

One of my favorite saints has always been Saint John Bosco. We would pray his prayer before all of our sporting events in Catholic schools, and then as I learned more about him what struck me with his story was how he felt called at an early age to priesthood and to be a shepherd to others, but over the course of his life it took incredible work; he dealt with difficulties from the government, from indifference, to even others in the Church who were not supportive of the work he was doing to help kids and also change the way people thought of children in particular those in need who were living on the streets often forced into labor at a young age and victimized.

But while you may know the name of John Bosco, you might not be as familiar with the story of Venerable Margaret Bosco, who was his mother. She not only helped him find his way to the priesthood and respond to God's call, but also helped him in his ministry.

Venerable Margaret Occhiena Bosco was born April 1, 1788 in Italy. She was baptized the same day. Her parents were peasants in a small Italian town. There were ten children in her family and many died young. But her family remained close to God.

The town was too small to have a school, and so Margaret was illiterate. Even though she had no schooling, she gained knowledge from church readings and homilies and was wise beyond her years. She not only memorized the catechism and listened attentively at Mass, she made time at the beginning of each day to pray and then continued the conversation with God throughout the day, a bit like Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof." She found much comfort in prayer and offered her work to God for the happiness of others.

Near the town, a farmer named Francis Bosco lived. He was 27 years old and a man of great faith. His wife died leaving him with their son, Anthony. Francis was also left to care for his semi-paralyzed mother. One of Francis' sisters lived near Margaret and he would visit her often.

Eventually, he met Margaret and later proposed to her. She declined stating that she needed to care for her parents; lovingly Margaret's siblings stepped in and promised to watch over their parents, and with her father's permission, she married Francis on June 6, 1812.

But life wasn't easy; in fact by the time she was 29, she was a widow with an ailing mother-in-law, a stepson, and two sons of her own, Joseph and John. Her husband had bought a plot of land, and then the Boscos endured 2 years of drought. Following the end of the drought, Francis died of pneumonia and in his will he asked that 30 Masses be said for him; John at the time was only 21 months of age. So now, not even 30, Margaret has 3 sons, a farm, and a boatload of debt. But rather than complain and brood and worry, she did two things: she turned her troubles over to God, and she got to work.

She saw how important teaching her sons was about Catholicism, and she would play a major role in teaching them the faith. She also held a special devotion to Mary which she passed on to her sons.

With respect to work, she raised Anthony, Joseph and John to all be hard workers. Not only would she teach them about the faith, but she'd teach them about the value of hard work. Mama Margaret as she was known may have been among the first to tell her kids to "ofer it up." From a young age, that was what she did. She would offer difficult farm tasks or monotonous family work for others to the glory of God. If she had a particularly difficult day, she asked Jesus to take it and turn it into something good for someone whose circumstance was worse than her own. She taught her boys to do the same. Despite their poverty, their small family considered themselves blessed.

When John the youngest was nine, he told his mother about a dream he had in which some rowdy boys were fighting him. Then, Jesus and Mary appeared in his dream. Jesus told John that fighting them would not change the boys' hearts. At a wave of his hand, the boys turned into wild animals. Next, the Blessed Mother waved her hand, and the wild animals became lambs. Margaret understood from this dream that God had a special mission in mind for John. From that day on, she did her best to make sure that John had the education he needed to become a priest.

On June 5, 1841, John was ordained a priest. His mother told him though that celebrating Mass meant that he would begin to suffer, and told him to embrace the hard work, and even to leave the priesthood if he felt at all he was doubting his vocation or his commitment. She of course didn't have to worry, John went on to become a saintly priest, and she was a big part of it.

At the age of 58, her life had eased up just a bit; between her other two sons she had 9 grandchildren and was a big part of their lives. Her son Don (the title for priest in Italian) became seriously ill and was sent home to recover. He recovered, but during his time at home with his mom, she was called to something new yet again - to help her son, who by this point was working with children in need. The work was taking a big toll on him, and so he asked his mother if she could help him. Without missing a beat she said "If you believe this to be the will of the Lord, I am ready to go." And so she left her calm rural life as a grandmother for the hectic city life. She would co-found the Salesian Apostolate, a community of religious brothers and priests that still exists today. It took many orphaned boys of which Margaret played their mother figure; this earned her the nickname "Mama Bosco." As a surrogate mother to these orphans living in the home that Don Bosco had established for them, Mama Bosco tended a garden, grew vegetables, and cooked meals for them, washed and mended their clothes, and taught them how to keep their home clean. Her presence turned what Don Bosco called the Oratory into a real home and family for these boys.

When the boys at the Oratory praised Don Bosco for his virtues, they often summed up their compliment by saying "He got it from Mama Margaret."

A time came when Mama Margaret felt that she had had enough. Life in the Oratory was loud, and the boys could be rough. She sat down with her son to have a heart-to-heart conversation, telling him she could do it no more. She wanted to return to the country. John listened and said nothing. When she finished speaking, his eyes wandered to the wall; her eyes followed his. They gazed upon the crucifix hanging there. Tears welled up in Mama Margaret's eyes, and she knew God and John were asking her to unite her sufferings to his. And so she stayed.

John realized he had to get his mother some help, and so more and more volunteers began to join the ministry of nurturing, teaching and training young boys. Before long, Don Bosco and Margaret had founded the Salesian Apostolate.

In an effort to provide some relief for his mother, John and Mama Margaret would take trips back home to the country. They would often take some of the boys with them to expose them to the fresh country air. Such trips were always a source of comfort and joy for the whole family.

On one trip home, however, Mama Margaret became ill. A cough and fever confined her to bed. The doctor diagnosed her with pneumonia. She would not return to the Oratory. John wasn't sure how he'd continue on without her, for he knew how much he needed her but also how much the boys needed her. But his mom reminded him, "Our Blessed Lady will always be in charge."

When she died, she had no money to her name, but the line of boys in the funeral procession to the parish church told how rich she truly was, for she had helped others to find the way to heaven by living out her vocation.

This is what all of us are called to do, and this feast of the Ascension really puts this in focus.

The apostles as Jesus is about to prepare to ascend to the heavens are perhaps thinking okay, this is it, this is when Jesus will restore Israel to greatness and change everything. But Jesus answers them and says do not worry about that; you are asking the wrong question. This is up to the Father; rather now is the time when the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Understandably we ask the same questions, wondering when God will return, or will He fix things in the world. God allows evil, and the response to this is to become one of us and to show us how much we are loved. But He also wishes us to learn how to love Him, and how to be people of hope in the world. The Holy Spirit comes and helps us on the mission; and now is the time if you will to get to work, and to be empowered to do Christ's work in the world. So don't worry about how it all comes together at the end or when God is coming back, rather focus on being a person of hope in this world. How then do we do this?

First, we listen as Mama Margaret did. She began each day with prayer; she listened to her son's words when he had his dream as a young boy, and turned to God every day. Note in the second reading Paul gives us the image of Christ: raised from the dead, and "the seating him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body.." The point here is Christ is like a general; He has gone to another dimension, outside of time, but is with us sacramentally in the Eucharist, but also like a general watching over his army, is there to guide us. But for us to know what the orders are, it requires listening daily to what God calls us to do.

Second, we are guided by a mission which is salvation of souls. How are we going to get people to heaven? This is the big battle plan as we go into life. We might not know every part of God's plans, but as a soldier in his army we ask ourselves how do I keep this grand plan in mind? How did I bring about the kingdom here on earth? We do it by doing what the Spirit commands, and remembering that no matter what role we play, it's an important role.

Third, we persevere in living out our daily mission, linking our sacrifices to his. Jesus is often referred to as the Lamb of God; and in the old Temple an animal was offered as a sacrifice in the Holy of Holies; in Jesus, He is the one whose blood is poured out and offered for us. However Jesus is outside of time, having ascended to the Father, and so now we can participate in this through the Mass; it's why at every Mass we think about God's love for us, but as we gaze upon the Eucharist, we are invited to become who we receive, and to link our lives to His. This means that Jesus will be with us on the journey, but we also do what Mama Margaret did as she gazed on the crucifix, linking our sacrifices and sufferings to the Lord. It is never easy, but when we do this we too can transform the world.

Our lives are full of so many people like Mama Margaret who help us to see the way to heaven. This weekend we honor a number of them in our mothers. Growing up I did not have a dream where I felt called to priesthood; but growing up like we all do I needed someone to help point me in the right direction, to help me understand the deeper meanings of life namely of God's love for me and how I could respond to that love, and what it looked like in action. And as I look at the life of my own mother, a mom who sacrificed much, worked hard, and did so much to encourage, to inspire, to help me and so many others, I am reminded daily of what faith, hope and love look like, and I strive every day to be a better person in part because mom has shown me how to do that, to go farther and farther just as Jesus has shown us.

I imagine Mama Margaret had so many days where the kids, her own and the orphans, or the life of being on a farm and then in the city, or the tasks before her seemed overwhelming. But she understood something: do simple things with great love. In my own mom it's something I saw whether she was helping me to tie a shoelace to learn to read or how to properly clean a house. I'm still trying to sort out the last one. But let us never forget, all our actions - big and small - can do so much to help people see Jesus,

now in the heavens, but also right here in our world, and in you and me. We just need a little help trying to find the road to the Heavenly Kingdom. So as we prepare to receive Him in Holy Communion, may we see Him in our lives, and help others to see Him through our actions, never forgetting the power we reveal to people the greatest of all truths: that they are loved by God, and precious to Him.

Venerable Margaret Bosco and Saint John Bosco, Pray for Us.