

BLESSED MARIA GABRIELLA SAGHEDDU:
A Life for Unity and her Ecumenical Heritage

1- “In the simplicity of my heart I gladly offer you everything, O Lord.”

Maria Sagheddu was born in Dorgali, Sardinia on March 17, 1914. She bore personally the traits characteristic of her land: she was obstinate, impetuous, rebellious and strong willed. To those who after her death sought testimony on her life, her family and acquaintances described her as an indomitable child little inclined towards religious practices.

But one perceived in Maria a fundamental holiness: at school she displayed an avidity for learning and knowledge. Intelligent, generous and cheerful, she was absolutely free of malice. At the age of seven Maria had a dream where she saw herself in the Church in Dorgali before the picture of the Holy Family, which came to life. Jesus stretched out his arms to her, while Mary watched and smiled. Maria’s reaction was to flee the church crying, “No! I am a sinner.”¹

This realism towards herself, clear and without half-measures, marked an adherence to the truth that would become a protecting shield. From her youth to her death, Maria’s striking quality was an extraneousness to falsehood in all its aspects, including ambiguity, hypocrisy, and self-justification.

In 1932 came the death of her sixteen year old younger sister Giovanna Antonia, to whom she was deeply attached. From biographical information we know that a change occurred in the life of Maria, that this was a turning point.

Towards the age of eighteen she changed decisively and stood out for her spirit of prayer. As her mother testified, she became “humble and docile,” two very significant words about the daughter whom she previously defined as “sourish.” Then she enrolled in Catholic Action. She participated in meetings, taught as a catechist, and prepared children for First Communion. She lingered in church to the point that her mother, who had earlier scolded her for seldom going to church, later had to reprimand her for staying too long.

She practiced charity towards the sick and the poor, and stooped over in preference for people whose lives were difficult or marked by sin, like that of her ill-mannered companion in whom she continued to take interest even after entering the monastery. The lack of pride that characterized her youthful simplicity matured into compassion and generosity.

Between her conversion and the request to her confessor to give her life to God in a monastery, about two years passed. The decision to enter was Maria’s. But the way, the time, and the place she entrusted to the discernment of Fr. Basilio Meloni, as he testified, “She responded quickly and generously to the vocation, and only for supernatural motives, to be all for God, forever. She was indifferent regarding the choice of the order. Knowing the Trappists, I proposed that Order, and she accepted gladly.”

¹Biographical notes taken from the *Positio super virtutibus*, 1976.

The documents of her Trappist life are meager: a notebook of brief quotations from the Abbess' chapters or her daily *lectio*, and announcements made to the community. Forty-two letters remain, which are Blessed Gabriella's most personal writing. Then there are the memories of the Abbess, Mother Pia Gullini, and the testimonies of the Canonical Process of Beatification, gathered in the *Summarium* of the *Positio*.

On September 30, 1935, Maria arrived at the Grottaferrata Trappist Monastery on the Albani hills near Rome, and took the name of Sr. Maria Gabriella, "the name of the Archangel Gabriel whom the Lord chose to announce to the Madonna the great event," as she wrote to her mother.² Presiding over the community was Mother Pia Gullini, a woman of exceptional human, intellectual, and spiritual qualities.

Maria Gabriella described the Trappist life to her mother as follows:

It is beautiful to live in the house of the Lord. The time of prayer is established, as is the time for work, so that no one follows her whims, and only during interval moments may we read, write, or go to church, each as she likes. . . . Our work may be at the vineyard, the garden, or in the monastery. As for silence, I tell you that it is something very beautiful, because in this way no one murmurs or criticizes as in our home town, but each of us minds our own business.³

Settling into this environment, Sr. Maria Gabriella found a reprieve, at her leisure and free. Her experience of conversion broadened. She abandoned her shield of defense, her morose modesty, and her trait of being a bit sharp. In the profound solitude of dialogue with God, she became more and more simple.

At the level of experience Maria imbibed the word of the Rule: "Listen, my son, to your master's precepts. Turn the ear of your heart to gladly receive your loving Father's advice and carry it out effectively, that by the labor of obedience you may return to him from whom you departed by the sloth of disobedience."⁴

On this passage from the Rule we find something akin to a commentary in a letter to her mother on her clothing day:

I feel that he has always loved me and now loves me even more. With this grace, I understand the great predilection that he has had for me, while he might have chosen so many others worthier than I who would have corresponded to his love more generously than I. But it is not so. He wanted to make me the object of his mercies. When I think of this I become confused seeing Jesus' great love for me, with my ungratefulness and lack of correspondence to his predilection. Now I understand well the saying that that God does not want the death of the sinner but that he turn from his sin and live, because I have experienced it in myself. He has treated me like the prodigal son.⁵

It is the ability to say *thank you* that from now on will accompany Sr. Maria Gabriella as she progresses, day after day, in the life of the monastery. She knows that she has received a gift which is undeserved. She discovers a love that comes to fill all her ungratefulness and "non-

² Letter to her mother of October 17, 1935.

³ Letter to her mother of October 17, 1935.

⁴ *Rule of Saint Benedict*, Prologue, 1.

⁵ Letter to her mother of April 13, 1936.

correspondence,” and this bears fruit for her life and the life of others. It is the experience of the forgiven son who experiences the joy and fecundity of re-entering the inheritance of the Father and of possessing it to the full.

From this came the exclamation that so often rose to her lips: “How good is the Lord!” which constitutes the truest synthesis of her spirituality, of which we have evidence in the text written at her profession:

In the simplicity of my heart I gladly offer you everything. You deigned to call me to yourself and I rush to your feet. On the day of your royal feast you want to make of this miserable creature your queen. With an overflowing soul I thank You, and in pronouncing the holy vows I abandon myself entirely to you. O Jesus, let me always remain faithful to my promises and never take back what I give you today. Come and reign in my soul as the king of love. I ask you to bless our monastery and make it a garden where your heart may find rest. Bless in a special way the nun and priest superiors who have greater obligations towards you. Bless my whole family, and in particular I recommend to you my brother and brother-in-law. Make a breach in their hearts and enter as king to take possession. Turn your eyes kindly upon our whole Order and make it a breeding-ground for saints. I entreat you on behalf of your Church, of the Sovereign Pontiff and our bishop. I recommend to your divine heart all my relatives, friends and benefactors, my parish and the association to which I belonged to. Deign to give them all peace, joy, and blessing. I recommend to you our monastery’s benefactors and the sister who had to leave, that you may accomplish the miracle we await. I pray you for the sisters of my home town, that all may persevere in love. Above all I recommend to you Reverend Mother, the mother mistress, and my confessor. Reward them for all they do for me and give them light to guide me along the way you have marked out for me. And give me great docility in obeying.

O Jesus, I offer myself in union with your sacrifice, and although I am unworthy and a trifle, I firmly hope that the divine Father will look with eyes of satisfaction on my little offering, because I am united to you, and I have given all I was able to give. O Jesus, consume me as a little host of love for your glory and for the salvation of souls. Eternal Father, show that on this day your Son is to wed, and establish his kingdom in every heart, so that all may love him and serve him in conformity to your divine will. To me, give what I need to be at true bride of Jesus. Amen.⁶

The offering of her life in January 1938, the decision to give herself completely for the cause of the unity of Christians, was the simple and radical response that flowed from her gratitude for the Lord’s immense gift of grace.

Concerning the offering of her life, Mother Pia Gullini attested later:

Her docility and her abandonment, it seems to me, come from having intuited the greatness of God and, without analyzing her feelings, she lived in the concrete adoration of the God who chose her and loved her. She felt herself so unworthy, so small, such a mere nothing; from this came her humility and gratitude.⁷

She displayed this gratitude even in illness, and so she wrote to her mother:

⁶ Feast of Christ the King, October 31, 1937.

⁷ Autograph “Quinternia” of Mother Pia Gullini, 1953, “Answers to some questions made by Signor Zananiri when writing the biography of Sr. Maria Gabriella,” Vitorchiano Archives.

pray that the Lord do in me what is for his greater glory. I am happy to be able to suffer something for love of Jesus. My joy grows when I think that the time for the true wedding approaches. As you know, the Lord has always favored me with special graces, but now with this illness he has given me one greater than all the others. I am completely abandoned in the Lord's hands and I have gained very, very much.⁸

And again later: "I will always thank and bless the Lord for what he has done for me and for you, but I feel that I will never be able to thank him enough."⁹

Suffering became the place of a more intense conversation with Jesus, the place where she became aware of her unity with the Cross that the Son had gloriously mounted. "My God, your glory," she repeated often in her talks with the Abbess.

In the letters written from the hospital, in the forty days where she experienced the deepest desolation at her separation from the monastery, her "treasure," Gabriella, renewing her offering for unity, found herself experiencing a special closeness with the poor sinners for whom her life was given, for the "all" that chapter 17 of the Gospel of John puts at the heart of the prayer of Jesus. Here her life became intercession in accordance with the full range of the offering of Christ. "Pray for me, so that I understand better and better the great gift of the cross, and so that I will profit from now on for my own sake and that of others."¹⁰

2 – Ut unum sint

Gabriella's "profiting" from the gift of the cross turned her offering into a sign universally recognized, testimony of a vocation for unity. It is of this young nun of humble origins and a hidden life that Saint John Paul II speaks in his ecumenical encyclical:

Praying for unity is not restricted, however, to those who live in a setting of division among Christians. In the intimate and personal dialogue that each of us must hold with the Lord in prayer, the concern for unity cannot be excluded. Only in this way, as a matter of fact, will it fully belong to the reality of our life and the commitments we have made in the Church. To reaffirm this necessity, I wanted to propose to the Church's faithful a model who seemed to me exemplary, that of a Trappist sister, Maria Gabriella of Unity, whom I proclaimed blessed on January 25, 1983. Sister Maria Gabriella, called by her vocation to be outside the world, dedicated her life to meditation and prayer centered on chapter 17 of the Gospel of Saint John, and offered her life for the unity of Christians. This is the fulcrum of every prayer: the offering of our own life, total and without reserve, to the Father by means of the Son in the Holy Spirit. The example of Sister Maria Gabriella instructs us, it makes us understand how there are no particular times, situations or places to pray for unity. The prayer of Christ to the Father is the model for us all, always and in every place.¹¹

⁸ Letter to her mother, July 6, 1938.

⁹ Letter to her mother, September 22, 1938.

¹⁰ Letter to Mother Pia, May 3, 1938.

¹¹ *Ut Unum Sint*, 1995, no.27.

But how did the vocation for unity reach Gabriella, and with such force?

It seems useful to me to give a brief word on how prayer for the unity of Christians took its place in the community of Grottaferrata and how Maria Gabriella became a witness of what was later to be defined as “spiritual ecumenism.”

2. a – Prayer for Unity

Some historical notes will assist us.

We find the first ecumenical initiatives in Anglican circles dating from 1838.¹² In 1907 Paul Wattson, an Episcopalian pastor in the United States, founded a Franciscan Third Order, the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, and launched the initiative of a prayer octave for the return of Anglicans to unity with Catholics. This octave began on the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter, January 18, and ended on the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, January 25. Then in 1909 his communities joined the Catholic Church. Only a few years later, in 1916, Pope Benedict XV extended the prayer octave to the entire world. Despite the success of the initiative, many non-Catholic Christians were reluctant to adopt it since, in Wattson’s formulation, it included the explicit recognition of the supremacy of the Pope of Rome.

In 1925 another important center formed in the Low Countries, under the aegis of Pope Pius XI, when Father Lambert Beaudin, a Benedictine monk of Mont-César near Louvain, founded the monastery of Union at Amay-Sur-Moyse for the reconciliation of Catholics to the oriental Church. Later the monastery transferred to Chevetogne.

In close dialogue with Father Beaudin was Father Paul Couturier, a priest of Lyon. In 1937 Father Couturier initiated an important programmatic turning point, proposing a new formula for the prayer octave that prays for the unity of Christians “as God desires and by the means he desires.” The means by which unity will be achieved are deferred to God and not to systems defined by men and women. We find in the Lyonnais priest one of the principal representatives of spiritual ecumenism. Not unaware of the motives for the divisions, he aimed at renewing in believers sorrow for the separation, and at inaugurating a new course of reconciliation, going back to the Gospels. Father Couturier conceived the ecumenical movement as an “invisible monastery” whose members are committed to reviving the early Christian community, gathered and reconciled in unity. This Father Couturier communicated by means of tracts.

2.b - Grottaferrata

It was in January of 1937 that for the first time at the Grottaferrata Trappist monastery one of Father Couturier’s tracts arrived with the invitation to participate in the Prayer Octave for Unity.

¹² The Association for Universal Prayer for the Convention of England was founded by a group of Anglicans in 1838.

Mother Pia Gullini had come to know the ecumenical ideals during her years spent at Laval, and became impassioned by them. Since she asserted that the path we must take is love,¹³ it is not surprising that she did not hesitate to propose this prayer intention to the community joined for chapter. The notice also mentioned several “voluntary offerings made under the safeguard of humility, properly authorized,” a practice not unusual for the spirituality of the time.

After the chapter Mother Immacolata presented herself to the Abbess. Small and bent over, leaning on her cane, the seventy-eight year old sister lifted two shining eyes to the Abbess and said, “This is for me. If you allow me, I offer the bit of life that remains to me.” This religious belonged to the first band of sisters from San Vito transferred to Grottaferrata. From a very poor rural family, capable of devotions and renunciations impossible for the other sisters, she passed most of her life in the monastery, first as an oblate then as a choir nun, in unconditional self-donation to the community.

Now she asked only the permission to offer herself: she wanted to give what little she had, like the widow of the Gospel with two coins. The sense of dignity of the elderly nun was striking. She knew that her offering was worthy of God, that it was precious in His eyes. The one who is poor in everything knows the true greatness of the human person before his Creator. The Lord came to take Mother Immacolata a month after the offering, which she had renewed many times in a brief and peace-filled agony.

To Gaston Zananiri,¹⁴ who years later questioned her on the delicate and demanding themes of “self-offering,” Mother Pia responded:

You ask me if the holocaust of one’s own life is a Cistercian tradition. I think it is a need for every generous soul, especially in the cloister. We have nothing else but ourselves: we have given all. We have given ourselves in the normal way with vows. Now we desire to put greater emphasis on our offering, adding to it the sense of consummation in suffering and of renunciation of life, together with the acceptance of a premature death.¹⁵

In the climate of closure and conflict that prevented any reconciliation among Catholics and Protestants, a new sensibility toward the possibility of encounter between different confessions began to irradiate from the monastic world, which progressively extended to the entire ecclesial domain.

¹³“It is charity that counts—charity, that is union. . . . Love, love of God, and for Him, love of all and, first of all, of my neighbor.” Letter to a novice, November 23, 1951. *Lettere e Scritti di Madre Pia*, Ennio Francia, (Rome: Messa degli artisti, 1971), 75.

¹⁴Gaston Zananiri (1904-1996) was a diplomat in Alexandria, Egypt. He knew Father Christophe-Jean Dumont and the Istina Center and through these came into contact with Mother Pia Gullini. He wrote the first French biography of Sister Maria Gabriella Sgheddu, *Dans le mystère de l’Unité, Maria Gabriella* (1955). He entered the Order of the Preachers and was secretary of the Center of Documentation on Churches and Sects in Paris.

¹⁵Autograph “Quinternia” of Mother Pia Gullini, 1953, “Answers to Some Questions Asked by Signore Zananiri While He wrote the Biography of Sister Maria Gabriella,” Archives of Vitorchiano.

In January 1938, the year following the death of Mother Immacolata, Mother Pia received a new invitation from Father Paul Couturier for the octave, entitled “The Universal Prayer of Christians for Christian Unity.” Mother Pia read the final part in chapter, from which came the following sentences, which had a decisive resonance in the heart of Sister Maria Gabriella:

Without willfully closing our eyes to our differences, dissolving them in a syncretism destructive of all true faith, we shall first look at what most nearly approaches our view, to give it special emphasis. In this way some shared perspectives will come to light where we will see the need to deny all that is negative and to re-evaluate our respective dogmatic line. . . . Prayer will remain the bright and living center, rich in resplendent irradiation, in universality and in simultaneous co-existence. This bright prayer can be seen shining through the shattered Christianity, which it can then draw during these days from January 18 to 25. . . along the ways of unity. . . . The complexity of the problem will throw us to our knees, in the heart of Christ, to repeat all together, in a single and immense act of love, “May there come, O Lord, the unity that you asked for all who love you: *‘Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.’*”¹⁶

The octave was celebrated as in the previous year. Each day, that is, was dedicated to the members of a determined group: Eastern Orthodox Christians, Anglicans, Lutherans and European Protestants, American Protestants, Christians who had ceased to frequent the sacraments, Jews, Moslems, and unbelievers from around the world.

We do not know how Maria Gabriella expressed her offering, since she left no written deed. In the reserve proper to the Trappist life her decision remains sealed in the secrecy in which it matured. Still, however deeply it may be desired, the gift of self, like any other offering to the Lord, is not a simple personal choice. The Rule of Saint Benedict prescribes that “each one submit to the Abbot what he proposes to offer, and carry it out supported by the Abbot’s prayer and assent.”¹⁷

Sister Maria Gabriella spoke of it first to the novice mistress, Mother Tecla, who testified as follows:

In those days Sr. Gabriella confided in me all that the Lord asked of her. She, too, wanted to offer her life for the unity of the Church. This was a topic that could not leave me cold. I had spent twenty-five years in the missions. I had had and still had among the “dissidents” many souls dear to me, and I could wish no better than to see them enter into the fold of the one good pastor. Experience had taught me, however, that the great means to obtain this was prayer and sacrifice. Sr. Gabriella, leaving to me the prayer, wanted to assume the sacrifice. Could I tell her no? Immediately I had the impression that this sacrifice would be accepted and that I was losing a daughter of so many and such beautiful hopes.¹⁸

¹⁶ *La Beata Maria Gabriella dell’Unità*, P. Beltrame Quattrocchi, (Vitorchiano: Monastero Trappiste, 1983),128.

¹⁷ *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, chapter 49.

¹⁸ Memories of Mother Tecla Fontana. Archives of Vitorchiano.

Sister Gabriella then posed the question to the Abbess, Mother Pia. She knelt, gentle and submissive as always, but insistent this time: “Let me offer my life—after all, what is it worth? I do nothing, I have never done anything. You yourself said that the offering could be made with the due permission.”

The Abbess was deeply moved to receive the generous incentive of the elderly Mother Immacolata, but the youthful vehemence of Sister Maria Gabriella had to be put to the test, and the answer was prudent. After several days, Sr. Gabriella returned, humble and timid: “It really seems to me that the Lord wants it; I feel impelled toward this without trying to think about it.” Mother Pia answered, “I will say neither yes nor no. Offer it to the will of God. Ask the chaplain as well. Then the Lord will do what he wants.”

Mother Pia thought no more about it, but the same day, before evening, the young girl felt an acute pain in one shoulder and a strange exhaustion. From then on physical suffering, unknown to her previously, never left her, but increased rapidly. She bore it in silence, without being amazed, serenely aware of her personal offering. Only later, questioned explicitly on the matter, she revealed to Mother Pia with simplicity the beginnings of the disease: “From the day that I offered myself I have no longer been well.”¹⁹In the beginning the indisposition did not seem worrisome: according to the monastery’s physician it was a matter of a simple chill. Still, he decided to have an x-ray taken, which required a brief departure from the enclosure. It was in April 1938 that Gabriella prepared herself to go the San Giovanni hospital in Rome to undergo some testing, sure to return by evening. The diagnosis was tuberculosis. The discovery was completely unexpected, both because there were no precedents in the Sagheddu family and because it would have been impossible for her to be infected within the monastery walls. The doctors were optimistic and, given the slight magnitude of the illness and the robust constitution of the patient, assured a speedy healing with the pneumothorax cure. For her part, Gabriella felt that things would proceed otherwise. She had given up what she had, youth, good health, and life. No one could know better than she that the gift had been accepted, independently of the doctors’ opinion.

The disappointment of not being able to return immediately to the monastery was lacerating, as she wrote to Mother Pia, “I cried my eyes out.”²⁰ It was not the prospective of the illness’s possible course that caused her anguish, but to find herself constrained to be so far from the monastery.

Her poor words of supplication cry out in the letters written from the hospital to the Abbess. She had never paid the slightest attention to suffering, nor would she do so later, in the monastery, when the physical suffering became excruciating. But there, from the hospital, she cried, “My heart is tormented and without special help from heaven my cross has become so heavy that I can no longer hold up.”²¹ She had never asked for anything for herself. Now she implored, “for the love of God, do all that is possible so that I can soon return to the monastery. . . .At certain times I wonder if the Lord has abandoned me. At other times I think that he tests those whom he loves.

¹⁹ From notes of Mother Pia, Vitorchiano Archives.

²⁰ Letter of April 24, 1938.

²¹ Letter of April 24, 1938.

At yet other times it seems impossible to me that God can be glorified by this life. But I always end up abandoning myself to his will.”²² Her strong nature and self-command surrendered:

The Lord keeps me on the naked cross and I have no other consolation than knowing that I suffer to fulfill his divine will, in a spirit of obedience. Sometimes I seem to have lost my head. Having begun to pray the rosary, I go on to say the chaplet of mercy. I start this chaplet and find myself praying the chaplet for the dead, and so on. Therefore I say with the psalmist, “I have become a beast of burden, yet I am always with you.”²³

There is no letter, no supplication, no cry that is not interspersed with terms of express desire to accomplish the will of the Father, to offer all for the glory of God and to always obey. “Before there was no way to bend my heart. Now I truly understand that the glory of God and being a victim do not consist in doing great things, but in the total sacrifice of my ego.”²⁴ It is in the reality of the Cross where the horror of pain and the faithful abandonment of the Son are found. A person suffers and rebels in every fiber of his existence and yet, in an unknown and surprising way there emerges the unshakeable security of the Father’s love. “I am weak, it is true, but the Lord, who knows my fragility and the cause of my pain, will forgive me and of this I feel convinced.”²⁵

The pneumothorax treatment was of no help to her, rather, it destroyed her final resistance to the disease. After forty days of hospitalization, she returned to the monastery much worse.

Entering the monastery infirmary, which she never again left, she said to her sister infirmarian, “The disease is my wealth. The Lord gave it to me, but I do not want to share with you, nor with anyone else.” All her care would be dedicated to avoid spreading the disease to the sisters, who later cited numberless episodes on the matter.

She guarded her treasure of suffering. Coughing broke out between the piercing pangs and her words were, “Jesus, I love you.” “Thank you, Jesus.” “I thank you for having me suffer.” “One can suffer without being sad.” “Here I am, Jesus, to do your will.”²⁶

She could think of nothing better for herself than the will of God in the present moment: “I neither desire nor think of living, nor of dying: I think of the will of God.” The last year of her life she read and reread chapter 17 of the Evangelist John, certainly without imagining that a great pope would speak of it on the day of her beatification, dwelling with tenderness on such a personal detail of the Gospel pages found worn by long use.

From these days onward, however, the affair of Gabriella was not worked out exclusively within the monastery walls. While her health worsened a new bond was formed between Mother Pia and the Anglican Abbey of Nashdom, instituted in 1926 in the English county of Buckingham with

²² Letter of April 24, 1938.

²³ Letter of May 3, 1938.

²⁴ Letter of May 3, 1938.

²⁵ Letter of April 28, 1938.

²⁶ Notes of M. Pia Gullini. Vitorchiano Archives.

the intention to work for reunion with the Roman Catholic Church.²⁷ Although Nashdom was under the authority of the Church of England, its monks were for all practical purposes Benedictine, both in the celebration of the liturgy, in Latin and according to the Roman rite, and in the general observance of the Rule of Saint Benedict. The Abbey's novice master, Father Benedict Ley, having learned from Father Paul Couturier that at the Grottaferrata Trappist monastery an elderly nun, Mother Immacolata, had died offering herself for unity, wrote to the Abbess in July 1938 to express his closeness. In responding, Mother Pia informed him of the further offering of a young sister, who had fallen ill with tuberculosis and was now at the end of her life. Father Benedict wrote to Maria Gabriella to communicate affection and gratitude, hoping to receive from her some autograph lines, as he subsequently declared. But Sister Gabriella did not even consider responding, and asked Mother Pia to thank him for her.

She died April 23, 1939 during the hour of vespers. It was Good Shepherd Sunday. The Gospel passage for that day expressed the significance of her departure: "I am the good shepherd. . .and I will give my life for my sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These, too, I must gather, and they will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, one shepherd."²⁸

Only a few days earlier she had turned twenty-five.

Her earthly affairs have come to an end, but not the mission to which the Lord called her.

With care and love Mother Pia gathered words and testimonies on Gabriella, certain that all that had occurred in her little Grottaferrata was light for the life of the Church. Providence had it that the young and brilliant writer Maria Giovanna Dore should arrive as a postulant.²⁹ The Abbess did not hesitate in entrusting to her the first biography, while a deep and ardent bond was being cemented with the monks of Nashdom, where her own ecumenical desire resonated.

The biography published in 1940, thanks in part to the preface by Iginio Giordani, a perspicacious Catholic journalist and politician, met immediately with widespread propagation. The exchanges between Grottaferrata and the ecumenical movement intensified. Among those who visited the monastery were two religious who were making a deep impact on ecumenism, Roger Schutz and Max Thurian from the Taizé community. Frère Roger's mother, Amélie, accompanied them and from then on kept up a correspondence with Mother Pia, joined in deep friendship.

In this way Grottaferrata became a reference center for the ecumenical movement.

This was later one of the points of friction between Mother Pia and the major superiors of the Order. Moreover, the early 1940s were far from that the general awareness possessed today that monasticism is by its very nature an ecumenical ambit.

²⁷ Mariella Carpinello, *Gabriella Dell'Unità, Lettere dalla Trappa* (Milan: San Paolo, 2006) 29.

²⁸ John 10:14-16.

²⁹ Maria Giovanna Dore (1910-1982), journalist and writer, after entering the Grottaferrata Trappist Monastery, she left for health motives. Later she founded at Mater Unitatis Monastery at Olzai, Sardinia, which followed the Benedictine rule and had the charism of prayer for the unity of Christians. Presently the community is in Dorgali, Sardinia, and has a mission in Sri Lanka.

It is so by its reference to the early church where all lived as “a single heart and a single soul.” It is so by its commitment from the beginning to be dedicated to the search for God, committing itself to translate the Gospels integrally into its life. It is so by its dexterity in the dialogue between the religions that possess monastic traditions. We know that in the twentieth century the expansion of traditional “occidental” Christian monks towards other continents and cultures encountered different forms of asceticism, discovering a unity in the experience of God, from which it has drawn new strength.

Even Protestantism, born in the sixteenth century with an aversion to monasticism, has re-evaluated its original reservation, rediscovering the wealth of an experience of faith proper to the monastic life and to the freedom which this life enjoys with respect to the compromise of institutions with temporal power.³⁰

In the history of feminine monasticism there have been various examples of how nuns have personified the prophecy within the Church in their striving for unity. At the beginning of the twentieth century Grottaferrata was one of the places where Christianity manifested its newness, which later found an expression in the ambit of the Second Vatican Council.

3 – The Fruits of a Good Seed: the Heritage of Sister Maria Gabriella

In no time Sister Maria Gabriella’s grave became the destination of increasing numbers of visitors, gathering in prayer. Thanks to the work of Mother Pia Gullini, in Italy, Europe and overseas, in the Catholic world and in other Christian churches, the biographies swiftly collaborated to make known the name and figure of Sister Maria Gabriella, linking her offering to the issue of Christian unity. There began an influx of letters, holy card requests, notifications of graces, healings and conversions to God and the Church attributed to the encounter with the little apostle of unity and to her intercession.

Within the span of very few years and contrary to every expectation, all of this gave rise to many attestations of the sort to justify a reputation of holiness, confirmed by episodes of *osmogenesia*, or supernatural perfume smelled by various witnesses. In 1957, contemporaneously to the transfer of the community from Grottaferrata to Vitorchiano, the Order’s General Chapter and the Holy See pronounced the go-ahead for the Cause for Beatification.

The miracle of the 1960 healing of Sister Maria Pia Manno, a Benedictine from Alcamo, Sicilia, advanced the cause to the point of beatification, which was celebrated January 25, 1983 at Saint Paul Outside the Walls at Rome.

³⁰Cf. CICALSAL “Consecrated Life in Christian Traditions,” Ecumenical Colloquium, January 22-25, 2015. During the January 24, 2015 meeting with ecumenical guests during the Year for Consecrated Life, Cardinal Kurt Koch noticed that: “Witnessing the presence of the living God in today’s increasingly secularized society is the underlying challenge of ecumenism. Recognizing this centrality of God, the consecrated life renders an exceptional service to ecumenism.” See also J.M. Hernández M. CMF, Communication to the 61st Congress of Theology on the Consecrated Life, Claretianum, Rome December, 15-18, 2015.

This was the occasion of deeper study of her message, of a more conscious appropriation of her heritage, for her own monastic community no less than for the others.

Mother Cristiana Piccardo writes on the matter:³¹

Beatification rendered suddenly paradigmatic a life that had moved in the wake of tradition and ordinariness. The attempt to rediscover it, to interiorize it, to learn from Gabriella to live the vocation to which we, too, were called, has led to reflections that belong to the usual Sunday chapter talks customary in our monasteries. And yet to elaborate such reflection has meant to enter into admiration and astonishment before the mystery of predilection with which God blessed and filled the soul of this sister. So we have teaching, examination of conscience, and stimulus to conversion that go well beyond the Beatification itself and the initial meditation it inspired. Gabriella, remaining a sister with whom we may pleasantly stroll, hand in hand, becomes teacher and sign, reference point and sign of life.³²

We can ask ourselves: how has Sister Maria Gabriella's offering developed in the Vitorchiano community as the good seed fallen in the fecund soil of the monastery?

The 1960s, when the Vatican Council and world events marked an epoch of whirlwind changes for the contemporary world, were a time of reflection and work.

Mother Cristiana Piccardo jotted down that:

The community of Vitorchiano was a community that was poor, but open to welcome what was new in history and in the new generations, with their questions and with the challenges and graces of which they were bearers. It was open to profoundly integrate the new into its monastic journey, because it possessed at heart what we would call today "a culture of life." It possessed an identity, that is, and an ability to welcome without prejudices, but with respect and love, every contribution that might be a source of authentic growth for the community.³³

This "culture of life" finds its source in the spirit of prayer and in striving to live out conversion of heart and self-offering, which are proper to the ecumenical vocation, as to any vocation which is authentically contemplative. The homily of John Paul II for the Beatification of Sister Maria Gabriella confirms this for us. There he underscores three fundamental values that unite the Trappist vocation and the ecumenical vocation: conversion, the cross (self-offering), and prayer.

This is the dynamism which still today makes us enter the ecumenical mission of the Church in the wake opened by Maria Gabriella's offering. For us this coincides with living our vocation in a way that is increasingly authentic. Heeding the Magisterium and implementing the renewal to which Vatican II called us has meant a deepening of the ecclesial sense of our life in its basic elements: in

³¹ Mother Cristiana Piccardo was Abbess of Vitorchiano from 1964 to 1988, Superior and Abbess from the community of Humocaro in Venezuela from 1991 to 2002.

³² Cristiana Piccardo, *Alla Scuola della Libertà*, (Ancora: Milano, 1992), 97.

³³ Cristiana Piccardo, *Living Wisdom*, translated by Erik Varden, (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, 2014), 10-11.

following Christ, in heeding authority, in fraternal communion, in personal responsibility and in the experience of forgiveness.

In the common life it stands out with dramatic clarity how sin against unity arises from the refusal to listen, and from the arrogance of a will incapable of humility and dialogue with the shared truth and charity that uphold the life of the Church. Unity can be continually received and constructed only if we are able to prefer the good of communion over any other restrictive and near-sighted conjecture. This commits us to the unpredictable, and it is a daily task of opening to receive, listen, and collaborate with the sister next to us in continual reference to the mind and judgment of Christ. It is making relevant the good zeal to which Saint Benedict calls us.³⁴

This requires continual conversion, which is the dynamism proper to the life of every monk and is the matter of a specific vow. Sister Maria Gabriella wrote in one of her letters:

For me entering a convent and becoming perfect were the same thing, but to the contrary, I have had to let experience convince me that it is not so. To arrive at perfection it is necessary to work hard. For, indeed, entering the monastery I brought with me my ego and my defects, which it is my duty to combat continually. . . .The Lord who has put me on this road will himself help me in the fight to achieve victory.³⁵

So we open to receive forgiveness, which in its widest sense is the grace of returning to our filial relation with the Father. This forgiveness is offered to us by Christ in the Church and becomes our responsibility in the dynamics of our relationships. The gesture so habitual in Sister Gabriella to confess the *mea culpa* and beat her breast has today acquired a dialogical form, in our being able to tell ourselves the truth and desire to start over each time, recognizing the value of our relationship with the other. We can forgive if we first experience forgiveness, reconciliation, and truth, before all else, in ourselves.

Openness to listening and dialogue has been essential, particularly in welcoming new generations of nuns with their problems and their wealth, in a dynamism of tradition and newness which has produced the current face of our house. This has opened a path of enculturation from the perspective of monastic mission offered us in the foundations that Vitorchiano has generated from 1968 onwards. These foundations have been the occasion of community unity for the realization of a common project. The life we have ourselves received spurs us to reach out together in the generation of each new house. We realize “our monastic calling, our clinging to the Lord, our passion for the spread of God’s kingdom in the place that God gives us, with the resources and modes of expression offered by the place.”³⁶

Mother Teresa Astoin had written of the impoverished Trappist Monastery at Saint Vito: “This house will be the mother of many others,” and Mother Pia confirmed it saying, “I see the

³⁴Cf. *Saint Benedict’s Rule*, Chapter 72.

³⁵ Letter to Father Basilio Meloni of June 9, 1937.

³⁶*Living Wisdom*, 115.

monastery as a river of life that branches out and carries water to every side.”³⁷This brings to mind an episode from Gabriella’s last days. In the delirium of her fever an immense country was presented to her: it was China. Many, many children ran towards her. She embraced one and said to him, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”³⁸

We may call these intuitions prophetic in that they arose during the community’s great poverty when a flourishing future would have been far from evident. But they counted on the attractive power of the monastic life and on its aptitude for establishing itself in every country in the world. They did not fear circumstances unfavorable from a cultural or historical point of view, but believed strongly in the evangelizing capability of Benedictine monasticism.

Mother Cristiana emphasizes how important for this development the influx of vocations after the 1970s had been, coming from new movements in the Church. Here “what these young people had received from the Church were a prophetic charism, a thirst for communion, the strength of proclamation, a passion for bearing witness.”³⁹ After the birth of Valsereina in 1960, the community had the task of bringing to life another six houses: in Argentina, Hinojo, 1973; in Chile, Quilvo, 1981; in Venezuela, Humocaró 1982; in Indonesia, Gedono, 1987; in the Philippines, Matutum, 1995; in the Czech Republic, Nasi Pani nad Vltavou, 2007; and a new foundation in Portugal is on its way.

We might say that from within the heart of Vitorchiano this bent for ecumenism has widened out to universal dimensions.

A last but no lesser aspect of her heritage is that of the intercession which Blessed Maria Gabriella exercises for all who entrust themselves to her in prayer.

She had written in her last letter to her mother, to be delivered after her death:

I write you these lines to send you my last thoughts and my last goodbye. The divine Bridegroom has renewed the invitation and the longed-for day draws near. I do not say the day of my death, but the day in which, freed from the bonds of this poor flesh, I will finally be able to pass from this life to the happy and blessed life of heaven. Separation from the body is not a death, but a passage to true life.

. . . Stay calm because from above I will be much more useful to you than I am here, since from there I will see clearly all your needs and I will be able to intercede more with the Lord.⁴⁰

From Blessed Gabriella’s friendly presence in the chapel dedicated in her honor, to which flock numerous pilgrims, a constant stream of prayer has gone out in worldwide dimensions.

³⁷ *Living Wisdom*, 121.

³⁸ Maria Giovanna Dore, *Suor Maria Gabriella per l’Unita della Chiesa*, (Morcelliana: Brescia, 1983), 175.

³⁹ *Living Wisdom*, 122-123.

⁴⁰ Carpinello, 133-134.

Numberless are the graces of unity in communities; in families and between couples; of forgiveness; of return to prayer, to the Lord and to the Church. Many graces of healing also occur. Most abundant are the graces given to women unable to bear children, who receive from her the gift to become mothers.

If during her earthly existence Maria Gabriella took up the challenge put to the Church by the division among its sons and daughters, today we see her attention fixed on the ultimate root of division, namely, on the contempt of communion in families and on the contempt of life. Here she turns her attention in order to heal.

It is to the initial nucleus of life that she turns her gaze and her intercession, not forgetting human life in all its needs. Just as *Lumen gentium* states:

Because of their most intimate union with Christ, the blessed strengthen the entire Church in holiness. . .they do not cease to intercede for us with the Father, offering the merits acquired on earth through Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and persons. . .Our weakness therefore is much aided by their fraternal solicitude. LG 49

We do not venerate the memory of saints only for the example they give us, but we venerate them even more in order that the union of the entire Church in the Spirit may be strengthened in the practice of fraternal charity. For, just as Christian communion between those on the way brings us closer to Christ, so communion with the saints joins us to Christ. From Him, as from the source and the head, emanates all grace and all life for the People of God. LG 50