

**St. Margaret of Cortona  
(Italy) (1247-1297)**

**Incarnate**

*Franciscan Tertiary and Mystic*

*Initially provided nursing care to sick ladies, then  
served the sick poor without recompense, subsisting solely on alms.*

*Established a hospital in Cortona.*

*Founded Confraternity of Our Lady of Mercy to care for sick.<sup>1</sup>*



St. Margaret of Cortona  
by Giovanni Battista Piazzetta

**Saint Margaret of Cortona** was born in Laviano, Tuscany (Italy, near Perugia), in 1247. Her father was a farmer. In 1254, when she was seven years old, her mother died. She found it difficult to live with her step-mother.

At the age of 14, she left home and lived with a young 16-year old son of a local baron from Montepulciano named Arsenio, with whom she bore a son. She lived with him in the family castle as his mistress for nine years. Arsenio was murdered. This she discovered when his dog returned home without him and then led her to the forest to his decaying corpse.

The crime shocked Margaret into a life of penance. She returned with her son to Laviano but was not welcomed by her father or stepmother. She then moved to Cortona where she received asylum from the Friars Minor of Cortona. Margaret still had difficulty overcoming the temptations of the flesh. One Sunday she returned to Laviano with a cord around her neck. At Mass, she asked for pardon for her past scandal. She attempted to mutilate her face but was prevented by Friar Giunta.

She earned a living providing nursing care to sick ladies. She then began serving the sick poor without recompense and subsisted solely on alms. She became such a skilled midwife that many women insisted that only Margaret deliver their infants.<sup>2</sup>

In 1277, at the age of 30, Margaret became a Franciscan tertiary and pursued a life of prayer and penance at Cortona. Her son became a Franciscan Friar a few years later.

Margaret was a mystic and received messages from God some of which were recorded by Friar Giunta. She was said to be in direct contact with Jesus and received frequent ecstasies.

Around 1286 A.D., she received a charter allowing her to work for the sick poor on a permanent basis. She founded a hospital in 1288 and worked there as a nurse, preferring to serve those with the most repulsive diseases. She formed a group of tertiaries called The Poverelle or “Little Poor Sisters” to care for the ill, serving in the hospital she had established in Cortona. She also founded the confraternity of Our Lady of Mercy,<sup>3</sup> composed of people, like herself, who were penitent over past sexual sins, to serve the city’s poor.

Some people accused Margaret of having illicit relations with Friar Giunta. However, this she disregarded and continued to teach against vice, and through her, many returned to the sacraments. Sinners were drawn to her for advice and inspiration. She was devoted to the Eucharist and to the Passion of Jesus Christ.

She was divinely infused with the knowledge of the day and hour of her death. She died peacefully on February 22, 1297, after having spent 29 years performing acts of penance. Many miracles occurred at her grave, including the raising of twelve persons. Her body is incorrupt and visible beneath the main altar of the Basilica of Cortona.<sup>3</sup>

Canonized in 1728 by Pope Benedict XIII. Patron saint of falsely accused, hoboos, homeless, insane, orphaned, mentally ill, midwives, penitents, single mothers, reformed prostitutes, third children, tramps.<sup>4</sup> (Memorial February 22)

St. Margaret of Cortona, Penitent, (February 22), from Rev. Alban Butler's (1883) *Lives of Saints*, Loreto Publications:<sup>5</sup>

Margaret was a native of Laviano, in Tuscany. The harshness of a stepmother, and her own indulged propension to vice, cast her headlong into the greatest disorders. The sight of the carcass of a man, half putrefied, who had been her gallant, struck her with so great a fear of the divine judgments, and with so deep a sense of the treachery of this world, that she in a moment became a perfect penitent. The first thing she did was throw herself at her father's feet, bathed in tears, to beg his pardon for her contempt of his authority and fatherly admonitions. She spent the days and nights in tears; and to repair the scandal she had given by her crimes, she went to the parish church of Laviano, with a rope about her neck, and there asked public pardon for them. After this she repaired to Cortona, and made her most penitent confession to a father of the order of St. Francis, who admired the great sentiments of compunction with which she was filled, and prescribed her austerities and practices suitable to her fervor. Her conversion happened in the year 1274, the twenty-fifth of her age. She was assaulted by violent temptations of various kinds, but courageously overcame them, and after a trial of three years, was admitted to her profession among the penitents of the third order of St. Francis, in Cortona. The extraordinary austerities with which she punished her criminal flesh soon disfigured her body. To exterior mortification she joined all sorts of humiliations; and the confusion with which she was covered at the sight of her own sins, pushed her on continually to invent many extraordinary means of drawing upon herself all manner of confusion before men. This model of true penitents, after twenty-three years spent in severe penance, and twenty of them in the religious habit, being worn out by austerities, and consumed by the fire of divine love, died on 22<sup>nd</sup> of February, in 1297. After the proof of many miracles, Leo X granted an office in her honor to the city of Cortona, which Urban VIII extended to the whole Franciscan order, in 1623; and she was canonized by Benedict XIII in 1728.

*From her life written by her confessor, in the Acta Sanctorum; by Bollandus, p. 298. Wadding, Annal. FF. Minorum ad an. 1297; and the Lives of the SS. of Third Ord. Barb. T. 1, p. 508. A. D. 1297.*

---

#### References:

- 1) Catholic Online. St. Margaret of Cortona. Accessed 9 May 2022.  
[https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=234](https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=234)
- 2) Thomas Craughwell. St. Margaret of Cortona: A saint for single mothers. Accessed 26 May 2022.  
<https://www.simplycatholic.com/st-margaret-of-cortona/>
- 3) Confraternity of Our Lady of Mercy. Accessed 9 May 2022. <http://confraternityofourladyofmercy.org/>
- 4) Francois Mauriac. Saint Margaret of Cortona. Accessed 26 May 2022.  
[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1828786.Saint\\_Margaret\\_of\\_Cortona](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1828786.Saint_Margaret_of_Cortona)
- 5) Reverend Alban Butler (1883). *The Lives of the Saints* as republished by Loreto Publications: Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 2020. Book Two, Vol. II & III, 184-185.

Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses ([www.ciciams.org](http://www.ciciams.org) / [www.nacn-usa.org](http://www.nacn-usa.org)): *to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients, bring salvation to souls.* May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at [www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka](http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka)