

As we all know, over the course of our lives we can go through changes. Sometimes those are changes for the better; ideally we grow in holiness and learn how to love God others better and better. But unfortunately due to the temptations of the world, and sometimes how others treat us, it can be easy to get lost. There is however hope - and this hope is in our Lord, who says to us "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." Jesus' love for us is so great, and ideally this results in a change for us once we come to know this love. Saint Paul writes in our second reading to the Ephesians that we should "put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth." Putting on the new self though takes effort. But when we cooperate with grace; when we allow God's love and mercy to transform us, it's incredible the change that can take place when we let go and let God.

About a month ago on July 6, our Church celebrated the feast day of Saint Maria Goretti. She is among the youngest of saints; she died at the age of 11. A young man who was working on the family farm became overcome with lust towards her; he ended up stabbing her 14 times. She died the next

day, and but she was adamant as she was in the hospital that she forgave her attacker.

The attacker was a 20-year old named Alessandro Serenelli. At the time he was still considered a minor under Italian law.

Alessandro was born into a family well acquainted with poverty and hardship. Shortly after he was born, his own mother attempted to drown him. Several months later, while in a mental asylum, she herself died. His brother would also be subsequently interned in an asylum, where he also died.

Alessandro's father, Giovanni, was an alcoholic who struggled to provide for his children. He moved the family multiple times trying to earn a living as a manual laborer. Unfortunately, his alcoholism prevented his holding down a job for very long. It was while endeavoring as a sharecropper that he met Luigi Goretti, father of Maria Goretti. Both families living in poverty, it was decided that they would partner together and attempt to work as a team for those hiring sharecroppers.

Both men eventually decided to move their families to a small town called Le Ferriere di Conca, near Nettuno, about 40 miles south of Rome. By this time, Giovanni Serenelli had only his son Alessandro living with him. Count Mazzoleni, a wealthy nobleman who owned much land around Le Ferriere, agreed to hire them as sharecroppers.

He provided a building that would house the Goretis on one side and the Serenellis on the other, the two living quarters being separated by a common kitchen.

Within two years, when Alessandro was 18-years-old, Maria's father died of malaria. His own father being increasingly gripped by alcoholism, Alessandro became more and more reclusive and withdrawn. Most alarming, however, was what he was cultivating in his heart: lust towards Maria.

At first Alessandro would make lewd jokes and gestures towards Maria. These were eventually followed by repeated attempts to seduce her. Maria wanted nothing to do with Alessandro and rejected one of his immoral propositions. Knowing he was capable of violence, she was careful never

to be alone with him. But Alessandro eventually devised a plan to force Maria into submission: he would approach the house in the middle of the day—when Maria would be alone and everyone else would be at work in the fields—and rape her.

When Maria found herself trapped in the house alone with Alessandro, seeing that his intention was to violate her, she resisted him with all her strength. In fact, her resistance was so great that he was physically unable to rape her. In a fit of rage, Alessandro struck Maria repeatedly with a metal file, delivering 14 puncture wounds. These would kill Maria 24 hours later.

Alessandro was sentenced to 30 years in prison. At his trial, he blamed Maria for her own death claiming that he was defending himself from a sexual attack that she herself instigated. In prison he was locked in isolation as his anger would lead to outbursts of physical violence against other inmates.

One night, six years into his prison sentence, Maria appeared to Alessandro. She appeared in a garden picking 14 white lily flowers, handing them to him one by one. This gesture of forgiveness, this act of love, filled

Alessandro with light and the Holy Spirit. He immediately became contrite for what he did to that little girl.

A bishop soon visited him after this. He finished the rest of his sentence in tranquility. In fact, his behavior became so docile, and the transformation of his person was so dramatic, that he was released three years early.

Shortly after his release he sought out, and received, the forgiveness of Maria's mother. He begged her for forgiveness and she told him, "If my daughter can figure you, who am I to withhold forgiveness?" The two went to Mass together the next day and received Holy Communion side by side at the altar rail. He eventually joined the Capuchin Franciscans and, as a lay brother, worked as a gardener, porter, and general laborer. He died in the peace of Christ, with the love and admiration of those that knew him, at the Cappuchin convent at Macerata, Italy, on May 6, 1970.

Following his death, the Capuchin friars with whom he lived found a sealed envelope among his personal effects. It was his spiritual testament, written in the form of an open letter to the world. It contains an appeal that all follow the way of Christ. It also paints a dramatic and touching picture of a

man who was able to regain his dignity through the generous mercy that those he wounded extended to him. In his words:

I am now almost 80 years old. I am close to the end of my days.

*Looking back at my past, I recognize that in my early youth I followed a false road—an evil path that led to my ruin.*

*Through the content of printed magazines, immoral shows, and bad examples in the media, I saw the majority of the young people of my day following evil without even thinking twice. Unworried, I did the same thing.*

*There were faithful and practicing Christian believers around me, but I paid no attention to them. I was blinded by a brute impulse that pushed me down the wrong way of living.*

*At the age of 20, I committed a crime of passion, the memory of which still horrifies me today. Maria Goretti, now a saint, was my good angel whom*

*God placed in my path to save me. Her words both of rebuke and forgiveness are still imprinted in my heart. She prayed for me, interceding for her killer. Thirty years in prison followed.*

*If I had not been a minor in Italian law I would have been sentenced to life in prison. Nevertheless, I accepted the sentence I received as something I deserved.*

*Resigned, I atoned for my sin. Little Maria was truly my protector. With her help, I served those 27 years in prison well. When society accepted me back among its members, I tried to live honestly. With angelic charity, the sons of St. Francis, the minor Capuchins of the Marches, welcomed me among them not as a servant, but as a brother. I have lived with them for 24 years. Now I look serenely to the time in which I will be admitted to the vision of God, to embrace my dear ones once again, and to be close to my guardian angel, Maria Goretti, and her dear mother, Assunta.*

*May all who read this letter of mine desire to follow the blessed teaching of avoiding evil and following the good. May all believe with the faith of little children that religion with its precepts is not something one can do without.*

*Rather, it is true comfort, and the only sure way in all of life's circumstances—even in the most painful.*

*Peace and all good.*

Like Alessandro, we can all lose our way, and try to fill ourselves with the things we think might bring fulfillment. Note the crowd in the Gospel is a bit shallow; they follow Jesus because they've been filled physically with the bread, and they want that meal ticket to continue. To put it another way, they've been unable to see beyond their own stomachs, and also blind to the layers of meaning with respect to their being fed. What Jesus tells them is that He is the one true bread who will satisfy them, because He has come to offer them His own Self.

We should look to that crowd and see ourselves. As Bishop John Quinn put it in a homily he gave to our priest's assembly (the bishop of the Winona diocese), don't drink the cheap wine. His point was on the Cross when Jesus is given a sponge with cheap wine, he refuses it. In our lives, the cheap wine is that which can satiate our thirst temporarily, but leave us wanting more. For true conversion, we have to be aware of the cheap wine and the things we look to for fulfillment. Some are sinful; others can just be taken to

excess and cause us to lose our way. And once we get things sorted out, we seek out the bread that fills us fully time and again for the path to true and lasting conversion.

First, the cheap wine. Alessandro is not a canonized saint. But he was present at the canonization Mass for Maria Goretti. And it's been suggested one day he would be the perfect patron saint for those who struggle with an addiction to sensual images. He noted that he battled that at the time; though there was no internet, there were those bad images around. They were sold near train stations. It twisted his ideas of the human body; it consumed him. Think of Gollum in "The Lord of the Rings" who changes from being a normal hobbit named Smeagol. The lust for the ring consumes him and transforms him. His appearance in the film is what sin does to a soul. So as a starting point, to effect that change so we don't live in the old ways as Paul says, we need to name these things. Maybe it's the battles that Alessandro had; maybe it's addiction to power, to money, to control, or being slothful or holding onto hate. Sometimes we go back to the well with these things and get satisfaction for a moment, but are ultimately left hungry and in these situations controlled by these sinful things like Alessandro was. It's why it's important to examine our conscience and not be dismissive of

things, or only think about them when Lent approaches. Sometimes we deny these things exist in our lives. We should not look at them with shame, but rather confront them head on, as Jesus does on the Cross, and take the steps to be liberated.

Second, sometimes it's not the cheap wine but not enough of the good food. Jesus is the spiritual food that fulfills our desires. But it's worth looking at how our time is spent and where our priorities are. Maybe we get hung up on wanting honor and esteem and recognition. Perhaps we put an emphasis on being busy with sports and activities. Maybe we work a lot of hours for a company and put a focus on that. Or maybe it's really liking leisure activities, or the company of friends. These are all fine things. But sometimes we can put too much emphasis on some of them, and they can become a higher priority than God in our lives. So does God occupy the proper place in my life is a question we also always want to be asking.

Third, seeking out God's love so we can make that lasting change. Alessandro had the vision, but then he sought out God. He prayed. He went to Mass. He'd celebrate confession. He worked on becoming a better man all those years with the Capuchins. And he sought forgiveness from Maria's

mother which was given to him. Identifying the problem areas is a start. But they don't really go away overnight. Temptations are always there. Old ways are easy to fall back into. This is why it's important to keep on coming to Mass. To regularly celebrate confession. To pray daily and examine our conscience. And to seek out others who can help us on our journey by asking them for advice, prayer and support.

Lastly, it's worth asking ourselves what food are we bringing to the people around us. Do we become what it is we receive when we come to Mass or not? If you are around my age or older and grew up in the 80s, you might remember the "war on drugs" commercials. Among them was a teenager who's father finds marijuana in his room. He confronts him and says "who taught you how to do this stuff?" and he yells back "you did dad, alright, I learned it by watching you!" It was a memorable ad that because it hits an important point: namely people learn from you and me, especially kids. So what are people learning? That gossip is acceptable around the dinner table? That it's OK to look at bad things on a computer screen? That bullying is OK? That there are no boundaries or we can always get our way if we bully or shout enough? That faith doesn't matter so much as other things? All of us have bad days. No one can say I've always been a great example

of the Gospel. But this is why it's so important to be aware. Had Alessandro's family life been different, perhaps he would have been able to make better choices as a young man. We must never forget we learn from what we experience and see others doing and hopefully we strive to always help people come to know how much God loves them, as Saint Maria Goretti did for Alessandro from the hospital and from heaven and her mother did by walking with him to Christmas Mass when he was released from prison.

A story is told of a woman named Gladys Dunn, who recently moved into a retirement community in a small town. One beautiful Sunday morning she walked down the street to a church not far from her apartment. Gladys was in awe of the big beautiful church building as she stepped inside to attend the worship service. Gladys however, wasn't too impressed with the sermon. She thought it was kind of boring and, as she looked around the church, she noticed that many of the members were nodding off. When the preacher finished his sermon he encouraged the congregation to greet those sitting close by. Gladys turned toward the man sitting on her left. He, too, had fallen asleep and was yawning and stretching trying to wake up. He smiled at her, and Gladys returned the smile. She politely offered

her hand and said, "I'm Gladys Dunn." "You and me both!" the man replied.

Every day, for years, he visited his wife in the nursing home. She suffered from Alzheimer's disease; with each day she slipped further and further away in the fog of dementia. Every day he would help her with her lunch. He would sit with her and show her the pictures of their children, telling her the latest family news and stories she would forget as soon as she heard them. He would patiently remind her who he was and explain that they were married for the past 52 years and they had two daughters and a son and four beautiful grandchildren. He would hold her hand as she drifted in and out of consciousness. Before leaving, he would kiss her and tell her how much he loved her – and she would never realize nor remember later that had even been there. His heartbroken friends would ask him, "Why do you keep going when she doesn't even know who you are?" And he would always reply, "Because I know who I am."

Sometimes we can forget who we are because sin gets in the way. Who we are though are children of a loving God. Who we are are baptized into that love and part of a Church. Who we are are priests, prophets and kings

through our baptism. So let us never forget that, and as we prepare to receive the Bread of Life in our Lord, let our vision be restored and let Jesus remind us of who we truly are, as we strive to become who we receive.