannot be conclusive proof, then testimony at least functions as

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[55] Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría et al., *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990).

[56] Rahner, "Dimensions of Martyrdom," 11.

[57] Paul Ricouer, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation by Paul Ricoeur*, tr. David Stewart and Charles E. Reagan (Fortress Press, 1980), 125.

[58] Ricouer, 125.

evidence for an argument. A testimony, then, is not merely a statement, but a statement that is trying to prove its content. Testimony wants to be believed. [59]

Ricoeur claims that concepts of juridical testimony and "quasi-empirical testimony" mix with Christian prophetic and confessional ideas of witness in shaping "the ordinary use of the word testimony." The idea of martyrdom is now built into our ordinary language of testimony.[60] One element of "testimony itself", then, is the inherent danger of committed "engagement" with "the just cause" and the necessity of suffering for truth. Thus, Ricoeur can affirm that "the confession that Jesus is the Christ constitutes testimony par excellence," while also affirming that biblical and martyrological discourses of witness are always interwoven with a juridical model of testimony as "the dialectic of things seen and things said."[61]

In a very different context—an article on the film *Shoah*, Shoshana Felman makes similar claims about the juridical framework behind other discourses of testimony. Felman depicts the work of testifying through film and literature, as fundamentally similar to the task of a witness in a trial. A juridical model of testimony haunts any attempt to bear witness by testifying "before an audience of readers or spectators." "To bear witness," she says, is to speak a truth,

> "Implicitly, from within the legal pledge and the judicial imperative of the witness's oath...Memory is conjured here essentially in order to address another, to impress upon a listener, to appeal to a community. To testify is always, metaphorically, to take the witness's stand."[62]

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[59] Ricouer, 123, 124.
[60] Ricouer, 128, 129.
[61] Ricouer, 134, 146.
[62] Shoshana Felman, "In an Era of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 39.

Like Ricoeur, Felman emphasizes the intention of the witness. In both texts testimony is understood as an attempt to persuade a judge or jury of some particular truth.

Such claims about the basically juridical nature of our concepts of testimony are a convenient starting point for examining recent extra-legal discourses of testimony. These testimonial discourses are rooted in a juridical logic of testimony but attempt to escape the limitations of juridical structures that do not always permit testimonies to be *heard*.

Since the Second World War, testimony has become a major philosophical problem—perhaps because of the way it seemed to fail victims who had no other form of proving their very victimhood. Twentieth-century violence was novel not only in the scale of destruction but also in the systematic way that evidence was destroyed along with people. In many notorious cases, such as the death chambers at Auschwitz and "forced disappearances" around the globe, the only evidence of particular murders was reports of absence. The only testimony to these crimes came from loved ones who were not even eyewitnesses to the actual deaths. This violence destroys its own traces; damaging the capacity of survivors to testify, much less prove that it ever happened.[63]

In the *Differend*, for instance, Jean-Francois Lyotard describes this double victimization as a "wrong" that leaves the victim incapable of effective testimony.

> This is what a wrong [tort] would be: a damage [*dommage*] accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage. This is the case if the victim is deprived of life, or of all his or her liberties, or of the freedom to make his or her ideas or opinions public, or simply of the right to testify to the damage, or even more simply if the testifying phrase is itself deprived of authority…In all of these cases, to the privation constituted by the damage there is added the impossibility of

[63] See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute,* tr. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988); Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* and *The Instant of My Death*; Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, for examples of philosophers problematizing testimony in the aftermath of WWII.

> bringing it to the knowledge of others, and in particular to the knowledge of a tribunal.[64]

Lyotard focuses here particularly on the language-game of the tribunal. However, like much of this literature, such as Primo Levi's memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*, Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* and Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman's *Testimony*, this passage of *the Differend* draws our attention to the absence of testimony, and the particular trauma of an experience being somehow "unspeakable."

During this same period, "non-juridical testimony" as a form exploded in popularity.[65] By the late twentieth-century, traumatized people, from Holocaust survivors to incest survivors, produced countless examples of such testimonies. The book-length first-person testimony chronologically narrating an individual's experiences of violent, often gruesome, victimization had become a formulaic genre of writing. Testimony became indispensable, even as its prevalence would seem to undermine the effectiveness of any particular example.

Testimony is often acclaimed as a vital tool for making injustice visible—and sometimes this visibility alone seems to be the goal. For example, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission created opportunities for thousands of victims of political violence to formally testify to their experiences, and recorded and preserved these testimonies that would not otherwise have been "heard." The law instituting the Commission establishes "the right of victims" to present their testimonies and have them

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[64] Lyotard, 5.
[65] Lauren Berlant, "Trauma and Ineloquence," *Cultural Values* 5, 1 (2001): 46.

"considered."[66] The Commission was thus given a mandate of "restoring the human and civil dignity of such victims [of political violence] by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims."[67] This phrasing assumes that providing a recognized public forum for victims to testify is a good in itself, and that testifying—or at least, having the opportunity to testify—is universally beneficial to individual victims. Like efforts to record and preserve testimonies by Holocaust survivors, the solicitation and publication of testimonies by the TRC operated on the assumption that retelling and thus raising consciousness about hidden forms of violence will lead to justice and healing for survivors and the prevention of similar violence in the future.[68]

What is most problematic about this focus on testimony, however, is the assumption that *testifying* is the same as *being heard* or even *being heard as one intends to be heard*. I fear that concepts of testimony that focus on the production and preservation of victim testimonies will be of limited value as tools for justice and social change. Such hoped-for results depend on whether or how a testimony is heard, not simply on whether or not it is produced. Moreover, the assumed benefits of this sort of victim testimony are not always weighed against the costs.

In bringing an analysis of martyrdom into discourses of testimony I do not mean to suggest that martyrdom can replace testimony. I am not advocating self-sacrificial death as the best tool for communicating about injustice! Rather, I hope that analysis of how witnessing functions in contemporary martyrdom can broaden our concepts of the

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[66] *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 1995, no. 34*. Republic of South Africa, Act 95-34, July 26, 1995.

[67] *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 1995, no. 34*.

[68] Fiona Ross, "On Having Voice and Being Heard: Some After-Effects of Testifying Before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Anthropological Theory* 3 (2003): 327.

testimonial process in a way that can help surmount the weaknesses of testimony as it is often understood and used. Martyrdom, with its key elements of an audience and a wrongful death, is always a way of seeing injustice and *in making it seen*.

Maria Goretti and Testimonies of Sexual Violence

Maria Goretti's cult, and its various uses of witnessing, is especially relevant to feminist theorization and deployment of testimonies of sexual violence. In the nascent rape crisis movement in the 1980s and '90s, eyewitness testimony became central to efforts of healing, advocating for legal changes, and raising awareness about the "private" crimes of rape and incest. Testimony was also framed as a morally significant way of standing in solidarity with other survivors. Much of the discourse in this community treated these various goals of testimony as if each entailed the others. For instance, therapeutic uses of testimony were often understood to be simultaneous or even identical to the consciousness-raising, judicial and political uses of testimony. The call for all women, and particularly survivors of sexual and domestic abuse, to "speak out" was thus presented as an unquestionable good—however difficult.

This optimism about the multiple benefits of testimony is apparent in feminist literary criticism from the '80s and '90s. In a 1997 piece Morny Joy described the function of writing (specifically, writing a book-length testimony for publication) for adult survivors of incest. Joy optimistically contends that, "in naming the experience, in finding the words to contain the original devastation, it is as if they protect themselves (though never completely) from further uninvited psychic and emotional assault. By

naming the experience, they achieve a measure of distance, of a fragile hold on the present."[69]

In reading through these "rape memoirs" it is obvious that words do not act as insulating barriers from painful memories.[70] In fact, a common trope in this literature, and a common experience for many victims of sexual assault, is that the victim's words fail her when she needs them most. Elly Danica's *Don't: A Woman's Word* constantly thematizes the horrifying ineffectiveness of her own language.

> 1.1 DON'T. I only know this word. This is the only word I have ever learned. Don't. I can not write with only this word. A woman's vocabulary: Don't.
> 1.2 Don't tell. Don't think. Don't, what ever else you do, don't feel. If you feel, the pain will be there again. Don't.
> 1.3 But the pain is there anyway…[71]

Not only does Danica's "don't" fail her, but the negative responses to her attempts at testimony become an entirely new source of pain. Danica recounts several attempts, from childhood through her forties, in which she tries to tell her mother, sister and other relatives that her father had sexually abused her. Again and again, she recalls, she was called a "liar" and angrily rejected.[72]

Reading through Danica's scenes in which she is punished for "lying" makes obvious that testimony is not always effective or safe. The dangers of testimony are already identified in Nicole Brossard's introduction to *Don't*. However, in this mid-80's

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[69] Morny Joy, "Writing as Repossession: The Narratives of Incest Victims," in *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation*, ed. Morny Joy (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1997), 42.

[70] This is the term Susan Brison uses for this testimonial literature. Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2003), 110.

[71] Elly Danica, *Don't: A Woman's Word* (Charlottestown: P.E.I. Gynergy, 1988), 7.

[72] Danica, 30-33

text Brossard shows no doubt that the benefits of testimony outweigh the immediate harm:

> This is a courageous, exemplary book written by an extraordinary woman, an incest survivor. It is the story of a heroine who moves forward word by word, into her memory and into her story, and who risks it all with every sentence, every image. For, between the book and the writing—that is to say between what is told and how it is told—there is a woman who, with all her being has chosen to tell the unbearable, has taken it upon herself to break the silence…Reading this book, we share intimately what seems beyond words. *Don't* goes beyond the simple act of recounting, for the lucidity and determination of the author spares us no detail. It brings us to the core of suffering and humiliation. Each word torments beyond anything we could imagine…Yes, this book takes us beyond the act of recounting, because the fact that it exists at all attests to the author's resistance, courage, intelligence and love of life.[73]

There is a great deal of harm that can come to a woman who tells ugly truths to an unwilling audience. And so it is worth asking whether and how a testimony accomplishes beneficial results. If a survivor "risks it all with every sentence" of testimony, then perhaps this is an unfair burden that we should not ask of sexual assault survivors.

Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, a widely-influential text of this era and movement, celebrates victim testimony as socially, politically and therapeutically beneficial. Herman depicts the dangers of publicly testifying about rape as largely a thing of the past: "in the late nineteenth-century…to speak about experiences in sexual or domestic life was to invite public humiliation, ridicule and disbelief." More troublingly, Herman envisions this "silence of women" as what "gave license to every form of sexual and domestic exploitation."[74] This logic asks victims of violence to make the sacrifice of enduring "humiliation, ridicule and disbelief" in order to bring about a culture in which

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[73] Nicole Brossard, foreword to *Don't: A Woman's Word*, by Elly Danica (Charlottestown: P.E.I. Gynergy, 1988), 4-5.

[74] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 28.

other women can testify in safety. There has certainly been progress in the social acceptability of testifying to sexual and domestic violence. Furthermore, American laws regarding such violence have changed considerably since the nineteenth century—and perhaps this has been an indirect result of many individual women's brave testimonies. Nonetheless, some of the dangers Herman enumerates still remain.

In their enthusiasm for testimony, activists, therapists and others have often over-emphasized the personal benefits of testifying while overlooking the way that the process of testifying and the demand for testimony can themselves be traumatic. This blindness by well-intentioned advocates is apparent, for instance, in a 1990 article on a "*testimony method* of psychotherapy" for refugees who had endured torture. Describing a particular case study, the authors write that, "the method was described to [a refugee known pseudonymously as] A both as a way of ridding oneself of the evil and as a means of collecting evidence against the regime."[75] This description suggests that evil—presumably the evil done to A—can be moved out of A's body and into a text, which A will then physically possess and control. The document produced in this process, though, is not so much a creative self-expression as a piece of objective evidence conforming to the form of testimony often required in legal contexts. In fact, the article suggests situations in which a refugee might be coerced to produce such testimony: for instance, "as evidence in an asylum case."[76]

Testimony, here, is supposed to readily combine a healing process with the production of a legally credible testimonial text. Even though Agger and Jensen specify no particular goal as to how this testimonial text ought to be used, the process of

[75] Inger Agger and Soren Buus Jensen, "Testimony as Ritual and Evidence in Psychotherapy for Political Refugees," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 3.1 (1990), 121.

[76] Agger and Jensen, 120.

testifying is nonetheless oriented towards creating a document that Western courts would recognize as credible testimonial evidence. According to their table outlining "The Testimony Method: Procedure Step By Step" the testimonial text produced through this process "typically" contains several elements including the following:

> (a) Background: Age, country of origin, social data, important political, cultural and/or religious aspects…
> (c) The trauma story in details: Dates, hours, places. Description of torture methods and the reaction to them. Examples of daily life in the prison. This can be complemented with drawings of places and situations…
> (e) Life in exile.
> (f) Dreams and hopes for the future and realistic possibilities.
> (g) A final statement where the client declares that this is a true account.[77]

The information that a client "typically" puts into a testimony is extremely intimate, and also so highly specific that it is difficult to imagine that traumatized refugees from disparate cultures would spontaneously narrate these details of their own volition. It might be cathartic for some people to dictate a document such as this within the "safe space" of a therapist's office. However, this same testimony, if produced within a different context, would surely be experienced as invasive rather than healing. For instance, in the context of an asylum hearing, the physical safety and material security of A's family might well be dependent on his ability to credibly testify to his experiences of torture. Is the experience of testifying a liberating, healing process, a way of reclaiming one's voice, if there is no real option to not testify? Yet the same information would likely be included in the more coercive testimony as in the testimony produced by the therapeutic process.

There is no reason to think that judicial testimony is necessarily liberating or healing. The circumstances of the event of testimony can range from therapeutic to

[77] Agger and Jensen, 120.

physically violent. In the context of a criminal trial or an asylum hearing, the testimony of the witness is constrained by the demands and questions of an unfamiliar language game. Apart from the ephemeral experience of speaking or writing testimony, the testimonial experience can be significantly determined by the ways in which the testimonial documents are used. A testimonial text can be used in a variety of ways, whether in the interest of justice for the testifying victim, in order to humiliate and expose the victim, or in any number of other ways that may or may not have been intended in the moment of testifying.

Just as testimony can be coerced and its form can be coerced, the very content of testimony can also be coerced. In the history of western judicial systems torture has sometimes been considered a credible test of testimony. In the last few years we have seen torture once again described as a method of "intelligence-gathering" as if true and legally credible information could be forcibly taken from a witness. *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry's study of torture and language, reveals political torture to be a perversion of testimony. Torture is used to produce false testimonies and false confessions, and this experience of being forced into stating falsehoods is itself a form of torture, breaking apart a person by separating her from her words. In this process "the torturer and the regime have doubled their voices since the prisoner is now speaking their words."[78] Just as the metaphor of juridical testimony is never entirely absent from contemporary non-juridical modes of testimony, so the history of using physical ordeals as confirmation of testimony may lurk behind our staid concepts of juridical testimony.

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[78] Scarry, 36.

By noting the ways that testimony can be harmful I do not mean to dissuade women from writing, telling or otherwise narrating their experiences of abuse. I fully agree that there is power in women's voices and a particular power in narratively shaping oneself and one's memories. If anything, though, women's words can be too powerful, in that the potency is not locked up safely at the moment of creation. Direct testimonies easily slip away from the author's control. My concern is that victim advocates encourage or even push them into publishing direct testimonies. There is no guarantee that testifying will be healing. Furthermore, there is a terrible vulnerability that comes from testimony, especially public forms of testimony, and especially when an author pours so much of her very selfhood, her most humiliating moments and her hopes for acceptance, into a text that becomes separate from her and out of her control.

Testimonies are often used in ways quite different from how their authors intend—and they can even be used in ways that undermine what is being sought in the act of testifying. For instance, by quoting from Danica's testimony of incest I have surely made use of her testimony in a way she did not intend. While I hope that my use of Danica's text has been respectful, a victim of violence might well be hurt to find that her own words, which she has used to narrate herself into being as a whole subject, have been *used* as a mere illustration or as data subject to analysis. Several victims of Apartheid violence who testified for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have since reported being surprised and pained by the discovery that their testimonies were publicized beyond their expectations and used without their consent.[79]

[79] Ross, 336.

Such harms may not outweigh the personal and social benefits of testimony, but it is unfair to solicit the testimony of vulnerable people without warning them that once their words are released in public they are uncontrollable. There is no way to guarantee that a testimony will be heard or used as its author intended. Additionally, there is always the possibility that a victim of some atrocity might testify with intimate detail about her experiences only to find that the testimony might fail to capture the interest of anyone at all. The focus on testimony, reified as a *product* that can be *given*, distracts us from the possibility that the testimony might fail to be received. In other words, a testimonial text might fail to *testify*. This threat directly touches on the purpose of testimony. The act of testifying is always done "*in order to* address *another*."[80]

Moreover, in discourses that approach testimony as an epistemological problem, the act of testifying is understood as an attempt to persuade the listener of some truth—on the basis of the testifier's own "say-so."[81] This definition of testimony is useful, at least, because it draws our attention away from the testimony as self-sufficient text to the testimonial event as an interaction between a speaker and a hearer. If testimonies fail to be received, if they are "monologues bouncing off each other like so many molecules", what is so very liberating about that?[82]

Feminist literary critics have sometimes resisted attempts to read women's writings in ways that emphasize the role of the reader/hearer and question the ability of an author to control her text.[83] Reading strategies based on the idea that the author does not control the reception of his or her own text have been perceived as threatening to

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[80] Felman, 39.
[81] C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (New York: Clarendon, 1992), 27.
[82] Berlant, 47.
[83] For a discussion of this phenomenon see Joy, 35, for instance.

women who have newly found agency and security in the form of autobiography or testimony. In 1988 the feminist "anti-theorist" Barbara Christian expressed suspicion that "the new emphasis on literary critical theory" is disempowering to "people of color, feminists, radical critics, creative writers, who have struggled for much longer than a decade to make their voices, their various voices, heard…"[84] Christian uses the title of Roland Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author," as an image of the destructiveness and "ugliness" of theories that de-center the author:

> Now I am being told that philosophers are the ones who write literature; that authors are dead, irrelevant, mere vessels through which their narratives ooze; that they do not work nor have they the faintest idea what they are doing—rather, they produce texts as disembodied as the angels.[85]

Yet I do not think it is a betrayal of women authors to recognize that their texts, particularly their testimonies, can be and in fact often *are* used against them. It is not my intention here to devalue readings that align with authorial intent. However, where testimony is intended to be a tool that will serve women individually and collectively it is important to be aware of the ways that testimony can fail in that function and work against the author.

Emphasizing "the human capacity to misunderstand" and misread women's testimonies does not force me to abandon the political project of bearing witness to victims of violence. This has been an acute concern of feminists. In the late 1980's Mary Hawkesworth despaired of the relativizing tendencies she saw in "postmodern

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[84] Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (Spring 1988): 71, 68-69.
[85] Christian, 72.

discourses," and even in "feminist postmodernism."[86] Hawkesworth argues against the nihilism she senses:

> Rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment (to mention just a few of the realities that circumscribe women's lives) are not fictions or figurations that admit of the free play of signification. The victim's account of these experiences is not simply an arbitrary imposition of a purely fictive meaning on an otherwise meaningless reality. A victim's knowledge of the event may not be exhaustive; indeed, the victim may be oblivious to the fact of premeditation, may not comprehend the motive for the assault, may not know the identity of the assailant. But it would be premature to conclude from the incompleteness of the victim's account that all other accounts (the assailant's, defense attorney's, character witnesses' for the defendant) are equally valid or that there are no objective grounds on which to distinguish between truth and falsity in divergent interpretations.[87]

Like Hawkesworth, I do not want to undermine the privileged perspective of the victim. Women's experiences of sexual violence have not been adequately appreciated in religious, moral or legal thought. Moreover, I have no interest in reading perpetrator testimonies.[88] However, in studying the political and rhetorical effectiveness of testimonial texts it is vital to recognize that victim accounts *can be* and often *are* read as being "equally valid" as the accounts of assailants.

When vulnerable people testify to ugly truths, the effectiveness of their testimony is limited by tacit cultural standards for evaluating the credibility of testimony. When an ordinary lay person reads or hears a non-juridical testimony, such as Danica's *Don't*, that reader probably is not judging the truth of the testimony according to a formal standard. However, our judicial and epistemological frameworks have formal standards for

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[86] Mary Hawkesworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth," *Signs* 14.3 (Spring 1989): 554, 535.

[87] Hawkesworth, 555.

[88] In the following chapter I do read the various testimonies given by St. Maria Goretti's assailant. The point of that reading, though, is to identify the ways that his testimony has been privileged—and illegitimately so.

evaluating witness testimony. Moreover, these standards tend to share common assumptions, and many people would probably regard them as commonsense guidelines. However, what is common to these standards for evaluating testimony is they are structured in a way that is biased against the credibility of those *others* who are most vulnerable: women, children, the poor, the mentally ill, or subalterns who do not speak from a position of power.

For example, David Hume's eminently modern essay "Of Miracles" advocates a socially conservative approach to evaluating testimony. By its very structure this form of testimony is ill suited to social or political transformation. Hume's essay asks what makes a witness able to credibly testify to an implausible fact. His answer quickly focuses on *who* makes a credible witness. Hume directly links the credibility of a particular testimony with the trustworthiness of the witness. This immediately undermines the testimonial capacity of those who are already defined as untrustworthy "others."

Hume recognizes that testimony has been a troubling question in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition precisely because it is neither argument nor proof, and yet everyone depends on testimony as the basis of much of our knowledge and behavior. According to Hume, we should weigh our judgment of testimony based on "several different causes; from the opposition of contrary testimony; from the character or number of the witnesses; from the manner of their delivering their testimony; or from the union of all these circumstances."[89] Hume's advice may sound familiar to us as the method we

[89] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 75.

might expect a jury to use in evaluating witness testimony. However, the sort of "character" that he depicts as giving authority to a witness is deeply problematic.

Hume imagines what would constitute the most authoritative kind of testimony:

> …a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good-sense, education, and learning, as to secure against us all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time, attesting facts, performed in such a public manner, and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable. All of which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men.[90]

In short, the characteristics of these witnesses are precisely the factors that give them power in other spheres. First of all, it is significant that these witnesses are men. In various societies women's testimony has been legally defined as inferior to the testimony of men, or even prohibited altogether.[91] Women's testimony will be judged less credible if women themselves are considered untrustworthy. Hume's ideal male witnesses are also well educated, of impeccable reputation, and have sufficient social status that they would fear the loss of status that would result if they were caught lying. Moreover, these men, in order to be most persuasive, must stand together. The most credible witnesses, then, would be a group of powerful men aligned together—the very people who have the most to gain by preserving current social, political and economic structures.

This does not mean to say that the testimony of every woman witness or every immigrant witness will always fail. On the contrary, testimonies *can* have powerful effects. I only mean to note a bias against the credibility of vulnerable outsiders, especially when they are testifying against powerful men. Moreover, this bias is

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[90] Hume, 78.
[91] I will avoid plucking examples from minority religious groups or non-Western cultures.

explicitly accepted, not only in the example of Hume, but also in legal systems where standards for evaluating witness credibility have been codified. In fact, at times this bias has actually been quantified. For instance, one medieval canon lawyer calculated that a "cardinal-bishop" could not be convicted of a crime without the "sworn testimony" of seventy-two male witnesses.[92] Meanwhile, women were prohibited from testifying against priests at all—much less could they count as witnesses against cardinals. Such formal criteria allow us to calculate the exact value of a woman's word. According to these guidelines one man can be convicted by two witnesses, one cardinal has the testimonial force of seventy-two men, and women have exponentially less testimonial force than even one ordinary man.

The explicit criteria for testimony in earlier legal systems and in Hume's rationalism were "common sense" in a way that is not completely gone from the way we think today. The problem of victim credibility will be one that always haunts testimony. Part of what makes victims vulnerable to violence is precisely the fact that they are unlikely to be believed if they report the crime. Hopefully one day we will manage gender and racial equality to the degree that the accusations of rape by black women against white men are just as credible as accusations by white women against black men. Someday perhaps black men will even be able to credibly testify to sexual abuse by white men. However, it seems basic to juridical concepts of testimony that whoever has the status of suspicious outsider will be unable to testify on equal grounds.

Within the fact-finding context of a trial, it is not assumed that everything testified by every witness really is true. Instead, witnesses present conflicting testimonies and the

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[92] James A. Brundage, "Juridical Space: Female Witnesses in Canon Law," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998): 151.

judge or jury then *judges* them. The text, the testimony itself, is judged in terms of its internal coherence, perhaps, or its inconsistency with other evidence. More problematic, though, is the necessity that the witness who speaks is also judged. This judging of the *witness* is an explicit part of the process. The very believability of the witness is judged as much as the statement she has given. There may be need, then, even in contemporary American trials, for "character witnesses" who swear to tell the truth about the trustworthiness of another witness.

This reliance on authority as the founding credibility of testimony shows precisely why testimony is a far more powerful tool in the hands of those who are already in power, already in a position of authority. Nonetheless, a large number of corroborating victim testimonies can certainly be powerful. For instance, as more women have come forward and self-identified as victims of sexual violence, and as more women have pushed for prosecutions of their assailants, the effect of these collective testimonies is to provide increasingly persuasive evidence that rape and incest are serious problems that infect even respectable communities. This accumulating evidence in the public sphere might make any particular accusation of rape sound more plausible to a juror who would otherwise be oblivious to the prevalence of sexual violence.

However, the testimony of any particular victim who testifies to an unwitnessed assault behind closed doors will be judged according to how the speaker is judged. Susan Brison and Susan Estrich both write about their peculiar fortune in being "believable" rape victims—both because of their own social advantages and because of the circumstances of the assaults. Both authors express a sense of obligation to testify because they can; that they must speak up for those other victims who lack the privileges

that would make their testimony credible.[93] Brison published her own experience of surviving rape, at least in part because, "I realized that I had all the advantages, from a public relations point of view, that a rape survivor could have."[94] As white, educated women, and professors at Ivy League universities, Brison and Estrich testify with more authority than the typical rape victim. They both describe themselves as "lucky" because, as Estrich phrases it, "everyone agrees that I was 'really' raped."[95] Brison sees herself as fortunate in that she succeeded in getting her attacker convicted. She had an "empowering" experience of testimony—because it worked.[96] Like Estrich, Brison was believed.[97] The success of her testimony, however, was due to circumstances other than the truth of her narrative or her skill in witnessing.

The contexts of both women's assaults happen to match our cultural lore about rape. Estrich was assaulted by a black man with a weapon who attacked her in a parking lot. Moreover, the rape was accompanied by other crimes. All of these details were of significance to the police officers at the scene. "He did take money; that made it an armed robbery. Much better than a rape. They got right on the radio with that."[98] Brison was "attacked suddenly, from behind, in broad daylight," by a stranger, while she was picking berries.[99] These details, she is fully aware, enhance her credibility because they point to her innocence. They suggest (but do not prove) that she was really raped and that she couldn't have done anything to prevent the attack.

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[93] Brison, 94; Susan Estrich, *Real Rape* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987), 4.
[94] Brison, 94.
[95] Brison, 102; Estrich, 3.
[96] Brison, 102.
[97] Brison, 7.
[98] Estrich, 1.
[99] Brison, 9, 105.

How does testimony function then, when it is spoken by someone without authority against someone with authority? Hume suggests that a testimony ought to be doubted "when the witnesses contradict each other; when they are but few, or of a doubtful character; when they have an interest in what they affirm; when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary, with too violent asseverations." [100] In fact, this description of suspicious testimony matches the ways that victims of sexual violence often tentatively or angrily come forward with accusations against their perpetrators or self-identification as survivors. Judith Herman's early book on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder notes that "people who have survived atrocities" whether on the battlefield or in their own home, "often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility."[101] Sexual crimes in particular tend to be perpetrated out of sight. By Hume's standards, such emotive testimony by a person without authority is reasonably read as improbable, and not deserving much trust.

Feminist legal scholars and activists have succeeded in making some important changes to rape laws, particularly to exclude certain vulnerable characteristics of the victim from consideration. So-called "rape shield laws" protect a woman's testimony from being explicitly criticized on the basis of her sexual reputation. A rape victim's virginity or "chastity" is supposed to be excluded from the standards for evaluation of her testimony.[102] But *ad hominem* attacks are a structural component of testimonial proof. Furthermore, outside of the rituals and rules of a courtroom, there are no such protections

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[100] Hume, 75.
[101] Herman, 1.
[102] Cassia Spohn and Julie Horney, *Rape Law Reform: A Grassroots Revolution and Its Impact* (New York: Plenum, 1992), 134.

for rape victims. In the media, credible news organizations do generally have *de facto* policies to protect certain information about rape victims—on the grounds that a woman's very allegation of rape cannot be reported without her entire character and person becoming subject to public judgment.

Hume's account of the trustworthy witness, the sort of witness whose account of a miracle ought (rationally) to be believed, forces us to confront the biases inherent in our judgments of witnesses. Who is presumed to speak truthfully? What kind of person is a believable person, a believable witness? Over this we must layer our assumptions about what testimonies are likely to be true. What are my expectations about the normal state of the world? If I assume that the Holy Spirit is active in the world and historically has accomplished certain well-documented miracles, then a report (a testimony) of a miracle is much more plausible. If I assume that women often make false accusations of rape or if I believe that no sane man would ever think of sexually abusing a child, then I will find a testimony of sexual abuse to be less plausible. Any given witness, then, who gives any testimony, will be judged according to the audience's expectations of who is truthful and what events occur in this world. Reading the standards of evidence that Hume deduced forces us to realize that there *are* criteria we use to judge the credibility of testimony, and these criteria are based largely on prejudices (otherwise known as assumptions) about the people and the world around us. Although forms of non-judicial testimony are meant to prove wrongs that are legally unprovable, there is no guarantee that witnesses of injustice and violence will be heard with any more welcome outside of the courtroom.[103]

[103] I am thinking here of Lyotard's description of a "wrong" as an unprovable harm, 5.

There is the possibility, though, that a testimony might be believed, at least by some audiences. A witness might be eloquent, might speak movingly, with compelling rhetoric, or have an honest face and a folksy, plainspoken manner. All of these factors matter, of course, and can affect the plausibility of her testimony in the eyes and ears of any given listener. A witness might even be a shrewd judge of people, and speak in the way that is considered believable by her audience. What I mean to emphasize, though, is that a witness has no way to guarantee the effectiveness of her words. Any way of speaking might be suspect according to the prejudices of a particular listener. And, in fact, this often happens. A plainspoken witness might sound direct and honest to one person, but sound ill informed or simple-minded to another listener. A witness who can evoke powerful emotions, trust and sympathy in one listener might sound too practiced to someone else. Ultimately, the effectiveness of testimony is dependent on the listener's standards of evidence and willingness to hear and receive the witness.

In *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* Jacques Derrida poignantly voices the fragility of testimony—that, fundamentally, it is no more than faith. "You must believe me because you must believe me—this is the difference, essential to testimony, between belief and proof."[104] Whereas Hume sought to establish rational grounds for trusting some testimony, and for distinguishing it from flighty stories of miracles, Derrida evokes Hume's essay "Of Miracles" to point to this same absence of proof in any testimony.

> …any testimony testifies in essence to the miraculous and the extraordinary from the moment it must, by definition, appeal to an act of faith beyond any proof. When one testifies, even on the subject of the most ordinary and the most 'normal' event, one asks the other to believe one at one's word as if it were a matter of a miracle….[105]

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[104] Jacques Derrida, "Demeure: Fiction and Testimony," in *The Instant of My Death*, tr. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford, 2000), 40.

[105] Derrida, 75.

There are any number of ways in which testimony can be turned against its speaker. However, there are times when testimonies *should* be held suspect. In the next chapter, for instance, I will analyze the way that the unique eyewitness testimony of Goretti's killer has shaped the development of her cult. He was the only witness to his assault on her, and his own obviously dubious character as a witness was set aside in order to definitively know factual details that were otherwise unknowable. The absence of explicit first-person testimony by the victim, though, does not necessarily mean an absence of any witness to injustice. The case of Maria Goretti particularly challenges us because of the absence of the victim's testimony. Surely the ethical obligation to respond and bear witness to someone else's suffering is not dependent on the victim's capacity to testify.

Reframing the Testimonial Process Using Martyrological Forms of Witness

In the following chapters I will identify distinct models of "bearing witness" that are currently functioning within the cult of Saint Maria Goretti. Through living forms of devotion, martyrs such as Maria Goretti are figured as witnesses, and devotees continue to engage with them, listening for and interpreting their martyrological witness. The ongoing existence of the cult is evidence of successful witnessing but also enacts that witnessing. The ongoing nature of the cult is evidence that the martyr has not been laid to rest altogether. Rather, devotees continue to engage with the martyr as a victim whose violent death "bears witness" and with the martyr herself as someone still interacting with her living devotees. The fact of the cult means that devotees are actively listening to and listening for the witness of the martyr.

In the conclusion to *Martyrdom and Memory* Elizabeth Castelli suggests that, "the figure of the 'martyr' might…be reconfigured" in ethical terms.

> What if, for example, we retrieved an older resonance of the term 'martyr'… What if, instead, we retrieved and critically engaged the dimension of the term that emphasizes a different range of ethical options: witnessing, truth-telling, testimony? … Perhaps the figure of 'the martyr' that we need to mobilize here is not the one who sacrifices him- or herself but the one whose compulsion is to witness and to provide testimony.[106]

Rethinking martyrdom in terms of an ethical form of witnessing, though, must simultaneously reconfigure our concepts of an ethical compulsion to witness.

Castelli points out that it is not the mere fact of death, or even death *in odium fidei*, that constitutes martyrdom. Rather, a martyrdom is a death that is *seen* and that *reveals* some truth beyond the act itself. Thus, "martyrdom requires audience," in some sense, as well as "retelling, interpretation, and world- and meaning-making activity."[107] Martyrdom and witnessing have to do with what can be seen and what can be heard. And this is an issue altogether separate from what can be spoken in the form of testimony.

We can find the entanglement of Christian theologies of martyrdom, testimony, and judicial standards of evidence already in the Gospel of John.[108] In the fifth chapter Jesus proclaims his own complicated role as a witness.

> If I testify [martyro] about myself, my testimony [martyria] is not true. There is another who testifies [martyron] on my behalf, and I know that his testimony [martyria] to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified [memartyreken] to the truth. Not that I accept such human testimony [martyrian], but I say these things so that you may be saved…But I have a testimony [martyrian] greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify [martyrei] on my behalf that the

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[106] Elisabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University, 2004), 203.

[107] Castelli, 34.

[108] This passage is typically interpreted within a framework of Jewish law, specifically Deuteronomy 19:15, which insists that the testimony of at least two or three male witnesses is required in order "to convict a man."

> Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified [memartyreken] on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him who he has sent.[109]

In this passage Jesus makes several odd assertions, which are especially rich when joined with a reading of Christian martyrdom. The following assertions are cited as the direct words of Jesus: that Jesus cannot rightly testify to himself, that Jesus does not accept human testimony, that Jesus testifies in works (rather than words), and that God testifies on behalf of Jesus.

Reading this convoluted passage we glimpse a model of Christian testimony, *martyrion,* that is complicated, indirect, and fraught with doubt. Jesus depicts his own capacity for self-testimony as dubious. In this passage Jesus acknowledges that even his own testimony is not self-evidently true. In Jewish law the solitary testimony of one man was not legally credible. [110] John the Baptist's testimony is held in doubt, with the odd claim that Jesus does not "accept such human testimony"; Jesus' statement here seems to render suspicious or "unacceptable" any testimony we might give about anything. Moreover, Jesus tells us that there *exists* testimony by the Father, God on high, but this testifying God is neither seen nor heard. This passage confronts us with a fracture between the testimony that is given and the reception or acceptance of that testimony.

Contrary to those who would insist on the plausibility of Christianity, using scientific evidence to argue for the rationality of belief, this passage acknowledges the legal and cultural standards of evidence that make Christian testimony believable only

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[109] John 5:31-38

[110] Coady uses a quote to depict the unjust implications of such a law: "The restriction of a corroboration requirement, Napoleon is said to have observed, would lead to a situation where, 'The testimony of one honourable man could not prove a single rascal guilty although the testimony of two rascals could prove an honourable man guilty,'" 12.

through a leap of faith. If frail human testimony is only able to plead, "you must believe me because you must believe me," then the one who accepts the testimony can likewise only say "I believe you because I believe you."[111] The belief of the listener is separate from any believability inherent in the witness or the content of the testimony.

The witness who speaks does not perform the act of persuading. She cannot make her experience known or believed; she cannot force belief. All she can do is bear witness. There is another actor present: the listener, the judge, who may embrace the testimony and receive it. The listener may accept the testimony, or may reject it, or, perhaps worse, the listener may let the words drift by without bothering to listen at all.

A Concluding Note on Terms

The noun "witness" and the verbal forms *to witness* and *to bear witness* have different emphases than the English word "testimony." I prefer to use the word "witness," although it can easily become confusing and awkward. "Testimony" has a tendency to fetishize the text that is produced by the witness. It draws attention to the speaking and the speech or text itself. Other languages blend together the concepts of testimony and witness, with the Latinate *testis*, *testimone*, *testigo* and *témoin*. English, however, keeps them separate, just as it preserves the Greek-based "martyr" apart from the language of legal testimony.

The term "witness" focuses more on the role of the witness, the one who witnesses, primarily as an eyewitness. The emphasis here is less on speaking than on perceiving, particularly seeing, and even knowing in the sense of receiving knowledge.

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[111] Derrida, 40.

The more passive emphases of the verb "witness" draw attention to the importance of listening or otherwise perceiving witness. One can witness by testifying, but one can also witness by observing, experiencing or surviving. One can witness someone else's testimony. The verb "testify," in contrast, moves outward, self-sufficient and separate from whatever verb comes next. I will use the term "witness" in the hopes that it can hold together in one concept the perception of the witness, the speaking of testimony, and what we can awkwardly refer to as "someone's accepting testimony."[112]

Maria Goretti's martyrdom, by bearing witness to a virtue rather than an article of faith, certainly relies on a different sense of what it means for a martyr to bear witness. Whatever it is that a martyr witnesses, it is surely not an objective historical fact, and it is surely not something that can be repeated in words. The witnessing in martyrdom is not separate from the fact of death. Rather, martyrdom is "a witness through death."[113] The death is the form through which the martyr bears witness. This speaking through death is surely received by the devotee as saying something more than what could be translated directly into a doctrine. Even Perpetua's death-combined-with-testimony cannot be reduced to her spoken testimony. The assertion "I am a Christian" is not identical with the pairing of that same assertion paired with an attempt to kill the speaker by having her gored by a cow.[114]

Martyrdom, as it has developed over the course of Christian history, is a subversion of the apparent reality that a would-be witness has been silenced. Reframing such a murder as martyrdom transforms a situation that is, on its face, a "failure." A

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[112] Coady, 26.

[113] Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 90.

[114] "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity" has Perpetua ultimately killed by a sword, but the spectacular attempts to kill her are at least as central to the narrative as the actual accomplishment of her death.

galling injustice thus becomes a sign of its opposite.[115] Devotees of Maria Goretti have, at times, overlooked what should be the first and most obvious reading of her death: as a grave wrong that should be grieved. It is obviously dangerous to jump to a reading of her death as a glorious victory, or to interpret Goretti as an agent who chose to die in order to bear witness. In an especially egregious example of an overly heroic reading, Goretti is depicted as a "heroic virgin and martyr" who "had chosen to be hacked to death" in order to bear witness to "God's law."[116]

We have become accustomed to thinking of martyrs as glorious heroes, but martyrdom does not work as a subversion of a failure unless we can see the failure in the first place. Martyrdom is witnessing where there would seem to be absence and silence. The death of a martyr is an intentional murder and it is specifically a violent attempt to silence the martyr. However, in a martyrdom, this attempt at silencing fails. Instead, the martyr is *heard* in an unexpected way and the murder is revealed in its injustice. The executioner manages to kill the martyr but fails in the attempt at silencing that is the goal of the murder. Martyrdom bears witness in "the negation of murder."[117]

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[115] Rahner, "Dimensions of Martyrdom," 11.

[116] Jerome Aixala, *Witnessing and Martyrdom: in the Second Vatican Council; in the New Testament; and in the Early and Modern Church* (Bombay: St. Paul, 1970), 302.

[117] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969), 171.

Chapter 2:
Written Testimony and Witnessing as Evidence

In late January 1985 the lay Italian journalist and historian Giordano Bruno Guerri published the book *Povera santa, povero assassino*, subtitled "The True Story of Maria Goretti." Guerri presented his text as an exposé of a martyrdom and canonization that had never before been considered objectively. As Guerri complains in his bibliography, "of the numerous books published about Maria Goretti," only three are drawn from original sources.[118] Everything else he dismisses as derivative and "uncritical" hagiography. Such texts, Guerri claims, are "without any interest."[119]

The Vatican responded immediately, reacting on a scale normally reserved for serious theological disputes. Guerri claims that he was publically declaimed by the prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Pietro Cardinal Palazzini, as an "instrument of the Devil."[120] Within days of the publication of *Povera santa* the Vatican announced the creation of a special commission to study Guerri's book.[121] A year later,

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[118] Giordano Bruno Guerri, *Povera santa povero assassino: la vera storia di Maria Goretti* (Milan: Tascabili Bompiani, 2008), 191.

[119] Guerri, (2008) 192.

[120] Giordano Bruno Guerri, "Una risposta alla risposta," in *Povera santa povero assassino: la vera storia di Maria Goretti* (Milan: Tascabili Bompiani, 2008), xi.

[121] "Comunicato della Sacra Congregazione per le Cause dei Santi," *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 6, 1985, Italian daily edition, 2.

this commission[122] published its response: a "white book" titled *A Proposito di Maria Goretti*: *santitá e canonizzazione: atti della Commissione di Studio istituita dalla Congregazione per le Cause dei Santi il 5 febbraio 1985*. As a strategy for undermining Guerri's book, this forceful reaction was clearly counterproductive. The very fact that a nine-person committee—including an array of professors and high ranking officials in the Roman Curia—spent a year responding to Guerri's text effectively established Guerri as a serious expert on Maria Goretti. The Commission's response did not hurt the sales of *Povera santa*, but instead provoked international headlines, such as "Scholars Disputing Saint's Purity, Virtue."[123]

I have no interest in joining this battle over "The True Story of Maria Goretti." Rather, I wish to analyze the dispute itself and what it reveals about the way testimonial documents are fetishized in Goretti's cult and, more broadly, in twentieth-century Roman Catholic canonization. I am especially interested in how Guerri and the Commission use written testimonies to prove their factual claims about Goretti's sainthood and martyrdom. Both Guerri and the Commission are remarkably credulous in assuming that Goretti's martyrological witness can be found in those documents. I argue that their dispute, based on these shared suppositions about testimony, demonstrates how the juridical model of testimony[124] is inadequate for the case of Maria Goretti. The model

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[122] The official name of this organization is also its description: *La Commissione di Studio Istituita dalla Congregazione per le Cause dei Santi il 5 febbraio 1985*. Throughout its published report (known as a white book), the commission refers to itself as *la «Commissione»*, always written with the *caporali* (« »). I will simply call it the Commission.

[123] Sari Gilbert, "Scholars Disputing Saint's Purity, Virtue," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), March 18, 1985.

[124] I am using the phrase "juridical of testimony" as shorthand for the structure of direct, evidentiary testimony that I describe and problematize in Chapter 1.

collapses into absurdity as both Guerri and the Commission claim to use testimonial evidence to objectively and scientifically determine Goretti's unwitnessed experiences.

This chapter moves backwards, often in reverse chronological order. It begins in 1985, with the Commission's critique of Guerri's *Povera santa*. From there I move back to earlier moments in the canonization of Maria Goretti, examining the various trials and testimonies that the two texts cite. After considering the use of testimony as objective data in the *Povera santa* controversy, I look at the particular quotes attributed to Maria Goretti. Next, I question the reliability of Goretti's "testimony," given that much of it is known only from testimony given by her killer. The chapter thus moves from confident citations of testimonial evidence back to the time when the words were recorded—when they were already recollections or even second-hand reports of earlier events and speech. This backwards movement may be disorienting, but this effect is central to my argument. My focus moves from confidence to doubt: from objective evidence, to credible testimony, to words that are sometimes little more than gossip. My goal is not to attack the credibility of any particular testimony, but to acknowledging the human fallibility entailed in every testimony.

I conclude this chapter by turning from the specific case of Maria Goretti to analyze the evolving role of testimonial evidence in the Roman Catholic canonization process. I locate Goretti's case within the modernizations of the twentieth-century, in which the Church claimed to be perfecting canonization processes for recording and interpreting testimony. Canonization is supposed to be a final evaluation of objective evidence of the martyr's quality as a witness. The lengthy and intentionally legalistic processes of canonization use ritual oaths and transcription to transform even hearsay

testimony into written evidence. However, no such process can make a given testimony more credible than the language, memory, and motivation of the person who speaks it. Those like Guerri and the Commission who regard such testimonies as reliable data seem to believe that some alchemy in the process of transcription turns testimony into something more secure than it is. In transforming from 'what so-and-so said' to testimonial evidence, words reported in canonization proceedings become so reliable that they can prove miracles and superhuman virtues.

As in this project as a whole, this chapter is not meant simply as a critique of Roman Catholic canonization or the single case of Maria Goretti's canonization. Rather, I am looking at this particular institution and this particular historical narrative as examples of some widespread and problematic assumptions about testimony—what it is and what it can accomplish. The canonization processes of Maria Goretti are especially illustrative of how and why the juridical model of testimony can go wrong. In the obsessive analyses of testimonies to her martyrdom, her slow death, and the assaults that preceded it, there is surprisingly little empathy with the experience of Maria Goretti and the myriad reasons why she *could not* effectively testify. My goal in this chapter is to peel away certainties so as to reveal the gaps, silences, and credulities in even the most authoritative records of Goretti's martyrdom. When the chapter concludes in that place of uncertainty, I hope the reader will see the necessity of exploring other possibilities for bearing witness in the chapters that follow.

Guerri v. the Commission

In 1985 the Commission framed its denunciation of *Povera santa* as a "scholarly dispute"—a dispute over whose was the more objective analysis of historical evidence. The Commission thus denounces Guerri for his "a-scientific, if not to say anti-scientific" methodology as well as his ignorance of much of the data that was gathered in Goretti's canonization processes.[125] According to the Commission, Guerri's representation of Maria Goretti was "anti-historical" and the result of his "false interpretations" of evidence.[126] In sum, *A Proposito* asserts that Guerri "contravenes nearly every canon of scientific historiography" with his "distorted methodology."[127] According to *A Proposito*, its entire response to Guerri is based exclusively on "the documents": authoritative, original, and historic textual evidence.[128]

The texts *Povera santa povero assassino*; *A Proposito di Maria Goretti*; and Guerri's subsequent written responses to *A Proposito* are conflicting narratives of Goretti's martyrdom that nonetheless share common assumptions about how "The True Story of Maria Goretti" can be established. Guerri and the Commission battle each other by lobbing citations, demonstrating their shared faith that Goretti's martyrdom is knowable and is fixed in written documents.[129] This shared certainty gives the parties a common ground from which to make their arguments. Guerri and the Commission directly contest each other's claims about certain historical facts. There are three loci of disagreement that particularly obsess these two parties. These three "facts," regarded as

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[125] Commissione di Studio Istituita dalla Congregazione per le Cause dei Santi, *A Proposito di Maria Goretti: Santitá e Canonizzazioni* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1985), 9-10.
[126] Commissione, 54, 77.
[127] Commissione, 125.
[128] Commissione, 126.
[129] However, not all of these documents are publically available. The Commission thus has a distinct advantage over Guerri in that it can refer to authoritative, perhaps definitive, documents that Guerri cannot access—and neither can I.

essential to the factualness of Goretti's martyrdom, are 1) what exactly Alexander Serenelli said to Maria Goretti in a locked kitchen on July 5, 1902, 2) why he stabbed her but did not rape her,[130] and 3) what exactly Maria Goretti said and did in response.

Guerri and the Commission both presume that Goretti's martyrdom depends on what was said and done by those two people alone in that locked room. This assumption, however, is extremely problematic. For the moment I will enumerate only two of the ethical problems with this assumption. First, this fixation on the precise facts of Goretti's death, including Serenelli's words and actions, grants the killer too much power to determine the meaning and religious value of his victim's death. If what Serenelli did and said determines whether or not Goretti was really martyred, and if her martyrdom determines her sainthood, then her sainthood (the evaluation of her life as exemplary in its holiness) is uncomfortably dependent on Serenelli. The second thing that troubles me in the Commission's and Guerri's shared assumption is that they assume that there are morally right and morally wrong ways for an eleven-year-old girl to respond to a sexual assault. In other words, their evaluation of Goretti's virtue and holiness depends on exactly how Goretti responded to Serenelli's attack. In this moral framework, one response is saintly, while other possible responses are condemned.

Happily, the rector of Goretti's shrine, who is also Goretti's leading contemporary hagiographer, is committed to undoing this fixation on Goretti's heroic moment. Padre Giovanni Alberti makes his argument not on the grounds of feminist ethics, but from a

[130] Commissione, 98-104.

theology of sainthood. Alberti's basic claim is that Goretti was not just "a saint for five minutes." Instead, Alberti wants to emphasize the holiness of Goretti's entire life.[131]

Nonetheless, those few minutes before and during the assault have traditionally defined Goretti's martyrdom and were the primary basis of her cause for canonization. Because Guerri and the Commission regard this brief encounter as determining Goretti's martyrdom and sainthood, they are deeply invested in the task of discovering and proving what *actually happened* in these moments. The credibility of Goretti's sainthood is at stake in Guerri's historical claims.

Maria Goretti was recognized as a martyr and saint on the grounds of her martyrdom "for chastity." According to the logic of the dispute, Goretti's martyrdom for the sake of chastity would be proven by evidence of this precise sequence of events. First, Serenelli explicitly gave Goretti the option to either commit a sexual sin and live, or else die for the sake of virtue. Then, Goretti resisted his advances, for religious reasons, knowing she would be killed for this choice. Such evidence would prove that Goretti's death was causally related to her chastity, and would thus justify her canonization.

Guerri, however, suggests several alternative sequences of events. He proposes, for instance, that Serenelli may have been impotent and that is why Goretti escaped rape.[132] Or perhaps Serenelli killed Goretti for some other reason, unrelated to whether or not she consented to the rape.[133] Guerri quotes from testimony Serenelli gave as part of his criminal proceedings, in which Serenelli claimed that Goretti did accede to the rape. Serenelli claimed that, when threatened at knifepoint, the frightened girl had said, "yes,

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[131] See, for instance, Giovani Alberti, "Non é la santa brava 'cinque minuti'" in *Maria Goretti: storia di un piccolo fiore del campo* (Nettuno, Italy: Stella del Mare, 2006), 225-230.
[132] Guerri (2008), 108.
[133] Guerri (2008), 107.

yes, yes!"—but that he had killed her nonetheless.[134] Or perhaps, Guerri suggests, Goretti had instinctively resisted the rape, but not because of any deep understanding of its sinfulness.[135] In any of these versions of the events, Maria Goretti's death ceases to be causally related to her commitment to chastity. Guerri concludes that she was not a martyr to chastity, but "was instead a martyr to misery and ignorance."[136] In other words, she was a powerless victim, not a heroic agent.

Guerri's attack on the pious narrative of Goretti's martyrdom was not the only threat that the Commission perceived in his book. According to the Commission, *Povera santa* was publicized as "a sort of trial of the canonization process itself," revealing the faults in the Vatican's methods for researching and judging potential saints.[137] *A Proposito* is thus designed not only as a defense of Maria Goretti, but also as a defense of "the fundamental theology of sainthood, as well as the methodology and the procedures used in the processes of canonization."[138]

The Recorded Words of Maria Goretti

The Commission contests fifty-seven distinct passages of Guerri's book—although it is careful to note that this is not an exhaustive list of Guerri's errors. Some of the contested claims seem inconsequential; others are genuinely polemical. However, Guerri makes at least one assertion that I find to be not only fair, but beyond dispute: we have no substantial testimony by Maria Goretti. Scouring through the "dozens of well-intentioned biographies" of Goretti, Guerri says that he can find only "a half dozen of her

[134] Guerri (2008), 112.
[135] Guerri, "Una risposta alla risposta" (2008), XII.
[136] Guerri (2008), 71.
[137] Commissione, "Premessa," V, 97.
[138] Commissione, "Premessa," VI.

own sentences," and that even these are "of pathetic banality."[139] Guerri argues that the testimonies transcribed in the Apostolic Process for Goretti's canonization depict a silent, shy, and fearful girl. In reading these testimonies, Guerri does not see Maria Goretti's personality emerge, except as a void. Witnesses frequently repeat that she was a quiet girl, but what Guerri notes its that "not one of the people who knew her…remembers ever hearing her express a concept, a thought, or an opinion."[140] The multitude of testimonies by Goretti's family members, neighbors and acquaintances tell us almost nothing about her interior life. She may as well have been "a saint from the catacombs" for all we are able to reconstruct her authentic experience.[141]

The Vatican Commission refutes these assertions. Its argument is concise: Guerri's claim that "in the Acts of the Cause one can find only a half dozen sentences by the Saint" is "simply false."[142] The Commission resents the implication that there is any "shortage of witness statements and documentary evidence." In any case, it adds, "it seems incumbent to note that in order to formulate a well-founded historical opinion of a person, one cannot limit oneself to that which the person said, but also must duly consider everything that the person did."[143] The unspoken suggestion here is that Goretti's acts culminating in her martyrdom transcend anything that she said. Thus, we can *know* her, or at least "formulate a well-founded historical opinion of" her, from her acts alone. What the Commission neglects to address is that Goretti's defining act is

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[139] See Guerri (2008), 70 and Giovano Bruno Guerri, *Povera santa povero assassino* (Milan: Mondadori, 1985), 76. A hagiographic text by Fabrizio Contessa uses very similar wording to acknowledge the absence of testimony by Goretti: "Di lei non si ricordano che una dozzina di frasi." Fabrizio Contessa, *Santa Maria Goretti* (Milan: San Paolo Edizione, 2001), 27.

[140] Guerri (1985), 77 and Guerri (2008), 71.

[141] Guerri (1985), 76 and Guerri (2008), 70.

[142] Commissione, 52.

[143] Commissione, 52.

known to them primarily through testimony—from the same witnesses and the same documents that record so little of Goretti's voice. As to Guerri's description of the "pathetic banality" of Goretti's few recorded words, the Commission dismisses that characterization as a grossly "subjective" claim that Guerri "does not document" in the least.[144]

In a later response, Guerri concedes his error. He now admits that there may in fact be "seven or eight" sentences attributed to Maria Goretti. Moreover, one of these sentences does in fact "contain a concept," albeit without elaboration.[145] Yet the one conceptual sentence Guerri acknowledges is known only from the testimony of Alessandro Serenelli. He reported that when he attempted to rape Goretti she resisted him with the words, "God does not want this!"[146] Serenelli's mediation of this testimony is a topic I will address in the next section of this chapter. For the moment I only want the reader to notice it, and proceed in the uneasy knowledge that we are accessing Goretti's words through the words of her killer.

Visitors to the Gorettian shrine in Nettuno can buy souvenirs inscribed with "the unwritten testimony of St. Maria Goretti through her most important words." The text fits easily on a postcard. Neat boxes chart Goretti's five "most important" utterances, alongside the general context of each quote.

The first quote is linked with "The occasion of the death of her father":

> *Mama, don't worry, God will not abandon us. You take the place of Papa in the fields and I will try to manage the house. We'll get by, you'll see…*[147]

The second quote is:

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[144] Commissione, 52.
[145] Guerri (2008), 205.
[146] Guerri (2008), 205.
[147] Ellipses included in the original.

> *Mama, when can I make my First Communion? I can't wait…*[148]

The third quote is one that is almost never mentioned in hagiographies, except those written by Father Alberti, who designed the chart. This quote is labeled as "A little before going to the Holy Mass":

> *Angelo, don't be like that, Jesus does not look to see whether your shoes are new or not. He looks at your heart.*

The fourth quote is one that I will return to later, particularly because of the centrality of these words, their phrasing and their intention, in the process of canonizing Goretti. The context given here is "Before her fatal assault."

> *Alessandro, what you are doing God does not want. You will go to Hell.*

The final quote, labeled "At the Hospital Orsenigo on her deathbed," begins with ellipses.

> *…Certainly I forgive Alessandro and I want him with me in Paradise.*

From the phrasing it is clear that this is an affirmative response to some other question or statement left out of the quote. This quote neglects to tell us what was said to Goretti that prompted her "*certo*," but the context is fleshed out somewhat in hagiographies. One of these texts imagines the deathbed scene as follows:

> The priest sat by her and told her how Jesus rose above His terrible suffering to pray for his killers, pardoning them, excusing also the thieves at His side and promising them, "Today, shalt thou be with me in Paradise." He paused, then asked her, "Marietta, do you even pardon Alessandro Serenelli for the love you bear Jesus?"[149]

In another hagiographic text, this priest at Goretti's bedside is identified as Father Signori, who "had given Maria her first Communion just months before" and who posed this question as a prelude to giving her last rites. After describing how Jesus forgave his

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[148] Ellipses included in the original.
[149] Pietro DiDonato, *The Penitent* (New York: Hawthorn, 1962), 70.

own killers, the priest asks "Can you, Maria, forgive your murderer with all your heart?"[150] The quote has been the basis of a theology of forgiveness in Goretti's cult, especially in recent years. However, it surely fails one of the Commission's own criteria of authentic testimony. Faced with such a leading question from such a respected figure, how can we regard Goretti's response as "spontaneously express[ing]" her "innermost thoughts"? [151]

Even if these quotes were direct testimony from Goretti, recorded in her exact words, they still would give us only limited access to the subject. These words surely are not the sum of a holy soul. If Goretti is any sort of martyrological witness, then we have to look beyond the direct testimony she gives in these five utterances to find the meaningful expression of her witness.

In these five phrases of Goretti's "unwritten testimony" it is hard to sense the richness and immediacy that is so often desired in first person testimonies. If we read the story seeking to find the young girl's personal experience of her suffering, phrased in her own original words, then this story will present us with a vacuum in place of such privileged victim testimony. This fact may lead us to question the value of Maria Goretti's martyrdom, as lacking any real "witness." Alternately, this absence may lead us to question the value of a model of testimony that cannot hear more in this story.

Goretti, in Serenelli's Own Words

The hermeneutical assumptions shared by Guerri and the Commission are most obvious in how they read the testimonies of Alessandro Serenelli. On at least

[150] Alicia Von Stamwitz, "Saint Maria Goretti: Modern Martyr," *Liguorian* 73 (July 1985): 39.
[151] Commissione, 85.

Figure 1. This prayer card signed by Alessandro Serenelli, framed together with an enlarged reproduction, hangs in the chapel of Goretti's natal home in Corinaldo (Ancona), Italy.

three separate occasions Goretti's murderer dictated or wrote his own account of Goretti's death. It should be no surprise that Serenelli's testimony changed over time, from his initial interrogation as a twenty-year old facing murder charges, to his re-interrogation decades later when he was the key witness in the Apostolic Process for Goretti's beatification, to his written reflections as an old man surveying the arc of his life. It would seem to be commonsense that, by virtue of being her murderer, Alessandro Serenelli is not a trustworthy witness to Goretti's words, intentions, and death. The fact that his proliferating testimonies contradict each other reinforces the intuition that he is not a credible witness on this subject. Oddly, the Commission uses these same facts to reach the opposite conclusion. The Commission acknowledges the disparities between Alessandro's testimony in his own defense in 1902 and his testimony decades later in the judicial processes for Goretti's canonization.[152] It takes for granted that Serenelli lied during his own trial, hoping to receive a more lenient sentence.[153] The Commission interprets Serenelli's later renunciation of that testimony as evidence that the second testimony is honest. *A Proposito* therefore rejects Guerri's skepticism about Serenelli's later testimony as "malicious" and an evident denial of "the redemptive force of forgiveness and penitence."[154] At various points, both Guerri and the Commission rely on data that only Serenelli's testimony can provide. Given the absence of other evidence, and proceeding within a juridical model of testimony, the only way for them to discover what *really* happened and whether or not Goretti was *really* a martyr is to accept Serenelli's testimony.

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[152] Commissione, 7.
[153] Commissione, 98.
[154] Commissione, 7.

Among their many disputes, Guerri and the Commission argue over the authenticity of Alessandro Serenelli's "Spiritual Testament." This 1961 document is only three paragraphs, but in Goretti's cult it has become an important proof of the miraculous conversion the saint produced in her murderer. The text begins, "I am an old man of almost eighty years, near the end of my days." Serenelli then recounts the sins of his youth, exhorting his readers to avoid his mistakes. He praises Goretti as his "good angel," his light and his protector. The text is a confession and reflection written, in his own hand, by the last living witness to Goretti's martyrdom.[155]

Guerri claims that the language of the text does not fit Serenelli's level of education, and thus it is "surely not his work." Both Guerri and the Commission fixate on a certain phrase in which Serenelli praises the "seraphic charity" of his Capuchin community.[156] The Commission argues that Serenelli could have legitimately adopted this Franciscan language. Anyone who has spent decades in a Capuchin monastery, it argues, could be expected "to spontaneously express his innermost thoughts" in this manner.[157] Again, I am not interested in siding with either party on whether the phrase "seraphic charity" is original to Alessandro Serenelli. Clearly Serenelli did not invent the term. Instead, what I want to note here is that Guerri and the Commission both assume that the text is an authentic testimony of Alessandro Serenelli only if it is his own "spontaneously express[ed]" wording.

To some extent, Roman Catholic concepts of martyrdom have always depended on the killer as the interpretive key to the martyrdom. Recent martyrdoms, though, tend

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[155] Giovanni Alberti, *Alessandro Serenelli: storia di un uomo 'salvato' dal perdono* (Nettuno, Italy: Santuario Madonna delle Grazie e S. Maria Goretti, 2004), 317-318. The original handwritten document is reproduced in Alberti's text on pages 319-320.

[156] Guerri (2008), 187.

[157] Commissione, 85.

to occur outside of the juridical context that was paradigmatic of early martyrdoms. A juridical context provides the benefit of clarity; the martyr is explicitly punished because of his faith. Without direct testimony from the martyr declaring why he died and that he chose to die, it becomes increasingly important to discover the killer's motivations. The canon law scholar Robert Sarno notes that "especially today" Christians are not often killed for their faith in the formal context of a "regular process" but instead "they are eliminated in a secret manner." For these cases, Sarno offers a guideline for discerning the motivations of contemporary martyrers.

> …on the part of the one inflicting death, it is not necessary that the individual act directly and formally out of hatred for God, against the person of Christ, his doctrine or his Church. It is sufficient that the person, for ideological reasons or for other motives, wants to force the Christian to commit acts which the person cannot do without sinning. If, in this context, we speak of *odium fidei* (hatred of the faith), on the part of the one killing the Christian, the term means the *attitude of hostility toward Christianity insofar as this impedes the attainment of the goal proposed by the persecutor*.[158]

This understanding of martyrdom retains the traditional concern about the motivations that inspire the martyrer to kill, but no longer requires explicit opposition to Christianity as such. Instead, a case for canonization must explain how the martyr's opposition to sin became an obstacle to some goal sought by the martyrer. Thus, the document *A Proposito* still needs to address the precise words and motivations of Maria and Alessandro. It is this obsession with the actual words of the encounter that privileges Serenelli's testimony as the most direct witness to the truth. His own sworn testimony as to his intentions (spoken or otherwise in the moment of the assault) and his accounts of it

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[158] Robert J. Sarno, "Theological Reflections on Canonization," in *Canonization: Theology, History, Process*, ed. William H. Woestman (Ottawa: Faculty of Canon Law, St. Paul University, 2002), 14.

afterwards are thereby central to determining the *meaning* of the events, and the true *meaning* of Goretti's own choices.

At times, Goretti's cult has recoiled from this dependence on Serenelli's testimony. Although the postulator of Goretti's cause for canonization, Padre Mauro, relied on Serenelli to identify the exact geographic spot where he stabbed Goretti, [159] Mauro was willing to privilege Serenelli's voice only up to a certain limit. When Mauro learned that Serenelli was planning to publish his own account of Goretti's martyrdom, Mauro urged him to maintain a respectful silence instead. Mauro also resisted some of the proto-hagiographic stories about Serenelli that were already becoming popular lore.[160]

It is odd is that Guerri and the Commission—or anyone—would have such confidence in Serenelli as a witness objectively reporting experiences from decades in the past. This portrayal of Serenelli as if he is independent from his testimony, both so honest and so self-aware that he can filter out his own biases, conflicts profoundly with other representations of Serenelli as a weak mind, swayed by external words and forces.

The Power and Peril of Texts

Narratives of Goretti's death sometimes treat Serenelli's descent into murderous violence as a cautionary tale about the dangers of texts. This theme has reappeared from

[159] Mauro dell'Immacolata, *Una Storia Vissuta, la canonizzazione di Maria Goretti* (Rome: Coletti, 1961), 80.

[160] For instance, the *New York Times* reported that Serenelli attended Goretti's beatification ceremony—a story that has been adapted into the popular narrative of Goretti's cult. The same article also reports that Serenelli is "known as Father Stephano" and suggests that he became a monk—another inaccurate legend. Mauro refutes both assertions in *Una Storia Vissuta*, 50. "Slayer Attends Girl's Beatification 45 Years After He Murdered Her," *New York Times* (April 28, 1947): 25.

time to time in the cult of Maria Goretti.[161] Most recently, the theme has been adopted by Catholic anti-pornography groups, and particularly one group named after Alessandro Serenelli: the Serenellian Apostolate.[162] A workbook promoted by the group encourages contemporary men to find hope by identifying with Alessandro Serenelli, the redeemed sinner.

> Alessandro, however, was a porn addict, which many reading this book have been in the past or may still be. His obsession with impurity eventually led him to murder an innocent twelve year old girl [sic]—which is probably *worse* than anything most readers of this book have done! Yet even he was not beyond redemption; the prayers of a saint saved his soul. There is hope for you as well, dear reader…[163]

In this narrative, Serenelli is a spiritual exemplar, on the model of Saint Paul, who was "the foremost" of sinners.[164] Although Serenelli succumbed to the temptations of evil, he repented and is sanctified. Thus, the workbook promises, "If a once-foul sinner like Alessandro Serenelli can now stand in the glory of Heaven, next to the pure young girl he murdered in a fit of lust, there is hope for you as well!"[165]

Pope Pius XII similarly framed Goretti's canonization as a response to a vague "conspiracy" of impurity, propagated through modern media.[166] In a speech given the day after Goretti's beatification, Pius noted that Serenelli was justly punished for his

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[161] Alberti, giving a psychological portrait of the young Serenelli, argues that past authors have overemphasized the effect of Serenelli's reading material on his character. Alberti, 344-345.

[162] Information about this group can be found on their website, www.pornnomore.com. I first learned of the organization thanks to Aline H. Kalbian, who discusses the organization in an unpublished article titled "Behind the Scenes: Women and Catholic Sexual Ethics."

[163] Rosemarie Scott, *Clean of Heart: Overcoming Habitual Sins Against Purity* (Mt. Laurel, NJ: R.A.G.E. Media, 2006), 99.

[164] 1 Timothy 1:15-16

[165] Scott, 108.

[166] Pius XII, "Nella esaltazione alla Gloria dei Santi di Maria Goretti" (speech given in Rome, Italy, May 24, 1950), *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Sua Santità Pio XII, 2 Marzo 1950-1° Marzo 1951* Volume 12 (Vatican City: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1955), 122

crimes, but that the greater culpability belongs to those who "armed" him.[167] Those who produce scandalous novels, newspapers, magazines, theater and film have not yet paid for their part in Goretti's death. They will face divine retribution, Pius promised.[168]

What were these pornographic texts that inflamed Serenelli to rape and kill Maria Goretti? Hagiographies frequently refer to corrupting texts and images, but rarely specify what they were. One of the only texts named directly is *Il Messaggero*, a Roman newspaper, castigated in Gorettian hagiographies for its lurid crime stories.[169] The same newspaper later reported the sensational story of Maria Goretti's murder.[170] Nonetheless, the narrative of Serenelli's susceptibility to scandalous texts holds that Serenelli, as one of the few literate peasants in the region, was incapable of distinguishing between reality and the written word. For instance, *The Penitent*, a biography of Serenelli based on interviews with his acquaintances, asserts that,

> …to Alessandro the fact that words were published established their intrinsic value; made them something persuasive, to be absorbed and, if needs be, imitated. Many of these writers had continental and international reputations and therefore whatever they said was gospel for Alessandro.[171]
>
> Alessandro was incapable of letting it go as blood-tingling entertainment, but morbidly accepted it as a free, desperate, empowering secret code for himself, an answer to his fastidious fears, a silent mental revolt against landowners and the stupidity of toil, poverty, and a religion in which he cold not believe.[172]

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[167] Pius XII, "La Celestiale Figura della Beata Goretti" (speech given in Rome, Italy, April 28, 1947), *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Sua Santità Pio XII, 2 Marzo 1947-1° Marzo 1948*, ed. Angelo Belardetti, Volume 9 (Rome: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1948), 51.

[168] Pius XII, "La Celestiale Figura," 51.

[169] Alberti, *Alessandro Serenelli*, 344; Aurelio della Passione, *La Santa Agnese del Secolo XX: La Beata Maria Goretti Martire della Purezza* (Rome: Coletti, 1947), 41.

[170] An example of the newspaper's sensational reporting on Goretti's death is an article from October 16, 1902 that describes Serenelli as a "Human Beast." "Ai filippini: La bestia umana di Nettuno," *Il Messaggero*, October 16, 1902, page 3, first column at the bottom.

[171] DiDonato, 18.

[172] DiDonato, 19-20.

In Serenelli's trial his lawyer pled for leniency using a similar argument. Among a laundry list of reasons mitigating Serenelli's responsibility, the lawyer blamed society, which "creates crime by mental contagion."[173]

The same biography of Serenelli reports that, years later, while serving his prison sentence for the murder of Goretti, Serenelli again turned to texts. His later reading-material, however, is described as uplifting. Through this literature, Serenelli came to the realization that "the printed word could be a potent influence for the activation of either good or evil. It was like a substance taken into one's being."[174] Pornographic texts had "fanned the fire towards his crime," but "humanistic" texts could be life giving. According to this narrative, the book that most affected the reformed Serenelli was *Crime and Punishment*. Serenelli purportedly identified with the fallen and redeemed Raskolnikov, whose own exposure to amoral texts and philosophies led to murder.[175]

The "Increasingly Perfect" Process of Canonization

Juridical testimony is central to the Vatican's processes for canonizing saints. In particular, the Vatican has long privileged eyewitness testimony as the most authoritative form of evidence in evaluating potential saints. Over the course of the twentieth-century, however, the process of canonization was altered several times, and increasingly privileged texts. These changes were designed to make the canonization process more modern, scientific and rigorous. Yet none of these changes can overcome the fragility of testimony that I describe in chapter one. For all its elaborate judicial processes, "scientific" analysis, and scrupulous recordkeeping, the canonization process still

[173] DiDonato, 92.
[174] DiDonato, 122.
[175] DiDonato, 123.

depends on juridical testimony, which, as Derrida has written, "must, by definition, appeal to an act of faith beyond proof."[176] Ultimately, a witness can only confirm her testimony with the appeal "you must believe me because you must believe me."[177] The canonization process, however, relies on testimonies to prove something miraculous—and to prove it with a superhuman degree of certitude.

If it is successful, a modern canonization process concludes with an infallible declaration.[178] At this final moment of the canonization process, when a pope declares a *beata* to be a saint, he is teaching an article of faith and also proclaiming a supernatural fact: the newly-declared saint is in heaven.[179] In *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, Ludwig Ott purports to offer an authoritative taxonomy of all possible objects of papal infallibility. Within the category of infallible teachings "not formally revealed" by God, Ott identifies four subcategories, one of which is the canonization of saints.[180] Ott asserts that canonizations are infallible, cites Thomas Aquinas to definitely prove it, and then ends with a grave warning: "If the Church could err in her opinion [on saints], consequences would arise which would be incompatible with the sanctity of the Church."[181]

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[176] Jaques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, tr. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford, 2000), 75.

[177] Derrida, 40.

[178] According to Kenneth Woodward's *Making Saints*, members of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints view canonization as infallible, and explicitly told him so. Woodward further reports that the Congregation for the Causes of Saints would not re-open Goretti's cause because it "would put the congregation in the untenable position of second-guessing an infallible declaration by a pope." Kenneth Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 122, 124; Francis Kieda, "Infallibility of the Pope in his Decree of Canonization," *Jurist* 6 (July 1946): 401-415.

[179] Kieda, 413.

[180] Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, tr. Patrick Lynch (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1964), 298-299.

[181] Ott, 299.

Yet the supposedly infallible truth that a saint is in heaven is deduced from knowledge that is not infallible. How could an infallible teaching of the church be based on fallible human testimony? This upside-down epistemology worried Thomas in *Quaestiones de Quodlibet I-XII*.[182] Supporters of infallibility read the text as resolving these concerns through the addition of divine providence.[183] The revised formula for secure canonizations is: fallible human evidence, plus the unfailing guidance of the Holy Spirit, produces an infallible teaching. This is not a very satisfying explanation, however, as the formula would seem to work equally well without any human testimony. If the pope's decisions about canonization are guided by the Holy Spirit, then why does he need any witness statements at all? How could changes to the standards of evidence improve a process that is already divinely guaranteed?

Some canonists insist that human knowledge does play a significant role in canonization. Although individual testimonies may be flawed, they attest to historical facts that *must* be true—for instance, that the saint was virtuous, was martyred, and interceded to produce miracles. One approach is to insist that infallibility refers to these historical facts, as well as to the supernatural fact that the saint is in heaven.[184] After all, a pope "inserts a person in the catalogue of Saints" if and only if he is persuaded by worldly evidence of saintliness.[185] How could the Holy Spirit allow the pope to make an infallible declaration based on false beliefs? The painstaking collection of evidence is necessary because canonization requires human reason. Revelation by the Holy Spirit cannot replace the data of sainthood. In fact, the requirement that canonization be based

[182] Quodlibet IX, question 8.
[183] For instance, Ott, 299; Kieda, 409.
[184] Kieda argues for this position. Kieda, 413.
[185] Kieda, 413.

on scientifically verifiable evidence is surprisingly old. We can date the beginning of this requirement to the year 794, when the Council of Frankfort decided that Christians may only honor saints (and angels) that are known to *actually* exist or have existed. In other words, the Council decreed that it is not sufficient to have mystical knowledge of the being's existence; there must be empirical evidence for the existence of the saint (or angel).[186]

From 1588-1902 "eye-witnesses" to the life and miracles of the potential saint were the preferred and most authoritative evidence in canonization processes.[187] So-called "historical evidence" was generally permitted but was "considered as subsidiary to that provided by eye-witnesses."[188] In the early twentieth century the Roman Catholic Church, led by Pope Leo XIII, attempted to embrace the scientific methods of the modern world. In 1902, five months after Maria Goretti's death, Leo XIII determined that the ancient genre of hagiography needed to become scientific. He instituted the Historical-Liturgical Committee, which did not have a role in canonization, but was tasked with evaluating the Church's lists of saints and martyrs.[189] Again, the Church was seeking to ascertain that its saints were real, this time using historical-critical methods. In 1913 Pope Pius X attempted to modernize the process of canonization. He decreed that in all causes for canonization or beatification, "each and every historical document, be they either manuscripts or printed works, which in any way whatever regard the cause which

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[186] Yvon Beaudoin, "History of Canonization" in *Canonization: Theology, History, Process,* ed. William H. Woestman (Ottawa: Faculty of Canon Law, Saint Paul University, 2002), 28.

[187] Robert Sarno, "The Integration of Historical Research in the Methodology used in the Causes of the Saints: the Inquiry with Experts," *Apollinaris* LXI, 1-2 (1988): 177.

[188] Sarno (1988), 178-179.

[189] Sarno (1988), 181.

is being considered, are to be produced with the ordinary or informative process."[190] Canonization now involved an exhaustive new process of gathering texts.

In 1983, John Paul II profoundly altered the shape of the canonization process. No longer would it look like a criminal trial with a defense attorney (advocate) making a case for sainthood, and a prosecutor (Promoter of the Faith or Devil's Advocate) critiquing the potential saint. The change has been described as a "paradigm shift" from "the courtroom as its model for arriving at the truth of a saint's life" to "the academic model of researching and writing a doctoral dissertation."[191] John Paul changed the process on the grounds of needing to keep up with "recent progress in the field of historical studies" and "respond more adequately to the dictates of historical criticism."[192] Henceforth, each potential saint's positio would be written "according to the rules of critical hagiography."[193]

Each of these attempts to modernize the science of sainthood was hailed as giving more perfect certainty—without ever admitting to errors in the earlier procedures.[194] Pope Pius XII called for modernizations of the process in 1958, eight years after he canonized Maria Goretti. In that discourse[195] Pius spoke of the ongoing "perfecting" of historical criticism and called for the adoption of modern "technical means" in

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[190] *Acta Apostolica Sedis* (August 26, 1913), 437, paragraph II. I am using the translation by Sarno (1988), 183.

[191] Woodward, 91.

[192] John Paul II, *Divinus perfectionis Magister (*Apostolic constitution promulgated January 25, 1983): paragraph 7.

[193] John Paul II, *Divinus perfectionis magister*, section III, paragraph 2.

[194] Although the informal ancient process of canonization has been criticized, there is no criticism of the procedures used by previous popes.

[195] Pius XII died before he was able to give this speech, but it was published in *L'Osservatore Romano* and it was later cited in several works by members of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

canonization proceedings.[196] Contemporary canonization processes are now required to collect and analyze all documents, "which in any way whatever" relate to the potential saint (the Servant of God).[197] This accumulation and evaluation of *all* textual evidence is supposed to produce "perfect certitude" in judging causes.[198] Although it was written only three years after John Paul's dramatic changes to the canonization process, *A Proposito di Maria Goretti* gave a blanket defense of the "strict and rigorous procedure" of canonization, which has been "perfected" over time.[199] The document denies that there were any flaws in the process used to determine Goretti's sainthood. Participants in the new process have praised it as if it were the pinnacle of human intellectual achievement. They claim that anyone contemplating the rigorous modern canonization process must surely wonder, "if in any other field of human knowledge one can find a method of research and evaluation that approximates the requirements and seriousness given to the Causes of Saints."[200]

Stabilizing Testimony at the End of the Twentieth Century

In the current process, certainty apparently comes from a glut of evidence—ever more testimonies recorded in ever more documents. The sheer quantity of evidence is supposed to compensate for the fallibility of each particular piece of evidence. Early in

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[196] Pius XII, "La figura, il pensiero, le opere del Sommon Pontefice Benedetto XIV," in Paolo Molinari and Peter Gumpel, "L'Elemento 'Esperienziale' nei Materiali Storici e Teologici delle Cause dei Santi: Un contributo allo studio ed approfondimento della spiritualitá cristiana?" in *Esperienza e spiritualitá,* ed. Herbert Alphonso (Rome: Editrice Pontifica Universita Gregoriana, 2005), 285.

[197] Fabijan Veraja, *Le Cause di Canonizzazione dei Santi* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), 12, 43.

[198] Sarno, (1988), 183.

[199] Commissione, 9.

[200] Molinari and Gumpel, 298.

the twentieth century, when eyewitness testimony to a church tribunal was the privileged form of evidence, the process operated on the assumption that the imperfections of individual testimonies could be resolved by multiplying testimonies. Hence, processes followed "the axiom that the greater the number of such witnesses was presented at the Tribunal, the more complete was the proof."[201] Eventually, this methodology came to be considered inadequate. Instead, canonization processes came to rely on "proof of a documentational nature" as "essential to the implementation of a sound historical-critical methodology."[202] In this revised process, "experts in historical matters" became the necessary interpreters and evaluators of the increased data.[203] The experts, in turn, produce new documents. Then the entire mass of documents, including the reports of the experts, has to be "authenticated and made part of the acts of the cause of canonization so that they may have juridic and probative force."[204]

The book *Povera santa povero assassino* seems to have most insulted the Commission by suggesting that "the obvious lack of witnesses and documentary evidence" undermine Goretti's canonization process.[205] The process of canonization does require very careful vetting of any texts written by or in the possession of the potential saint. Yet the process is structured negatively—to filter out anything "contrary to faith or morals." Thus, before any cause can proceed to beatification, "there had to exist certainty that nothing contrary to faith or morals was contained in the person's writings, i.e., sermons, letters, diaries, autobiography, and any other writings, whether published or

[201] Sarno (1988), 193.
[202] Sarno (1988), 196, 197.
[203] Sarno (1988), 203.
[204] Sarno (1988), 201-202.
[205] Commissione, 52.

only in manuscript, whether written in the person's own hand or dictated."[206] Goretti certainly never wrote or read anything illicit, and this did indeed simplify the process. Nothing problematic could be found, because there was nothing there at all.

In the last years of the twentieth-century, though, documentation became an end in itself. Pope John Paul II spoke of a positive obligation to study, record, research, and remember martyrs. Particularly in *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*, John Paul II is troubled by the idea of "anonymous martyrs." In italics, he thunders:

> *This witness must not be forgotten*. The Church of the first centuries, although facing considerable organizational difficulties, took care to write down in special martyrologies the witness of the martyrs. These martyrologies have been constantly updated through the centuries…

The text goes on to say that,

> *In our own century the martyrs have returned*, many of them nameless, "unknown soldiers" as it were *of God's great cause*. As far as possible, their witness should not be lost to the Church…*the local Churches should do everything possible to ensure that the memory of those who have suffered martyrdom should be safeguarded, gathering the necessary documentation*.[207]

Logically, remembrance is how martyrs continue to function as witnesses. To remember and record their martyrdoms is to participate in the martyrdom—to help the martyr bear witness.

A second method for stabilizing testimony, which also contributes to the proliferation of documents, is the juridical liturgy of swearing an oath. The ritual of an oath is the traditional guarantor of the truth of testimony, not only in canon law, but also throughout Western legal traditions. The oaths that witnesses must take are central to what it means for the canonization process to be a juridical process. An oath is presumed

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[206] William H. Woestman, "Codification of the Norms for Beatification and Canonization and Changes Prior to 1983" in *Canonization: Theology, History, Process*, ed. William H. Woestman (Ottawa: Faculty of Canon Law, St. Paul University, 2002), 35.

[207] John Paul II, *Tertio millenio adveniente* (apostolic letter promulgated November 10, 1994).

to add something to a testimony, transforming it from just "believe me because you must believe me" to "believe me because I swear it on pain of excommunication." Thus, the text *A Proposito di Maria Goretti* resolves conflicting testimonies by favoring the testimony given to an ecclesiastical court over earlier testimonies, such as those collected by a priest who was writing Goretti's first hagiography.[208] The court, operating according to canon law, can "truly verify the truth,"[209] making the previous testimony "irrelevant"[210] —despite the fact that the priest who recorded the earlier testimony later swore to the court that he had "meticulously interrogated" the witness to "precisely ascertain the truth."[211]

In canonization processes, witnesses, theological censors, and members of the Historical Commission all must begin their depositions with the following ritual. They are asked, "Please place your hand on the Holy Scriptures. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"[212] Following this familiar oath, the witness testifies in a prepared statement and/or in response to the questions of the tribunal. The entire proceedings are carefully transcribed, and when the tribunal is finished with the witness, the vice-notary reads this transcript. The witness then signs, attesting to the accuracy of the transcript. This signature, of course, must also be notarized. The vice-notary must also swear and sign an oath affirming that he has read the transcript and that the witness has "confirmed it under oath."[213] These multiple

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[208] Commissione, 93.
[209] This repetition of the root word "true" is used in the Italian text: "verament appurare la veritá."
[210] Commissione, 93.
[211] Quoted by Guerri (2008), 218 from PsCi, Summarium, p.2, II.
[212] Woestman, appendix, 361, 360, 358
[213] Woestman, 333.

oaths—testimonies affirming testimonies—are supposed to provide the tribunal with sufficient evidence to know with perfect certainty whether or not someone was a saint.

Through the liturgical proliferation of documentation, the Church claims to solve the problem of testimony. Sworn, documented, signed and notarized oaths are required of every participant of these proceedings, including the copyist, notary, and all vice-notaries. For instance, upon the occasion of the "Presentation of the Copies of the Acts" the vice-notary must swear a special oath, called the "Oath Affirming the Faithful Accomplishment of Copying the Acts." As the name of the oath suggests, the vice-notary (whose signature is also notarized by the notary), must "swear that I have fulfilled the assigned task of making two true copies of the acts of this inquiry."[214]

These repetitive oaths, signatures, and transcriptions trace the lingering doubt, never fully excised, about the truthfulness of testimonies. The very rigor of these processes reveals the urgent desire to fix text, author, and meaning, and the reality that they forever slide away. The confident certainty with which the Commission cites these testimonies is thus undermined by the fuller text and context of the testimonies, which can never stand alone as truth, but must be accompanied by the explicit oath and signature that are implicit in any testimony. The rituals of recording, reading, swearing and signing the truth of a testimony all suggest the possibility that a testimony might not be true, and the additional possibility that it might not be believed.

The ideal of preserving and accessing testimonial truths through text is almost as ill suited to Maria Goretti as the earlier model of verbal testimony in a trial. Even if Goretti's few reported sentences could be authenticated as her direct testimony, it would

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[214] Woestman, 344.

nonetheless be a dull and bare testimony. Whatever the precise number of sentences cited by witnesses, there are not more of Goretti's words recorded because no one remembered other original statements she had made. This need not imply that Goretti only ever spoke vapid, unremarkable sentences. Instead, this absence of recorded testimony indicates how little social value was given to the words of someone like Maria Goretti: someone young, poor, illiterate, rural, and female.

Goretti's value as a witness *must* be more than what we read in the content of her testimony.

Chapter 3:
Speaking Corpses, Reading Martyred Flesh

Because there is so little record of Goretti's words and ideas, her martyrdom is especially dependent on the nonverbal testimony of her body. If martyrdom is itself a form of speech, then it is a speech act that a martyr can "speak" only once, because it is said in her visible suffering and death. Christians can certainly confess their faith without dying, but death has become a vital component of martyrdom because it is understood as an especially profound form of speech. Indeed, the very body of the dying martyr somehow manifests important truths.

Maria Goretti's hagiographers embrace the contrast between the paucity of language and the eloquence of her death. For instance, the 1951 hagiography *Maria Goretti: Vittima Pura* depicts Goretti's whole life as a wordless, embodied testimony: "…In silence, in hiddenness, in the daily acceptance of pain and toil, she was writing a poem with her blood, and in its harmony she soared to the song of martyrdom supreme."[215] Goretti's illiteracy is irrelevant if her body itself can testify unequivocally. The metaphor of poetry in flesh becomes even more visceral in an article that appeared in the Nettuno shrine's newsletter immediately after Goretti's canonization: "The fourteen wounds that the murderous blade produced in her little body are like fourteen mouths with which this Agnes of the twentieth century sings her heroic love to the Immaculate Lamb."[216] In this imagery, Goretti's body does not merely speak; it emits a prayerful

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[215] Elvira Cacciato, *Maria Goretti: Vittima Pura* (Rome: Coletti Editore, 1951), 72.

[216] Valentino, "È veramente Santa?," *Il Santuario di Nettuno e Maria Goretti* 1 (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, September 1950): 2.

song to God. Her wounds are mouths and her blood is ink, but in this language of flesh Goretti "says" what she could not have spoken any other way.

Goretti here instantiates an essential feature of Christian martyrdom: martyrs speak through bodily spectacle. Elizabeth Castelli claims that, "martyrdom literalizes the project of testimony."[217] Martyrs are not so much witnesses in the sense of verbally testifying to "what they have seen." Rather, the martyr "becomes" her testimony "through the display of the self, through becoming that which others see."[218] Thus, the martyr's testimony *is* the spectacle of her wounded flesh.

In this chapter I argue for the theological significance of martyrdom's visibility and tangibility. It is in these aspects that martyrdom is a distinct form of witnessing. Unlike testimony, martyrdom is not an argument. There is no propositional content to a martyrdom that could be translated from flesh into words. In the first section of this chapter I identify two models of the language of martyrdom. One is drawn from writings of Karl Rahner, and the other from works by his contemporary, the Latin American liberation theologian Jon Sobrino.[219] Both models suggest how the martyr's dying body can speak to spectators in a way that transcends the limitations of language. For a death to be a martyrdom it must be seen and recognized, and yet the closer it is to the template of Christ's death, the more it is unrecognizable. Following the explication of these two models, I consider the continuing significance of martyred flesh in Christian history.

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[217] Elizabeth Castelli, "Visions and Voyeurism: Holy Women and the Politics of Sight in Early Christianity," in *Protocol of the Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture*, ed. Christopher Ocker (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, December 1994), 12.

[218] Castelli, "Visions and Voyeurism," 12.

[219] While Rahner himself did not do liberation theology, he was sympathetic to the movement. Sobrino argues that Rahner's theology strongly influenced Latin American liberation theology—albeit indirectly. Jon Sobrino, "Karl Rahner and Liberation Theology," *The Way* 43.4, (October 2004): 53-66.

"Relic cult" is the broad term for practices that value proximity to martyrs' bodies and body parts. In this second section of the chapter I consider bodily relics as a medium of communication between earth-bound Christians and the realm of the divine. Finally, I turn my focus to one particular body: the corpse of Saint Maria Goretti. Analyzing displays of Goretti's relics and the visual imagery of her cult, I identify forceful messages that are, for various reasons, "unspeakable."

Triangulated Speech: Martyr, God, and Witness

In the metaphor comparing Goretti's "fourteen wounds" to "fourteen mouths," God is the apparent addressee of Goretti's bodily speech. Through her mouth-like wounds she "sings her heroic love to the Immaculate Lamb."[220] Presumably, though, Goretti's suffering body can be heard by devout listeners. How else would it be possible to identify her as a martyr? Moreover, if other people could not hear her, what would be the use of identifying her as a martyr? Hagiographers lovingly describe the martyr's body in order to invite readers to sense her wounds crying out to God. This produces a voyeuristic dynamic in the scene of martyrdom: the martyr is oriented towards God, while the audience (including the reader of a hagiography) is oriented towards the martyr, as if the crowd is eavesdropping with its eyes.

While Christian concepts of martyrdom have always been theocentric, the act of martyrdom is never solely in reference to God and cannot be accomplished in isolation. Martyrdom requires, at a bare minimum, the presence of at least one human witness: the person who kills the martyr and thereby brings about "a death which could have been

[220] Valentino, 2.

avoided" by the martyr.[221] Martyrdom is accomplished in human bodies through human violence, in the presence of human eyewitnesses. Thus, concepts of martyrdom cannot help but suggest a triangulation between the martyr, a community of spectators, and the divine. This triangulation is figured in terms of a visual "revelation" or a physical "manifestation"—the flesh of the martyr makes spiritual truths visible to witnesses.

This revelatory aspect is integral to concepts of martyrdom. We can only know or speak about a martyrdom from the perspective of a third party who observes this God-oriented act. Thus, it is impossible to escape the language of witnessing. If martyrdom were like private prayer it could be silent, invisible, and largely unobservable to human eyes. Yet martyrdom is markedly different—it is necessarily both observable and observed. In this fleshly violence something of spiritual or moral importance is manifested to the spectators. However it functions, this manifestation is essential to our understanding of martyrdom. Thus, William Cavanaugh rightly privileges the *interpretation* of a martyr's testimony over the testimony intended by the martyr. Cavanaugh claims that:

> What is most crucial to martyrdom is not whether or not the person killed intended to act out of love or for justice…but whether or not those with eyes to see are able to discern the body of Christ, crucified and glorified, in the body broken by the violence of the world.[222]

It is this interpretation by witnesses that turns murder into martyrdom.

The Language of Martyred Flesh, Model 1

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[221] Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 105.

[222] William Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 64.

Although martyrdom is not direct speech, martyrdom is sometimes described as speaking more directly than any verbal language. Karl Rahner gives the fullest elaboration of this model of martyrdom as the perfect speech act. In the final chapter of *On the Theology of Death* Rahner describes this concept of martyrdom, imagining it as speech that needs no interpretation. The meaning is manifest, real, present, and only needs to be sensed. Martyrdom, he asserts, is "absolute testimony."[223] Sacraments, such as the Eucharist, mysteriously, even scandalously, unite a physical signifier with a spiritual signified. Rahner suggests that martyrdom does something even more remarkable: the signifier *is* the signified. Martyrdom, then, is "more" than a sacrament.[224] Instead, Rahner speaks of martyrdom as a "supra-sacrament" in which the outward sign perfectly coincides with its inward nature.[225] There is no "divergence" between the apparent act and the grace "which he appears to receive." Christian martyrdom is "revelatory" in such a way that "mere semblance is *a priori* excluded."[226]

In this text Rahner does not point to any particular martyrdoms as examples of this "perfect harmony between interior reality and external appearance."[227] Instead, he is offering a description of martyrdom as it *ought* to be, if it is to live up to the Church's current definition of martyrdom. This fully communicative martyrdom is somewhere between fact and supposition. Rahner tells us what martyrdom "would be" and "should be," "if there is such a revelatory and self-explanatory Christian death."[228] If martyrdom

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[223] Rahner, *Death*, 108

[224] Although Rahner does not reference it here, there is a tradition of paralleling martyrdom with the sacrament of baptism and even regarding martyrdom as an effective replacement for baptism.

[225] Rahner, *Death*, 107-110.

[226] Rahner, *Death,* 111.

[227] Rahner, *Death,* 105.

[228] Rahner, *Death,* 105.

exists, then "the very nature of the Church, as the triumphant and visible manifestation of God's eschatological grace in the world and in history… guarantees that in martyrdom there cannot exist any cleavage… between the appearance and the thing itself."[229] If martyrdom is testimony to Christian faith, then the Christian God cannot permit any falsehood in this testimony. Rahner imagines martyrdom not only as testimony *to* God, but revelation *by* God.[230] It is divine speech written in human flesh, and as such it surely must communicate with supernatural clarity.[231] Rahner's insistence on the supernatural "guarantee" of martyrdom's authenticity implies an underlying assumption: revelation must be unmistakably recognizable. For martyrdom to work as an embodied sign and manifestation of Christian truth, it must be a sign that we can read by gazing at the martyr's body.

What, though, is the *content* of this revelation in human flesh? Traditionally, martyrs are seen as imitators of Christ, such that the spectator sees Christ—visually—in the martyr's body. The martyr is an image of an image in a chain that points to God.

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[229] Rahner, *Death,* 113.

[230] Rahner's arguments here are surprisingly similar to arguments defending the infallibility of all canonizations. For instance, "The Roman Pontiff derives absolute certitude from indirect and mediate revelation, namely, from the miracles, for these manifest the will of God." Francis J. Kieda, C.R., "Infallibility of the Pope in his Decree of Canonization" *The Jurist* 6 (1946): 414.

[231] In describing martyrdom as "revelatory and self-explanatory" Rahner fully embraces the metaphor of knowledge as vision. Interestingly, Emmanuel Levinas describes this as a temptation always present when we think of knowledge as sight. In the philosophical tradition we have inherited, he claims, we tend to think of vision as giving direct access to knowledge, without any interpretation—as though "the disclosure of truth" were "a simple optical phenomenon." Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1998), 132. For Levinas, this heliocentric model of knowledge is acquisitive as well as violent. Knowledge is obtained through disclosure, like "the exposure of skin to gaze." Emmanuel Levinas, "Truth of Disclosure, Truth of Testimony," *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings,* ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1996), 102. The underlying illusion is that by merely opening our eyes we absorb wholly the information that is manifested to us. Rahner is certainly not claiming that knowledge *is* direct in this way—but he does elevate such an epistemology as an ideal harmony befitting of divine revelation.

"The Martyrs of Lyons" clearly exemplifies this understanding of the martyr as a visual echo. In the narrative, Saint Blandina's wounded body becomes an image of Christ—who is himself the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). In the midst of her martyrdom, Blandina is a spectacle—for the spectators who watch her torments in the amphitheater, for her fellow Christians being martyred alongside her, and also for the reader. The narrator describes Blandina's physical appearance from the perspective of the historical watchers:

> …[The martyrs] were in the end sacrificed, after being made all the day long a spectacle to the world to replace the varied entertainment of the gladiatorial combat. Blandina was hung on a post and exposed as bait for the wild animals…She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayer she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who were undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes they saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them, that he might convince all who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ's glory will have eternal fellowship in the living God.[232]

Through this display of Blandina's suffering and death, a different body is revealed. The visibility and physicality of Blandina's suffering body allows the other martyrs to see *through* her body to the body that is not present. Thus, Blandina's body re-manifests the human body of God. In this passage Blandina becomes an image of Christ, whose physical body was not visibly present at the time of her generation. Her martyrdom reenacts the crucifixion, allowing that prior event to become real and tangible to this audience who, as eyewitnesses to the martyrdom, can witness Christ's suffering in her body. The narrator interprets this vision: the merging of Blandina's body with Christ's image conveys the doctrine that all martyrs will be rewarded by such union with the

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[232] Herbert Musurillo, trans., "The Martyrs of Lyons," in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 75.

divine. Individual Christians who endure persecution will be united in "eternal fellowship in the living God."

Blandina does not only take on the appearance of Christ—she also takes on properties of Christ's body. Blandina wears Christ like armor. Her own body is "tiny, weak, and insignificant" but is supernaturally protected because "she had put on Christ, that mighty and invincible athlete" and thus "had overcome the Adversary in many contests."[233] Blandina's body is clothed in Christ's body, but the femininity and vulnerability of her own body remain apparent as well. Although her fellow martyrs see Christ in her with their "physical eyes", they recognize that they are looking at an image of Christ—a representation rather than an apparition of Christ himself.

Likewise, the text of "The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp" insists on that martyr's likeness to Christ.[234] In fact, Polycarp's martyrdom appears so Christ-like that, according to the narrator, "the jealous and envious Evil One" is unable to distinguish between Christ and the "holy flesh" of the dead Polycarp. Demonic forces thus attempt to destroy Polycarp's corpse, expressing fear that if the Christians were to obtain the body, "they may abandon the Crucified and begin to worship this man."[235] The Christians in the story, though, are perfectly capable of distinguishing between Christ who they worship "as they Son of God" and martyrs who they "love…as the disciples and imitators of the Lord."[236] The Christians can see Christ in Polycarp and appreciate the martyr as an excellent "imitator." Yet they appreciate Polycarp precisely *as* an imitator—"a

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[233] Musurillo, "The Martyrs of Lyons," 75.

[234] Saint Polycarp is constantly accompanied by Christic allusions in this text, including a persecutor named Herod, a "voice from heaven," a dove, and even the metaphorical identification of Polycarp's body with bread.

[235] Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp," 15.

[236] Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp," 17.

conspicuous martyr, whose testimony, following the Gospel of Christ, everyone desires to imitate."[237]

Martyrs, though, do not sacrifice their lives imitating Christ simply of their own volition. Early martyrdom narratives are full of references to the Holy Spirit, and expressions of gratitude for the God-given grace that allows them to endure martyrdom. The feats of physical endurance exhibited by the martyrs, as well as the miracles and supernatural signs associated with the martyrs, are evidence of divine intervention. Martyrological testimony, then, is understandable as testimony *by* God through the martyr as much as it is testimony by the martyr to or on behalf of God. Martyrs, then are God-given images of Christ and act as revelations of Christ for their contemporaries. They are "Christ made accessible."[238]

Although martyrs are recognizable as images of Christ, they can be recognized as martyrs only through what Elizabeth Castelli calls an "inversion of conventional meaning."[239] Death comes to mean life, weakness is understood as power, and pain becomes a source of joy. Defendants boldly warn judges that they themselves will face judgment, and criminals are exalted as heroes. In order to see victory in pain and death, an inversion of ordinary values must take place. It is in this spirit that Tertullian wrote to imprisoned Christians, arguing that the outside world is the real prison and that in entering jail they have become freer and safer.[240] Here Tertullian is not upsetting a mere social convention. Rather, he is asserting a reality that is the opposite of sensed

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[237] Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp," 17.

[238] Peter Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations* 2 (Spring 1983): 9, 10.

[239] Castelli, "Vision and Voyeurism," 12.

[240] Tertullian, "Ad Martyras," tr. S. Thelwall, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 3 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), Ch II. 693-694.

experience. The Roman authorities mocked, punished, and executed early Christians, and expected this show of force to frighten and discourage other Christians. However, the Christian community reversed the meaning intended by those who martyred the martyrs. In Christian interpretation, the persecutors inadvertently caused their victims to be elevated, receive divine reward, eternal life, and acclaim within their minority community. This reversal has been enormously successful over the centuries. In fact, the assertion that martyrdom is desirable and praiseworthy that it can seem to be the natural interpretation of self-sacrificing death.

To be fair, Karl Rahner does acknowledge that martyrdom is counterintuitive—even though he also describes martyrdom as "revelatory and self-explanatory." Rahner recognizes that in ordinary terms, martyrdom is failure. The martyr "experiences and endures the power of evil and his own powerlessness in the experience of his outward failure."[241] For Rahner, the triumph of martyrdom is a victory that can arise only out of total failure and powerlessness. Moreover, that powerlessness is a real part of the martyr's experience—it is not merely illusory. Hence, in *Ad Martyras,* after praising the freedom within prison, Tertullian admits that the suffering of imprisonment is also real—and "even to Christians the prison is unpleasant."[242]

Any model of martyrdom as testimony has to confront the fundamental inversion of apparent meaning that makes a murder or execution interpretable as a Christ-revealing heroic act. Rahner recognizes this as "one basic difficulty."[243] What makes the inversion readable? Do you need to have a concept of martyrdom in order to recognize a murder as

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[241] Karl Rahner, "Dimensions of Martyrdom: A Plea for the Broadening of a Classical Concept" in *Concilium: Martyrdom Today*, ed. Johannes-Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (New York: Seabury, 1983), 11.

[242] Tertullian, *Ad Martyras*, Ch III, 694.

[243] Rahner, *Death*, 123.

a martyrdom?[244] Is martyrdom a self-revelatory act testifying to the Christian faith that can only be recognized by people who are already Christian? How then can martyrdom be "a motive for faith"? It would seem that martyrdom is readable as self-explanatory only to witnesses who are prepared to see correctly. If that is so, Rahner ponders, martyrdom must not be a particularly revealing revelation, if it "is recognized as such in fact only by one who is in his heart already (perhaps without even knowing it) in accord with the events he is observing, that is, who is himself already a Christian."[245] Rahner ends up insisting that the capacity to recognize martyrdom is inborn; that we can read the inversion "naturally," without training.[246]

I am not convinced by this conclusion. It seems that the more accurately martyrs imitate Christ, the more difficult it is to recognize them as martyrs at all. If a martyr is an image and imitation that clearly reveals Christ, we face the more basic question of what it means for Christ to be God's self-revelation—in an (almost) unrecognizable form. The Incarnation is one of the most profound mysteries of the Christian faith, and I will make no attempt to resolve it into a coherent model for Christian martyrological witnessing. It is enough here to note that "when we take Christ as the martyr's model," we recall the obscurity of Christ's own death.[247] Christ is the exemplar of martyrological inversion. Thus the deaths of martyrs read like variations of the crucifixion:

> The man lying on the ground suffocated by his own mortal weakness…or the martyr hanging among real criminals, almost without any chance of being distinguished from them; the martyr who is almost convinced that he is not a martyr at all…the martyr…may die an apparently normal death. [248]

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[244] Rahner, *Death*, 123.
[245] Rahner, *Death,* 123.
[246] Rahner, *Death*, 123, 124.
[247] Rahner, *Death,* 125.
[248] Rahner, *Death,* 125, 126.

In the Gospels, Jesus is frequently unrecognized as the Christ, even by his own disciples. In fact, we might say that the Incarnation of God in Jesus is both a revelation and a disguise. Jesus' physical appearance, behavior, and speech are frequently taken as signs that he is *not* who he says he is—to the extent that he self-identifies as the Messiah at all. The divinity of the living Jesus was by no means apparent to people passing him on the street. Certainly there was nothing in the physical appearance of his body that compelled belief. Popular piety, however, has never been content to envision Jesus as unremarkable and unrecognizable.[249] Why would the incarnation of God not have a body befitting him?

Although the papal bulls *Ineffabilis Deus* and *Munificentissimus Deus* obsess over the body of the Virgin Mary as "a fit habitation for Christ," there are no comparable teachings on Jesus' own body as "fitting" for himself. It is Mary who "approaches as near to God himself as is possible for a created being" and who was born, lived, gave birth, and aged in a unique body. These nineteenth- and twentieth-century marian dogmas suggest that Mary would have been recognizable to her contemporaries. If Mary was "ever free of any stain of sin, wholly beautiful and perfect" and loved and graced by God "above all creatures" then surely she would have looked different—and definitely better—than other Palestinian girls.

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[249] American Protestants in the mid-twentieth century might have disdained the semi-idolatrous cult of the saints, but they could immediately recognize the face of Jesus. They "knew" what Jesus "looked like." Colleen McDannell identifies Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* as the "ubiquitous" image of Jesus for mid-century Protestants. Contemporary Americans who are not directly familiar with Sallman's image would nonetheless immediately recognize it as Jesus: a white man with long hair and a beard, large, gentle eyes, and a flowing robe. There is no historical basis for such an image, but Sallman's *Head of Christ* fit the American cultural expectations of what Jesus ought to look like. David Morgan, "'Would Jesus Have Sat for a Portrait?' The Likeness of Christ in the Popular Reception of Sallman's Art" in *Icons of American Protestantism: the Art of Warner Sallman*, ed. David Morgan (New Haven: Yale, 1996), 186; Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), 189.

Yet the Gospels generally suggest that nothing in Jesus' physical appearance "argued" for his divinity. He is repeatedly unrecognized and misrecognized, and witnesses to his death found it laughable that he might be the "king of the Jews" (Matthew 27:29). The apparent ignobility of Jesus' death is significant because martyrs imitate Jesus at the very moment when he was least recognizable. His was no self-interpreting death. On the contrary, Jesus had to return in the flesh, again unrecognized, to explain it to his disciples.

The Language of Martyred Flesh, Model 2

If we were trying to translate the testimony of a martyred body into the entirely incommensurable language of English, one approximate translation would be "No!" Many theologians describe martyrdom as a negation rather than as positive testimony, but Jon Sobrino eloquently describes this model of martyrdom with a visual metaphor: "A murder is darkness, but *sub specie contrarii* it throws light on many things. A martyrdom has its own strong light, which says more than a thousand words about life and faith."[250] Martyrdom illuminates by revealing darkness, through darkness. Building on the imagery of 1 Corinthians 13:12, Sobrino depicts martyrdom as a dark mirror:

> As if in a glass, darkly, the oppressors can see themselves and confront their deepest truth in the crucified peoples. And more than light, they bring the energy that makes conversion possible; that attracts people to communion, solidarity, utopia; that makes life possible.[251]

Here martyrdom is a mirror pointing, not to heaven, but back to earth. Sobrino looks for divine revelation precisely in human social and political action. He focuses on the

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[250] Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría et al., *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990), 21.

[251] Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2003), 112-113.

politically/ethically transformative potential of martyrdom—that it can reveal to us more than we want to see. Sobrino describes a dynamic in which the oppressor looks at the martyr and sees the violence he is doing to this other, innocent body. The oppressor, we hope, will recoil from this gruesome image of himself, seeing his own injustice in the martyr's blood. Martyrdom is ugly, hard to look at, and reveals what the viewer does not want to see. However, the very horror of martyrdom—the sight of wounded bodies—forces the oppressor to realize that this violence is not right. The wounds rebuke him.

In this model of martyrological testimony, martyrs do not reveal heavenly rewards or minimize earthly suffering. Instead, Sobrino depicts martyrdom as death that *looks like* Jesus' death, with all its apparent ignominy. Thus, the mirror-like quality of martyrdom is not inversion. Sobrino does not want martyrdom to reframe an ugly death as something beautiful. Instead, martyrdom reveals sin and violence in their true ugliness. Martyrdom serves justice when it causes us to see the obvious horror of this violence. Sobrino hopes that when we—especially we in the first world—see martyrdom, we will react with instinctive aversion to pain. We should be startled and appalled by what we see reflected in tortured bodies. This instinctive feeling, he hopes, will override ideologies that justify torture and execution.

> Sobrino cites an especially earthy metaphor that Ignacio Ellacuría used to describe this necessary revelation, in all its unpleasantness.
> …in order to test the health of the First World it was necessary to do a 'coproanalysis,' that is, to examine its feces, because it is the reality of the crucified peoples that appears in that analysis, and their reality reveals that of those who produce them.[252]

Sobrino is optimistic that martyrdom can have the revelatory and diagnostic effect of a "coproanalysis." Because martyrdom is unjust violence, "the martyrs and victims

[252] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom,* 160.

emphatically reveal" injustice, along with the destructive structures and "idols" that provoke such cruelty.[253] "At the very least," Sobrino argues,

> … the murder of these six Jesuits must make the Western Christian world honestly ask itself whether it is as good and holy as it says it is, whether it is as human and free as it claims. The murder should strip off the mantle of hypocrisy with which it tries to envelop democracy and freedom for the few at the expense of repression and poverty for many. It should lead to the suspicion at least that wealth, national security, individual freedom for the few necessarily generate idols who produce many victims in other places, even though these may be thousands of miles away.[254]

In this model, the language of martyrdom is a language written in reverse, like images seen in a mirror, because it always speaks in opposition to whatever produces the martyrdom. Here, however, the force that motivates the killer is what defines, explains, and interprets a murder as martyrdom. Hence, it becomes especially important to ask, "Why were they killed?"[255]

According to Sobrino, the martyrs in El Salvador were killed because of their work on behalf of the poor: "This is the context in which I see the ultimate malice of the murder of these Jesuits. They have murdered men who defended the poor, and the poor are even more unprotected."[256] Sobrino then reads these martyrdoms in opposition to the intention of the martyrers. The Jesuit martyrs were killed because of their work for the poor; their deaths thereby testify on behalf of the poor by showing how viciously the poor of El Salvador are oppressed. If the Jesuits had been doing the very same work, but their killers had been motivated by hatred of their biblical hermeneutics, then their deaths would testify in a different direction—perhaps revealing the subversive power of biblical interpretation. In Sobrino's model, it is the sin that shines brightly in martyrdom, not the

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[253] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom,* 114.
[254] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom,* 80.
[255] Sobrino, *Companions of Jesus,* 21.
[256] Sobrino, *Companions of Jesus*, 52

virtue of the martyrs or the glory of God.

Sobrino is optimistic that martyrdom can and does effectively communicate in this way. He points to Archbishop Oscar Romero as an example of someone who was transformed by seeing a martyred body. For Romero, the martyr was his murdered friend, Rutilio Grande. Sobrino imagines that "as Archbishop Romero stood gazing at the mortal remains of Rutilio Grande, the scales fell from his eyes. Rutilio had been right!"[257] Romero himself could only become a martyr after witnessing his friend's martyrdom and seeing in the reflection of that violence his own guilt in remaining neutral to such injustice.

Thus Sobrino preaches: "All those who seek to accumulate wealth and only think about living better and better, should **look at themselves in the mirror of the victims of this world and see plainly the evils they are causing.**"[258] There is, however, a note of desperation in this demand. A martyr, after all, cannot impose her witness by force of logic. One of Rahner's most helpful insights about reading martyrdom is that the "evidence" or message of martyrdom is not directly translatable into the form of propositional statements or logical proofs. Martyr's deaths "are not logical arguments that, by-passing man's free decision, conclude automatically and compel his assent, as would be true of mathematical or physical demonstrations."[259] If martyrdom is tangible, self-interpreting testimony by God, it nonetheless lacks the force of scientific evidence. Without any guarantee of martyrdom's efficacy, Sobrino must simply hope that it will work—because "If the First World cannot see its own reality in this light, we do not

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[257] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom,* 17.
[258] Bolded in the original. Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom,* 80.
[259] Rahner, *Death,* 123, 122.

know what can make it do so."[260]

The Bodies of the Martyrs at the Center of the Christian Community

In the next part of this chapter I will narrate more concretely the practices through which Christians have historically looked at and interacted with the bodies of their martyrs. I will begin by emphasizing the physical and spiritual centrality of martyrs' bodies in the church. Then I will focus more specifically on the body of Maria Goretti: its postmortem adventures, and how it has been displayed and viewed. Finally, the chapter will consider those practices in light of Rahner and Sobrino's approaches to reading martyred bodies.

Martyrological witness is accomplished through the dying of a body. However, Christian communities have always valued their martyrs' corpses long after the event of martyrdom. In a rather literal sense, "the blood of the martyrs" has historically been "the seed of the church."[261] During the first few centuries of Christianity, the rituals, architecture, and self-identity of Christian communities were partially determined by their interactions with martyred bodies. Today, martyr relics continue to have a central, although often unrecognized, place in almost every Roman Catholic church.

In the context of Tertullian's *Apology*, the blood of Christians is seed-like in that it causes numerical growth by attracting new converts. Yet, we could also say that martyred Christian bodies were the material substance that rooted and shaped local churches. The places where martyred bodies were buried became holy by the presence of

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[260] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom,* 160.

[261] This aphorism in contemporary Christianity is a frequently misattributed, loose derivation from Tertullian's actual quote: *"semen est sanguis Christianorum."* Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 50, 13: *PL* 1, 534.

those corpses, and so these burial places became sites of Christian worship. According to the Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye, the cult of any particular martyr and, indeed, the Christian cult of saints more broadly "can only begin with the glorious cadaver."[262] Delehaye traces contemporary practices of martyr cult to the public funereal rituals practiced by early Christian communities.[263] These rituals were similar to the private funeral practices observed in the broader classical culture, but with the whole local Christian community taking on the traditional role of the family of the deceased.[264] The corpse would be washed, perfumed, and clothed, then brought to the tomb. Later, at regular intervals, families would return to eat meals at the graveside—especially on the birthday of the deceased. The early Christians gathered around the graves of their martyrs established traditions that began as modest variations on these patterns, but eventually grew into much of what we would recognize as devotionalism: "that array of practices, objects, liquids, images, ceremonies, and gestures by which Catholics engaged the presence of God and the saints in the spaces and times of everyday life."[265] The location of martyrs' tombs dictated the place of Christian worship until the innovation of relics made holy space portable.[266]

Seen from the outside, the whole cult of martyrs can easily appear to be anti-body.[267] After all, martyrs are, by definition, dead—and this death is often framed as the victorious escape from bodily existence, which has been sacrificed in favor of a greater,

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[262] Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les origins du culte des martyres* (Brussels: Bollandistes, 1912), 29.
[263] Delehaye, 32.
[264] Delehaye, 40.
[265] Delehaye, 35; Robert Orsi, "'The Infant of Prague's Nightie': The Devotional Origins of Contemporary Catholic Memory," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 21.2 (Spring 2003): 8.
[266] John Crook, *The Architectural Setting of the Cult of Saints in the Early Christian West c.300-c.1200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.
[267] By "seen from the outside," I mean the perspective of anyone, inside or outside of the church, who perceives the cult as foreign.

spiritual good.[268] Martyrdom is a process of separating body and soul. In some narratives there are even hints of this separation occurring *before* death. These martyrs survive torture and fatal attacks without feeling the pain that is inflicted on their bodies. Yet *passiones* are never dry meditations on transcending pain. On the contrary, these texts often read as sadistic love letters exulting in the destruction and wounding of flesh. This combination makes martyrological suffering "inherently paradoxical: it is horrendously elaborated to the point of redundancy, yet ultimately conquered and unimportant."[269] The martyr's acceptance of bodily destruction is such a powerful sacrifice only if we recognize that the body is of real value. Prudentius' "Hymn to St. Eulalia" exemplifies this paradox, combining a gruesome sensuality with a spiritualism that is indifferent to the body. Prudentius viscerally describes assaults on the body of Saint Eulalia as though they were separate from the experience of the still-living Eulalia.

> In a moment two executioners are tearing her slim breast, the claw striking her two girlish sides and cutting to the bone, while Eulalia counts the marks. 'See Lord, 'she says, 'thy name is being written on me. How I love to read these letters, for they record thy victories, O Christ, and the very scarlet of the blood that is drawn speaks the holy name.[270]

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[268] Technically, the term martyr only applies after death, according to a strict distinction between confessors and martyrs that developed in the second century. Eusebius emphasizes this distinction in the following description of confessors: "They were so eager to imitate Christ that for all their glory in witnessing not once or twice but many times and returning from the beasts covered with burns, scars, and wounds, they neither announced themselves as martyrs nor allowed us to address them by that name, sharply rebuking any who tried. For they gladly yielded the title of martyr to Christ, the true Martyr and Firstborn from the dead, and they reminded us of martyrs who had already passed away: 'They are martyrs indeed who were taken up as soon as they had confessed Christ; we are merely humble confessors.' They pleaded with their brothers in tears to pray for their fulfillment, proving the power of martyrdom by their actions but refusing the title through fear of God." Eusebius, *The Church History,* trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 5.2, page 159.

[269] Lucy Grig, "Torture and Truth in Late Antique Martyrology," *Early Medieval Europe* 11. 4 (2002): 323.

[270] Prudentius, "Hymn to St. Eulalia," in *Prudence, Tome IV*, tr. M. Lavarenne (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1963), 151.

Even while her body is being violently transformed into a text, Eulalia speaks as if she were simply a reader of that text, seeing it from the outside. Prudentius goes on to elaborately describe Eulalia's flowing blood but suggests that, if Eulalia feels anything at all, she experiences her bloodshed as a pleasant bath. "The dreadful pain did not reach her spirit while the fresh blood was colouring her body and washing her skin in its warm stream."[271] When Eulalia finally dies, engulfed in flames, her spirit exits her body in the form of a dove flying out of her mouth. We can imagine what happens next: Eulalia's spirit, freed from her body, presumably flies to heaven where it joins the other saints in an invisible "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1).

In devotional practice, however, martyrdom is not regarded as a simple matter of spirit conquering flesh. Martyrs are not so much disembodied as bilocated in "the two realms." They are "simultaneously present in heaven in spirit, and on earth in their physical remains."[272] Although released from their bodies, martyrs nonetheless remain profoundly connected to their corpses—and the smallest pieces thereof. Martyred bodies are not empty vessels, but a medium of communication between the human petitioner and the heavenly intercessor favored by God.

In the cultural context of early Christianity, Delehaye argues, it was widely believed that the deceased person continued to have some sort of relationship with his or her corpse, as though "the dead continued to live an invisible life near the tomb."[273] With the transition from worship at martyr burial sites to bringing martyr relics to worship spaces, the saints' ongoing earthly presence became more explicitly identified with their corpses. Christians do not always articulate the metaphysics implicit in these practices,

[271] Prudentius, "Hymn to St. Eulalia," 153.
[272] Crook, 1.
[273] Delehaye, 35.

but that does not mean that the practices lack theological significance. Caroline Walker Bynum argues that the devotional practices of medieval "ordinary folk" were given theological rationale in Scholastic debates about bodily resurrection. She points out that the Scholastics themselves participated in and encouraged relic cults in which lay people "behaved as if the bodies were the saints."[274] In the past century, however, modern and "serious" Roman Catholic theology has distanced itself from popular devotional practices. Bynum begins her article on "Material Continuity" by evoking this disconnect. She notes that, "to twentieth-century non-Christians and Christians alike, no tenet of Christianity has seemed more improbable—indeed incredible—than the doctrine of the resurrection of the body." [275]

It might be more accurate to say that in the mid-twentieth century these ideas about bodily continuity were still deeply present in popular Catholic devotional forms, but became increasingly incompatible with other aspects of the contemporary western world view. Robert Orsi describes mid-twentieth century Roman Catholic devotionalism as based on a "culture of embodiment, of sacred presence" that, at least in the United States, was largely rejected in the era of Vatican II.[276] Orsi locates a shift in popular American Catholic literature in the mid-1960s. Practices of devotion to saints suddenly seemed medieval and outright embarrassing to "modern" Catholics.

Paolo Molinari, the Jesuit Postulator General, spent his career trying to revive the

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[274] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Material Continuity, Personal Survival, and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval and Modern Contexts," *History of Religions* 30.1, The Body (August 1990): 75.
[275] Bynum, 51.
[276] Orsi, 8.

cult of the saints in the post-Vatican II church.[277] In 1965 he published *Saints: Their Place in the Church*, knowing that many Catholics now regarded much about the cult of the saints as archaic and superstitious. Molinari thus attempted to describe, to this skeptical audience, how earthly humans interact with deceased saints. His explanation amounts to a linguistic theory—albeit one that is lightly sketched.

First, Molinari describes ordinary human speech: "On earth, personal contacts and mutual exchanges can be effected in virtue of our common corporeal nature: we simply have recourse to the spoken and the written word, or to other natural and conventional signs."[278] Molinari brackets inter-human communication as obvious in its use of signs. In passing, though, he notes that signs are corporeal. We are only able to communicate with other human beings through our bodies. Mouths move air that touches ears, and hands mark objects that are transported over space and then examined through movements of hands and eyes. Molinari's statement that human beings communicate with each other through "our common corporeal nature" presupposes the fundamental physicality of all human language.

Martyrs and other saints, however, do not have this same corporeal nature. They do have some physical presence on earth via their relics. Even so, human communication with saints through prayer is not as simple as ordinary corporeal communication. Molinari defines what it means for humans and saints to communicate:

> *…the bonds which join us to our brothers in heaven can be experienced as interpersonal contacts, in which a communicational dialogue can be established whereby initiative on the part of one will evoke a reaction in the other, arouse an*

[277] In 1985 Molinari was President of the College of Postulators and served on the nine-person Vatican commission that investigated and responded to Giordano Bruno Guerri's controversial exposé of Goretti, *Povera Santa, Povero Assassino*.

[278] Paolo Molinari, *Saints: Their Place in the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 151-152.

> *interest, call for a response, in such a way that the petitioner can be aware of the interest he has evoked*.[279]

Unfortunately, Molinari says little more about *how* this communication is accomplished, describing it as "a strictly supernatural communication."[280] However, Molinari does elaborate "the doctrine common among theologians" that saints have limited consciousness of terrestrial matters. This doctrine posits that any particular saint has "an actual explicit awareness" *only* of "that which has direct reference to and intimate connection with him and his earthly life." Molinari does not define these latter terms, but strongly suggests that a saint's bodily remains have "direct reference" or "intimate connection" with the deceased saint.

This theory of saintly consciousness aligns well with the popular hierarchy of relics. If a saint is most linked to his or her bodily remains, and thus most conscious of earthly matters in the vicinity of bodily material, that may explain why such material is so highly prized as "first-class relics." The lesser grades of relics are linked to the saint only through contact, in the case of second-class relics, or contact with relics, in the case of third-class relics.[281] This system for valuing relics or determining the degree of an object's communicative link to a saint is every bit as corporeal as Molinari's account of human communication. Physical contact is regarded as the medium through which holiness and communicative potential is transmitted.

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[279] Molinari, 151.

[280] Molinari, 155.

[281] Much more about the popular economy of relics can be learned from eBay advertisements for relics, and the site's official and unofficial guidelines regarding the sale of relics and the sale of human body parts. Currently, eBay formally considers first class relics to be "restricted" items: "If you are selling a first-class relic, you must state in the item description what the relic is made from. If it's a human remain it can't be sold if it's made from any body part except human scalp hair." eBay, "Human Remains and Body Parts Policy," http://pages.ebay.com/help/policies/remains.html (accessed June 7, 2010).

The bodies of saints are still present in Roman Catholic churches around the world, even in communities that would be baffled by the idea of using relics as a medium of "intercommunication." As in the past, the current *Missale Romanum* institutes a central place for martyr relics in every church.[282] An altar cannot be consecrated without having some sort of first-class relics placed under the altar or inside a specially sealed cavity—and an altar loses its consecration if the relics are removed. Until recently, these had to include authenticated relics from a martyr in order for the altar to be consecrated.[283] This physical union of the Christian altar and the martyr's relics suggests the unity of the martyr's death with Christ's death—not only as a repetition but also almost as an extension of the original sacrifice. However, the relics of martyrs are not permitted to touch the surface of the altar. The *mensa* is "reserved for the Body and Blood of the King of Martyrs."[284] In the celebration of the Eucharist the bread and wine become the actual flesh and blood of Christ—the "head of the martyrs" who ascended without leaving any particles.[285] Through the miracle of transubstantiation the elements give physical access to Jesus Christ—whose very physicality gives humankind access to God.

The dead bodies of the martyrs have had a seminal role in the church. Two millennia of devotional practices and theologies have evolved in response to these bodies

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[282] In 1906 the requirement was relaxed, henceforth requiring only the relics of at least one martyr, and was changed more recently to permit the substitution of relics from saints who were not martyred.

[283] Brown, 14; Godefridus Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist* (New York: Brill, 1995), 177, 185.

[284] Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory on Popular Piety and The Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines* (Vatican: December 2001) http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html#Chapter%20Eight (accessed April 4, 2010), para. 237

[285] Bynum cites arguments as to why Christ's teeth and foreskin would not remain on earth after the resurrection. Bynum, 55.

and the communal rituals honoring their graves. What is most striking, though, is the quiet omnipresence of martyred bodies throughout the world. For twelve centuries, martyrs were physically present in every consecrated altar, as though new churches and new Christian communities could only grow if seeded by the flesh of martyrs.

The History of Maria Goretti's Body, Postmortem

Acta and *passiones* are stories that effectively end when the protagonist dies. At this point, the martyrdom is accomplished. Often, that death is rather anticlimactic—the inevitable stopping point after a dramatic succession of tortures, miraculously endured. Martyrdom texts frequently continue a bit after the death of the protagonist, but the story really ends at the death. After that point the hagiographer has little to say except to affirm the story just narrated, as both factual and important. Death is the decisive point that determines the martyr's victory. Wicked tyrants can and do assault these bodies, hide or destroy them altogether—as happens in the "Passion of the Martyrs of Lyons", whose ashes were washed away in the Rhone. The martyrs, though, have no need to worry about these postmortem assaults: their virtue, salvation, and victory are inalterably fixed by death.

Hagiographies of Maria Goretti fixate on the girl's living flesh. All martyrdoms entail violence, and generally torture, but Goretti's martyrdom is represented with especial attention to her bodily wholeness and purity throughout her life. Invariably these stories narrate her body as a battleground of competing forces. The crises and drama in the story are almost entirely physical: the purity of her body, its domestic labors, Serenelli's sexual assaults, Goretti's "successful" defense of her virginity, and the

violence and pain Goretti endured in her final days of life. The central themes of temptation, threat, and endurance ensure that the drama can only end conclusively with her death.

However, Goretti's body has now had a lengthy postmortem existence, with adventures far more exotic than what she experienced in life. Compared to saints like Joan of Arc, who waited centuries for recognition, Goretti was canonized with shocking speed. Even though canonization occurred relatively recently, Goretti has now been dead for much longer than she was alive. Goretti has been recognized as a saint for over sixty years, whereas she lived for only a few months past her eleventh birthday. In the first couple decades after her death, Goretti's body rested in a cemetery. Since then, her corpse and relics have traveled widely.[286]

To understand the valuation of Maria Goretti's postmortem body, one must first consider her dying and wounded body while it was still alive. Even before it became disparate sacred relics, her body was not entirely whole. During her short life, Goretti's body was strained by poverty, manual labor, fear and violence. After Serenelli's fatal assault, her death was slow and gruesome. She was delirious, feverish, miserable with thirst, and hemorrhaging blood from multiple stab wounds. The ultimate "cause of death was septic peritonitis, originating from the intestinal wounds."[287]

> It is important to dwell on these physical details of Goretti's suffering in order to respectfully recognize the ordinary vulnerability of Goretti's living body. Many of Goretti's hagiographies repeat the detail that Goretti survived for twenty-one hours without anesthesia. This is appreciated as a significant quantity of pain, but

[286] I find it useful to speak of Goretti's "corpse" or "body" despite the fact that it has not been a whole body, or even a whole skeleton, for a very long time. At what point does a corpse cease to be a body and instead become a collection of major body parts? I will not attempt to solve that existential question here.

[287] Mauro dell'Immacolata, *Le Vie della Provvidenza: Santa Maria Goretti Martire della Purezza* (Rome: Coletti Editore, 1955), 93.

> the physicality of that suffering tends to be obscured by spiritual interpretations. Goretti is continuously depicted as pure and whole, as though the most important parts of her self were undamaged in the assault.
> Serenelli's violent assault is the apex of the Gorettian drama; the slicing of flesh

reveals Goretti's true self. Afterwards, in some hagiographies, Goretti actually glows with a visible holiness. In one of the earlier English-language hagiographies, Goretti's spiritual qualities become physically manifested in her dying body. The metaphorical beauty of her soul is literalized. In this hagiographic death scene:

> Padre Girolamo approached the bedside. Had he not seen it with his own eyes, he would never have believed it possible. Maria was transformed. Intense physical suffering was making her more and more angelic. Her rare beauty deepened and had become spiritualized. Her lovely body was becoming radiant as earth slipped slowly away from her. The Padre could see Maria's soul, and it was lovable and plucky and tenderhearted and pure.[288]

This supernatural display of Goretti's true character obscures the horror that is usually apparent in septic deaths. Instead, we find the phenomenon of martyrdom fully naturalized. The passage gives no indication that Padre Girolamo experiences any tension between the spiritual meaning of Goretti's death and its surface appearance. Rather, her soul is there to be seen, and Girolamo simply happens to have been present to see it.

Maria Goretti's experience of her own death is even harder to perceive in these texts. In fact, to the extent that Goretti spoke about her own physical and emotional experience, her statements are interpreted as virtuous deceptions. Several texts record a bizarre deathbed conversation between Goretti and her mother. In one version, Assunta asks Maria how she feels: "'Good, mamma!' Marietta said, cheerful in spite of her excruciating, life-stealing pain." The pretense continues: "'Mamma, why do you weep?'

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[288] Alfred MacConastair, *Lily of the Marshes: the Story of Maria Goretti* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 173.

Marietta asked. 'I…I'm well!'"[289] Hagiographers of this scene evidently see no need to intercede in the text to interpret Goretti's obvious lies. Rather, the lies stand as further evidence of Goretti's goodness and her desire to protect Assunta from the pain of empathy.[290]

There is a pattern, in Gorettian devotional texts, of skipping over bodily details in favor of spiritual interpretations. Pius XII is probably most responsible for establishing this rhetorical pattern. In his 1950 homily for Goretti's canonization, Pius XII praises Goretti's "purity"—the "Christian virtue" most evident in her martyrdom. In her purity, he says, we find "the most basic and most significant affirmation of the perfect dominion of spirit over matter."[291] Given this precedent it is little wonder that a hagiography published the following year could narrate Goretti's murder and death, then immediately proceed to make the airy assertion that "Maria is not dead. She lives in the kingdom of Glory" where her spirit is "freed from the binds of the body and potent with the power of that God to whom she is closely united."[292] As Pius had said, Goretti now lives in the "immense heaven of beauty," located far "above the unhealthy swamps and mud of the world."[293]

Goretti's martyred body is represented in unacknowledged metaphors linking moral, sexual and ritual purity to literal, physical purity. Goretti is frequently described

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[289] Pietro DiDonato, *The Penitent* (New York: Hawthorn, 1962), 65. Assunta Goretti narrated this conversation somewhat less dramatically in her testimony for the *Processo Apostolico sul martirio*. Giovanni Alberti, *Assunta Goretti* (Nettuno, Rome: Santuario Madonna delle Grazie e S. Maria Goretti, 2007), 389.

[290] If Goretti is an image of Christ here, she evokes a Christ on the cross who winces and says "Don't mind me, it doesn't hurt a bit."

[291] Pius XII, "Nella esaltazione alla gloria dei Santi di Maria Goretti," speech given May 24, 1950, *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Sua Santità Pio XII, 2 Marzo 1950-1° Marzo 1951*. 12 (Vatican, 1955), 122.

[292] Cacciato, 55

[293] Pius XII, *Discorsi 1950-1951,* 122.

as a martyr *to* or *for* purity, an extremely vague phrase that is used, I believe, intentionally for its euphemistic obscurity. In the language of germ theory, Goretti's body died because of the impurities it was exposed to in the attack. Before elaborating on the spiritual meanings of Goretti's martyred body it is important to note the physical reality that stabbing is a destructive penetration of the body. The healthy wholeness of Goretti's body was breached by a dirty implement. Internal and external were upset, and her inner organs were exposed to outside pathogens. Goretti died from infection. It is only through the inverting lens of martyrdom that her butchered body becomes a symbol of purity or ideal femininity.

Immediately after her death, Goretti's body became an object of devotion and study. Mauro's hagiography dramatically recounts the beginning of the story of the corpse: "Human justice" required that "the mortal remains of the little Maria were once again put under the knife for the autopsy."[294] This scientific analysis of Goretti's body, however, was in no way antithetical to cultic treatment of the corpse. In fact, the accoutrements of surgery and autopsy became sacred relics through their contact with the body. Shortly after Goretti's death the Superiore of the Fatebenefratelli, who ran the hospital where Goretti died, presented the Nettuno Santuario with a much-valued gift: the cloth on which Goretti's body was autopsied.[295] More recently, the shrine obtained the marble table "that with almost absolute certainty" was used for Goretti's surgery and autopsy.[296] This altar-like autopsy table, now holding a gold-colored statue of a dying Goretti, bluntly symbolizes twentieth-century efforts to add scientific rigor to the

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[294] Mauro, *Provvidenza*, 91.

[295] Mauro, *Una storia vissuta: la canonizzazione di S. Maria Goretti* (Rome: Orlando Baldazzi, 1961), 35.

[296] Giovanni Alberti, *Maria Goretti: Storia di un piccolo fiore di campo* (Nettuno, Rome: Santuario Madonna delle Grazie e S. Maria Goretti, 2006), 166

canonization process.

The autopsy was legally necessary in order to gather evidence for the prosecution of Goretti's killer. However, the autopsy report was also included in the proceedings for Goretti's beatification and canonization, and is quoted at length in several hagiographies. The report notes the exact measurements and locations of all Goretti's cuts, bruises, and wounds, which covered her torso, front and back, as well as her legs. These details, lovingly repeated, are supposed to reveal the extent of Goretti's suffering and the hateful force that she opposed. Padre Giovanni Alberti, the current rector of Goretti's shrine in Nettuno, writes that "the fury of Alessandro Serenelli appears in its brutality only at the moment of the autopsy," performed shortly after Goretti's death.[297]

Within the cult, though, Goretti's cadaver and autopsy are most discussed in terms of what they reveal about Goretti's chastity. Not only does the autopsy confirm the physical fact of her virginity, but, Mauro notes, the documentation of "the multiple contusions found on her body" allows us "to know with what energy she defended her virginal purity," and how Goretti responded to "the fury of blows." According to Mauro, the autopsy report indicates that Goretti did not fight Serenelli or attempt to protect herself from being stabbed. Instead, it indicates that, "she was worried about covering her limbs and saving the soul of her killer."[298] Mauro reads in this medical text a dramatic display of feminine chastity, echoing a scene of Perpetua's martyrdom. In the *passio* of that third century martyr, Perpetua exhibits an incredible concern for propriety even as she is being trampled to death by a wild cow:

First the heifer tossed Perpetua and she fell on her back. Then sitting up she

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[297] Alberti, *Maria Goretti*, 164.
[298] Mauro, *Provvidenza*, 93.

> pulled down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair: for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph.[299]

Hagiographic readings of Goretti's autopsy report find a similar narrative of superhuman modesty written in the patterns of Goretti's wounds. Thus, Padre Aurelio, another Passionist hagiographer, gave this 1947 narrative of the attack:

> …the weak girl, emboldened by her faith in God and by her horror at sin, became a lioness: and faced with equal fearlessness the murderous iron that already fell tearing through her virginal limbs, opening…deep slashes in her abdomen. Such destruction!…And yet, the heroic maiden, ignoring the strikes and thinking only of her modesty, deliberately arranged her clothes as they also became pierced by the [weapon].[300]

Perpetua's modest behavior was observed by an arena full of spectators, and the hagiographer suggests that it was performed intentionally for the crowd, in order to enact a martyrdom that would be properly recognized. Yet, Mauro and Aurelio claim to read a comparable history in the scientific analysis of Goretti's cadaver. I am surprised that they do not praise Goretti's actions as being especially remarkable because she acted so incredibly without any expectation of being seen—it was an un-self-conscious display of virtue.

Gorettian hagiographies shy away from describing whether Goretti's hymen was examined before or after her death. In either case, virginity is a diagnosis to be made by medical experts. Giovanni Alberti, citing the *Positio super martirio*, reports that shortly before Goretti's death, her mother, Assunta Goretti, asked the doctor to confirm Goretti's claim that Serenelli had not succeeded in raping her. Alberti quotes the doctor's elliptical

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[299] Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas," 129.

[300] Aurelio della Passione, *La S. Agnese del secolo XX: la Beata Maria Goretti martire della purezza* (Rome: Coletti Editore, 1947), 48.

response as "Without a doubt, it is as when she was born."[301] This report places the medical diagnosis of virginity prior to Goretti's death. However, it exemplifies a pattern that we see elsewhere in discourse of relics and, especially, the bodies of virgin martyrs. Both Assunta Goretti and the doctor presume that examination of Goretti's physical body is an important source of knowledge that is required for confirming Goretti's spoken testimony. Moreover, in this exchange between Assunta and the doctor we can see a slippage of euphemisms. Successful resistance of a sexual assault is here equated with something physical and visible. Presumably, the doctor is reporting that Goretti's hymen is intact, but he is not so crude as to specify what "it" is. "It" is understood.

One hagiography quotes Maria Goretti, on her deathbed, making a modestly veiled assertion of her virginity. In this hagiography, Goretti narrates her assault with the obscure statement: "It was Alessandro. He tried to make me do something that was a sin. But he couldn't make me do it. He couldn't. I wouldn't let him."[302] Lest the reader suspect that Goretti did do the unspoken thing that Serenelli tried to make her do, the narrator provides corroboration. The hagiography goes on to say that, "…the surgeons at Nettuno confirmed her boast. He had not succeeded. Her crown was to be not that of martyrdom only, but of virginity."[303] Goretti's virginity is confirmed here by surgeons, the experts qualified to make such an evaluation. Likewise, the 1954 hagiography *Teen-ager's Saint: Saint Maria Goretti* ends its narrative of Goretti's life with the triumphal words: "Aside from the many wounds, the bruises show the energy with which she had to face her attacker. But victory was hers. Doctors testified in their statement that her

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[301] "…*Essa é come é nata*." Alberti, *Maria Goretti,* 166.

[302] C. E. Maguire, *Saint Maria Goretti: Martyr of Purity* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1950), 55.

[303] Maguire, 55.

virginity emerged from the fight absolutely unsullied."[304] The physical condition of Goretti's corpse redeems her death, making it a victory.

Goretti's assault and subsequent death caught the attention of the Italian media, making her an instant celebrity even before she was buried. Padre Mauro writes that Goretti's death was reported by many Italian journalists, both "good and evil," but "all recognized in her an extraordinary girl."[305] Her burial, shortly after the autopsy, took place amidst this sensational and sentimental publicity. Decades later, Mauro imagines the scene: "For twenty-four hours, a sorrowing crowd filed past the martyr's remains. Many would have stayed longer, had they been allowed. Others tried to kiss her, to cut a lock of her hair, to touch the body, such was their veneration of her."[306] Almost all of the mourners who attended her funeral had been strangers to Goretti when she was alive. Already though, "she became dear to them all solely because of her martyrdom immediately in defense of her purity."[307]

The procession of Goretti's corpse from the hospital to the cemetery included representatives of every religious order in Nettuno and Anzio. There was no private ceremony for the family, which would have been financially unfeasible, but instead a community-wide religious event, including "palms, and…throngs of people reciting the Rosary."[308] Goretti's grave was donated by the city, and local politicians of various political parties participated in the funeral, giving speeches in praise of Goretti's

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[304] James Morelli, *Teen-ager's Saint: Saint Maria Goretti,* ed. William Peil (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Grail Publications, 1954), 63.
[305] Mauro, *Vissuta*, 25.
[306] Mauro, *Vissuta*, 25.
[307] Mauro, *Provvidenza*, 94.
[308] Mauro, *Provvidenza*, 94

chastity.[309] The archpriest gave a funeral sermon implicitly recognizing Goretti's sainthood. According to Mauro, it was a moving sermon that ended by "invoking little Maria's intercession with God" on behalf of everyone present, in hopes that she would "awaken in them the living flame of faith and of Christian purity."[310]

There were indications even then that the cemetery would only be a temporary resting place for Goretti's body. Two years following her death, there were two monuments built in commemoration of Maria Goretti. The monument at the church then called the *Santuario di Nostra Signora delle Grazie* in Nettuno is on display now in the *Salone Storico*, a museum-like hall outside the nave of the *Santuario*. Stretching from floor to the high ceiling, it depicts a girl, apparently the same girl, sculpted three times over. The lowest of the three Gorettis (surely they are all meant to be Gorettis) is fully carved and most realistic. This figure lies facedown, perpendicular across the monument. If not dead, she is surely dying. In fact, this sculpture was supposedly modeled after *The Martyrdom of Saint Cecilia*.[311] That Renaissance sculpture is famous as a remarkably lifelike representation of Cecilia's corpse—with her head twisted away from the viewer and her severed neck on display.[312] In the Gorettian version, a lily seems to grow above the girl's head, in bas-relief. Above that, an angelic girl floats in clouds with her arms outstretched and surrounded by heavenly rays, as she is watched over by cherubim. The structure is topped by a haloed head with closed eyes—a death mask, wreathed with lilies.

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[309] Mauro, *Provvidenza*, 94, 95.
[310] Mauro, *Provvidenza*, 95.
[311] "Un Monumento," *La Stella del Mare* (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, October 1934): 1039, 1041. *The Martyrdom of Saint Cecilia*, a sculpture by Stefano Maderno is in *Santa Cecilia in Trastavere*, in Rome.
[312] Marco Bussagli and Mattia Reiche, *Baroque & Rococo*, tr. Patrick McKeown (New York: Sterling, 2009), 16.

The second monument referred to this first one. A marble cross marking Goretti's grave read:

> July 6, 1902
> ***Here rests the virginal corpse***
> of the heroic Maria Goretti…
> waiting for legal authorization
> to be entombed
> in the *Santuario di Nostra Signora delle Grazie*
> where her monument rises[313]

Goretti's body remained in the cemetery for almost twenty-seven years—as World War I delayed the exhumation.[314] However, the tombstone's prediction was fulfilled when Goretti was exhumed and gradually translated to the *Santuario* in 1929.[315] Nine years later Assunta Goretti described the exhumation, as she remembered the occasion:

> In January 1928 [sic] they did the exhumation; I was present, along with my son Mariano, Teresa Cimarelli, the Archpriest of Nettuno, some Passionists and other people. The body was undone[316]; the bones remained and there was still hair on the head. We also found the hair that had been cut off at the hospital as part of the autopsy. The hair had been placed in a box [in the grave]. They also found the document and the medal of the Daughters of Mary, which [she] had received with joy on her deathbed. Everything was gathered together in a small box, which was then placed in the tomb of the Sisters in the same cemetery. The Passionist Fathers took away the sheet that had covered the cadaver…also the hair and the boards from the old coffin. I don't know if the medal and the document were taken by the Passionists or put in the new box.[317]

Mauro offers, as usual, a more dramatic account. He describes Assunta Goretti watching

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[313] Mauro, *Vissuta*, 26, 27; Alberti, *Maria Goretti*, 170. Alberti's text includes the word "dodicenne" (indicating that Goretti was in her 12th year of life) after her name on the plaque.

[314] Mauro, *Vissuta*, 32.

[315] Mauro, *Vissuta*, 35.

[316] "*Il corpo era disfatto…*" The word "undone" is the most literal translation of *disfatto*, and I use it to avoid the visceral and negative connotations of more specific English terms such as "degraded" or "stripped of flesh."

[317] Alberti reproduces the text of Assunta's testimony on October 29, 1938, Sessio XXII of the Apostolic Process, in response to Interrogation XV. Alberti, *Assunta Goretti*, 241.

over the exhumation and quietly contemplating "the various bones. Upon seeing the head of her Marietta she was at the verge of fainting, but immediately she recovered" with supernatural sustenance, "and imparted, one last time, a kiss."[318]

Several months later the relics were "finally" moved to the shrine. Accompanied by a procession of religious and civil authorities, schoolchildren, and religious associations, Goretti's body was carried in an elaborately decorated catafalque. This coffin-like box was draped in swags of black fabric with gold-colored lace and covered with white lilies.[319]

Assunta Goretti's testimony would seem to be one of the most authoritative records of this cultic event. Her verbal testimony, based on ten-year-old memories, was transcribed in the Copia Publica of testimony from the Apostolic Process for Goretti's beatification. Here are her exact words, according to my translation:

> Later that same year, June 27th to be precise, if I'm not mistaken, in the evening the remains were privately taken from the cemetery to the church, they told me it was the church of S. Francesco. Then the next day it was transported from there to the *Santuario delle Grazie*, which […[320]] solemn. On the 27th I wasn't in Nettuno, but the next day I was present and with me were another nine people from Corinaldo, including my son Mariano, his wife, and their little daughter Isolina, who that very morning made her first Communion in the *Chiesa della Madonna delle Grazie*. The procession was very long. You took part: the clergy. The Daughters of Mary, dressed in white; authorities; children dressed as angels, etc. There were many people. The coffin was carried on the shoulders of twelve Daughters of Mary on a *cataletto* draped in black cloth with gold lace. The Daughters of Mary and the children carried flowers and palms. There was also a discourse in church. The remains were interred the following day; my son was there at the Church of the Passionists, behind the monument of the Servant of God. The case as placed inside the wall, in a hole made in the exterior. And today it is still there.[321]

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[318] Mauro, Provvidenza, 120.

[319] "Le trionfali onoranze di Nettuno alla fanciulla Maria Goretti," *La Stella del Mare* (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, 1929): 54.

[320] The text is illegible here.

[321] Assunta Goretti, testimony, October 29, 1938, Sessio XXII in Alberti, *Assunta Goretti*, 241.

Another historic record of this event is a 1929 article published shortly after the translation in *La Stella del Mare*, the monthly magazine of the church that was to be Goretti's shrine. The article breathlessly describes the beauty and grandeur of the procession, the universal outpouring of emotion, and the magnificent decorations of the shrine.[322] At the main altar "a feast of lights and flowers" was placed at the feet of the statue of the Madonna delle Grazie, "as if in thanks for welcoming…the remains of the unconquered little virgin" into "her temple."[323]

In addition to this relocation, Goretti's body also changed ownership. Maria Goretti's mother signed a formal document affirming:

> I, the below-signing Assunta Goretti, in gratitude to the Passionist Fathers, who are so interested in the glorification of my deceased daughter Maria Goretti, voluntarily offer them the body of my daughter so that it will be preserved in their Santuario della Madonna delle Grazie here in Nettuno.

Beneath these words, Assunta marked her signature with an "X", along with signatures by her son and an accompanying friend who co-signed as witnesses.[324]

All afternoon visitors "flocked to the shrine" to be near those "blessed remains." According to the article, "the faithful prayed devoutly and at length" and "touched rosaries and other objects" to the casket. Before leaving Goretti's side, these devotees "gathered up flowers and twigs to keep religiously"[325] as well as hagiographies, which were distributed "by the dozen."[326] After this outpouring of affection, the relics were enclosed in the Gorettian monument at the shrine, where they remained for the next ten

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[322] "Le trionfali onoranze," 55.
[323] "Le trionfali onoranze," 54-55.
[324] Mauro, *Provvidenza*, 124.
[325] This practice of saving floral matter from major religious events continues in the contemporary cult of St. Maria Goretti and I have been told that it is common generally in Italian popular Catholicism.
[326] "Le trionfali onoranze," 57.

years.

Goretti's cause for beatification progressed during the thirties, but her remains had to be retrieved for a final step: the canonical recognition of the body. This ceremony, required by church law, was performed jointly by two medical doctors and the Ecclesiastical Tribunal for the Apostolic Process for the Beatification of the Servant of God, with the participation of "several other laymen."[327] The ceremony opened with prayers. In Mauro's published memoir of the *causa,* he describes a solemn atmosphere of careful scientific analysis performed as part of a religious ritual.

> …the *urna*[328] was brought forth from the place where it had been secreted ten years previously, and was brought into the Sacristy of the *Santuario* in Nettuno. There, in the presence of Monsignor Salvatore Natucci, the *Promotore Generale della Fede*, as well as Monsignor Giovanni Calvi, the *Cancelliere dei Riti*...the bones were extracted from the box enclosed in the urna and reassembled on a table covered in a white sheet…[329]

The doctors carefully counted and measured the bones, calculating the approximate size of Goretti's living body. Next, the body was somehow identified by "several other laymen invited by the *r.mo P. Postulatore* in order to give testimony to their recognition." The remains were "touched" with "rosaries, medals and images of the Servant of God herself."[330] The bones were then carefully enclosed in a new box made of wood and zinc, "stamped with the seal" of the *Promotore Generale della Fede*, and

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[327] "La ricognizione canonica del corpo di Maria Goretti a Nettuno," *Osservatore Romano* (January 22, 1939), reprinted in Alberti, *Assunta Goretti*, 285.

[328] The word *urna* is usually defined as a vase or (ballot) box. However, it is also used to refer to the glass caskets commonly used in Italy to display saints' relics. The word's meaning here is probably not so specific: every container that has held Goretti's exhumed remains is called an *urna* in one text or another.

[329] Mauro, *Vissuta,* 45.

[330] "La ricognizione canonica del corpo di Maria Goretti a Nettuno" in Alberti, *Assunta Goretti*, 285.

returned to the niche in the monument.[331]

For the fourth time Goretti's body had been laid to rest, but it was not long before it was disturbed by World War II. Mussolini had taken special interest in Nettuno, draining its malarial swamps and combining it with the town of Anzio to create a model city. In turn, the Allied commanders chose precisely these shores to launch an invasion of Rome in 1944. Inhabitants of Nettuno and Anzio fled, and American and British troops used the abandoned homes to build shelters for several months of fighting and air raids. Well before this battle began, Mauro undertook to personally rescue "the precious treasure of the body of little Maria." In 1943 he was given permission to remove the remains from Nettuno and hide them in Rome at the Passionist monastery of saints Giovanni e Paolo.[332]

Even before the war was quite over, Goretti's cause for sainthood moved forward. On March 25, 1945, Maria Goretti was declared a martyr. In preparation for her imminent beatification, Goretti's remains were then transferred to an expensive new *urna* made of crystal glass and bronze.[333] The metal parts of this vessel came from of the bullets and cartridges gathered from around the Santuario after the Allied Invasion.[334]

A crisis arose days before Goretti's canonization when a certain Cardinal Micara "expressed the desire that the body of the Saint be displayed more artistically." At the time, however, the *urna* was in Nettuno, and the three artists hired to improve it were in Rome. Cardinal Micara, the *Promotore Generale della Fede* and other high officials kept watch over the relics as the reliquary was united to its new, more artistic parts. Three

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[331] Mauro, *Vissuta,* 45.
[332] Mauro, *Vissuta*, 45.
[333] Mauro, *Vissuta*, 47.
[334] Padre Umberto, "L'Altare provvisorio di S. Maria Goretti," *Il Santuario di Nettuno e S. Maria Goretti* 1, 8/9 (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, April/May 1951): 4.

days before the canonization the work became frantic when it was discovered that the new wax head was disproportionate to the body that had been in use since the beatification. At this point there wasn't time to sculpt Goretti's hair in wax, as planned. Goretti's own hair was unusable, as it had all been cut off before her burial. Instead, human hair was acquired from a source in Milan and flown to Rome in time for the canonization.[335]

Since 1969, Goretti's body has made its home in a subterranean chapel, her "crypt," which was recently remodeled. The relics are displayed in a glass case under the

Figure 2. The wax body that displays/obscures Goretti's relics, in its glass case under the altar in the crypt of the *Basilica Santuario Nostra Signora delle Grazie e Santa Maria Goretti* in Nettuno (Roma), Italy.

[335] Mauro, *Vissuta*, 91.

altar. The whole chapel is a heavy modernist space, oval shaped and surrounded with mosaic murals of Gorettian hagiographic scenes. In the back of the room a curved turquoise container protrudes from the wall. Inside it are the bodily remains of Padre Mauro dell'Immacolata. Mauro, Goretti's original Postulator, died two months prior to the inauguration of the newly rebuilt church. Like Goretti, Mauro was buried temporarily in the Nettuno cemetery—awaiting permission to have his body moved nearer the relics of Goretti, "'his' little martyr."[336] In 1969 Mauro was reenacting the ancient Christian practice of seeking burial as near as possible to the tombs or relics of martyrs—a practice even Augustine found somewhat questionable.[337] Nonetheless, the Gorettian cult repeatedly affirms the holiness of her relics and the places that have been "touched" by proximity to her corpse.

Assunta Goretti died in Corinaldo in 1954. *Memento mori* photographs show Padre Mauro and Alessandro Serenelli sitting with her corpse, a Goretti prayer card in her hands.[338] Assunta was buried, following an elaborate funeral Mass celebrated by eight bishops. Two years later, though, Assunta's body was exhumed and moved to a crypt in the Chiesa dell'Addolorata where Corinaldo's Gorettian relic was kept. A biographer of Alessandro Serenelli writes of visiting this crypt: "Enshrined on the canopied altar in a crystal cylinder filled with blue liquid preservative is the age-blackened forearm bone, part of the arm with which Marietta tried to ward off Alessandro's attack. With Ersilia I lighted candles, and prayed before the relic of her sister."[339]

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[336] "In memoria del P. Mauro dell'Immacolata," *Il Santuario di N.S. delle Grazie e di S. Maria Goretti in Nettuno* LX. 8 (September 1969): 126-127.

[337] Augustine, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, especially section 6.

[338] Alberti, *Assunta Goretti*, 316, 317.

[339] DiDonato, 174.

Figure 3. Goretti's statue and relic under the altar of the diocesan shrine in Corinaldo (Ancona), Italy.

Later, in 1987, Goretti's arm bone was moved a few hundred meters to the newly renamed Diocesan Shrine of St. Maria Goretti.[340] Some months later Assunta's body followed, placed at the back of the church on the left. On the right side of the church, opposite Assunta, there is a parallel marker and niche containing bodily relics of Alessandro Serenelli. Don Franco Morico, the rector of Corinaldo's Diocesan Shrine, with the support of the rector at the Nettuno shrine, spent several years petitioning Rome, the local bishop, civil authorities, and the Capuchin community at Macerata for permission to translate Serenelli's body. In late 2008, Morico succeeded in uniting the

[340] Alberti, *Assunta Goretti*, 321.

remains of mother, martyr, and murderer under one roof.[341] Since then, advertisements and brochures for the Corinaldo shrine have been updated to reflect this addition. The shrine now entices visitors with "its 'famous relic' [of Goretti], the remains of Mama Assunta and, most recently, those of Alessandro Serenelli—the one converted by the forgiveness of Marietta" and the promise that "ST. MARIA GORETTI AWAITS YOU!"[342]

Even after finding these permanent resting places, Goretti's relics and corpse have traveled widely. 2008 was a particularly active year. One Gorettian relic, a fragment of bone that normally resides in Rome, toured Australia alongside relics of two other young saints. The three all served as patrons of the 2008 World Youth Day, together with Servant of God John Paul II, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta (formerly known as Mother Teresa) and a handful of other holy figures.[343] That same year her "body" traveled throughout southern Italy. On that voyage the body made a "pilgrimage" to Sicily, to the prison cell where Serenelli was confined in punishment for her murder—and where he famously dreamed of her.[344] *La Stella del Mare* published a photograph to accompany the story. The wax body in its glass casket sits before an altar in the jail cell, the statue's white dress seeming to glow in the soft light. The caption identifies the image as

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[341] A photograph of Serenelli's grave in Macerata appears in a 2007 issue of the Gorettian magazine, *La Stella del Mare* 98. 6 (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, July/August 2007): 6. Alberti, *Assunta Goretti*, 320-321.

[342] Franco Morico, "Invito al Santuario: Lettera del Rettore ai Sacerdoti, Educatori, Ragazzi, Gruppi Giovanili," *Il Giglio di Corinaldo: S. Maria Goretti* (Corinaldo, An, Italy: Il Santuario di S. Maria Goretti, June 2008), 1; See also the four page advertisement "Invito al Santuario di S. Maria Goretti," *Il Giglio di Corinaldo: S. Maria Goretti* 1 (Corinaldo, An, Italy: Il Santuario di S. Maria Goretti, 2011), 15-18.

[343] Carolyn Webb, "Saints be Praised, Holy Bones Hit Road," *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia), May 9, 2008, News, first edition, 6.

[344] Tonino Golino, "Marietta nella Cella n.45 di Noto," *La Stella del Mare* (July/August 2008): 21-22.

"Historic Photo—the body of St. Maria Goretti for the first time enters cell no. 45 of the Noto prison, where Alessandro Serenelli was held." The possibility of a future visit seems to be implied. Upon leaving Sicily, the body made a final stop in Nettuno before returning to the crypt. "After 106 years" another article announces, Goretti's body returned to the room where she died—now a small chapel called the *Tenda del Perdono*. Masses, rosaries, Vespers, Lauds, vigils and pilgrims celebrated this historic visit across town.[345] With the completion of these journeys, Goretti's body has now visited every landmark of her narrative. It has traveled to her birthplace in Corinaldo, the room where she was fatally assaulted, the hospital where she died, and even followed her assailant's footsteps, further sanctifying these once-sad places by the presence of her purifying body.

Incorruptibility and Chaste Bodies

In a 1992 hagiography, an American priest reports having visited Goretti's shrine in Nettuno, and he praises at length the miracle of incorruptibility that he believes he saw. Father Rego reports a thoroughly inaccurate history that nonetheless fit the evidence of his eyes.

> When her casket was opened twenty years after her death, what a sight was revealed! Maria's body was perfectly intact. She looked like a young lady sleeping! Can we not see God's message here? God loves purity! … In life, Maria refused to allow sin to decay her soul. In death, the Heavenly Father would not allow corruption to decay the chaste body of His little friend. To this day, her incorrupt body is encased in a glass coffin in the main altar of the Basilica in Nettuno. She is there for all the world to see, incorrupt. I have seen her with my own eyes. She is dressed in white with a lily in her hand. And, Oh! Oh! How beautiful Maria is! How God loved her and honored her purity![346]

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[345] "Dopo 106 anni, il ritorno nella Tenda del Perdono," *La Stella del Mare* (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, July/August 2008): 26-28.

[346] Richard J. Rego, "*No! No! It is a Sin!*": *A Message to the Young Adults of Today from Saint Maria Goretti Patroness of Youth* (St. Paul: Leaflet Missal, 1992), 15.

The figure Rego saw in Goretti's crypt was a life-like, life-size body, dressed in real clothes, and occupying the space where he expected to see Goretti's relics. Yet the shrine does not pretend that Goretti's body is incorrupt, or even a whole body. In the gift shop the sisters sell postcards that unapologetically describe the state of Goretti's body:

> In the *urna* are found the principal parts of her body: the skull, the vertebral column, the upper and longer limbs. Of these, the only part missing is the ulna or small bone of the right arm, which was given to the mother of the Saint to take to Corinaldo. Also missing are other small parts of the body, such as the phalanges and the ribs, splinters of which are used to prepare relics.

From this description, it is difficult to imagine how this assortment of bones could be expected to look like a living girl. Nonetheless, Rego is not the only devotee who believed in Goretti's incorruptibility.

Padre Mauro, as Goretti's postulator, was tasked with collecting evidence regarding every aspect of Goretti's character, spiritual life, death, and post-mortem miracles. In Mauro's reports of the exhumation, he consistently notes that all they found of Goretti's body was an intact skeleton—which was no less holy because of its condition.

It should be no surprise to discover that Goretti's corpse degraded over time. This is what bodies do, a fact that the Ash Wednesday liturgy reinforces with the mark of ashes and the reminder, "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). In other periods of Christian history, the inevitable degradation of human flesh has been itself a subject of cult. Medieval Italian churches are full of the iconography of bodily decay. This spiritual theme in church imagery manifests most fully in Rome's Capuchin Crypt, an hour by train from Goretti's shrine in Nettuno. A series of low, dark chambers are decorated with bones: vertebrae shaped into chandeliers, shoulder blades formed into

wings, and walls neatly tiled by skulls. The space formed as a spiritual practice for thousands of monks who slowly built designs out of the bones of their deceased confreres, meditating on their own bodily future in the crypt. An inscription in the final chamber addresses the living in the voice of the bones: "what you are now we used to be, what we are now you will be."

Goretti's cult, though, did not develop amid such monastic asceticism. Instead, Goretti's cult blossomed in the triumphant post-WWII era, at precisely the same time that Catholics around the world were introduced to a compulsory new doctrine regarding incorruptibility. Pius XII's *Munificentissimus Deus* sets out arguments that can be borrowed to justify an expectation of Goretti's incorruptibility.

On November 1, 1950, some months after the canonization of Saint Maria Goretti, Pius XII issued the apostolic constitution absolutizing "the bodily Assumption into heaven of Mary, the Virgin Mother of God" as an article of faith. [347] The Assumption had been a serious theological topic in medieval Scholasticism, and can seem to epitomize the obscure concerns of those scholars—like debates regarding the relative size of angels and pins. Suddenly and radically, this medieval theology was set forth as infallible doctrine in the year 1950.

In *Munificentissimus Deus* Mary's body is distinguished from all other human bodies, which are doomed to decay. "And so it is that the bodies of even the just are corrupted after death, and only on the last day will they be joined, each to its own glorious soul."[348] The theology is argued concisely with the single assertion that,

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[347] Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*. Apostolic constitution promulgated November 1, 1950. paragraph 3.

[348] Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*. paragraph. 4.

> Now God has willed that the Blessed Virgin Mary should be exempted from this general rule. She, by an entirely unique privilege, completely overcame sin by her Immaculate Conception, and as a result she was not subject to the law of remaining in the corruption of the grave, and she did not have to wait until the end of time for the redemption of her body.

Mary was conceived without original sin, she conceived and bore Jesus without contracting sin, and remained free of sin throughout her lifetime. *Munificentissimus Deus* combines this claim with the proposition that death is the natural result of sin, and concludes the reverse: that a sinless body does not physically degrade. Hence, the document concludes that, "her sacred body had never been subject to the corruption of the tomb, and that the august tabernacle of the Divine Word had never been reduced to dust and ashes."[349]

If Mary's Assumption (a total escape from physical corruption) is causally related to her exemplary virginity and bodily sinlessness, then Goretti's devotees could reasonably expect that the corpse of the famous new martyr to chastity *could* and *would* be preserved from natural degradation. Why shouldn't the first martyr to chastity be granted some degree of incorruptibility? Many saintly relics have been regarded as incorruptible—and particularly the bodies of virgin martyrs such as St. Agatha and St. Cecilia. At one point reports of incorruptibility were so common that Pope Benedict XIV was compelled to raise the standard of incorruptibility in *De Cadaverum Incorruptione,* dismissing as less than miraculous those relics that did not "retain their lifelike flexibility, color, and freshness, without deliberate intervention, for many years following their deaths."[350] Moreover, every cause for sainthood, in order to proceed to canonization,

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[349] Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*. para. 14.

[350] This is the description of Benedict XIV's standard as described by Joan Carroll Cruz. She goes on to add that "These requirements are, of course, magnificently met by most of the incorruptibles included in" her book. Joan Carroll Cruz, *The Incorruptibles: A Study of the*

must provide evidence of the saint's intercession with God. The Vatican does not recognize saints—or recognize non-martyrs as *beati*—without extensive documentation of tangible miracles. These miracles are almost always bodily healings.[351] The Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints has an elaborate process for recognizing miracles, and requires five medical doctors to evaluate each purported healing.[352] Every new canonization, then, is dependent on physical evidence that the deceased saint can intercede with God to act on human bodies. Why shouldn't the saints' own bodies be miraculously protected in a similar way?

One day at Goretti's shrine in Nettuno, I was conscripted to serve as a translator and representative of the shrine. It was not a role I had expected to play, but I was the only English-speaker at the monastery that day when a bus full of pilgrims from Minnesota had arrived unexpectedly. The American priest leading the group said Mass at the altar directly over Goretti's remains. After the service, some of the Minnesotans asked me to confirm what they already knew: that the body they saw under the altar was the actual incorrupt body of St. Maria Goretti. They seemed skeptical when I told them that what they were seeing was actually a wax statue. Perhaps the incorrupt body was somewhere else, they concluded. Was the real body kept in a chamber beneath the statue? If the visible body under the altar was not itself Goretti's body, then where was

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Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati (St. Benedict Press & TAN Books, 1977), 40.

[351] In an analysis of the Vatican Archives' files on 600 miracles attributed to potential saints and beati, Jacalyn Duffin found that more than 95% of reported miracles were physical healings. Moreover, almost half of the remaining miracles she found were reports of incorrupt corpses. Jacalyn Duffin, "The Doctor was Surprised; or, How to Diagnose a Miracle," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 81. 4 (Winter 2007): 706, 708.

[352] John Collins Harvey, "The Role of the Physician in Certifying Miracles in the Canonization Process of the Catholic Church III," *Southern Medical Journal* 100.12 (December 2007): 1257.

Figure 4. Goretti's relics under the altar, as seen from the first row of pews in the Crypt of Saint Maria Goretti, at the shrine in Nettuno.

her body? It was an awkward moment for me as a researcher. I was at the shrine precisely to observe devotional practices and learn how devotees thought about Goretti. I was not yet prepared to help shape Gorettian devotion, although my presence and my explanation of my research project inevitably influenced the people I met.[353] I was a guest at the shrine, doing my best to be respectful of my hosts and their pride in their

[353] For instance, my presence immediately became proof of Maria Goretti's worldwide fame and importance. During a pilgrimage on her feast day the rector stirred the enthusiasm of the crowd, in part, by announcing that "people" had travelled from as far away as Atlanta, Georgia to be present for the occasion.

local saint. Less nobly, I knew that I could not accomplish my research without the cooperation and generosity of my hosts. I was studiously cautious of saying anything to suggest that my motives conflicted with theirs. I did not want to tell devotees what to believe, nor did I want to harm Goretti's reputation for sanctity. However, the shrine does not pretend to have an incorrupt relic, and their published materials clearly describe the dispersion of Goretti's body parts. Tentatively, delicately, I explained that Goretti's body had decayed naturally during its twenty-seven years in the ground. The pilgrims were clearly displeased and I suspect they simply didn't believe me. As American Catholics, they probably had had few direct encounters with the corpses of saints, whereas their knowledge of Marian doctrines, legends of incorrupt saints, and the story of Goretti's martyrdom indicate that her body *ought* to be divinely preserved from decay.

Unspeakable Virtue

When Pope Pius XII beatified Maria Goretti, he gave a speech titled "La Celestiale Figura della Beata Goretti," in praise of her virginity. Pius' much-quoted speech establishes patterns of speech and imagery that recur monotonously in Goretti's cult. One small section demonstrates two phenomena that are prevalent in representations of Maria Goretti.

> Our Beata was a woman of strength. She knew and understood; and precisely because of this she preferred to die. She had not yet completed twelve years when she fell, martyred. But what perspicacity, what prudence, what energy this girl demonstrated! Conscious of the danger, day and night she kept guard to defend her virginity [*illibatezza*], with all her might she sought to never be alone, and in continual prayer she entrusted the lily of her purity to the Virgin of Virgins.[354]

[354] Pius XII, "La Celestiale Figura della Beata Goretti," speech given in Rome, April 28, 1947, *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Sua Santità Pio XII, 2 Marzo 1947-1° Marzo 1948*, ed. Angelo Belardetti (Rome: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1948), 47.

The two features I wish to highlight are the image/euphemism of the lily and the avoidance of nouns—most obviously in the second sentence. Both of these rhetorical quirks are strategies for suggesting sexual words without having to say them. The circumlocution, however, often obscures meaning—especially when a single speech contains multiple forms of circumlocution. Pius XII's youthful audience might well have been mystified rather than edified by this moralizing discourse. In fact, reading it even now, I am not certain what Goretti "knew and understood" or whether "the lily of her purity" is a body part, a moral quality, or a redundant metaphor for purity.

In Caryl Rivers' memoir, *Aphrodite at Mid-Century: Growing up Female and Catholic in Postwar America*, Rivers recalls learning about Maria Goretti in her convent school. The teachers were "zealous in pointing out the evils of sins against the sixth and ninth Commandments," but provided little nuance or vocabulary for sexuality. Rivers recounts:

> Clare once went to confession in the sixth grade and told the priest, 'Bless me Father. I have sinned. I committed adultery.'
> 'Just what did you do?' the priest asked her.
> 'Me and Mary Murphy talked about where babies come from.'[355]

In Rivers' anecdote, even direct speech about sex constituted a sexual sin. Likewise, Pius' discourse in praise of virginity does little to clarify what virginity *is*—whether, for instance, it is a condition of the body or the soul. Pius vigorously refutes critics (real or hypothetical) who doubt that Goretti's virginity is supernatural or heroic. In his defense of Goretti, Pius indicates that innocent virginity is less praiseworthy that virginity that is hard-won over years of temptation.

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[355] Caryl Rivers, *Aphrodite at Mid-Century: Growing up Female and Catholic in Postwar America* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1973), 179.

> How could they, who surrendered themselves without a fight, imagine how much strength is needed to control, for long years, throughout a whole life, without an instant of weakness, the secret agitations and disturbances of the senses and the heart which, ever since the original sin, are aroused in human nature starting in adolescence? To resist, without ceding even a single time, to the thousands of small temptations [*curiosità*] to see, to hear, to taste, to feel, that approach the lips from the intoxicating chalice to inhale the fatal aroma that emanates from the flower of evil?[356]

In this paragraph virginity seems to mean unceasing resistance against all of the senses. Moreover, Pius introduces a new floral image—the flower of evil—that threatens Goretti's lily of purity. However, none of this talk of flowers and temptations helps the listener to understand Maria Goretti's dilemma and choice.

Goretti is repeatedly figured as a lily; a long-standing Christian symbol of purity, virginity, and chastity. Like the palm leaf as a visual identifier of martyrs, the white lily is an iconographic marker of virgin saints, the Virgin Mary, the angel Gabriel (messenger of the virginal conception of Christ), and other saints known for their purity or chastity.[357] However, in the cult of St. Maria Goretti, the lily is an over-worked symbol and metaphor. The traits traditionally signified by the lily are here blurred together as a single, vague, and all-important virtue. The lily is not merely an iconographic marker of Goretti's chastity. Rather, Goretti herself is figured as a lily, and her every trait is labeled lily-like to the point of absurdity.

In his canonization speech, Pius XII calls Goretti a "lily draped in purple" who draws devotees, "almost forces" them, by her "dazzling splendour and intoxicating fragrance."[358] Goretti's virtues are a "rustic garland, but as dear to God" as the crowns of

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[356] Pius XII, "La Celestiale Figura della Beata Goretti," 46-47.
[357] Margaret Tabor, *The Saints in Art* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1969), xxvii.
[358] Pius XII, "Nella esaltazione alla gloria dei Santi di Maria Goretti," *Discorsi 1950-1951*, 121.

wildflowers Goretti wore for her First Communion and for her funeral.[359] With seemingly faint praise, the new saint's virtues are valued as highly as the real flowers that decorated her body. She was a "rustic lily"[360] who never took a vow of chastity. Pius assumes that had Goretti lived to adulthood, she would have gotten married and "brought the flower of [her] innocence [*candidezza*] to the altar."[361] Nonetheless, Goretti's heart emits the same perfume as that of Saint Agnes.[362] She resisted the "flower of evil" and "entrusted the lily of her purity to the Virgin of Virgins."[363] In a single speech for Goretti's beatification, Pius envisions Goretti as a lily whose self is in part composed of a vulnerable lily, and who is in a desperate battle against the fragrance of some other flower.

Later hagiographers further develop the metaphor of Goretti as lily, particularly mixing the lily, as symbol of virginity, with the violent imagery of martyrdom. She is the *Lily of the Marshes* in a hagiography by that name. That text awkwardly returns to the floral metaphor at the dramatic peak of the story. Goretti has been fighting vigorously, when suddenly she topples over, a fragile flower. "He plunged the dagger into her back repeatedly, furiously. She went limp in his hands, but would not yield, and with a shuddering groan, sank to the floor. The stem was broken, but the Lily of the Marshes was still beautiful."[364] Goretti is "the bloody lily" on a 1964 audio-recording of her narrative; "Maria Goretti: il Giglio Insanguinato." In addition, the image can even be reversed. Sometimes Goretti's bloody wounds are depicted *as* lilies.

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[359] Pius XII, "Nella esaltazione alla gloria dei Santi di Maria Goretti," *Discorsi 1950-1951,*128.
[360] Pius XII, "L'Omelia in Onore della Martire," *Discorsi 1950-1951,* 128.
[361] Pius XII, "La Celestiale Figura della Beata Goretti," *Discorsi 1947-1948*, 48
[362] Pius XII, "La Celestiale Figura della Beata Goretti," *Discorsi 1947-1948*, 46.
[363] Pius XII, "La Celestiale Figura della Beata Goretti," *Discorsi 1947-1948*, 47.
[364] MacConastair, 156.

Alessandro Serenelli contributed significantly to the association between Goretti and lilies. Hagiographies of Maria Goretti written since the 1970's have a final narrative twist after Goretti's death: the Conversion of Alessandro Serenelli. In these later hagiographies, that conversion is immediately initiated by a dream. At times this dream is more or less mystical, varying according to which actor is the agent of the dream. Either Serenelli dreamed about Goretti, or she appeared to him in a dream. In either case, the dream image of Goretti has become central to Gorettian iconography. The basic narrative of the dream begins with Alessandro in prison—still unrepentant. Then, one night, in his sleep, he sees Goretti dressed in white. She is holding lilies, which she hands him, one by one. There are fourteen lilies in total, and Serenelli immediately understands that they represent the fourteen wounds he had inflicted on her body. As Serenelli takes these lilies they turn into a purifying flame.

Serenelli did not merely describe this vision: he also had it rendered in sculpture for public display. A 1963 article in the shrine's magazine reports that Serenelli used his own savings to commission an altar and sculpture, which were installed on the grounds of the Capuchin monastery where he was living. Serenelli is quoted as explaining that he wanted this wooden sculpture of his dream encounter with Goretti to "give tangible proof of his gratitude" for Goretti's forgiveness.[365] As far as I can tell from photographs, the piece consists of two figures carved with their bodies touching at two points. Serenelli is in the foreground, in profile. He is dressed in prison clothes, kneeling and holding his bowed head, with a furrowed brow. Goretti stands behind him, with Serenelli's head almost leaning into her lap. She gazes at him. One of her hands rests on Serenelli's

[365] Si-Nemo C.P., "Notiziaro Gorettiano," *Il Santuario di N.S. delle Grazie e di S. Maria Goretti in Nettuno* LIV (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, July/August 1963).

back. With her other arm she clutches a bouquet of lilies. She is dressed in peasant clothes, which are draped in a mantle reminiscent of the Virgin Mary. Goretti's head is ringed with a halo.

Images from Serenelli's dream appear frequently in Gorettian kitsch, especially in items marketed to children. A hagiography in the form of a coloring book represents Serenelli's dream as an apparition,[366] with Goretti floating amidst clouds in Serenelli's jail cell. She holds her large bouquet of lilies and a tear falls from her eye, as she watches over a sleeping Serenelli.[367] Serenelli certainly did not invent the tropes of lilies and clouds. These appeared in Gorettian imagery well before Serenelli's prison dream. For instance, Gorettian processions in 1904, 1929 and throughout the 1950's included little girls in white dresses, some with angel wings, carrying lilies and palms. Nonetheless, Serenelli's influence has been far-reaching. The lilies from his dream are featured on T-shirts sold by an American purveyor of Catholic goods. This shirt is both a product and a devotional image—part of a line of pink shirts, hats and purses with the phrase "Maria Goretti's Girls Club."[368] Here we see an abstraction away from the use of the female body. The figure of Goretti is replaced by the symbols of her martyrdom. The caption below the pictured shirt interprets the imagery—the "fourteen lilies on the shirt symbolize the fourteen stab wounds she received." Here the wearer of the T-shirt—the extra-small size "will fit preteen age young ladies"—is put in the place of the

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[366] This scene is entirely excluded from a second Gorettian coloring book. Giovanni Alberti and Adelia Cirilli, *I Fioretti di Marietta: La Vita di S. Maria Goretti Rivistata con la Sensibilità dei Bambini* (Nettuno: Santuario Madonna delle Grazie e S. Maria Goretti, 2005).

[367] Mary Fabyan Windeatt and Gedge Harmon, *St. Maria Goretti: Catholic Story Coloring Book* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1989), 31.

[368] Catholic to the Max, "St. Maria Goretti's Girls Club Junior sizes," Nelson Fine Art & Gifts, Steubenville, OH, http://www.catholicposters.com/shop/category.php?cat=32+33+109+ (accessed June 22, 2010).

martyr.[369] Indeed, the consumer is decorated with the martyr's wounds, in direct imitation of the martyr saint. Perhaps the wearer is meant to literally "put on" Maria Goretti in the way that the martyr Blandina "put on Christ," both visually and behaviorally.[370] The shirt bears the phrase "Purity's Worth Dying For," in quotation marks. The webpage identifies this phrase as "the shirt's tag line," but it is unclear who is repeating this phrase (the wearer?) or who is being quoted (is this what Goretti's martyrdom "said"?)[371] The saccharine pink design of the shirt is consistent with uses of lily imagery that permeate Goretti's cult. In this contemporary object, though, the tension between signifier and signified is particularly jarring. The innocuous design appeals to the wearer or reader, with the directive to imitate Goretti, precisely by obscuring the rape and murder that it references.

In fact, it is rare to find the word "rape" in devotional literature and in the public prayers of the cult of Maria Goretti. Even the word "chastity" is relatively rare in many of these texts, at least in comparison with more vague synonyms. Instead, the texts refer to Goretti's "purity," "virginity," "innocence" "virtue," *candore*—suggesting both whiteness and innocence, and her *illibatezza*—a term for female virginity that literally means she is "untasted." In fact, the sexual violence in the story is often so obscured and coded that a reader unfamiliar with the narrative might be entirely confused as to what Goretti did or didn't do. For instance, *Saint Maria Goretti: Martyr of Purity*, a hagiography from 1950, is masterfully vague. The "message" of Maria Goretti is described in this baffling passage:

But Maria has also a message for American women: not only the dignity of work

[369] Catholic to the Max.
[370] Musurillo, "The Martyrs of Lyons," 75.
[371] Catholic to the Max.

> and the inviolable sanctity of a woman's honor, but a clear-sighted facing of issues which is becoming rare in a world of blurred edges. In one of the Decrees concerning her occur the words: "understanding what the law of God commanded, what was promised and what was threatened…" This sums her up quite simply. Everything else was set aside. There was no weighing of evidence for and against, no consideration of possibly extenuating circumstances, no balancing of guilt on both sides, no wondering how far she could safely go. She understood the law. She knew the promise and the threat. Without need for consultation, she chose one and rejected the other. And this was not, as must be evident by now, from any momentary exaltation or childish excitement. There was perfect clarity, unwavering decision.[372]

This passage has remarkably little content, as though the key nouns and verbs had been edited out and partially replaced by unspecified pronouns. This "message" does not tell us, for instance, what Goretti chose, what the alternative was, or the consequences of either choice. It does, however, inform us that the choice she made was in accord with some absolute divine command. In short, a reader can only learn from the supposedly edifying story if the reader already *knows* what it is that Goretti knows.

If it were stated explicitly, the suggested but unspoken "message" would be grotesque and immoral. The "law of God" in this passage seems to be that God makes no distinction between rape, fornication, and adultery. Maria Goretti "knew" that if her body were sullied by Serenelli's rape at knifepoint then God would punish her. This message is unspeakable—too horrible to say—even in the very texts where it is being advocated. It is this un-Christian message that repels even the most lukewarm feminists, who are rightly "outraged that the Roman Catholic church would ever have said that a woman is better dead than raped."[373] Indeed, this message is unappealing even to contemporary leaders in Goretti's cult. The rector at Goretti's shrine in Nettuno told me

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[372] Ellipses in the original. Maguire, 92-93.

[373] Eileen J. Stenzel, "Maria Goretti: Rape and the Politics of Sainthood," *Concilium*: *Violence Against Women,* ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 91.

that he was originally uninterested in Maria Goretti until he found a different narrative that de-emphasizes her chastity (he prefers the theme of forgiveness). Like many other contemporary devotees, Padre Giovanni Alberti never quotes Goretti's supposed testimony in such ugly terms.

Does Maria Goretti's martyred corpse speak? It has been obscured in layers of wax, satin, and euphemism, but if we could see that small body—first butchered, then studied, then dismembered into relics—I think it would be horrifying. There is the danger that we would be repulsed and quickly turn away. I hope, like Sobrino, that it would manifest our own sins, reflecting the structural violence that make impoverished and undereducated girls especially vulnerable to physical violence, and reflecting our own impassivity towards other victims of domestic and sexual violence.

It would be nice if everything to be transparent: for virtue to be recognizable, for inner beauty to have outward manifestations, for martyrological witnesses to be readily recognizable *as* witnesses. In the cult of Maria Goretti, though, every attempt to reveal is matched by a movement to obscure. Martyrdom and miracles are supposed to be tangible outward messages from God—but in practice they seem to be no more self-interpreting than human-authored texts. In the next chapter I will examine another possible mode in which Maria Goretti might witness—not through her corpse, but through her devotees' collective engagements with her and their performances of her martyrdom.

Chapter 4:
Performance and Testimonial Practices

On my first visit to the town of Nettuno, I noticed a sign by the door of the Gorettian shrine, noting the schedule of regular services. It listed the daily Masses, Vespers, and a monthly "Gorettian Thursday" when Mass is celebrated in Goretti's crypt on the altar over her glass-encased body. Among other services, the sign also listed a Tuesday afternoon gathering in the *Tenda del Perdono*, a small chapel made out of the hospital room where Maria Goretti died. I had already visited the *Tenda del Perdono,* a space covered floor to ceiling in gorettian icons, artifacts, and ex-votos. The chapel is named after Goretti's famous act of forgiving her killer, as she lay dying in that room. Apart from occasional visits by pilgrims, the space seemed to be little used. In fact, I had initially found the chapel locked—an elderly religious sister lent me the key so I could explore it at my leisure. I did not expect to learn much more from a second visit to the chapel, but the following Tuesday I returned for the service advertised as a "solemn Adoration of the Eucharist."

Although I arrived promptly, every bit of pew space in the chapel was already occupied, with even more people squeezed into the enclosed courtyard, sitting in rows of plastic chairs and leaning against the walls. Because the chapel is so small, and had its back doors flung open, everyone in the courtyard had a clear view of the room. A speaker system had been set up to carry the voice of the priest—who did indeed present the consecrated host in a large, gold monstrance—as well as the voice of the woman who seemed to be actually leading the service.

Apart from the traditional monstrance, the service was not at all what I expected. A guitar appeared, and there was a great deal of enthusiastic singing, then a series of rapid and repetitive extemporaneous prayers. I became increasingly disoriented until I realized that the woman at the microphone was not speaking an unfamiliar dialect—this was glossolalia. Most of the participants around me were also prayerfully mumbling nonsense syllables. By the end of the service everyone was beaming and several women approached to enthusiastically welcome me. They explained that they were members of *Rinnovamento nello Spirito Santo* (RnS), the Italian organization of the Charismatic Catholic Renewal.

As I spent more time in Nettuno, I crossed paths with members of the local RnS chapter almost daily. The group, known as "*Pentecoste*," seemed to be involved with every aspect of Gorettian cult in the community. They helped organize and lead the pilgrimage for Goretti's feast day, and I found photographs of them escorting Goretti's relics around Italy, but I also found that they had some very nontraditional ways of honoring the saint. For instance, one event commemorating Goretti's feast was a youth talent competition—sponsored by *Pentecoste*. The group has also collectively written and produced two musicals about Maria Goretti. In fact, the guitar-playing woman who led the service that day in the *Tenda del Perdono*, a laywoman who self-identifies as a "consecrated virgin," also played the role of martyr's mother in both musicals. This was a community practicing devotion to Maria Goretti in ways I had never imagined.

Within Nettuno, though, there are other groups such as the *Associazione Santa Maria Goretti*, that practice very different forms of devotionalism. I first discovered the *Associazione* on the day I arrived in Nettuno with a suitcase and letter saying I was

welcome to spend the summer living and researching at the shrine. Unfortunately, I had arrived during the *sosta* and so the shrine was closed, along with nearly everything else in town. At the café across the street, however, I met the *Associazione*'s president and treasurer, who chivalrously bought me lunch, carried my suitcase, and made the necessary calls to have me promptly settled in the shrine. Like the other members of the *Associazione*, these were burly local businessmen whom I would frequently find drinking espressos or *amari* at the café.

In comparison with the RnS group, the *Associazione di Santa Maria Goretti* performs its Gorettian devotion in a way that is more professional and more masculine. The organization is structured as a non-profit organization with a polished website and an elaborate constitution. Its stated goal is to raise funds "to promote the cult of St. Maria Goretti" through advertising, "marketing" (including "touristic marketing") and organizing Gorettian events.[374] One of the *Associazione*'s most visible contributions to the annual celebration of Goretti's feast day is a display of fireworks from the roof of the shrine. The display I observed was dramatic, and somewhat terrifying. It claimed the life of at least one seagull but did not, as I feared, destroy the shrine.

My original plan for studying the lived cult of Maria Goretti was to do interviews with women visiting the Nettuno shrine. I hoped they would explain to me how they personally understood and related to Saint Maria Goretti. My plan, I thought, resembled the research Robert Orsi did on women's devotionalism at the National Shrine of St. Jude in Chicago. Saint Jude is known as the patron saint of "hopeless" or "lost" causes, and

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[374] It also has a second mission of charity towards the poor. *Associazione Santa Maria Goretti*, "Lo Statuto," http://www.associazionesantamariagoretti.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=58&Itemid=55&lang=it (accessed March 8, 2012).

Orsi studied the ways American women have turned to Jude with their desperate petitionary prayers. According to Orsi, women often frame petitions to Jude in a "stark, simple statements of what was happening" such as "my husband is unfaithful, my son is an alcoholic, my child has cancer, I am lonely and afraid."[375] I wanted to know what sort of petitions or "cases" women bring to Maria Goretti. Like Jude, Goretti has been ascribed patronage of certain realms. Her specialties have to do with the circumstances of her murder: she is "patroness of purity,"[376] "patroness of youth,"[377] and a saint for teenagers.[378] Back in 1950, when Pius XII canonized Goretti, he modeled how to approach Goretti as a patron saint. He publically addressed the saint with a petition.

> To you, powerful intercessor with the Lamb of God, we entrust these, Our sons and daughters, those who are present here and all those others who are spiritually united with Us. Fathers and mothers have recourse to you, that you might assist them in their educational mission. Through our hands, maidens and all youths find refuge in you, that they might be protected from every contamination and be able to walk the road of life in the serenity and joy of the pure of heart. Let it be so.[379]

This language of "protection" and "contamination" is once again euphemistically vague. But Goretti is also frequently cited as a "patron saint of rape victims."[380]

I wanted to know what this patronage means in a contemporary context. How does one relate to the patron saint of rape victims? And what sort of petitions would one make of such a patron? Would one pray to for her protection from violence? Would rape

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[375] Robert Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude*, (New Haven: Yale, 1996), 122.

[376] Rosemarie Scott, *Clean of Heart: Overcoming Habitual Sins Against Purity* (Mt. Laurel, NJ: R.A.G.E. Media, 2006, 99.

[377] Richard Rego, *'No! No! It is a Sin!' A Message to the Young Adults of Today from Saint Maria Goretti, Patroness of Youth (*St. Paul: The Leaflet Missal Company, 1992).

[378] James Morelli, *Teen-ager's Saint: Saint Maria Goretti,* ed. William Peil (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Grail Publications), 1954

[379] Pius XII, "Nella Esaltazione alla Gloria dei Santi di Maria Goretti."

[380] For instance, Meera Lester, *Saints' Blessings* (Fair Winds, 2005), 103; Michael Freze, *Patron Saints* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1992) 239, 250

victims pray to her for healing? I imagined that I might meet rape survivors who had found a sense of solidarity with Maria Goretti, a saint of their own, who had shared their experience. I imagined, at least, that I would speak with women who had developed their own ways of narrating the story of Maria Goretti.

Yet the contemporary devotion I found in Nettuno simply wasn't that sort of phenomenon. When I asked people about Maria Goretti, they did not speak as though they had *chosen* her for a special devotion. Rarely did anyone mention being motivated by the traditional story of Goretti's martyrdom. There is a regular flow of pilgrims visiting the shrine, especially in the summertime tourist season, but most arrive in large groups with complex motivations. Goretti is often one of several saints they are visiting on an excursion, so they must hurry in and out of the shrine to keep to the schedule. These religious tourists arrive by the busload, some groups in matching T-shirts and others in matching clerical garb—and they are clearly distinguishable from the beachgoers they pass in the shared parking lot. Visiting families, though, are more likely to incorporate a visit to the shrine into a weekend at the seaside. The motivations and behaviors of these pilgrims are fascinating, and would be wonderful fodder for a study of religious tourism—but that wasn't the project I was doing.

Instead, I became increasingly interested in the cult of Maria Goretti as it was being reaffirmed but also reshaped by the community of people who live in Nettuno and regularly worship at the shrine. The locals spoke as if Maria Goretti had always been there, as part of their community. One woman, who sells Gorettian kitsch and beach gear in front of the ocean-side shrine, proudly told me that her father had been healed by Goretti. Her devotion to Goretti was tied to her family's pride in having

Figure 5. Gorettian icons and beach gear for sale along the *Lungomare P. Mauro Liberati*, the boardwalk separating the shrine from the beach in Nettuno.

participated in the canonization process. It was a devotion based on an existing relationship, rather than to a particular appreciation of Goretti's "message." The people I met in Corinaldo and Nettuno, the Italian towns where Goretti was born and was killed, regard Goretti as part of their community identity. For better or worse, she is there and they need to figure out a way to relate to her. The experimentation I observed, with new and creative performances of devotion, point towards new possibilities for this relationship. What they are *doing* in these practices is far more interesting than anything they were willing to s*ay* about Maria Goretti.

To be more precise, their practices are more interesting than anything they were willing to say *to me*. Before my first trip to Nettuno I had naively imagined not only that

personal devotion to Goretti must exist, but also that I could find it. I imagined that I would be able to speak directly with lay devotees about their relationships with Goretti, and that, for some reason, they would speak openly with me. I had hoped to privilege women's voices and private religious experiences. Instead, my "data" on devotional practices turned out to be mediated by institutional limitations. Most of what I know about Goretti's canonization and cult is thanks to Giovanni Alberti, directly or indirectly. Padre Giovanni is rector of the shrine, editor of its monthly magazine, and—as he is often introduced at book-signings—the world's top Gorettian scholar. Working with Padre Giovanni gave me access, credibility, and authority that I would not otherwise have, but it also changed my subject from private to public devotionalism.

I hadn't realized how much I would become involved with—and dependent upon—the shrine in Nettuno, and Giovanni Alberti in particular. He was my host for a summer, allowing me to live with the Passionist nuns in the convent attached to the shrine. He introduced me to some of the most active members of the *Perla Del Oriente* RnS theater group, and offered them up for interviews. He gave me books, pamphlets, and posters, invited me to use his office whenever I liked, and even invited me to help myself to water bottles and snacks when I was working alone in his office. Padre Giovanni gave me access to materials I simply could not have accessed in any other way, such as the complete documentation of the Apostolic Process of Goretti's cause for beatification. This consists of hundreds of handwritten pages of transcribed interviews with witnesses attesting to Goretti's character, martyrdom, and reputation for sanctity. The only other copy of this massive document is currently held in the Vatican's secret archives. Yet Padre Giovanni trusted me alone with the book for hours on end, and gave

me permission to photograph pages for later study. He also allowed me to read through—and borrow from—the complete collection of the shrine's magazine. That collection alone is a tremendous resource. The magazine has been in publication, usually under the name *La Stella del Mare*, since 1909—ceasing publication only during the years of World War II. At approximately ten issues per year, that adds up to a massive archive on a century of Gorettian devotion. I studied dozens of these issues (many of which I photographed in their entirety and have read and reread), and used them as records of historical, recent, and ongoing devotional practices.[381] Perhaps even more helpful, though, were the many conversations with Padre Giovanni, especially on afternoons when we were both working in his office. He answered my endless questions about unfamiliar practices and my often-faulty interpretations.

It would have been an intolerably one-sided relationship except that Padre Giovanni asked for my help in translating English-language books and emails from contacts in England, Canada, and especially the United States. While I was in Nettuno studying local devotionalism, he was trying to reach out to far-away parishes and schools dedicated to Maria Goretti. Issues of the shrine's magazine from the 1950s and 60s are filled with letters from devotees around the world, and monthly reports of new Gorettian institutions under construction. Padre Giovanni is trying to recapture this attention, and once again make the Nettuno shrine into the world capital of Gorettian devotion. I know he hoped that my research would contribute to this goal—that I would produce a book

[381] My research was limited to issues of the magazine published in the 1930s, 50s, 60s, and since 2000. Within those issues, I focused on articles and images directly depicting Gorettian devotionalism. The collection of magazines, however, could be fruitfully used in many other ways—for instance, by imitating Orsi's analysis of "the thousands of pieces of correspondence published since 1935 in the Shrine's magazine, the *Voice of St. Jude* and its successor, *St. Jude's Journal*." Orsi, XII.

Figure 6. The central Gorettian shrine—the *Pontificio Santuario-Basilica Madonna delle Grazie e Santa Maria Goretti* in Nettuno.

that would re-introduce Americans to Maria Goretti. He knew, though, that I was coming from a non-Catholic University, and that my particular interests (testimony, gender) suggested a relatively unorthodox project. Nonetheless, he let me research and write as I pleased—trusting that I would not produce an exposé like *Povera Santa Povero Assassino*.

I have not written the straightforward celebration of Gorettian devotionalism that Padre Giovanni might have hoped for, but I hope I nonetheless convey my respect for the people I met in Nettuno and Corinaldo. In the remainder of this chapter I survey and evaluate a range of historical and contemporary devotional practices that distinct communities have used to bear witness to Maria Goretti. I begin with early practices that

represent Goretti as a model to be emulated, particularly by young girls. This is a paradigm that I find problematic. However, my criticism is largely directed towards practices that were depicted in the shrine's magazine in the 1950s and 60s—practices designed to encourage young girls to imitate Goretti. I then turn to alternative ways of performing and relating to Maria Goretti, describing some of the wildly diverse forms of Gorettian devotion today. I describe practices that I observed and participated in, both in Nettuno and in the town of Corinaldo, as well as practices outside of Italy that I know about only from texts and emails with participants.

Blurring the Line between Liturgies and Modern Media

Throughout this chapter I lump together liturgy with performance, and popular cultic practices with hierarchically-authorized devotion. This might seem like an inappropriate blurring of categories, but in my experience with public devotional practices in Goretti's cult, liturgies and performances, both popular and institutional, are all intermingled. The charismatic service in the *Tenda del Perdono* was in some respects a formal liturgy, with a priest, the Eucharist, and a church. Yet it would not have been a "charismatic" service were it not for the enthusiastic and spontaneous lay participation. There are many such devotional practices that cannot be easily categorized. For instance, the gift shop of the Nettuno shrine sells a CD that commemorates the centenary of Goretti's martyrdom in the genre of soft rock.[382] To what extent is that CD an artifact of popular devotion? Can that devotional aspect be isolated from its function as a creative performance? And to what extent is it church-sanctioned? These same questions apply

[382] Stefano Mazzilli, *Marietta Vive*, (Zagarolo, Rm, Italy: Merlino Edizioni Musicali, 2002), CD.

to an Italian made-for-TV movie about Goretti that was released in 2003.[383] The film credits Giovanni Alberti as a consultant.[384] Is the film therefore a product of, and perhaps even propaganda for, the Nettuno shrine? Or is it really an expression of popular devotion? Since 1902, Goretti's death has been performed and commemorated in a range of media, including vinyl records, MP3s, and Gorettian plays written in several different languages. One of these plays, authored by a priest, was written for an all-female cast—probably with the intention that the script would be used for productions at Catholic girls' schools.[385] None of these performances was written by a bishop or produced by the Vatican, but neither are these performances secular or independent of church influence. There is so much cross-pollination between these creative performances and the formal cult led by the Passionists in Nettuno, that I find it most useful to group all these practices together as the public performance of Gorettian devotion.

In the creativity and diversity of these performances I see a struggle to find new stories within the old story of Maria Goretti. The ongoing experimentation with new ways of relating to Goretti suggests that the old practices and models are no longer adequate. Some of the relatively long-standing traditions are still repeated on an annual basis, but perhaps do not satisfy the community, or do not satisfy the young charismatic Catholics who are involved in the most innovative local performances. It seems hopeful that residents of Corinaldo and Nettuno are looking for new approaches to the saint rather than abandoning Goretti as their patron.

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[383] *Maria Goretti*, directed by Giulio Base (Italy: RAI/San Paolo, 2006), DVD.
[384] *Maria Goretti,* DVD, 1:36:33.
[385] Adriano Grossi, *Il Giglio Ammantato di Porpora (S. Maria Goretti): Rievocazione Scenica in Tre Parti, per Sole Femmine, della Vita e del Martirio della Santa* (Florence: Rinaldi, 1954).

Early Practices of Imitating Goretti

The most prevalent early pattern of Gorettian devotional practice was to portray the martyr as an exemplar of heroic chastity who ought to be imitated. This didactic approach, generally directed towards young girls, attempts to transform them into replicas of Goretti. And in defining what it means to perform as Goretti, a new image of the saint is constructed.

The most direct form of Gorettian imitation is the designation of particular girls as "*le Gorettine*" or "the little Gorettis." The term is still part of the contemporary language of Gorettian devotion in the town of Corinaldo. In recent years, some of the town's most elaborate celebrations of the saint have included prepubescent girls who are identified as *le Gorettine* and costumed as old-fashioned peasants. These young girls are then treated as dignitaries, placed at the head of processions, and positioned symmetrically alongside the altar during special Masses.

In Nettuno, the term *Gorettine* has generally been used to refer to members of the *Pia Unione S. Maria Goretti*, a group formed to inculcate supposedly Gorettian values. Throughout the 1950s and 60s the Nettuno shrine aggressively promoted the organization and the ideal of the *Gorettina* through the shrine's magazine. According to the group's statute, the *Pia Unione* is primarily targeted at "maidens and girls" but membership is open to "believers of any age and condition."[386] Despite that invitation, I have never seen any reference to a *Gorettina* who is either male or adult.

During these peak decades of Gorettian devotion the magazine regularly published photographs of groups of girls from all over the world, identifying them as

[386] "Statuto," *Il Santuario di Nettuno e Maria Goretti* 3 (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, November 1950): 4.

(exemplary) *Gorettine*. In these photos the *Gorettine* are often even younger than Goretti was at the time of her death. For instance, the cover of the March 1963 magazine features a photograph of Argentinean kindergarten students assembled and costumed for a "Gorettian procession." The kindergarten *Gorettine* wear white dresses and veils and each holds a white lily. They are posed in front of an icon of Maria Goretti, who is similarly clad.[387] In other photographs, *Gorettine* are sometimes shown with angel wings added to this standard costume.[388] Lilies, white dresses and angel wings are all potent symbols in the iconography of Christian art and kitsch, but these physical markers of Gorettian imitation have no overlap with the lived experience of the historical Goretti. Instead, these costumes interpret what it means to imitate Goretti, and thus, what is central to *being* Goretti. It is likewise significant that such very young girls are repeatedly selected as examples of Gorettianism. The *Gorettine* are costumed as perfect sexual innocence, and their youth further suggests that only the youngest girls are innocent enough to represent Goretti. They bear no resemblance to Goretti as she looked when she died, but instead represent a younger, cleaner, and more obviously holy version of Goretti, or perhaps represent the saint in her glorified body.

Although the *Pia Unione* is now defunct, in the 50s and 60s it was a worldwide organization and membership depended on observing certain religious practices and paying dues to the shrine in Nettuno. According to the 1950 statue for the *Pia Unione*, the Gorettian virtues that the *Gorettine* were instructed to imitate were, "in particular a)

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[387] *Il Santuario di N.S. delle Grazie e di S. Maria Goretti in Nettuno* (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, March 1963), cover.

[388] Winged Gorettine are pictured for instance in the January 1951 issue of the magazine. A photo identified as "Le Gorettine" from Gariz, Udine depicts seven pre-pubescent girls dressed in white with crowns and elaborate angel wings, posed with lilies and folded hands alongside an image of Goretti in the same pose. "Le Gorettine," *Il Santuario di Nettuno e S. Maria Goretti* (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, January 1951): 9.

purity of mind, heart, and body and b) generous charity towards the neighbor."[389] In addition to those generic feminine virtues, in order to publicly identify themselves as little Gorettis, girls had to take communion at least monthly and say certain prayers to the Virgin Mary and St. Maria Goretti on a daily basis. The practices indicated that a girl was living in a way that emulates Maria Goretti. Later, additional requirements were added. *Gorettine* were expected to "popularize devotion [to Goretti]," "*spread* the Magazine of the Shrine," and "be zealous for the glory of the Shrine in Nettuno."[390]

Constructing a Maria Goretti to Imitate

The historical Maria Goretti was never photographed, and so her budding cult struggled for several years to find or create an "authentic" image of what Maria Goretti really looked like. Eventually, the face of Maria Goretti came to be identified with the face of Ines Orsini—the actress who played Goretti in the film *Cielo sulla Palude*. The popular film was released in 1949, one year before Goretti's canonization.[391]

In some ways, film of Ines Orsini playing Goretti is treated as if it were film of Goretti herself. I have seen Goretti prayer cards featuring a devotional image of Orsini. Even Goretti's postulator used frames from *Cielo sulla Palude* in his book *Una storia vissuta* about Goretti. There the frames serve as illustrations of the text about Goretti herself, and it would be easy to mistake them for photographic records of historical events. One page, for instance, reproduces a frame from the film and simply labels it "First Communion" as if it were a photograph of a First Communion, or specifically

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[389] "Statuto," 4.
[390] "Pia Unione S. Maria Goretti," *Il Santuario di N.S. delle Grazie e di S. Maria Goretti in Nettuno* (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti: January 1962).
[391] *Cielo sulla Palude,* directed by Augusto Genina (Rome: St. Paul Films, l949).

Goretti's First Communion, rather than an image of an actress performing the scene of Goretti's First Communion.[392]

Pilgrims who visit the *cascina antica*, the house outside Nettuno that was once shared by the Gorettis and Serenellis, do not encounter any relics of Goretti's body or the objects she lived with. Instead, much of the house feels like a gallery. There is almost no furniture, only framed black and white photographs neatly lining every wall of the Goretti family quarters. There is little text to explain the photographs, perhaps because the typical pilgrim can easily identify Maria Goretti, her mother, and her assailant in these images. These pictures, which seem to be family photos lining the walls of Goretti's former home, are actually frames from *Cielo sulla Palude*. It is Orsini's face on the wall of Goretti's bedroom.

This slippage between Orsini's performance of Goretti and the "authentic" Goretti is further nuanced by Orsini's long-term role as a devotee of Goretti. Even now that Orsini is an elderly woman, the Gorettian shrines in Nettuno and Corinaldo both continue to publicize her visits to those towns and her participation in their devotional activities.[393] Over the years the Nettuno shrine's magazine has published frequent updates about Orsini in which Orsini is portrayed as the most visible imitator of Maria Goretti. In a 1951 letter published by the magazine, Orsini wrote, "I am not the only actress who plays Maria Goretti; we ALL ought to be her faithful copies, especially the *Gorettine*…"[394] The letter is quite short, but Orsini does give a brief and dramatic account of what it

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[392] Mauro dell'Immaculata, *Una storia vissuta, la Canonizzazione di Maria Goretti (*Rome: Coletti, 1961), 19.

[393] When Orsini participated in the 2009 pilgrimage to the *cascina antica* she was treated as a special guest and I was chided for not having noticed her in the crowd.

[394] Ines Orsini, "Ines Orsini: Fervente Gorettina," *Il Santuario di Nettuno e S. Maria Goretti* (Nettuno, Italy: PP. Passionisti, February 1951): 9.

means to imitate Goretti. According to Orsini, acting as Goretti means screaming with Goretti: "NO! It is a sin! God does not want it!: Even if the cost is death, [I will] never betray the love of Christ!"[395]

Although Ines Orsini, the actress, has been portrayed as the paradigmatic *Gorettina*, her representation of Goretti in the film *Cielo sulla Palude* conveys a more nuanced message about girlish chastity. The film is deeply problematic in that it represents Goretti's life primarily through her complex relationship with Alessandro. In many of the pivotal scenes she is speaking his name—even on her deathbed where her

Figure 7. Frames from the film *Cielo sulla Palude* on the walls of Goretti's bedroom (in the *cascina antica* in Le Ferriere, outside Nettuno). Shown here are images of Mauro Matteucci's portrayal of Alessandro Serenelli.

[395] Orsini, 9.

final words are that she "will live in heaven for him." Yet the film is one of very few representations of Goretti's life and martyrdom that depicts the saint as a *person* who grows and changes over time. Orsini's Goretti is much more than the cartoonish portrayal of the *Gorettine*.

In its cinematography, *Cielo sulla Palude* incorporates two different genres in one film. Both are rather disturbing. The character of Alessandro Serenelli is cast, played, and shot as though he were the romantic lead in a passionate love story. Tall, good-looking, with chiseled cheekbones, his most frequent activity onscreen is brooding attractively. Through Alessandro we can see the romantic narrative developing. The pretty young girl seeks him out and begs him to take her to the beach, then tells him how much she likes him. As Alessandro sits watching, Maria raises her skirts all the way to her thighs to splash in the water in front of him. She describes the pleasurable sensation of the water against her skin. When Alessandro teases her about the danger of the waves, she grabs his arm and turns to him for help because she is allegedly frightened. Is she really frightened? Or is she just looking for an excuse to touch him? Later she walks along the beach hand-in-hand with him, and even rests her hand on his knee at one point, although she pulls back when he responds by caressing her arm. In this story, Maria Goretti is giving Serenelli a succession of flirtatious signals. We do not think that she is an intentional coquette, but nonetheless, she somehow, innocently, uses every trick of flirtation. She leans towards him, beams at him, and tells him how she depends on him.

Yet Orsini manages to perform these seductive acts while nonetheless convincingly playing a naïve child. Maria's sensuality is a child's sensuality; her touch and affection are devoid of sexual significance because she clearly does not see herself as

a sexual being. Before Alessandro's first assault, Maria sees herself as a child and imagines that Alessandro sees her the same way. She takes off her shoes and splashes in the surf because it is fun and new and she enjoys it. When she tells Alessandro that she likes the feel of the water on her feet, we know that she is saying this simply because she likes the feel of the water on her feet.[396]

In this part of the film, Goretti has no chastity to worry about. The transformation—her rude awakening to her own chastity—is simultaneous with Serenelli's first attempt to rape her. The scene begins with the two of them at their domestic labors, when he offers her a piece of candy. It is not candy from a stranger, but even so, the audience senses that this is a sort of trick. Enthusiastic about this rare treat, she accepts the gift and relishes the candy as he watches lasciviously. Gradually she senses that there is something wrong—and at the moment when she becomes aware of his desires, he grabs her.

But Goretti's awakening does not move her into the same romantic plot that Alessandro is playing out. Instead, she suddenly realizes that she is being stalked, that there is danger all around, and every shadow might hide her assailant. He tells her that he will eventually succeed in assaulting her, and "if not today, then it will be tomorrow," but that either way "it will happen."

In one scene of Alessandro's stalking we see Maria watching as a white calf is wrangled to the ground by two men and hog-tied. Goretti cries hysterically as she

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[396] This Maria Goretti, nine or ten years old in this scene, is like the girls of that age who splash on the beach in front of her shrine in Nettuno now. I have often seen young girls on that beach dressed only in bikini bottoms. However, theirs is not a woman's topless sunbathing, but equivalent to the bare chests of little boys running around with them. To these girls, and the parents who allow them to play bare-chested on the public beach, their nude torsos are no more erotic than those of the boys who think nothing of going shirtless.

watches this assault on the small cow, which is has named *Colomba* (dove). We then see Alessandro, hidden in the grass, watching Maria's terror, and looking for the opportunity to attack her as soon as she is alone.

In contrast to the image of Goretti seen through the *Gorettine*, *Cielo sulla Palude* depicts a Goretti who loses her innocence. Serenelli's terrorization deprives the child of her sense of security, and thus her freedom to move around at will, play children's games and feel joy. Eventually she is unable even to accomplish basic domestic tasks, such as fetching a pail of water, without fear and the constant awareness that she is being watched. Here Goretti's innocence is not equated with her virginity, which is preserved. Innocence is still linked to sexual experience, but the child's loss of innocence comes from the experience of being the vulnerable and unwilling object of someone else's sexual desire.

This understanding of innocence reveals the danger of constructing young girls as little Gorettis. Is it possible for a girl to become constantly aware of her own chastity, and believe that her chastity (like Goretti's) is always in danger, without losing her innocence—in the sense of the carefree, unselfconsciousness of childhood?

The destructive implications of presenting Goretti's life as exemplary and a model for imitation are disturbingly apparent in a 1991 book, *Palme e gigli: come Santa Maria Goretti*. The book is a collection of stories of other girls who are "like Maria Goretti" in that they too were killed "for chastity" in attempted rapes. The cover image depicts Goretti in the costume of the *Gorettine*—in a white dress and holding a bouquet of palms and lilies. In the title, though, "palms and lilies" stand in for the other girls murdered, like Goretti, because they resisted sexual assault. The preface makes this association

explicit, "from the title you will have gathered that this book addresses a crowd of souls who sacrificed their lives for evangelical purity, quite like Saint Maria Goretti, although before or after her."[397] The stories are gruesome, and all the more so because of their repetitiveness. The supposedly happy consequences of emulating Maria Goretti are jarringly emphasized in each narrative. The story of a fourteen-year-old "black sister of Saint Maria Goretti" has this dramatic apex:

> When the stars began to shine in the sky some Christians and the Sisters from the Mission found the mangled body of little Antonia. The courageous maiden was still alive, and seeing the Sisters she attempted to smile; breathing with great difficulty she murmured: 'I preferred death…I didn't sin either, like Maria Goretti!'[398]

This tragic death is framed as a victory laid at the feet of Maria Goretti. This is the cult of Maria Goretti at its worst, boasting that "her example has infected more than 53 girls, from diverse nations" who died similarly.[399]

Against such examples of Gorettian imitation, I would like to suggest a minimal standard of what counts as a progressive, helpful way of relating to or performing the saint: Gorettian devotional practices ought not to cause more children to experience the fear, violence, and tragic death that marked Goretti's childhood.

In the years since Vatican II, relating to saints as models has been an attractive option from many theological vantage points. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that in recent years this has seemed to be the *least problematic* of the traditional ways of relating to saints. During Vatican II and its immediate aftermath there seemed to be a disconnect between the modernizing church and the antiquated—even superstitious—

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[397] Simone Schonocchia and Fortunato Ciomei, *Palme e Gigli: Come Santa Maria Goretti* (Nettuno, Italy: Santuario N.S. delle Grazie e Santa Maria Goretti, 1991), 5.

[398] *Palme e Gigli*, 42

[399] "La Donna Deve Riconoscere la Propria Dignitá," *Il Giglio di Corinaldo: S. Maria Goretti* 2 (Corinaldo, AN, Italy: Il Santuario di S. Maria Goretti, 2009): 9-10.

devotional practices of many lay Catholics. These practices could be theologically problematic because they might undermine the new focus on "Christ, the one Mediator."[400] *Lumen gentium* thus expresses concern about "abuses, excesses or defects" in popular devotion to the saints.[401] In theory, relating to the saints as models of virtue and heroism ought to produce devotionalism that is more oriented towards the ethical rather than to the superstitious. Traditional alternatives, such as relating to saints as patrons and/or intercessors, are—in theory—far more suspect.[402] However, historical practices of imitation-based devotion to Goretti are unacceptable. In the interest of promoting moral (sexual) virtues, these practices end up devaluing the lives of women and girls.

Recent Experiments in Re-presenting Goretti

Model

Within the Nettuno cult, there have been some recent attempts to treat Goretti as a model for emulation—but with a different set of virtues and actions commended for imitation. As I have mentioned before, Giovanni Alberti—the Gorettian scholar and rector of the shrine—prefers to emphasize Goretti's act of forgiveness rather than her chastity.

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[400] Dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium,* paragraph 8.

[401] *Lumen gentium*, paragraph 51.

[402] A document issued by the Vatican in 2001 does affirm the appropriateness of both of these ways of relating to saints, along with others. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "Principles and Guidelines," *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), paragraph 211.

Even knowing that, I found it jarring when I first encountered this renarration enacted in a devotional performance. In 2009 I gathered with hundreds of other pilgrims (local and otherwise) to participate in the annual "pilgrimage" procession from the shrine in Nettuno to the still-rural *cascina antica*. Each person was given a prayer card stating the contemplative theme for the event. In loosely translated Italian, the card said:

> The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it... In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper to a night already devoid of stars…Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.[403]

This group of Italian Catholics was reinterpreting their patron saint through the lens of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Moreover, they seemed to be drawing on the political and moral credibility of Dr. King to give contemporary relevance to a saint normally associated with conservative politics and unforgiving sexual ethics. Read alone, this single quote from King's final book sounds almost mystical, with its imagery of spirals and darkness. However, the prayer card does not mention that in its original context this quote directly follows King's reflections on the practical necessity of integration in the multiracial context of the United States. Italy currently has some significant racial tensions and conflict, particularly regarding the treatment of Roma and African immigrants. However, the excerpt from King was divorced from any reflection on race.

I was surprised to find King's model of nonviolence being cited in a liturgical context so foreign from King's life and politics. At best, the reference to King was being used to portray Goretti's martyrdom as nonviolent resistance against oppression. She did

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[403] Martin Luther King, "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?" *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 594.

not resist Serenelli with hatred or violence, but instead forgave him and prayed for him. Here Goretti is a heroic pacifist! However, the use of this particular quote risks portraying both 'saints'—King and Maria Goretti—as models of a destructive, self-sacrificial ethic. It is all the more problematic if King and Goretti are being presented in this way as models to be emulated by minorities and women. It might have been more helpful to quote a different line from the same book: "Freedom is not won by a passive acceptance of suffering. Freedom is won by a struggle *against* suffering."[404] Goretti then might have appeared as a model of resistance rather than passivity.

Patron

The imitative model of sainthood is hardly the only possible basis for depictions of Maria Goretti. Another traditional Roman Catholic model of relating to saints is in terms of patronage. Goretti has certainly been claimed as the patron of her two native towns, but this is more of a civic designation than an assertion that the saint is the community's special intercessor with God, "who will plead their cause and obtain spiritual and material favors that would otherwise not be forthcoming."[405] In recent years the Vatican has legitimated not only local and regional patronage, but also forms of patronage that are often derided as superstition, such as patronage "of corporations and professions (St. Omobono for tailors)…or to obtain specific graces (St. Lucy for the recovery of eyesight)."[406] The feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson has particularly

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[404] King, 567.

[405] Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 2.

[406] Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "Principles and Guidelines," *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), paragraph 211

criticized patronage models of the human/saint relationship, in part because they "reinforce the imperial model of God's relation to the world, so contrary to feminist and liberation theologies' vision of reality."[407]

The World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO) has recently adopted a variant of the patronage model as a way of relating to Goretti. In 2006 the WUCWO resolved the following.

> WUCWO will make a formal approach to the Holy See to have St. Maria Goretti proclaimed Patroness of the Innocence of Children.
> WUCWO will request the Holy See to set aside St. Maria Goretti's Feast Day on 6th July as a day of prayer throughout the Universal Church for all those who are currently being sexually abused, and a day on which to pray for the healing of all those who have suffered sexual abuse in their childhood. [408]

In email correspondence with someone involved in this effort, I have been told that "the WUCWO Secretariat took this resolution to the Holy See," but that, unfortunately, "the Cardinal to whom it was given felt that it was 'not the opportune time' for it to be proclaimed within the Universal Church."[409]

The representation of the saint as a sort of heavenly or inter-worldly protector of children seems to have more liberationist potential than Johnson sees in the representation of saints as spiritual patrons. Envisioning Goretti as a protector of children emphasizes the vulnerability of children, particularly in terms of their "innocence." I am choosing not to read "innocence" as obsession with children's sexuality, but as freedom from sexual violence and threats. In this sense, the acknowledgement of vulnerability—even dependence—is entirely appropriate. The historical Goretti was a vulnerable child

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[407] Johnson, 91.

[408] World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, "Resolution 1. Day of Prayer for Sexually Abused," in *Resolutions Adopted 31st May-7th June 2006 Arlington, Va (USA),* (Arlington: WUCWO, 2006), 3.

[409] Maree Triffett, email message to the author, August 7, 2008.

who did not have anyone to protect her when she was assaulted in her own home. Perhaps it is helpful to think of her as empowered by her sainthood to function in some protective way, and to envision her as especially sensitive to women and children who are vulnerable to the same sorts of domestic and sexual violence that she experienced.

Companion

Elizabeth Johnson prefers a model of the saints as a "circle of companions" who relate with living human beings on more equal terms.[410] Using her model we might think of Goretti as a "comrade" who stands in solidarity with victims.[411] Brian McNeil, a priest with the Canons Regular of St. Augustine, argues for this sort of relationship with Goretti. McNeil grew up in a Catholic community in Scotland where Maria Goretti was "consciously presented as [a model] to be imitated," but he rejects that approach, rooting devotion elsewhere entirely.[412] "Let us begin," he suggests, "by saying that the story of Maria Goretti has nothing whatever to do with the defense of the virtue of chastity."[413] Instead, it is a story about "a child who was sexually abused and cruelly murdered."[414] How, though, could devotion coexist with this unredeemed horror? McNeil proposes that contemporary devotion to Maria Goretti can and should be based on the fact that she "shared the fate of countless other victims."[415] McNeil insists that Goretti's death was tragic but unremarkable. Even so, conceiving of her as a martyr can still be meaningful and potentially liberating.

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[410] Johnson, 79.
[411] Johnson, 93.
[412] Brian McNeil ,"Maria Goretti—a Saint for Today?" *New Blackfriars* 81, 958 (December 2000), 498.
[413] McNeil, 502.
[414] McNeil, 503.
[415] McNeil, 504, 503.

> Perhaps the cultic veneration of these persons as 'martyrs' can motivate us to work for a more humane world. Perhaps it can also remind us of the profound theological truth that no one is forgotten before God, and that all suffering—even the meaningless pain and involuntary death of the victims—is given a place in a hidden manner in the unfathomable divine mystery of cross and resurrection."[416]

In this reinterpretation, Maria Goretti no longer functions as a moral or spiritual model to be imitated. Instead, she is exemplary only in the sense that she is an example of a too-familiar story. For McNeil, Goretti represents other victims who are anonymous. Thus, her name can "emerge for a brief historical moment from the illimitable sea of human mystery and remind us of all those others whose names are now forgotten."[417] Yet what McNeil provides is not lived devotionalism, but a sketch of how a different kind of devotionalism might function. His text is framed as a proposal, perhaps for a brave homilist to take up on the day of Goretti's feast.

Image of Christ

Giovanni Alberti has created several liturgies based on Goretti's "unwritten testimony."[418] In his "Rosario con S. Maria Goretti," Goretti's five statements are aligned with a selection of traditional "mysteries of the rosary."[419] Thus, Goretti's martyrdom narrative is layered over the story of Christ's path to the cross. In this Gorettian rosary there are five "mysteries" named for their corresponding biblical event. For instance, the first meditation is titled "Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane." This biblical scene is identified with the first utterance from "the unwritten testimony," thereby endowing

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[416] McNeil 504.
[417] McNeil. 504.
[418] See Chapter Two for a close analysis of "the unwritten testimony of St. Maria Goretti through her most important words."
[419] Giovanni Alberti, "Il Rosario con S. Maria Goretti," *Preghiamo con Marietta* (Nettuno, Italy: Stella del Mare, 2003), 9-10

Goretti's words with the gravity of "the Word." As I note in Chapter Two, when read as juridical testimony, the recorded words of Maria Goretti are bare, even vapid. Likewise, when I first read the text of this rosary, published in a book of Gorettian liturgies, the child's words fell flat in this comparison with Christ. For instance, the second mystery of this rosary invites contemplation of Goretti's words: "Mamma, when can I make my First Communion? I can't wait!"—alongside Jesus' institution of the Eucharist.[420] When I first read this, I was embarrassed by the unpersuasive attempt to stretch her few sentences into a narrative of the Good News.

However, when I participated in a solemn liturgical performance of the "Rosario con S. Maria Goretti," what had been awkward suddenly became a poignant juxtaposition. I was in the Italian town of Corinaldo, Goretti's birthplace, to observe the celebration of the saint's birthday.[421] My husband and I walked down from the medieval hilltop town to the "birth house" set in the fields. It was already dark, and so cold that a scheduled pilgrimage had to be canceled. The tiny chapel in the house, however, was filled with proud Corinaldo citizens holding rosaries and copies of Alberti's book. Selected parishioners rose to read their designated texts, evoking the grand narrative of Christianity in the anonymous, impoverished life of a local girl. As we silently meditated on these texts, the Gorettian rosary began to seem profound and subversive. The fourth "mystery" of this rosary centers on Goretti's reported words to Serenelli as he attacked her: "Alessandro, what are you doing? God does not want this and you will go to Hell!" The text of Alberti's rosary interprets the scene in this way: "Marietta proclaims the

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[420] Alberti, "Il Rosario con S. Maria Goretti," 9.

[421] Goretti's feast is celebrated on July 6th, the anniversary of her death—a day that marks her birth into the communion of saints. My visit to Corinaldo, however, was for Goretti's actual birthday, October 16th.

eternal Truth of the Gospel and she fights against sin with all of her being, with the dignity and resolve of one who feels beloved by God."[422] Elsewhere the brief quote is used as testimonial evidence of Goretti's sanctity, but in this context, Goretti's words were not meant to prove anything. Instead, we were trying to see the crucified Christ in the body of a little girl who was the victim of sexual violence in her own home.

I became more confident in my new interpretation of this liturgy when the final Mass of the birthday celebrations was given two days later in the same place. This service was also the debut of "the new priest," freshly arrived from the seminary. The young priest began his sermon by saying how meaningful it felt to celebrate "here in this little house," where we enter to recall the life of Maria Goretti, a life that he said recalls the Incarnation. He imagined, in turn, the childhood home of Jesus. The boy Jesus, like Goretti, might also have seemed like an anonymous poor person, from a place "forgotten by God" and "forgotten by man." Neither the rosary nor the homily portrayed Goretti as a heroic exemplar of chastity. Instead, Goretti was portrayed as something both less and more. She was a young girl who might easily have lived and died in anonymity. Yet, with thrilling audacity, both liturgies portray Goretti as an image of Christ, while still holding onto the domestic context of Goretti's thoroughly gendered assault.

Imperfect Experiments

While I am hopeful about the potential of these many experiments in Gorettian devotion, it is important to recognize that not all such practices will be liberating—even

[422] Alberti, "Il Rosario con S. Maria Goretti," 10.

if they are creative, lay-directed performances. Novel forms can be used to reinscribe old ideas—a possibility that is realized at certain points in the musical "*Sbarre di Carta*."

Ten years ago, youth members of the *Pentecoste* group formed a theater company, and wrote a play called "*Domani sará Grano,*" based on Giovanni Alberti's hagio-biography of Maria Goretti. After producing and performed that show as a musical about the life of Maria Goretti,[423] they turned to Alberti's book about the life of Alessandro Serenelli to develop a new show. The plot of "*Sbarre di Carta*" thus centers on Serenelli's experience of repentance and redemption, and Goretti does not appear as a character—although she is referenced in every scene.[424]

In one scene titled "The Apostolic Process," Serenelli proclaims his gratitude for having lived long enough to able to testify on behalf of Goretti's cause for canonization. If he had died before giving this testimony, "it would have been like killing her a second time." According to the script, this declaration of the irreplaceability of Serenelli's testimony is followed by the "Dance of the Pen," which represents Serenelli's signature.[425] This scene and the reading of Serenelli's "Spiritual Testament"[426] in the final scene of the musical have the effect of reinscribing juridical testimony as the quintessential form of bearing witness. Even more troubling, these scenes emphasize Serenelli's central role as a witness—the only witness who can testify to what happened during Goretti's martyrdom.

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[423] Simona Colantuono, "Domani sará Grano" *La Stella del Mare*, September 2002, 25-26.

[424] One of the cast members generously shared the script with me, by emailing it as a Microsoft Word document. La Perla d'Oriente, "Sbarre di Carta." Script written in Italian, in Nettuno, Italy. First performed July 14, 2007, Nettuno, Italy.

[425] I have seen photographs and youtube.com film clips of other parts of the show, but I have not seen this dance and so I know nothing about the choreography or music for this dance.

[426] I analyze this document—and competing interpretations of it—in Chapter Two.

Gorettian Devotion as Activism Against Human Trafficking

There is one more evolution in Gorettian devotion that I want to describe—the recent development of practices linking Gorettian devotion to efforts to help women and children who have been forced into prostitution. In 2002, the Catholic Women's League of Australia (CWLA)[427] decided to "celebrate" the 100th anniversary of Goretti's martyrdom with a Day of Prayer "aimed at stopping" human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of children. According to Maree Triffett, who was then the National Social Issues Convenor of the CWLA, the Day of Prayer was intended to "highlight the rise in sexual exploitation in tourism and the extent of sexual slavery and child abuse throughout the world"—and also to draw attention to Australia's particularly high rate of human trafficking. Participants were encouraged to pray with an activist intention, "to pray that those in positions of power will have the political will to combat this evil within society."[428] This Day of Prayer became an annual event held on Goretti's feast. The CWLA made and distributed a prayer card, with an image and prayer designed by children at a Catholic elementary school in Sydney.

At the same time, working independently, the Gorettian shrine in Corinaldo, Italy began collecting offerings "to help girls in the 3rd world, rescuing them from the risk of violence, from exploitation."[429] The shrine's webpage for this initiative specifically focuses on the need "to liberate" Brazilian girls who are being raped and prostituted. The webpage invokes Goretti to appeal to the reader: "Maria Goretti, martyr of purity, asks

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[427] This is the organization that proposed the resolution on Goretti that the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations eventually passed.

[428] Maree Triffett, "Saint Maria Goretti and initiative against trafficking," email message to the author, August 7, 2008.

[429] "SOS INFANZIA nel Nome di S. M. Goretti," *Il Giglio di Corinaldo: S. Maria Goretti* (Corinaldo, AN, Italy: Il Santuario di S. Maria Goretti, June 2008): 14.

you to help restore dignity to these little girls."[430] I have found very little information about what work is actually being done with these funds, but what strikes me as powerful about the project is that it is phrased as an attempt "to live concretely the Messages of our little Martyr."[431] As in the work done by the CWLA in Australia, this project is evidently built on the premise that a devotional relationship with Maria Goretti has implications for how devotees relate to the broader society, and how they relate to and care for vulnerable girls, in particular.

A Continuing Project

These more recent attempts to align her with liberal political agendas, while perhaps jarring in their novelty, are no more arbitrary than the identification of Goretti with political agendas in past decades. These contemporary efforts do what the cult has *always* done: perform Maria Goretti's story in the absence of her direct testimony. Again, it was worth noting that although we know Goretti lived, and how she suffered and died, we have no record of Goretti's self-representation, how she would have cast herself, or what plot, genre or message Goretti would have used to describe her own life. The story of Maria Goretti has always been written from the outside, by other people who are invested in her story, and who have their own social-political contexts and commitments. Perhaps this makes it easier to see that her story is not and cannot ever be fixed. Because there is no single canonical testimony of Maria Goretti, participants in her cult have an enormous degree of freedom, and a corresponding responsibility for the performances and relationships they construct.

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[430] "Appelli dal Santuario," (Corinaldo, AN, Italy: Il Santuario di S. Maria Goretti), http://www.santamariagoretti.it/Appelli.htm

[431] "Appelli dal Santuario."

Conclusion

The people who live in the towns of Nettuno and Corinaldo are forced into a closer relationship with Maria Goretti than they might have chosen. If citizens of those communities were given the opportunity today to build an ideal patron saint, they might select someone different, maybe a saint more like Mother Theresa, or perhaps a martyr who died heroically to save her neighbors. But luck gave them this saint. That predicament, though, is simply a more intense version of the predicament of the Roman Catholic Church. For better or worse, we are stuck with Maria Goretti.

Not all of us will experience having Goretti's relics paraded past our houses. If we did—if we regularly encountered Gorettian processions just outside our doors—we would have to decide how to respond. Would we drape the balconies in streamers to welcome her? Set up an *altarino*? With what icons or symbols? Would we instead picket the event? Or simply close the door and turn off the lights? Distance makes it much easier to ignore the martyr, her story, and her cult. Yet however much we may try to ignore her, she is still *there*, part of the cloud of witnesses recognized by the Roman Catholic Church and fixed on its universal calendar. Those Catholics who regularly attend Mass, even at the height of summer, are likely to encounter Goretti at least once a year, often as the subject of an especially awkward homily. As I note in Chapter Two, there is no system in place that could undo her canonization, even if canonizing her was not an infallibly wise decision to begin with. Like it or not, Goretti is here to stay. And

to the extent that we interact with Maria Goretti and share a church with her, we become implicated in the reception of this saint. It is a relationship, one that matters precisely because it is—or ought to be—a conflicted and troubling relationship.

In the course of my research on the cult of Maria Goretti I have encountered, and found my attention captivated by, a number of unexpected artifacts, histories and practices. I have included some of those discoveries here, whereas I have had to leave out others that are equally fascinating. For instance, I have not found the space to analyze performances of *quadri viventi*—in which local devotees pose in frozen scenes from Goretti's life, death and afterlife—that have been part of Le Ferriere's Gorettian festivities for over fifty years. I have scarcely even investigated a California-based organization called The Goretti Group, which sponsors lectures and retreats on Gorettian virtues, and funds its activities with an annual Race for the Chaste. My project nonetheless follows a number of colorful detours—so much so that it may at times lose sight of the terrible ordinariness of Maria Goretti's experience.

The murder of Maria Goretti is a familiar story for anyone who reads a local newspaper. The findings of the National Violence Against Women Survey tell the same story, set in the United States in the year 2000. Nine percent of the adult women surveyed report having been raped before the age of eighteen, and almost half report having been physically assaulted by a caretaker.[432] As in Goretti's story, the vast majority of children who are raped had some sort of previous relationship with the person

[432] Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, November 2000), 35.

who hurt them.[433] Moreover, the majority of rapes take place in the home of the victim or the rapist, or—as in the case of Goretti—the home shared by both.[434] In the National Violence Against Women survey, the location of the assault in the home and threats by the perpetrator "to harm or kill the victim or someone close to the victim" are both associated with an increased risk of injury. Contrary to the logic of the traditional Goretti story, which presumes that Goretti would have been safe from violence if she had submitted to Serenelli's demands, this survey finds that "if the rape was completed" the victim was *more* likely to be injured.[435]

The cult of St. Maria Goretti is most troubling when it treats Goretti as if she were not one of these statistics but different from and *better than* other victims of sexual assault. Once, while visiting a Gorettian site, I chatted with a nun who asked me why I was interested in Maria Goretti. Always a little uncomfortable with this question, I explained that I had worked with women who were rape survivors and that many of these women turn to religious resources to cope with the trauma. I told her that I thought Maria Goretti could be meaningful for rape survivors because, like them, Goretti had been sexually assaulted. The nun corrected me, insisting that Goretti is "unique" because she forgave her assailant. Goretti's martyrdom, in her view, was not like the experiences of the countless other victims of sexual assault. I was shocked by this claim, which seemed to be justifying Goretti's special status by denigrating other victims of sexual assault—as though they had all failed to behave as morally exemplary victims. The nun's comment hinted at an ugly question: why were other victims *not* saints like Goretti? What was

[433] Tjaden, 36.
[434] Tjaden, 51.
[435] Tjaden, 50.

wrong with them? There is much more still to be said about the moral responsibility and agency of rape victims, but that awaits a different project.

The question of Goretti's likeness to or difference from other people and other victims is an ongoing challenge for Goretti's devotees, and for feminists who might want to reclaim her. I believe that our responses to Maria Goretti both reflect and shape our responses to other victims of sexual violence. Yet in using Goretti to address these broader concerns, I risk treating her once again as a cipher.[436] Even now I am still uncertain as to how much the particularity of Goretti's experience matters. There are abundant hagiographies and there has been obsessive attention to her particular body, both as evidence and as a sacred object. None of that, though, can replace the testimony from Goretti herself—the absent testimony of her personal experience.

By virtue of her canonization, Maria Goretti has been set apart and therefore is different from the rest of us. Whatever complicated motivations brought about that canonization, it has the consequence of placing Goretti in relationship with the people who constitute the Roman Catholic Church. That relationship makes Goretti, and the violence she suffered, visible to a society that would often prefer not to think about such things.

I have tried to shift attention from the victim/martyr to her reception. It is not possible to recover Goretti's voice, but in her devotional communities the process of witnessing is still ongoing. To be sure, this kind of witnessing is not a replacement for juridical testimony—it is not evidence and should not be treated as though it were. Furthermore, devotees cannot replace Goretti's voice. Too often people have claimed to

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[436] Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 223.

speak “for her.” Perhaps the best they—we—can do is struggle to remain in this devotional relationship. Within it, we are indispensible participants in Goretti’s martyrological witness.

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