

Sinners to Saints



Biographies of Saints who battled
sexual purity

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battled sexual purity**

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Dedication

I wish to dedicate this book to my wife, Roxane, my angel. After all the pain that I have caused you, you are still at my side. Without you, I would not be the man I am today. The ministry of helping others would not have happened without you. Thank you.

“The struggle is the sign of holiness.
A Saint is a sinner that keeps trying”
St Josemaria Escriva

St. Augustine

As the son of a pagan father and a Christian mother, Augustine was pulled early on in two different directions. Although instructed in the Catholic faith as a child by his saintly mother, Monica, yet his natural abilities and worldly ambitions steered him in the opposite path. At the age of 16 Augustine went to Carthage to study rhetoric and quickly fell into the dissolute habits of his peers in that great city. Yet too shy to keep up with the exploits of his more boisterous companions he would complain, "my only shame was to be ashamed." Still, he managed to form a sexual relationship with a young woman who became his concubine for the next 14 years. His passionate, jealous nature led to frequent outbursts yet the relationship endured and she bore a son they named Adeodatus, meaning "gift from God."

Caught up in his sinful lifestyle, Augustine drifted into Manichaeism, a dualistic heresy which taught that the body and the soul act independently of one another. The body is inherently evil while the soul is inherently good which means, conveniently, that what we do with our bodies has no connection to our spiritual well being. Carnal lust cannot be helped because it is bodily and not spiritual. At death the soul will be released

from its bodily cage to experience beatitude. The problem for Augustine was that while this philosophy neatly rationalized his own sinfulness, it gave him no real peace of soul or mind. In fact, he was more restless than ever.

In 384 at the age of 30, Augustine moved to Milan as the official rhetorician of that city. There, he began to attend the sermons of the renowned Ambrose, bishop of Milan. He had no interest in the Faith but only wanted to hear Ambrose's eloquence as a speaker in order to polish his own skills. At the same time his mother, Monica, followed Augustine to Milan praying ever more fervently for his conversion. Monica did convince her son to break off the illicit union with his lover in order to enter into a proper marriage with a reputable young woman. Yet even during his engagement Augustine found himself unable to resist various sexual encounters with other women. He had by now rejected Manichaeism through studying of the writings of St. John the Beloved and St. Paul, but he was still not ready to plunge headlong into Catholicism. His old habits had become too ingrained. He prayed, "Make me chaste, O Lord, but not right now!"

In September of 386, while in conversation with some Christian friends, God finally opened

Augustine's eyes and heart by granting him the grace of conversion. His mother was overjoyed when he revealed his change of heart. For the next seven months he received instructions from Bishop Ambrose who later baptized Augustine at the Easter Vigil in 387. His son was also baptized and would die a couple of short years later. Monica died shortly after the baptism, in November 387. Through a lifetime of patient love and persistence she had managed the conversion to the Faith of her pagan husband, Patricius, as well as her son and grandson.

Augustine had never considered the clerical state but in 391, with no surviving family and upon returning to Hippo in his native North Africa, he was ordained a priest. Four years later he was consecrated as a bishop. He would remain as Hippo's bishop and become a renowned Father of the Church until his death 35 years later in 430. It was during this period, upon great reflection, that Augustine composed his *Confessions* in which he laments his former dissolute life. "Late have I loved Thee, O Lord!" He knew fully the power of concupiscence over our human natures, yet he realized that there is something deeper still that is intended to overcome our weaknesses. Man has a free will, centered in the heart, which can cooperate with grace to free us from slavery

to sin. Reason can only lead us so far in finding the truth. The rest of that journey must be completed in the heart and soul of every person, which is why Augustine so famously exclaimed, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O Lord!" The restless heart has only one true home which can truly satisfy it, namely God.

*St. Augustine, direct my
own restless heart towards
its Divine end.*

St. Mary of Egypt

Perhaps no other saint exemplifies the modern-day curse of sexual addiction than St. Mary of Egypt. Born sometime around 344, Mary was typified the decadent culture of the late Roman Empire awash in unbridled hedonism and sensuality. Similar to today's runaway kids, she ran off to Alexandria at the age of twelve where she quickly lost her virginity. For 17 years she engaged in prostitution, more often for sheer pleasure than for the money. In her own confession she relates, "I am ashamed to recall how there, I at first ruined my maidenhood and then unrestrainedly and insatiably gave myself up to sensuality. I was like a fire of public debauch, and it was not for the sake of gain — here I speak the truth. Often when they wished to pay me, I refused the money."

Around the age of 29, Mary joined a pilgrimage to Jerusalem as a kind of "camp follower," looking for sex. Upon trying to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulcher she was barred by some unseen force. She then glanced up at an icon of the Virgin Mary and began to weep. Oh Lady, Mother of God, I have heard that God was born of thee, and became a man purposely to call sinners to repentance. Help me, for I have no other help." After this prayer she was

suddenly able to enter the church. As she venerated a relic of the True Cross inside she heard a voice directing her. “If you cross the Jordan, you will find glorious rest.”

She followed this command and for the next 47 years she wandered the Jordanian desert subsisting on small plants and herbs. She lived a life of austere penance in complete isolation. Many years later St. Zosimus of Palestine found her while making a Lenten retreat in the desert. The story goes that her clothes had long ago rotted away and she was covered only by her long strands of hair. Zosimus threw a cloak about her and counseled her. When he was about to leave she requested that he return and meet her on the banks of the Jordan in one year so that she might receive the Eucharist. This he did, at which time Mary asked him to meet her again in one year in the desert where he had first found her. The following year when he returned he found only her body and a scrawled note declaring that she had died on the night of Holy Thursday, 421 AD. St. Zosimus realized that was the very night after which she had fed on the Eucharist.

Formed from childhood in a culture that literally scoffed at the idea of sexual purity, Mary of Egypt was a true child of the age. Like her contemporary, St. Augustine, she found chastity an impossible virtue to attain until her complete surrender to God’s graces.

She is a true model of hope in our own sex saturated culture where, through peer pressure and internet devices, even twelve-year olds are all too frequently trapped in sexual bonds from which they cannot free themselves.

*St. Mary of Egypt, pray for
our youth.*

Sts. Justina and Cyprian

St. Justina of Antioch lived around the 3rd^h century. As a young pagan woman she became fascinated by the prayers of a Christian deacon and converted to Christianity. After converting, along with her mother and father, a pagan priest, she decided to dedicate her life to Christ as a virgin. Little did she realize that this decision would produce great sacrifice and torment for her. As she would walk to Mass a vain and worldly young man caught sight of her beauty, determined that he must have her. Failing in his initial attempts to seduce Justina he proposed a marriage which she rejected. Finally he attempted to abduct Justina physically but was again thwarted. In anger the rich young man hired a renowned magician of the black arts named Cyprian to unleash a series of lustful demons against Justina.

One day while at prayer she suddenly felt an agitation in her body, a storm of bodily lust for the suitor whom she had rejected. Her blood was boiling as in a kettle; now she thought about that which she had always despised as vile. She cried out for Divine assistance. "O Lord Jesus Christ, my God, my enemies have risen up against me and have prepared a snare for my feet. For Thee I have kept the purity of my body, and to Thee I have entrusted my soul. Preserve Thy

lamb, O good Shepherd. Do not permit the beast which seeks to devour me to consume me, and grant me to prevail over the evil desires of my flesh.”

Upon making the Sign of the Cross the demon fled, yet each time this happened Cyprian would dispatch an even stronger demon, always with the same result. Finally the prince of the demons tried a different strategy. He disguised himself as an older woman and sympathetically engaged Justina in conversation, slyly suggesting that her chastity was in fact something evil because it left no way to populate the world. She chortled, “Imagine if Eve had vowed herself to chastity, where would we now be?” Becoming suspicious at this point Justina made the Sign of the Cross and the old woman vanished.

The magician Cyprian, who had long before made a pact with Satan in order to learn the magical arts, now began to question the devil’s true power. Going to Justina himself he learned that it was the power of the Cross that was defeating the demons. As his loyalty to the devil wavered he was himself attacked by a strong demon. Suddenly he remembered what Justina had told him. He signed himself in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and the devil fled. Renouncing sorcery he pleaded to be accepted into the Christian fold. After his baptism he became a

renowned priest and then a bishop. His success stirred up the hostility of his former pagan associates. Finally, through a campaign of slander and calumny both Cyprian and Justina were condemned to death. After various tortures they were beheaded about the year 268.

*Sts. Justina and Cyprian,
teach us the humility needed
to overpower those demons
in our lives.*

St. John the Long Suffering

Few have ever struggled against lustful passions more than St. John the Long Suffering, a 12th century Ukrainian hermit. Struggling to conquer the demon of lust, John exiled himself for 30 years to the Caves of Lavra outside of Kiev. At one point, tempted to abandon the struggle, he dug a pit and buried himself up to the chest, remaining immobile for the entire Lenten season. Yet even after resorting to such extreme measures, John found little peace.

Once a terrible fire breathing serpent appeared in a vision to torment him, even threatening to devour him, for that is how lust works. It devours one's true humanity and integrity of soul even to the point of appropriating our free will. On the night of Easter the spectral serpent closed its jaws around John who prayed desperately for deliverance. A sudden bolt of lightning flashed through the cave and the evil creature vanished. As John prostrated himself on the ground he cried out, "Lord, why did you leave me so long in torment?" He heard a gentle voice reply, "I tried you according to the power of your endurance so that you may be purified like gold."

We live in an age today that constantly tantalizes and torments our senses through the media, pornography, and even the thoughtless, casual way that strangers adorn and expose their bodies. This presents a spiritual paradox. Those who have more sensitive natures tend to suffer the most in such an environment. Their appreciation for the beauty and goodness with which God imbued his creatures can become in a way the cause for greater temptation, and therefore suffering, in the sensitive soul. Ironically, it is not evil but the very goodness of those things we perceive that make us desire them so intensely. It is only when we desire his gifts more than we desire God, the true gift giver, that we succumb to evil.

As John discovered, the greater our desire the greater will be our struggle, but also the greater the reward will be when we finally master those lesser desires of the heart. Like John, we must learn endurance in the face of temptation so that God can purify us like gold in the crucible of Divine love. He desires that we too will one day shine brilliantly like gold.

*St. John the Long Suffering,
help us to persevere till
death.*

St. Margaret of Cortona

“In times of desolation, God conceals Himself from us so that we can discover for ourselves what we are without Him.” These words of St. Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297) offer a clue as to the vital nature of grace, for in its absence our fallen human nature wastes no time asserting itself. Margaret’s early life serves as a model for today’s youth who increasingly reject marriage in favor of simply living together. Margaret lost her pious mother at the tender age of seven. After her father remarried, her new stepmother became a source of abuse and conflict for the high spirited Margaret. In her home she sought love but found it not. By the age of 17 she had developed great beauty which attracted a young nobleman of Montepulciano. Leaving her wretched home life she ran off to become Arsenio’s mistress, moving into his palace to live the glamorous life of a courtier.

For nine years Margaret lived with her lover even bearing him a son. But it was Arsenio’s unexpected murder that shocked Margaret back to her spiritual senses. Leaving her friends and the palace behind, she moved away with her young son to Cortona where she embarked on a life of prayer, penance, and good works. Becoming a Franciscan tertiary she established a hospital and even founded a congregation of sisters.

Still vital and beautiful she continued to struggle with her passions. “Don’t ask me to give in to this body of mine. I can’t afford it. Between me and my body there must be a struggle until death.” Such frank honesty regarding the temptations of the flesh should certainly make Margaret an inspiration to our own day. She wisely advised, “Hide nothing from your confessor... a sick man can be cured only by revealing his wounds.”

Her rigorous penances caused her confessor to order her to moderate her self denial. That same high spiritedness and love for life that initially led Margaret away from the virtuous path would now make her an exemplary model of Christian motherhood and love. Years later her son would join the Franciscans under her inspiration. In realizing that the first true object of her love had to be God Margaret was then able to learn the proper mode of loving human beings, as persons not as objects of gratification. But first she had to experience the desolation of God hiding himself from her in order to realize her own wretchedness. No person or thing we love in this life can ever be an adequate substitute for God. Ephemeral happiness does not last, just as Margaret experienced, but holy Wisdom drew her up and showed her the true path to happiness.

*May St. Margaret of Cortona
be a model for young people
today*

St. Aloysius Gonzaga

In 1568, Aloysius was baptized in the womb because it was feared he would not survive. Always fragile in health he was nonetheless born into nobility, wealth, and power. At seven he fell seriously ill and the experience made him realize the vanity of his ambitions, for life is short and there is no real security in worldly things. At nine he made a vow of perpetual virginity. As he grew older he confessed that he had strong sexual desires which were undoubtedly inflamed by the courtly life of Renaissance Italy. In order to counter these strong influences he turned to the example of the great saints. He sought self-mastery in three ways: through prayer, custody of his eyes, and an austere lifestyle.

He regarded prayer as a moist dew which covers the dry grass and brush so that it will not be somehow ignited. He daily prayed the Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the seven Penitential Psalms. Every midnight he arose to pray on the cold stone floor and daily filled his mind with divine meditations. He learned to keep his eyes lowered in the presence of women and to control any natural curiosity. Aloysius took seriously the words of Christ, “But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already

committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Mt 5:28)
From the age of 13 Aloysius fasted three days a week on bread and water and even scourged himself in order to master his hot-blooded nature.

He was acquainted with St. Charles Borromeo from whom he first received the Eucharist. At the age of 16 Aloysius joined the Jesuit order becoming a model novice. In 1591 the plague broke out in Rome. Aloysius volunteered to nurse the plague victims despite his own fragile health. Soon he contracted the dreaded disease and, shortly after receiving the last rites from St. Robert Bellarmine, He died at the age of 23. In 1600 St. Margaret de Pazzi had a vision of Aloysius, describing him as “radiant in his glory because of his interior works, a hidden martyr to his great love of God.” Pope Benedict XIII proclaimed Aloysius as the patron and model of Christian youth. Today he is also the patron of young students as well as AIDS patients and their caregivers.

*St. Aloysius Gonzaga,
protect the morals of all
young people.*

Inspirational story of St. Maria Goretti and Alessandro Serenelli

The story of Maria Goretti's martyrdom is well known but it was the conversion of her killer, in the aftermath of her death, that makes her story so compelling. Alessandro Serenelli was seemingly born under a curse. As an infant his own mother had tried to drown him and was taken to a psychiatric hospital where she died a few months later. His father was a poor laborer who ended up working as a farm hand on the same farm where Maria's mother, Asunta Goretti, labored while trying to hold her own family together after the death of her husband. The 20 year old Alessandro began taking an unhealthy interest in 11 year old Maria. He began sexually harassing her with vile comments and suggestions which Maria rebuffed reminding Alessandro that this could only lead to mortal sin.

On July 5, 1902 Alessandro, frustrated by her refusals, attacked Maria with a 10" awl, brutally stabbing her 14 times, each wound corresponding to a

station of the cross commemorating Our Lord's own passion. Before she died the next day, Maria pointedly forgave Alessandro who was nevertheless sentenced to spend the next 30 years in prison — and that only because he was legally considered a minor. For those first few years in prison Serenelli was a hardened convict. His life had been miserable from the start and now anger and bitterness poured like bile from the depths of his soul. That is, until one night in a dream he saw Maria in a beautiful field smiling at him. In her arms were 14 white lilies, a symbol of purity. One by one she handed him 14 lilies, one for each of the dagger wounds he had inflicted on her.

The next morning Alessandro awoke with tears in his eyes. He summoned the guards and asked for a priest to be sent to him. After making a sincere confession, the old Alessandro became a new man; a model prisoner, so much so that he was released early in 1929. Profoundly ashamed yet sincerely repentant, it took him five more years to dare approach Maria's mother, Asunta Goretti. At Christmas of 1934 Alessandro showed up on her doorstep to beg her forgiveness for the terrible crime he had inflicted on her eldest daughter. Her reply was simple and plain spoken. "Alessandro, Maria forgave you and God forgives you, how could I not forgive you?" That night they attended midnight Mass together.

Alessandro eventually joined the Capuchin friary in Marche where he served faithfully as a lay brother for 24 years until his death in 1970. During that time the young girl he had murdered many decades earlier was canonized in 1950. Half a million people were present at that ceremony, including Maria's mother Asunta and her younger brother Mariano. Mariano had been the only soldier of his unit to survive a charge against German machine guns during the First World War, after he heard Maria's voice instructing him to stay in the trench. Pope Pius XII called Maria the St. Agnes of the 20th century in his address to the crowd. The pope then challenged the young people present, "Are you determined to resist any attack on your chastity with the help of the grace of God?" The thunderous response was, "*Si, Si!* — Yes, Yes. Sadly, only three years later one of the early vanguards of a new sexual revolution appeared on the streets, called *Playboy Magazine*.

In May of 1961 Alessandro Serenelli dictated a will in which he testified about the corrosive nature of pornography, much tamer as it was in 1902, and other related influences that had led to his own depraved actions. "My behavior was influenced by print, mass media, and bad examples which are followed by the

majority of young people without even thinking. And I did the same. I was not worried.” After this cautionary warning he proceeds to give the credit where it is due. “Maria Goretti, now a saint, was my Good Angel, sent to me through Providence to guide and save me. I still have impressed upon my heart her words of rebuke and of pardon. She prayed for me; she interceded for her murderer.

“I hope this letter can teach others the happy lesson of avoiding evil and always following the right path, like little children.” Alessandro Serenelli learned from hard experience how destructive the spirit of lust can become. But in the end, through God’s abundant grace, he modeled his own life on the very child he once tried to rape. Still, his dramatic conversion would never have occurred without the unconditional forgiveness of Maria herself. His story represents one of the most powerful examples of conversion in our modern age — a story which must be shared with all young people today so that they can realize the true power of virtue, even as they struggle in a world which scorns virtue. We must all become like little children if we ever hope to see the vision of God. Maria Goretti, as a child of 11, willingly gave her life rather than plunge herself and her attacker into terrible sin, and yet how often are we quite willing to go there? Children in their innocence can teach us a great deal that we, as

adults, have too often long forgotten. Our Lord always speaks most lovingly of children. They are doubly blessed because their angels never cease to gaze on the face of God.

*St. Maria Goretti, keep me
ever on the Road to Purity.*
