

A Life's Offering for Unity : Blessed Maria Gabriella

An Address by the Revd Robert Farmer, 2002

Christian Unity is not currently as fashionable as it was. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s everyone was into Unity, but there has been a great cooling of desire and interest. Cardinal Kasper (Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the Unity of Christians) has called this 1990s an 'ecumenical winter' and most Christian churches are simply trying to hold themselves together.

But for a peasant girl born in Sardinia ninety years ago, Christian Unity would have meant even less than it does to people now. In her experience, there was just one Church: the Roman Catholic Church. Maria Sagheddu came from a family of shepherds and is remembered as a child of great fidelity, devotion to duty and strength of character. As a teenager, she showed little interest in organised religion beyond what was expected of her in the normal course of events as a Catholic girl in a Catholic country. At the age of eighteen, however, a personal encounter with God and a new desire to share his life transformed her. She gave increasing time and energy to prayer, worship and the service of the poor. By the age of 21, she had entered the strictly enclosed Trappist Cistercian convent at Grottaferrata near Rome. That might have been the end of the story, as least as far as a wider public was concerned. But Maria stood out from the crowd even then. Her desire to serve God and to do his will was overpowering in its intensity; but in what specific way was this to be channelled?

When the community was contacted by the French priest, Paul Couturier, who was seeking their prayers for the unity of the Church and especially for the Church of England, Maria's aim and purpose became clear: she was to pray for Unity. Indeed, she went further and offered here very life to God to serve the cause of Reunion. At almost the same time as this offering was made, Maria fell ill with tuberculosis and before long it became clear that the offering which she had made would be consummated sooner, rather than later. During her illness, Maria was bed-ridden and unable to share in the community's liturgical worship; but she still found ways in which to pray and to praise. After her death, a small Bible was found by her bed and it was noted that the pages containing Jesus' own prayer for Unity from St John's Gospel were worn and stained by constant use. Here was the food for the prayer which was offered during those long months of sickness. Her fellow nuns also recognised other signs that God had accepted and blessed her offering. Maria died on 23 April 1939, the Sunday of the Good Shepherd and the feast of the Patron Saint of England, for whose separated Christian brothers and sisters she had prayer. And the gospel for that day's Mass read, 'I have other sheep as well that are not of this fold. I must lead these also so that there will be but One Shepherd and One Flock.'

Some months earlier, the Anglican Benedictine monastery at Nashdom (now Elmore) had learned of her offering for Christian Unity through Father Couturier. One of the monks, Dom Benedict Ley, began to correspond with the Abbess of Grottaferrata. A spiritual pact was formed between the two communities at a time when the law of the Church forbade Roman Catholics even to say the *Our Father* in common with other Christians. That pact is still in place to this day, working and praying for Unity. Dom Benedict, as the originator of these contacts and plans, did all he could to strengthen the praying link between the two communities, offering to say the Divine Office on Sister Maria's behalf when she became too ill to say it herself. When he was sent a photograph of Sister Maria on her death-bed, he was deeply impressed by the peace and resignation of her appearance. He wrote in reply,

The photograph taken of Sister Maria Gabriella after the consummation of her sacrifice will teach me to accept whatever sacrifice the Lord may ask of me. In this way she will help me to enter in that unspeakable Unity that is the term of our Christian vocation, the Unity of the Blessed Trinity.

The community now lives at Vitorchiano, near Viterbo, north of Rome, and honours her remains in its Chapel of Unity. On 25 January 1983, Pope John Paul II beatified her, and requested that she should be known for ever as Blessed Maria Gabriella of Unity.

O God, eternal Shepherd,
who inspired Blessed Maria Gabriella, virgin,
to offer her life for the Unity of Christians,

Grant that, through her intercession
the day may be hastened,
in which all believers in Christ,
gathered around the table of your Word and of your Bread,
may praise you with one heart and one voice.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.