

Blessed Margaret Of Castello . . .

# A Good Patron For The Universal Pro-Life Apostolate

By RANDY ENGEL

(Author's note: This Jan. 22nd, when thousands of pro-life men and women — young and old, lay, and cleric — converged on Capitol Hill for the fifth annual March for Life program, I regretfully was not among them. I am therefore very grateful to the editor of *The Wanderer* for permitting me to use this opportunity to present to all my pro-life friends this gift: the story of Blessed Margaret of Castello. May our little heroine inspire us each day to fight the good fight on behalf of life and He who gave us Life, and may we in turn storm the gates of Heaven on behalf of the cause of canonization of Blessed Margaret. We should also pray that the Holy Father gave her to us as the universal patron saint of the unborn and the unwanted and handicapped child. God bless you all.)

Our story of little Margaret begins more than 600 years ago in medieval Italy on the eve of the Renaissance in the small papal state of Massa Trabaria, southeast of Florence, at the castle fortress of Metola hidden deep in the Apennine mountain forests.

The lord of the castle, Parisio, and his young wife Emila were of noble birth and wielded tremendous influence over the countryside among both the peasants and the nobility — militarily, politically, and socially. Parisio is best characterized as a man of his times, mighty in power, ruthless, and unscrupulous in his personal and public enterprises. His wife was more subdued in personality without any personal moral courage but nevertheless ambitious for the family name (which Margaret's biographers discreetly omitted for reasons which will soon be very apparent).

Into this family in the year 1287 a child was born. . . .

In anticipation of the birth of a robust male heir, Parisio had ordered the preparation of a great feast with the finest wines and dressed peacocks to mark the day of celebration. But his moment of triumph never came.

Their child — their sole heir — was born horribly deformed and destined all her life to be a crippled, hunchbacked dwarf and, to make matters worse, she was totally blind. Thus the night of her entrance into the world, word was sent out from the lord's castle that the child was not expected to live but a few hours or days and plans were made in haste under the cloak of darkness to have the child baptized in the nearby Cathedral of San Pietro d'Ico. The child was given the name of Margaret which, in medieval Italian, meant pearl . . . and indeed our little Margaret would prove to be a divine treasure.

Most of us can appreciate the initial shock of parents who are told that they have a child born with a major defect. But in most cases the child is taken into their heart and the father and mother shed their love on their new baby knowing that, in the words of the gifted poet Janet Gracie ". . . The enlightened accept their grief, Knowing any fool can love Perfection."

But Margaret's parents were weak in faith and strong in pride and they saw their newborn as a curse upon the family name — a disgrace to be hidden away until Death would make its claim.

And so, from the first moments of her birth, Margaret was put into the hands of castle servants sworn to secrecy under penalty of death and ordered kept out of sight in a far section of the castle.

As the young child gradually gained a sense of mobility, despite the fact of her lameness and blindness, she began to explore the passageways of the castle and make the acquaintance of a number of servants and members of families of the knights of the fortress. One thing was certain — despite her physical handicaps Margaret was extremely intelligent and very cheerful and friendly. Those who knew her grew to love her, including the castle chaplain Padre Cappellano who was charged with the young child's spiritual care. It was the good priest who first discovered the remarkable spiritual gifts God had bestowed on the young girl and who helped Margaret during her long years of imprisonment.

## A LOVE FOR THE CROSS

The first period of isolation from her home began at the time of her sixth birthday. Little Margaret slipped out of the sight of her nurse and her identity was almost discovered by a visitor to the small chapel in the main section of the

castle. Driven by fear of exposure, her father with the consent of her mother devised a plan of getting Margaret out of the fortress entirely. Parisio ordered a small room to be built adjacent to the small forest chapel of the Church of St. Mary of the Fortress of Metola from which Margaret could view Mass each day. Once she was placed inside, a mason was told to wall up the doorway leaving only a small window through which food and other essentials might be passed.

Upon hearing the news, Padre Cappellano — who had been away in Milan when Margaret was taken to the chapel — stormed Parisio's quarters and demanded the release of the small child, but to no avail. What should be done? The priest conferred with other occupants of the fortress to arrive at a solution, but in the end Parisio's decision was accepted. Convinced of her holiness, Padre Cappellano decided that the child who was favored by God would come to no harm, despite her primitive surroundings and isolation from the world. And so Margaret remained in her chapel prison for more than nine years, her sole visitors being the servants and her

confessor-priest. Here she developed her love for the cross of our Savior by bearing her cross day in and day out.

During her ninth year in prison however, a chain of events occurred that altered Margaret's life drastically.

The castle came under the attack of invading armies and, fearing that Margaret's identity would be discovered, she was taken to a new family residence in the nearby town of Marcatello and placed in an underground vault in total isolation. This proved to be a most unsatisfactory arrangement in her parents' eyes, realizing as they did that they could not keep their deformed daughter hidden forever.

One day however, Emilia chanced to hear some town gossip that many miracles were being wrought at the tomb of a holy Dominican friar in Citta di Castello. Upon conveying news of these miracles to her husband, a decision was made to make their tiny daughter a candidate for a miracle of the first class. Preparations were immediately made to travel over the mountains to the shrine in order that Margaret's multiple infirmities could be cured. In any case, Parisio was convinced that — one way or another — the family would be rid of its "curse" — cure or no cure!

Soon after their arrival in the strange city, Margaret, now 16 years of age, was taken to the shrine and told by her parents to pray for a cure. Always obedient to their wishes, though not desiring a cure for herself unless it was God's

will, little Margaret spent the day in prayer near the coffin of the holy priest. Later in the afternoon upon returning from their stroll around the city, her parents saw that Margaret was the same as they had left her. Quickly they rushed to the inn, packed their belongings and, as if Hell itself pursued them, rode out of the city gates never to lay eyes on their daughter again in this life.

### PEACE AND CONTENTMENT

In the meantime, the vesper bells began to peal and the church sexton began his rounds in order to close the shrine for the evening. After explaining that she was waiting for the return of her parents Margaret, went outside the church and spent the night curled up in the doorway, worrying that some harm had befallen her parents whom she still loved very much despite their harshness and lack of affection.

As it happened, the next day turned out to be a feast day in the town which meant that the entrance of the church began filling up with beggars quite early in the morning. Upon discovering Margaret and hearing her story, two of the beggars decided to find out the whereabouts of her parents by checking first at the inn and then with the guards at the city gates. As hardened as they were to life, even they could not believe that parents were capable of abandoning a helpless young girl in a strange city. Margaret however was capable of understanding the truth of the matter. Yet in spite of her distress and fear she explained that her parents had in fact clothed and fed her for many years and that it was about time she was out on her own in the world. That night she spent in the company of her new-found friends — the dregs of the city — in a nearby stable, confident that God would take care of her and show her His Will.

Clearly however, our Margaret would not turn out to be an ordinary beggar. While accepting alms from the townspeople, she would talk of God's love to anyone who might chance to listen to her. At first, her kindness, charity, and wisdom were looked upon as incredible because the young girl was blind and crippled. Gradually word spread that Margaret was indeed a holy soul and soon she received invitations from some poor families to stay in their household as long as funds would permit. As months passed, a strange thing took place. In every household that she was permitted to remain as a guest, Margaret brought peace and contentment to the residents.

Eventually word of Margaret's holiness reached the Sisters of the nearby Monastery of St. Margaret who invited Margaret to join their Order. Never had our young Margaret enjoyed such happiness!

Imagine — a new home — the vocation of the sisterhood — the chance to be closer to God. Unfortunately, her happiness proved to be rather short-lived.

As it happened, discipline had become very lax over the years at the convent. Every rule has its exception, which the Sisters easily turned to their advantage. All things in moderation — apparently even the love of God.

In accepting the habit, Margaret had pledged herself totally to God.

She not only kept the discipline of the Order but underwent additional penances and trials. All this sanctity began to annoy the other Sisters whose consciences were being pricked by Margaret's actions. Didn't Margaret understand that things had changed in the Order? Why did she insist on following the old ways? Margaret was certainly becoming a source of embarrassment to her more worldly Sisters who finally demanded that the prioress of the Order dismiss Margaret on the charge that Margaret was being disobedient and obstinate.

With great sorrow and a heavy heart Margaret was expelled and forced to return to the streets of Citta di Castello where she now came to understand the harshest of punishments — that of public opinion.

Naturally, as soon as Margaret was expelled, the Sisters at the convent felt the need to justify her dismissal. Word spread. Margaret was a fake after all! Mimicking their parents, the children would scream "hunchback" and other cruel words at the young girl as she would make her way with her cane through the narrow streets of the city. And how did Margaret reply? She remained silent and said nothing even to those close friends who guessed the source of the real problem at the convent. No explanation whatever except to say that the Sisters were kind to her and whatever troubles she had she had brought on herself. That was all.

## GOD'S PLAN FOR MARGARET REVEALED

Of all the events in Margaret's short life, no other impressed this writer as much as the following. From her earliest years, Margaret understood that all things work to the good in God's plan and indeed her expulsion did, in time, confirm her trust in God. It is not difficult to imagine the height of our little friend's anguish at being turned out of the convent and back into the world. Yet, we know now that such a tragedy had to take place in order that Margaret discover her true home and God's will for her. Never was her faith in Our Lord to be so sorely tested. Clearly, God did not want Margaret hidden away forever in the convent. He wanted her out in the world in order that those who saw her might be drawn to Him through her reflection of His Love.

During this difficult period when most of her friends and the patrons of the town had turned against her, Margaret was befriended by a small group of Dominican tertiaries. Known as the Mantellate after the fashion of their headress, these laywomen were generally widowed or aged and they spent their lives living at home rather than in a convent. Although members of the Order of Penance of St. Dominic now wear secular dress, in Margaret's time the laywomen wore the black and white robes as a habit.

Convinced of Margaret's holiness, the tertiaries managed to convince the local bishop that the young girl despite her age and handicaps ought to be admitted to the Order. By this time, the town's attitude towards Margaret began to turn in her favor as people noted that the difficulty in the convent was not Margaret, but the disgruntled Sisters themselves who were plagued by their own worldliness. Margaret's presence merely served as a mirror for their guilty consciences and lack of faith.

## THE RULE OF ST. DOMINIC

Thus it was, that Margaret who had never known a real home and a real family, was welcomed into one of the greatest Religious Orders of all times. Indeed God is not mocked!

Margaret was very attracted to the Order of St. Dominic with its strong emphasis on study, prayer, and penance. Throughout her entire life prayer and penance were never strangers to our little friend. Margaret was especially drawn to pray on the theme of Our Lord's passion and the Holy Family — the Holy Child, the Virgin Mary, and St. Joseph.

Early in the morning you could hear her tapping along the cobblestone street as she made her way to Mass or daily confession, followed by a visit to the needy of the town — including the sick, the infirm, and the imprisoned. No distance was too great for her to travel. Even the human cesspools of the local prisons attracted her attention. Seeing Margaret's own suffering, many hardened criminals again found God through Margaret. Wherever Margaret went — peace followed. She was a living witness to the fact that goodness attracts — a fact that we pro-lifers should always keep before us, especially when we encounter circumstances which appear to be spawned in Hell.

Towards the end of her life, God gave Margaret a very special gift which permitted her to see our Lord Incarnate on the altar between the time of the consecration and communion. Her deep theological insights brought a sense of wonder to those priests blessed to be her confessors.

By the time of her 33rd birthday, it became clear to all that Margaret was dying and soon would be delivered up to Our Lord. Her frail little body could no longer

contain her soul, which longed to be with God. On April 13th, 1320, the second Sunday after Easter, Margaret went to her heavenly abode.

## A VIOLENT BURIAL

As was the local custom, Margaret's tiny body was wrapped in a shroud by the friars and plans were made to take her body for burial in the cloister cemetery. The people of Citta di Castello however had a very different plan! As the friars were making their way with the funeral procession, their path was blocked by the townsfolk who demanded that Margaret be buried in the church, as was befitting a saint. "No!" replied the friars, "Only the Church could rule on such a matter." But the people would not budge from the road. "By the time the Church gets around to canonizing our little Margaret, she will be forgotten," they shouted. Amidst the pushing and shoving, a small child who had been mute and crippled since birth was brought to the coffin and to the wonder of the crowd, the child was instantly cured. The debate had ended. Margaret would be buried in the church and arrangements were made to make sure all the necessary documents and testimonies were collected and properly processed to insure that Margaret's cause would be heard in Rome as the first step toward her elevation as a saint of the Church.

In normal times, we can assume that the canonization procedure for Margaret would have gone along very smoothly. The mounting numbers of miraculous cures brought about through her intercession left little doubt about this matter.

However, times were not normal and shortly after Margaret's death the Citta di Castello became the center of political intrigue and violence. War soon ravaged the entire countryside and the Black Death waited at the city gates.

On a different level, while certain individual Dominicans pleaded Margaret's cause, the Order as a whole did not act aggressively in Rome on her behalf. Two and a half centuries passed. Our little Margaret was all but forgotten.

## AN AMAZING DISCOVERY

In the spring of 1558, seeing that Margaret's coffin was rotting away, the friars made preparations to obtain a new one and transfer her remains. To their amazement, they discovered that her body was perfectly preserved while her shroud had turned to dust. There before them lay Margaret's tiny body just as it had appeared 200 years ago! In 1601 the Dominican Order formalized her cause and on Oct. 19th, 1609 the Church recognized Margaret's sanctity giving the date of April 13th as her feast day.

Today the tiny body of Blessed Margaret lies uncorrupt under the high altar of the Church of San Domenico in Citta di Castello. Blind students from the local school next door to the church established in memory of Blessed Margaret are among the frequent visitors to her side.

In the 1950s the cause of Blessed Margaret was given a boost thanks to the scholarly efforts of a well-known Dominican historian, Fr. William Bonniwell. His book, *The Life of Margaret of Castello*, which has been out of print for a number of years, is currently undergoing a second printing, insuring that the life and works of our precious Margaret will be made better known.

#### BLESSED MARGARET AND THE PRO-LIFE APOSTOLATE

The first time I heard about Blessed Margaret was through Fr. Charles Fiore, O.P., of Chicago, a Dominican priest and pro-life leader, who in turn had heard about Margaret through the efforts of the Dominican Sisters at the Monastery in Summit, N.J.

The more I learned about Blessed Margaret the more I felt drawn to her especially, I think, because during this particular period of time I was completing work on a special report on the March of Dimes, and the policy of eugenic abortion as a means of disposing of deformed preborn children.

How little human nature changes throughout the ages! Margaret's parents could not bear to look upon their little child because she was physically deformed and so they put her away and in the end left her alone in a foreign city at the mercy of the elements. Today, with the advancement of death technology, parents who suspect a defective birth turn to amniocentesis and selective abortion. They are spared the sight of even looking upon a deformed or handicapped newborn but, like Margaret's parents, the conscience can never be wiped clean.

Many who looked upon Margaret thought that she would be better off dead. They pitied her blindness and her gross physical deformities. Like many today, they see the deformity of the body as the greatest tragedy rather than seeing the deformity of the soul through sin as the ultimate evil. When we consider the innocent child in the womb — no matter what the degree of the handicap —

and we look upon the person of the abortionist and his accomplices, who indeed are the deformed ones in the eyes of God? No one was ever deprived of Heaven because he was born blind or crippled. The only thing that separates us from God is sin. But the world, as we all know, sees things all together different.

Perhaps the greatest mystery of Blessed Margaret was that throughout her trials and

humiliations she never became embittered nor her spirit warped. This is easily explained, though very difficult to emulate. We know that Margaret profoundly believed that God knows what He is doing and that there is a reason for all that befalls us — bad as well as good — even though at the time we ourselves may lack an explanation. She was faithful to God's will for her. Since she could not see outwardly, her eyes turned inwardly on her soul and she was blessed with infused knowledge and the goodness of knowing our Lord. She was humble and bore all her crosses without complaint, strengthened by the Eucharist and confession and prayer. She was charitable in the midst of her own suffering.

God is our Father. He delights in all His children. This central theme kept our little Margaret on a balanced spiritual keel despite all the storms of adversity that she encountered during her short life.

Her life, in terms of seeking and doing God's will, has meaning for us all, especially those of us in the pro-life apostolate who are faced daily with the battle against life. Considering the ever-present threat of infighting among various pro-life groups, much can be gained by emulating Blessed Margaret's virtues. Getting our own spiritual house in order and fulfilling our obligations according to our unique vocation in life is the most important thing. Without this as our trademark, the pro-life apostolate will never succeed.

Blessed Margaret loved everyone with the grace of charity, especially those who were in need — the homeless, the aged, the very young, the imprisoned, the deformed, the helpless. Our net of pro-life charity must likewise extend to these very same persons. We simply cannot go wrong with Blessed Margaret as our model.

Blessed Margaret is certainly a saint for our times. To know her is to love her.

#### SPECIAL NOVENA SERVICES

To further the cause of canonization of Blessed Margaret, there will be a nationwide Novena beginning April 5th and ending on her feast day April 13th. For further information write *Loaves and Fishes*, Box 315, Export, Pa. 15632. Novena booklets for daily use may be obtained for \$.35 each from Mother Mary Albert, Prioress, Dominican Monastery, 543 Springfield Ave., Summit, N.J. 07401

Let us commend to Blessed Margaret all the unborn children whose lives are threatened by abortion; let us also commend to her the mothers of those unborn and those who carry out the destruction of new life in the womb. And let us pray that God will grant us a miracle or two to make the canonization of our little Margaret a reality on Earth as it must surely be already in Heaven.