

April 29, 2018 5th Sunday of Easter

In Italy, in the late 1800's, Cecilia Seranelli just received a diagnosis of mental illness, and they were going to institutionalize her. Her older son had already been institutionalized. So, she took her infant son Alessandro, and she put him in a basket and dropped him into the well, so that he would not have to deal with the stigma of mental illness and not have to deal with having it. Luckily for Alessandro his older brother heard him crying, pulled him out of the well and saved his life. Life in Italy in the late 1800's was hard, especially for the poor. Alessandro's family was desperately poor. They moved multiple times looking for work. Alessandro himself began working on fishing boats with the fishermen at the age of thirteen. He got the rough language and their rough ways. But even so, given the chance, he was a quiet boy. He would go into a corner and read anything he could get his hands on; magazines, books, whatever. At seventeen, Alessandro and his father Geovanni, moved closer to Rome because Geovanni had heard of an opportunity to sharecrop for a land owner. As part of the deal, the owner let Geovanni and Alessandro live in an abandoned factory on his property. Sharing the living quarters, was another family, Luigi Assunta and their six children. Work on the farm was grueling, conditions were horrible. The farm was in a marshy, muggy, mosquito ridden area, like my house. Luigi soon contracted malaria and died leaving his wife and children to have to care for themselves. Desperate to provide for her family, Assunta went to work in the fields with the men, leaving the children in the care of her ten-year-old daughter. Rose's daughter was mature for her age, physically and mentally. She was already devoted to Jesus, Mary, and holiness; she wanted to be a saint. After the back-breaking work in the fields, the two families would gather and say the rosary together before eating their meager supper. On feast days and Sundays, they would walk seven miles one way to church, so they could be there for God. Alessandro, however was respectful but he isolated himself from everyone else, staying in his room by himself. On his walls, immodest pictures of women that he cut out of magazines, that his father gave him. Something he learned from the fisherman days. Over time Alessandro's thoughts about women grew more than immodest; he was overcome by a violent lust. The object of his lust was the oldest daughter of the other family. For months he fought the desires, but finally he forced himself on her. She fought him off, "No, no, that is a sin and I'm not going to commit a sin with you." He tried to assault her twice more, in the next few weeks, she fended him off both times. The resistance only angered Alessandro. He got a farm implement and made it into a weapon. When everyone else, one day was in the fields, he tried to assault this girl again. She said, "No!" she fought him off, so he stabbed her fourteen times. The next day she died. But what she said before she died gave everyone pause. "I forgive Alessandro and I want him to be in heaven with me forever.

Six months later, Alessandro was put in prison for thirty years, of hard labor. Life in the prison was even harder than life on the outside; it was brutal. Alessandro, even though he had heard what the girl had said about him, he put on a hardened criminal face and front. He would sing vulgar songs, he was abusive to the prison staff and fellow prisoners. He even tried to attack a priest who came to see him. It was so bad that he went into solitary confinement for three straight years. He imprisoned himself, drowning in his misery. Then in 1908 when he was still in prison, he had a dream. In this dream, a beautiful garden spread out before him and the young girl he had tried to assault and actually killed was dressed in white garments holding lilies in her hand. She came towards him and as she did, she handed him a lily, and each time she handed him a lily, it burst into flame and disappeared. She did this fourteen times. He understood through his dream that God and this girl had forgiven him. But now the biggest

challenge would come in his life, could he forgive himself? You know, he didn't want it to change him, but over time, his violence and his hatred and his anger, melted away. He started becoming a model prisoner. Eventually in 1929 he got two years off for good behavior. It was the end of WWI so Italy pardoned all the prisoners, so he got three years off. For several years after his release, Alessandro went around and worked odd jobs, but he knew he had to do something. So one day, Christmas Eve 1934, he gathered his courage and he went and knocked on the rectory door where he knew Assunta, the girl's mother was working as a housekeeper for the priest. She opened the door and he couldn't look at her, he put his head down. He said, "Do you know who I am?" She said, "Of course I do." Then he said, "Do you forgive me?" She saw the anguish on his face, she said, "If God has forgiven you then I will too." He burst into tears. They spent the evening talking in the rectory. Then they went to Christmas, midnight Mass, sat together, knelt together and received communion at the communion rail. His heart was flooded with emotion. He was free; he could finally live in freedom. He kept up with her until he died.

He decided to stop doing odd jobs, and he went and he attached himself to a priory of religious priests. He decided there and then that he was going to take over all the jobs; manual, physical jobs, so that they could pray more. So that they could be involved in more spiritual things. So over time, the children in the classroom in the school that was on the priory property, would look out and see a quiet old man gardening in the garden. They would see him opening doors for people, in cars, in buildings. They would see him carrying luggage, they would see him doing all kinds of things. They never could have imagined who he had been. They called him Uncle Alessandro, a kind peaceful lay brother. He went to Mass every day, said the rosary with the priests, and he testified at the church proceedings to have the girl he murdered be a saint. He lived to see that; he was at the Mass of her beatification. Finally, he died in 1970 at the age of 87. Alessandro was the murderer of Saint Maria Gorretti. The murderer of a Saint. And yet, without that bad action of a murder, we could not have had a saint. It's in how we react. Maria knew that she had to remain on the vine; the vine that is Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "Without me, you can do nothing." But on the flip side, "With me, you can do anything." Alessandro learned that too, because of Maria. He let Jesus' grace, flow through the vine and into his branch, himself, and he bore fruit. Sometimes it's not tremendous fruit like becoming a saint. Sometimes it's just bearing fruit within ourselves, of becoming closer to Christ. Doing what He wants us to do; becoming who we're supposed to be.

Pope Francis says, "When we turn away from Jesus, we are still attached to the vine; we are still getting His juices getting pumped into us." Even if we say, "No," we cannot escape from that inevitable fact. So we should just give in and let God, let Jesus change us into bearing tremendous fruit within ourselves. Because if it changes ourselves, it will change those around us. Who could have imagined that this old man, full of kindness and showing tremendous generosity, could have been a murderer. That's the fruit, the conversion that comes from the divine. We need to pray for the ability to accept the grace of Jesus in our lives. To remember that we are always, always, still attached to our Lord and Savior.

God bless you.