Doing Nothing, Achieving All: Blessed Maria Gabriella of Unity (1) Ecumenism at Grottaferrata

Sr Maria Gabriella knew she would be dead within a year's time.

With her abbess's permission she left her room in the infirmary and went to the novitiate. There, she gathered and destroyed all her writings. *Sparisco io, sparisca tutto*, she said, "If I'm going, it all goes."

Twenty-four years old, Maria Gabriella wanted to die as she had lived, silent and unnoticed. People who knew her in her childhood would remember nothing exceptional about Maria Gabriella Sagheddu. Her sisters in the monastery would recall nothing particularly outstanding. This was her desire: to be a saint without attracting attention.

Sr Maria Gabriella died in the spring of 1939. She had been in the monastery of Grottaferrata barely three years. By 1940, her first biography was published. Soon several editions in several languages appeared. Other biographies followed and Maria Gabriella's notoriety spread.

Sr Maria Gabriella's tomb in the crypt of her undistinguished Trappistine monastery in the Colli Albani outside Rome became the destination of a stream of pilgrims and devotees from Europe, Great Britain and North America. In 1958 the process for the canonization of Maria Gabriella Sagheddu was opened. Finally, in 1995, people reading Pope John Paul II's Encyclical Letter on the commitment to ecumenism, *Ut unum sint*, found Maria Gabriella Sagheddu, native of Dorgali, Sardegna, and nun of Grottaferrata, offered to them as the model for carrying out every Christian's duty to pray for Christian unity.

Sr Maria Gabriella did not succeed in disappearing.

Nor did she entirely destroy all her "writings." There remained some reading notes and a collection of forty letters, mostly to her mother and to her abbess.

The letters taken together are a story of a soul, honest and convincing, like the bread of Maria Gabriella's native Dorgali. Given her age and provenience, they are also puzzling. The reader is struck as a relative in Dorgali was: her letters seem to be written by someone else. "They are on a level superior to Maria Gabriella's ability, who had no more than a sixth grade education."

It is impossible to find in these documents anything that would explain her efforts to "destroy her writings." A constant of Maria Gabriella Sagheddu's personality, from childhood to deathbed, was her limpid honesty. The content of her letters is discreet, the style parsimonious, yet there is never a doubt that all the truth is there, as Maria Gabriella wished it to be told. The letters provide no way of knowing what she was trying to keep hidden.

And this is precisely the clue to the matter.

For Sr Maria Gabriella did have a secret. It was the one thing she never wrote home about. Her secret was a decision she had made. Once she made her decision with the approval of her superiors, she never mentioned it again, not once, not even to them. Besides Maria Gabriella's two or three superiors, only her mother Caterina Sagheddu and Dom Benedict Ley of the Anglican Benedictine Abbey of Nashdom would be privy to her secret before her death.

The best guess, then, as to what Maria Gabriella wished to destroy with her "writings" was this unique decision, her only secret. As it happened, she was right. For her secret, made public after her death, resulted in the very thing she had tried to preclude, attention

drawn to herself. Maria Gabriella, in January,1938, had decided to offer her life for the cause of Christian Unity. Her secret was the soul of her life, the key to her death, the form of her sanctity. It proved, too, to forge the destiny of her monastic community.

Six month after her offering, Maria Gabriella's abbess, Madre Pia Gullini, wrote to Sr Maria Gabriella's mother. Madre Pia told Caterina Sagheddu of her daughter's offering. She went on to say that her daughter was gravely ill with tuberculosis. Maria Gabriella died on April 23, 1939. On April 26, Madre Pia again wrote to Caterina. It was a long letter, woman to woman -- better, mother to mother.

In minute detail Madre Pia described to Mamma Caterina her daughter's final hours: "On Thursday the 20th...After dinner of that Saturday...Around 2:00 A.M....At 4:00 P.M... At 5:30 with the greatest tranquillity she stopped breathing. She lowered her eyelids just like she used to when she couldn't speak to indicate 'Yes.' She was already with her Lord. She loved him so much that she offered him the sacrifice of her young life for the union of the separated Churches. It was the Sunday of the Good Shepherd, and the Gospel spoke of the 'other sheep that are not of the fold and who must be gathered in." The next morning, Madre Pia spoke to the assembled nuns of Grottaferrata. "Sr Maria Gabriella was a real Trappistine...She forgot herself completely in her quest for the glory of God...She passed smilingly among us without ever attracting attention to herself, without ever causing anyone to complain about her...except for the anguish they felt when they learned she was ill and discovered the hidden treasure they possessed."

Sr Maria Gabriella was Madre Pia's *figliola*, her little daughter. Maria Gabriella thought of herself as a "pygmy in the way of the spirit;" to Pia, she was "wisdom's own wisdom." Later, Madre Pia would say that Sr Maria Gabriella was a "pacifying light." But if Maria Gabriella Sagheddu was light, Pia Gullini was the lens focusing it, and Grottaferrata the textured surface upon which it fell to be seen.

Maria Elena Gullini was, by her own account, a woman of strong and fiery temperament who had let herself fall in love with the incarnate God. She entered the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance at Laval, France, in 1916, at the age of twenty-one. She was given the name Pia after Pope Pius X from whom she had received her First Communion. After ten years of Trappist life at Laval, Sr Pia was sent to the monastery at Grottaferrata in her native Italy.

"Grotta," as it was called, was a fervent, culturally backward, materially poor Trappistine community. When Pia arrived at Grotta she brought with her from Laval a monastic culture and spiritual vigor grounded in liturgy and doctrine. Elected abbess in 1931, four years before Maria Gabriella entered, Madre Pia opened to her daughters the ascetic doctrines of J. P. de Caussade, Francis de Sales, Therese of Lisieux and Dom Vital Lehodey.

Above all, Madre Pia thrust this willing but unsuspecting community into an apostolate practically unheard of for Italian women religious of the time, let alone Trappistines of any nationality: the newly opened "ecumenical movement."

Madre Pia had been introduced in the mid-30's to the hopes and challenges of ecumenism by a French laywoman she had befriended while still at Laval. By 1936 she was in regular contact with Abbe Paul Courturier, the great promoter of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Through Abbe Couturier Pia began an active exchange of letters with the Anglican Benedictine Dom Benedict Ley. Madre Pia's idea for the 1940 biography of Maria Gabriella was a farsighted tactic in the service of Christian Unity. In the 1950's Pia would remark, "I am in close contact with the Brothers of Taize whose young founder together with his mother and Brother Max came to Grotta in 1950. They

all descended to the tomb of Sr M. Gabriella." The friendship between Madre Pia and Madame Schutz lasted until the latter's death. In 1983, Br Roger would be in the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls when Pope John Paul II beatified Sr. Maria Gabriella, Patroness of Unity.

In 1947, the Anglican Benedictine Dom Benedict Ley paid his first visit to Grottaferrata. Lodged in the chaplain's quarters at Grotta, Dom Benedict took every opportunity to spend time in prayer at the tomb of Sr Maria Gabriella. With Grotta as home base, he met with Monsignor Montini of the Vatican Secretariat of State to discuss Anglican-Catholic relations in England. Within the next decade Dom Benedict would visit Grotta two more times.

As a result of Dom Benedict's reports some fifty Anglicans, Orthodox, and Protestants from England visited Grotta from 1948 to 1951 alone. All were deeply impressed by the warm and sisterly welcome they received from Madre Pia and the other nuns. "I cannot tell you how good the Trappistines of Grottaferrata have been to me," reported one Anglican visitor in 1949. "They gave a magnificent dinner in honor of my mission, a true *agape*, and even gave me presents!"

In their news bulletin for 1950 the nuns of Grotta announced to the Cistercian Order, "Visitors to Grotta have been almost continuous during this Holy Year, coming from the many parts of Italy as well as from outside. Among our pilgrim friends are a good number of separated brethren...In September an important international meeting of specialists in the area of Christian Unity was held at the Greek Catholic Abbey of St Nilus in Grottaferrata. Given our proximity to St. Nilus and the interest the topic has for us, we were able closely to follow the three days of conferences."

Madre Pia Gullini's ardor for Christian Unity would find its match in Sr Maria Gabriella Sagheddu's secret appropriation of the prayer of Jesus, "that all may be one." If for Pia ecumenism was a sign of the times eliciting her prophetic ecclesial response, for Maria Gabriella it was the longing of her Bridegroom. "Jesus, I love you! I thank you! In these few words all is said;...may you be glorified in me."

The notoriety that accrued to the Trappistines of Grottaferrata from their abbess's zeal for ecumenism and the overwhelming success of the 1940 biography of Maria Gabriella did not go unnoticed by the authorities of the Cistercian Order. They watched it with no small degree of incomprehension. The outcome for Pia was the swift, premature abandonment of her abbatial charge in 1951, and immediate exile to Switzerland.

By that time, Grotta had been immersed in ecumenism for over a decade. To say the community of Trappistines was ahead of its time is to say too little.

On the one hand, this group of truly humble, poor, hardworking nuns was the perfect fulfillment of the wish Pius XI made before the consistory of March 24, 1924. The Pontiff said, "We will be obliged to all Catholics who strive, under the impulse of divine grace, to facilitate admittance to the true faith for their separated brothers, whoever these may be, by dispelling their prejudices, keeping in view unadulterated Catholic teaching, and especially making evident in themselves the features of disciples of Christ, for there is love."

On the other hand, an historian of the times says that in 1930's Italy, "the dispute between Catholics and Protestants was...mean-spirited to the point of lacking any civility. Catholics and Protestants regarded each other with hostility, as adversaries, full of suspicion and anger..."

While some Church authorities seemed bent on defending the bases of disunion, Madre Pia and the community of Grotta were among the most fervent and active supporters in Italy of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. If Rome understood reunion in terms returning to the fold by the renunciation of errors, Madre Pia followed the line of Paul Courturier: to pray that the will of Jesus be done by the means he chooses. "It is from [the] stance of friendship," she said, "that Catholics and Protestants need to start in order to find -- like brothers -- the common ground...It is love that matters, love that is union, reciprocity." There is little doubt that the young sarda, Sr Maria Gabriella Sagheddu, was the hidden and silent center of Madre Pia's bold and courageous service to Grotta and to the Church. "I go to see her every evening," Pia confided before Maria Gabriella died, "and I confess to you that for me this is a joy, a strength, true spiritual refreshment." In 1948, Madre Pia wrote a letter to a woman doing research for a new biography of Maria Gabriella. "Years of experience with this question of 'Reunion'...have led me to understand that the success of your book will rest on the fact that there is nothing whatsoever about her life that anyone could use as a fulcrum for controversy... Those who are ignorant of the problem will come to understand it from the example of Sr. Maria Gabriella. Those who are experts will find in her a repose they had never known before, a pacifying light, a new horizon disposing them to love rather than debate."

Doing Nothing, Achieving All: Blessed Maria Gabriella of Unity (2) The Act of Faith

On Sunday, January 16, 1938, the fifty nuns of the Trappistine community of Grottaferrata outside Rome were gathered in the chapter room of the monastery to listen to the teaching of their abbess, Mother Pia Gullini. Among them was twenty-three year old Sr Maria Gabriella Sagheddu. This particular Sunday Mother Pia read aloud and commented upon the tract by Abbe Paul Couturier announcing the 1938 "Unity Week," today known as the "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity."

The "Unity Week" was the annual crusade of prayer from the 18th to the 25th of January for the healing of divisions and the reunion of the Church. In 1932, the French priest Paul Couturier began actively to promote Unity Week, lending to it his idea of "spiritual ecumenism." He understood that external material unity had to be preceded by an essential inner unity expressed by a great number of souls praying and offering themselves in union with the offering of Jesus. He liked to envision an "invisible monastery," a community of prayer and sacrifice that was not limited by denomination or state in life. In 1936 Abbe Paul published his first tract.

The following year, 1937, Abbe Couturier sent out more than 1500 copies of his tract. For the first time, at the request of Madre Pia, a copy of Abbe Paul's tract arrived at Grottaferrata and was read by her in Chapter to the nuns.

Now, on January 16, 1938, Mother Pia for the second time read Abbe Paul's annual tract to her Trappistine sisters.

Prayer will remain the living and luminous center [of the work for Christian unity]...Openly and simultaneously participated in by all throughout the fractured Church during these days of the 18th to the 25th of January, prayer will lead the Church along the way of Unity.

The suffering of disunity alone can open the hearts of all Christians and make them listen to the sorrow hidden in the prayer of Christ to his Father at the Last Supper...'may they be one in us...that the world may believe.'

The tract continued. "May there be a harvest of many offerings to the Spirit from obscure and hidden lives," Mother Pia read, "to collaborate in his great work of reunion of Christians."

The Trappistines of Grottaferrata listened as Abbe Couturier went on to give three examples of Christians who recently had offered their lives for the cause of Christian unity. Among them he named -- a revelation to many of the nuns -- Grottaferrata's own Madre dell' Immaculata Scalvini. Seventy-eight years old, Madre dell' Immaculata had the previous January offered her life for the cause of Christian unity in response to Abbe Paul's tract read in Chapter. She died a month later.

Listening to these appeals to spiritual ecumenism, Sr Maria Gabriella could not help being moved. She had once said to her novice director, "I would not know how to keep account of my interior life. I simply look for occasions to make sacrifices...I look them in the face and act."

It is no surprise, then, that soon after hearing Abbe Couturier's 1938 tract, Sr Maria Gabriella Sagheddu knocked at the Madre Pia's door and entered the abbess's office. "Let me offer my life," Mother Pia recalled her asking. "What is it worth anyway? I am doing nothing. I have never done anything. You yourself said that one might make this offering with permission." After prudent discernment, permission was granted the young Trappistine to "offer her life" for the cause of Christian Unity.

It is difficult to write about Maria Gabriella Sagheddu.

It is difficult because her life is not a matter of all those dramatic patterns that most of us in the western world think of as "real life," events, talents and accomplishments, successes and failures. Nor is it a matter of "relationships," at least not the kinds of relationships that Western Europeans and North Americans entering the third millennium are exposed to in sitcoms, entertainment weeklies and radio talk shows.

Rather, Maria Gabriella's life, at least after her conversion at eighteen, was quintessentially spiritual. "My only desire," she once said, "is to...make myself a saint." This was self love, but not selfishness and egoism. She wanted to be a saint, not for her sake but for God's and her neighbors'. Someone said of her, "she was not spoiled," and hardly more need be said. As a young adult and as a nun her life was a shot arrow splitting the air, not so much propelled as drawn with ever increasing velocity by and to the target.

Maria Gabriella Sagheddu entered the Trappistines of Grottaferrata on Monday, 30 September, 1935. She was twenty-one. One of her neighbors in Dorgali said later, "When I heard Maria Sagheddu was planning on becoming a nun I couldn't believe it...She didn't seem to me to be the type called to the convent." Many others would have agreed.

Two contradictory sets of traits marked Maria Gabriella Sagheddu as a child. On the one hand, she was honest, bright, and optimistic. Although she had to quit school at twelve years of age, she was an excellent student. She loved to read, especially novels, and was always ready to help other students with their work. Duty, loyalty, and obedience were primary values for the young Maria Gabriella. Physically strong and healthy, she did not hesitate to bear the heavier parts of domestic or field work.

But at the same time, young Maria Gabriella was mischievous, impatient, and demanding. She always wanted to be right, to have the last word. She expected others to be as honest and forthright as she herself. "Go to hell" and "Damn" [Va alla malora! Accidenti!] she would say when people didn't live up to her expectations. If something

didn't go her way, she stamped her feet in anger and frustration. Both these sets of traits, increasingly transformed, set in order, and put at the service of a single-minded goal, would color Maria Gabriella's character for the rest of her life.

In her childhood and early adolescence, Maria's religious practice was minimal. This did not pass unnoticed in the traditional Catholic culture of Dorgali largely centered on the parish and religious devotions. Baptized a week after her birth, Maria made her first communion at the age of ten but after that, except for the Sunday obligation, neglected the sacraments and attendance at church services. "She wasn't much given to church," people remembered. She preferred reading novels and playing cards and board games. If her mother urged her to go to evening benediction, Maria might respond, "Go yourself!" or, "There's no obligation. Leave me alone," and remain intent on her book or her game.

But at the age of eighteen, a quiet revolution took place in the soul of Maria Gabriella. She never talked about it. She did not have to. The revolution bore the fruits of conversion and they spoke for her. She joined Catholic Action and began giving religious instruction to children. She regularly visited the sick, taking particular interest in a young woman with an illegitimate son. She established a friendship with a girl who had a poor reputation and helped her overcome her destructive behavior. She never refused people asking for a handout, and would often rise early in the morning to help neighbors with the bread making.

It was recalled that "she began to meditate and to make the monthly adoration...She went to confession almost every week and received daily communion...I often saw her kneeling in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. What struck me was her attitude of deep recollection. There was nothing sugary about it; rather, there was a great austerity."

Not long after her conversion, Maria Gabriella looked into a religious vocation. She had seen other young women leave Dorgali to enter Grottaferrata. Now she spoke to her pastor, Don Basilio Meloni, about the possibility for herself. "You want to go to Grottaferrata, then?", Don Meloni asked her. "Send me where you will," Maria replied. "Then to Grottaferrata you will go," decided Don Meloni.

In July of 1938, seven month's after Sr Maria Gabriella's oblation, Mother Pia wrote a long letter to the Anglican Benedictine Dom Benedict Ley. Dom Benedict, novice master of Nashdom Abbey, England, had for some time already been an "ecumenical" friend of Mother Pia's. Mother Pia told Dom Benedict,

As I did last year, I had read in chapter the invitation of our friend Don Couturier. A young professed nun, just twenty-four years old, asked to make the same offering as Madre dell Immacolata. I gave her permission...Now Sister is in the infirmary with tuberculosis, she who was one of the strongest in the community with absolutely no family history of this illness...

It is Sr Maria Gabriella, a beautiful daughter...gifted with uncommon intelligence. Only now that the Lord is calling do I realize what a treasure she is.

A month earlier, Mother Pia had written to Sr Maria Gabriella's mother Caterina Sagheddu, informing her of her daughter's grave condition. "For me, it is a great sorrow. But knowing that Sr Maria Gabriella offered herself to the Lord for one of the most noble causes, the hasty union of the dissident Churches, I realize that the Lord has accepted the offering. Your daughter told me this: 'From that day when I offered myself, I have not once been well." Over a period of forty days in a Roman sanitarium, Sr Maria Gabriella underwent humiliating treatment that only aggravated her tubercular condition. She returned to Grottaferrata in May, 1938. On April 23, 1939, just after her twenty-fifth birthday, Sr Maria Gabriella died in the arms of Madre Pia in the monastery infirmary. In her final agony Mother Pia asked Maria Gabriella, "You offer it all for Unity, don't you?" The dying nun replied, simply, "Yes."

Madre Pia wrote to Maria Gabriella's mother Caterina informing her of her daughter's death. She recalled that April 23 was Good Shepherd Sunday that year. "The gospel spoke of the other sheep that are not of this fold that I must bring also." Mother Pia reminded Caterina Sagheddu that her daughter "loved her Lord so much as to offer him the sacrifice of her young life for the union of the separated Churches."

When Anglican Benedictine Dom Benedict Ley got word of Maria Gabriella's death, he pointed out that April 23 was also the Feast of St George, Patron of England. "She will take our...efforts...for Unity under her special protection," he said. Dom Benedict was kind enough to send condolences to Caterina Sagheddu. "I hope you will allow me to tell you, he wrote, that the sacrifice of your daughter compels me to a greater fidelity to Christ and to a more intimate prayer for the reunion of all Christians under the Pope."

Except for such brief remarks as those quoted above to her abbess, Sr Maria Gabriella made no explicit reference to her "offering" for unity. Nevertheless, the collection of forty letters written by Maria Gabriella that survive reveals that her offering was the core of her identity as a Christian and as a Cistercian nun. Her offering of her life for unity gave specific form to her spirituality. It became the place for her encounter with God.

Sr Maria Gabriella's letters are like the best of letters, spontaneous, intimate, at times random and always self-revealing and engaging. In them Maria Gabriella uses three sets of images, or three languages, to write about her offering. The language of "holy abandonment" is reminiscent of J. P. de Caussade and Therese of Lisieux. Spousal or nuptial imagery recalls Bernard of Clairvaux, Jan van Ruysbroeck, and John of the Cross. And the semantic fields of "love," "joy," "glory," "consecration," and "fullness" are clear echoes of the last discourse of Jesus, his prayer for unity, in the Gospel of John, chapters 13 through 17, chapters that Maria Gabriella read with particular intensity during her final illness. She can so easily blend these traditional languages that it is evident she has made each of them her own. In the examples that follow, the italic print isolates the language of abandonment, the nuptial imagery, and the echoes of John's Gospel.

In a letter from July of 1938 to her former spiritual director in Dorgali, Maria Gabriella assures him,

I will be happy and my happiness is truly great. What joy to be able to suffer something for the love of Jesus and for souls. I have made a great act of abandonment into the hands of the Lord, and my heart and my soul are now immersed in a profound peace, a great joy. When I think of the blessed day [when] I will go above to embrace the Celestial Spouse, then my joy and my happiness surpass anything on earth!

In April of 1938 Sr Maria Gabriella wrote her mother from the sanitarium. "Pray for me, that I will always glorify the Lord in doing his divine will in whatever form it takes...I have offered myself entirely to my Jesus and do not take back my word."

A few weeks later, after a sputum analysis had proven positive, she wrote to Madre Pia,

The first day I suffered a great deal; then, yesterday afternoon I felt a great force take root in my heart and I resigned myself fully to the will of God, accepting to suffer for his glory...I assure you that my sacrifice is total, because from dawn to night I do nothing but renounce my will, my hopes, my desires and everything that is in me, whether holy or defective, in everything and for everything. At first there was no way to bend my heart; now I truly understand that the glory of God and being a victim does not consist in doing great things but in the total sacrifice of one's own "I."

Again, writing to her mother,

The people of the world say we are selfish, closing ourselves up in a convent and thinking only of ourselves. That's not true. We live a life of continual sacrifice to the point of immolation for the salvation of souls...In the monastery, every act, even the most repugnant, even doing nothing at all, when it is commanded by obedience, brings with it great merit.

In another letter to Don Meloni Sr Maria Gabriella confided,

Living in abandonment, I have not had to regret the past even once; what's more, I am even certain about what the future will be and sure that Jesus will do what is for his greater glory and what is best for my sanctification...Jesus has chosen me as a privileged one of his love, giving me suffering to make me more like him, and for that I am perfectly happy and I thank him. I think I will never arrive at understanding enough the love Jesus shows me in offering me this cross.

It was the Church's ascetical tradition that gave Sr Maria Gabriella Sagheddu a language for expressing her deepest hopes and most intimate experiences of God. But her hopes and experiences themselves cannot be reduced to repetitions of classical formulas, nor dismissed as merely derived. If Maria Gabriella's response of faith is to be accurately located in the history of Christian spirituality, it would have to be in a Benedictine monasticism grounded in lectio divina and the liturgy.

Pope John Paul II affirmed this in his homily on the occasion of the beatification of Maria Gabriella, January 25, 1983. She had the capacity, the Pope said, to receive and put into practice with 'the intelligence of love' St Benedict's 'school of the Lord's service'..."It was precisely in her fidelity to listening that the young Maria Sagheddu succeeded in realizing that 'conversion of heart' that St Benedict asks of his children; conversion of heart that is the true and primary source of unity."

Maria Gabriella's life of conversion and the gift of herself to God in response to God's inviting love are original examples of biblical faith. They are as original and as uniquely her own as the fiat of Mary of Nazareth, as Jesus' "I have come...to give my life as a ransom for all," and as St Paul's "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." Maria Gabriella made this act of faith while still in Dorgali: "Just let God call me, and I am ready." On the day of her monastic profession she renewed it: "In the simplicity of my heart, O Lord, I gladly offer you everything. You have been pleased to call me to yourself and...I have given everything that was in my power to give." Finally, some months before her death Maria Gabriella confessed,

I have abandoned myself totally into the hands of the Lord...I feel I love my Spouse with all my heart, but I want to love him even more. I want to love him for those who do not love him, for those who despise him, for those who offend him: in short, my desire is nothing but to love.

"Blessed Maria Gabriella Sagheddu," said the John Paul II in his beatification homily, "became a sign of the times and a model of that 'Spiritual Ecumenism' of which the Second Vatican Council reminded us. She encourages us to look with optimism -over and above the inevitable difficulties that are ours as human beings -- to the marvelous prospects of ecclesial unity, whose progressive verification is linked with the ever deeper desire to be converted to Christ, in order to make active and effective his yearning: Ut omnes unum sint!"