

Memorial of St. Maria Goretti

July 6

Hos 8: 4-7, 11-13

Matt 9: 32-38

Joseph L. Narog, O.S.A.

Help Wanted

Imagine with me for a few moments an advertisement in a local newspaper, The *Citizen Times* or the *Mountaineer* perhaps. “Help wanted. Laborers needed. Job entails teaching, proclaiming, and healing. Will interact often with the troubled and abandoned. Difficult work at times, but wonderful benefits. No ethnic, gender, or age restrictions. Both youth and senior adults welcome. Job security guaranteed. In fact, no retirement, as this is a permanent, lifetime position. Only requirement is that one must possess compassion and the ability to give witness and to express forgiveness.”

Would we be willing to answer this ad? Isn't this exactly what Jesus calls us to do? In today's Gospel, he's looking for laborers to join him in his work in the world of gathering the harvest, of gathering people to God. Is there any denying that many persons are searching and yearning these days? Last week I was wandering through a bookstore and couldn't help but notice all the spiritual and self-help titles: *The Purpose-Driven Life*, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul*. (I must admit I was especially intrigued by that last one.) Yes, people are hungry. “The harvest is abundant.” But, as Jesus, adds, “the laborers are few.”

Too often I think that we've interpreted this simply to mean that we need more religious and priests. And, of course, this is something for which we pray. But Christ's “Help Wanted Ad” is meant for all of us, for everyone. There need be no unemployment when it comes to Christ's work force. Each one of us here - single, married, widowed - each one of us this morning, in Maggie Valley, has a job to do, if we choose to accept it. Do we realize how our lives can give witness to Christ? Do we forget how our words and actions can influence others? As with Jesus, are our hearts moved with pity, with compassion or are we turned inwards, making idols for ourselves, like those Hosea admonishes in the First Reading?

The saint we remember today, Maria Goretti, challenges us to answer Christ's ad. Though she was quite young and lived a rather simple, ordinary life, Maria understood that she was a laborer with Christ. Her life, and untimely death, would give witness to the Gospel, even beyond her own imagining, and draw untold numbers closer to God, even her assailant.

I'd like to share a bit of her story. Maria was an Italian girl, from a poor farm family, who lived at the turn of the 20th century. Her father died when she was just 10, leaving Maria to help her mother with running the house and raising the family. She was described as “happy, openhearted,” compassionate, “but with a sense and seriousness beyond her years.” One day, when Maria was working alone in the house, an 18 year old boy, named Alessandro, who worked in the fields with her family and who had been threatening her, broke in and tried to rape her. She resisted, saying, “God does not wish this! It is a sin.” Enraged, Alessandro stabbed her 14 times and fled. Maria died the next day – the 6th of July, 1902 – but not before she forgave the boy, “for the love of Jesus,” she said, hoping that Alessandro would

recognize the evil he had done. Not quite 12 years old and just 5 weeks after her First Holy Communion, Maria was a martyr, a victim of violence and abuse. Unfortunately, this is a tragic problem that continues, as we know, right here in our own county.

Fast forward to 1950 , St. Peter's Square, Rome, and the largest crowd to date ever assembled for a canonization. As Maria Goretti was officially declared a saint, her mother, siblings, and Alessandro looked on. A unique gathering indeed! You see, while still in prison, Maria's assailant said that she appeared to him in a dream, offering him a bouquet of lilies. Alessandro experienced conversion, reformed his life, begging forgiveness of Maria's mother, which she granted. He ultimately joined the Franciscan Third Order and lived until 1970.

St. Maria Goretti, her mother, and, eventually, Alessandro- all laborers for Christ. As we partake of this Eucharist, may we be nourished to join them in being sent out for the harvest- to help nourish others, to stand up against violence & abuse. Help wanted. Consider today how we might answer that ad.