

Triduum: St. Gerard Majella

Introduction

We prepare to celebrate the feast of St Gerard Majella, one of the most popular and well-loved of all the Redemptorist saints. St Gerard Majella is known as the Mother's saint and particularly expectant mothers, the saint for Children (and unborn children in particular); the saint for childbirth and for motherhood; the saint for falsely accused people; the Saint for good confessions; and the saint for Religious brothers and above all the joyful saint.

Gerard Majella was born in Muro Lucano on 6 April 1726, the youngest of five children. His father Domenico Majella was a tailor who died when Gerard was 12 years leaving the family in poverty. His mother, Benedetta Galella, then sent him to her brother so that he could teach Gerard to sew and follow in his father's footsteps. However, the foreman was abusive. The boy kept silent, but his uncle soon found out and the man who taught him resigned from the job. After four years of apprenticeship, he took a job as a servant to work for the local Bishop of Lacedonia. Upon the bishop's death, Gerard returned to his trade, working first as a journeyman and then on his own account. He divided his earnings between his mother and the poor and in offerings for the souls in Purgatory.

He tried to join the Capuchin Order twice, but being an only son and having poor health he was rejected. During the season of lent in 1749 the Redemptorists arrived in Muro, the town of Gerard to give a mission. Gerard was twenty-three years old at the time. He left the house to become a Saint. On his insisting with the Redemptorists, however, he was reluctantly accepted by Father Paolo Cafaro, who thought him too weak to face the hardships of a life of austerity. He sent Gerard to the novitiate in Deliceto, to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Consolation; Gerard was happy and the date was May 17, 1749. Three years later, on the feast of the Most Holy Redeemer, 16th July 1752, he took his religious vows in Deliceto.

During his life, he was very close to the peasants and other outsiders who lived in the Neapolitan countryside. In his work with the Redemptorist community, he was variously a gardener, sacristan, tailor, porter, cook, carpenter, and clerk of works on the new buildings at Caposele.

At 27, Majella was controversially accused for having molested a young lady. Even though he was innocent St. Gerard accepted the blame silently. His superior St Alphonsus Ligouri questioned him and, due to his silence, banned him from receiving Holy Communion.

One miracle in particular explains how Majella became known as the special patron of mothers. A few months before his death, he visited the Pirofalo family and accidentally dropped his handkerchief. One of the Pirofalo girls spotted the handkerchief moments after he had left the house, and she ran after Gerard to return it. "Keep it," he said to her. "You may need it some day." Years later when the girl, now a married woman, was on the verge of dying in childbirth, she remembered the words of Gerard. She asked for the handkerchief to be brought to her. Almost immediately, the pain disappeared and she gave birth to a healthy child. That was no small feat in an era when only one out of three pregnancies resulted in a live birth, and word of the miracle spread quickly.

All through Gerard was motivated by a small note he had inscribed on the door of his cell: "Here the will of God is done, as God wills, and as long as God wills."

In August 1755, Gerard returned to Materdomini, the Marian sanctuary he loved so much. His tuberculosis worsened, and two months later, he died in Materdomini on 16th October 1755, worn out by his austerities, and by tuberculosis, on the very day and at the precise hour that he had foretold. His simple and short life (twenty-nine years, six of which were spent in religious life), interwoven with extraordinary deeds, is a clear expression of the love of God and of Gerard's docility to the action of the Holy Spirit. He was beatified by Leo XIII on 29th January 1893 and canonised by Pius X on 11th December 1904. A large number of Catholics throughout the world honour Gerard as the special patron of mothers, sick children and families. Materdomini is now a large shrine and the devotion to St. Gerard is extremely popular in S. Italy.

We will reflect during the next three days and finally on the feast day of St. Gerard on the 4 loves of St. Gerard, namely, His love for the Crucified Jesus, His love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, his love for the Our Blessed Mother and finally his love for the poor.

I invite you to make this triduum and to learn more about the life and spirituality of this most loved Redemptorist Saint and to share this link and invite your family and friends to pray with us Redemptorists as we glorify the Lord for the life of St. Gerard.