

- Reading through today's readings, one can easily think of St. Maria Goretti, the youthful virgin martyr whose feast day we celebrated this past Thursday, for she embodies the virtues of meekness and chastity that are extolled in our readings today.
- Maria Goretti grew up very poor in material goods, but very rich in faith. She, her widowed mother, and her siblings were a tightly-knit family who were devoutly Catholic, and throughout her short life of less than 12 years, Maria strove for virtue in everything she did.
- Her virtue was proved on July 5, 1902, when Maria was subjected to the unwanted advances of Alessandro Serenelli, a young man with whose family her family shared living quarters.
- When Alessandro set her upon, Maria told him that she would rather die than lose her purity. Taking her at her word, Alessandro brutally stabbed Maria 14 times and then fled.
- Alessandro's father eventually found Maria barely alive, and she was taken to a nearby hospital, where she was operated upon without any anesthesia. Unfortunately, Maria's wounds were too great, and she died the following day, July 6th, which is now her feast day.
- But before she died, she was able to receive the Last Rites and to express her forgiveness for her attacker. Maria said, "Yes, for the love of Jesus I forgive him...and I want him to be with me in paradise."
- Both our 1st reading and Gospel today extol the virtue of meekness, which, contrary to what many believe, is not weakness! This is a common misunderstanding in our society. To understand meekness, we need only to look at Christ, Who is meek and humble of heart.
- In Him we see that the essence of meekness is not to cause harm. Meekness is a form of selflessness which avoids harming others, whether by action or inaction. Moreover, meekness helps us to endure injury with patience and without resentment.
- Most importantly, meekness is submissiveness to God, and not to the world. It is a humble receptivity to God and His divine will.
- The motive for this submissiveness, this receptivity, is our confidence in God, and when we cultivate meekness in our hearts, that meekness works to help free us from pride, arrogance, and anger.
- Certainly, we see all of this in the way that St. Maria Goretti forgave Alessandro on her deathbed. There was no resentment or anger in her; just a humble forgiveness and a desire for his salvation.
- Rather than being angry about what happened, Maria simply accepted her suffering as part of God's providence. And in her confidence in God's mercy, she knew she would be saved.
- In our 2nd reading, St. Paul reminds us of the freedom we should have from the flesh, and in doing so, he is reminding us to practice the virtue of chastity, or purity.
- He tells us today: "Brothers and sisters, we are not debtors to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."
- In other words, we cannot let the desires of the flesh rule us. We must live spiritual lives: i.e., lives focused on the world to come, and not pursue the vain pleasures of the flesh that lead us into mortal sin – and can eventually result in our damnation.
- Yet, to live by the Spirit, we need the virtue of chastity, which restrains the body from acts of impurity, while also ridding the soul of lustful desires.

- Obviously, like all the virgin martyrs, St. Maria Goretti shows us so beautifully the value of chastity, as she willingly laid down her life rather than allow her chastity to be sullied.
- How stark a contrast we find not only between Maria Goretti and Alessandro, but between Maria Goretti and the prevailing notions of our world!
- In our world today, so many live their lives focused on sins of the flesh. We've made of the marital act, which has been designed by God to be an act of selfless self-giving, a vehicle for our own selfish pleasure.
- We've reduced the beautiful and sacred act of procreation, by which we share with God the power of creating new life, into a very selfish form of recreation.
- And what we see in people like Alessandro Serenelli, who forsake the virtue of chastity, is that their lust imprisons them and gives birth to a whole host of other vices, like impatience, anger, and wrath.
- This is why the virtue of chastity is so important. It liberates us from the flesh and earthly attachments, making it easier to live the life of the Spirit by which we conform our wills to God's will. Chastity liberates us from our passions so we can grow in the other virtues.
- Indeed, I would submit to you that it was because she so carefully cultivated the virtue of chastity that St. Maria Goretti had the liberty of soul to be meek, patient, and forgiving of Alessandro on her deathbed. Her chastity freed her to act in such saintly fashion.
- Truly, while lust shackles us to this world, chastity frees us to be ready for the next world.
- So, as we consider our readings today, and especially as we consider the life of St. Maria Goretti, it's good to ask ourselves just how meek we are, and how chaste we are.
- Do we regularly commit sins of the flesh; are we easily tempted by lust, anger, and impatience? Do we truly try to live by the Spirit, or are we debtors to the flesh?
- As for Alessandro Serenelli, after Maria's murder, he was quickly captured and was sentenced to 30 years in prison – a punishment that he went to without repentance.
- But 3 years into his imprisonment, Alessandro had a dream in which Maria Goretti appeared to him and gave him white lilies – the flower symbolizing purity and virginity.
- In fact, Maria gave Alessandro 14 lilies, one for each of her stab wounds. When he awoke, Alessandro was a changed man. He repented, confessed his sins, and when he was finally released from prison, he visited Maria's mother to beg her forgiveness.
- To her credit Maria's mother said, "If my daughter can forgive you, who am I to withhold forgiveness." Eventually, Alessandro became a Franciscan friar, living out his years in peace and tranquility – while being so very devoted to Maria's memory.
- In fact, Alessandro was present at St. Peter's Basilica in 1950 when Maria Goretti was canonized, along with Maria's mother and surviving siblings.
- Yet most importantly, the virtues that Alessandro had refused in his youth were eventually formed in him in his later years, such that he died in the odor of sanctity at the age of 87.
- In fact, there is even now a movement in the Church encouraging those who are addicted to sins of the flesh to turn to Alessandro Serenelli for his intercession. You see, God never gives up on any of us, even the most depraved, lustful, and wrathful among us.
- If we can just take on the gentle yoke of Christ and strive to live by the Spirit and not by the flesh, God can make saints of us.
- Through Alessandro's intercession and that of St. Maria Goretti, may we all be meek and chaste for the glory of God!