

Pietro Di Donato's 'The Penitent' tells the story of Maria Goretti's tragic death from her perspective—and her murderer's



Joe Pagetta

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I give you thanks, Lord and King,
I praise you, God my savior!
I declare your name, refuge of my life,
because you have ransomed my life from death;
You held back my body from the pit,
and delivered my foot from the power of Sheol.

-Sirach 51: 1-2

It is 1961, and the author and essayist Pietro Di Donato is lying on a bed in a room at the Capuchin monastery in Macerata, Italy. He has come here to interview Alessandro Serenelli, the murderer in 1902 of Maria Goretti, for a book he is writing. Serenelli is 80 years old and a lay brother of the secular third order of the Capuchin Franciscans. When Di Donato visits, Serenelli is recovering from cataract surgery. No longer able to labor, he lives a life of peace and prayer in anonymity among the friars.

*What is clear from *The Penitent* is that Maria Goretti's body was never her own.*

Maria, 11 years old when she was murdered by the then-20 year old Serenelli, is now a saint, canonized on June 24, 1950 by Pope Pius XII in a ceremony in St. Peter's Square. It was attended by a crowd estimated between 300,000 to 500,000 people, including her mother. In the book *The Penitent*, Di Donato writes of the moment:

In my monastery room I lay abed thinking about the wonders of faith. The misfortune of Alessando's life is counterpoised by the forgiveness and intercession of his victim who guided him to penance and God. If her grace had not reached him, overwhelming darkness would have been his fate. The Catholic faith elevated Maria Goretti to her whole worth, and salvaged the soul of Alessandro.

The Penitent would come out the year after Di Donato visited the monastery and cap off a dizzyingly prolific five years for the writer; a stunning second wind for someone best known for a book that had come out more than 20 years earlier, 1939's *Christ in Concrete*.

In 1958, Di Donato emerged from decades of writing magazine articles, short stories and essays, and published his second novel, *This Woman*, which the Chicago Sun-Times called “hot and tempestuous ... that occasionally flashes like lightning.” Two years later, he published two books—*Three Circles of Light*, a prequel of sorts to *Christ in Concrete*, and *Immigrant Saint: The Life of Mother Cabrini*, his first foray into book-length nonfiction.

The passage in the monastery comes near the end of *The Penitent* and acts as a coda. It is then that you realize everything you have read up that point, the detailed descriptions of Serenelli and Maria’s hard lives at the turn of the century as sharecroppers with their families—Serenelli with his father, and Maria with her mother, Assunta, and brothers and sisters—come in part from the interviews he is about to have with Serenelli. Outside of court transcripts and news reports (“I knew there was just so much I could learn from the living,” writes Di Donato a few pages earlier), much of what we know outside of the most public details, Di Donato hasn’t learned yet. It is a powerful literary device that makes clear the reverence and discernment with which Di Donato is treating, and has treated, the story.

Maria Goretti’s entire skeletal remains, save for her right arm and various bone fragments, toured the United States in 2015.

Maria’s story

What is clear from *The Penitent* is that Maria’s body was never her own. At 11 years old, readying for her First Communion, she believed her body belonged to Christ. And Serenelli, at 20 years old, believed the body of the “... little nun in rags, a holy, pious little girl, always speaking of God, of Jesus and the saints” belonged to him.

While her family was busy threshing beans in the barn and his father lying ill under the stairs, Serenelli lured her into the upstairs kitchen of the house they shared. When Maria rejected his attempt to rape her, and declared that she would choose “Death, but not sin!”, he grabbed a brush hook and stabbed her 14 times. She died the next day, on July 6, 1902, forgiving Serenelli on her deathbed.

Writes Di Donato:

Marietta pressed her crucifix to her lips. Her eyes closed. It was as if a specter appeared before her, for she raised her arms defensively, and a final breath cried, ‘What are you doing, Alessandro? Your soul will go to Hell! No, Alessandro! Your soul is meant for Paradise ... I forgive you, Alessandro.’

Maria was a virgin martyr. Her body was buried in the city cemetery in Nettuno, Italy, close to where she lived and was murdered. Twenty-seven years later, in 1929, per Italian custom, her skeletal remains were disinterred from the plot in the cemetery to be placed in a mass grave. Hers were no ordinary bones though.

In the almost three decades following her murder, decades in which Serenelli sat behind bars, a case was being made for her canonization by the Passionist Fathers, the congregation serving the town of Nettuno, where she died. As detailed in the March 18, 1929 issue of the newspaper, *The People*, and quoted by Di Donato:

All were concord that the remains of the dear young girl were not to be dispersed to the indiscriminate community bone-heap, but there was a difference of opinion as the location of the new sepulchre. The archpriest Don Marinelli of Corinaldo wanted her birthplace of Corinaldo honored with her final resting place, but the Passionist Fathers instead wanted her to rest in Nettuno, in the area of the scene of her martyrdom, and already had a sanctuary prepared for her...

A compromise was reached. After being placed briefly in the Sisters of the Cross Chapel, her remains were donated by her mother to the Passionists and placed in the Sanctuary of Nostra Signora delle Grazie (Our Lady of Grace) in Nettuno. They still sit there, encased in a wax figure within a glass and marble reliquary designed by the sculptor

Ugo Zaccagnini. At the time of the donation, her right arm was separated from the rest of the remains—it was with her right arm that Maria defended herself against Serenelli—and donated to the Church of St. Nicholas in her hometown of Corinaldo. The church is now known as the sanctuary of Saint Maria Goretti and the arm is contained within a reliquary above the high altar.

Maria's entire skeletal remains, save for her right arm and various bone fragments, toured the United States in 2015. Maria's body, never her own, now belongs to us.

While Serenelli's remains are intact and interred at the Casa Natale di Santa Maria Goretti (after being moved from the cemetery of Macerata in 2007), Di Donato makes the case that perhaps his body, and especially his mind, was never his own either.

“The peasant's life was less secure than that of the oxen,” writes Di Donato as an omniscient narrator of Serenelli's young thoughts.

Serenelli, before and after

“The peasant's life was less secure than that of the oxen,” writes Di Donato as an omniscient narrator of Serenelli's young thoughts. “The oxen were carefully fed and stabled. Who was there to feed the sharecroppers? No one but the mute statues of God and the saints—who never answered prayers.”

“What mysterious law decreed that one man could possess thousands of acres,” he adds, “and hundreds of peasants be subjected to him and his land?”

Serenelli is disaffected to the point of nihilism. But he is literate, and the news he reads only exacerbates his condition.

“The periodicals of the day reflected the government's anti-clerical attitudes, fostering criminal and socially inflammatory stories appealing to the masses,” writes Di Donato. “It was fashionable to pass down the shocking philosophies of the vain, each of whom vied to outdo the other with the embellishment of horror, all of which was heralded and blazoned in cheap print.”

“He had read much that ridiculed religion, church and priests, and reasoned that if the mockery were not based on truth it would not have been printed,” Di Donato adds. “Therefore, the printed word was oracle.”

That they were published made them something more than persuasive to Serenelli. These stories were to be absorbed and, if necessary, imitated. Serenelli recalls reading an account of a prostitute killed by a lover witnessed by the French writer Stendahl in the 1830s. At the trial, Stendahl proclaimed, “the murderer had more soul in him than all the poets, and more wit than the gentleman judging him.” Serenelli would underline phrases in books and periodicals that struck him, many of them involving crimes of passion.

Serenelli was 20 when he killed Maria, Di Donato reminds us, and additionally oppressed by irrepressible desire. His walls were adorned by erotic images of women he would never have.

Five years into his 30-year prison sentence, a time in which he remained unrepentant for his crime, Maria appeared to Serenelli in a dream.

[Marietta] was walking among flowers toward him, smiling and without the least fear. He wanted to flee from her but could not. Marietta picked white lilies and handed them to him saying, "Alessandro, take them." But a strange thing took place. As he received them from her fingers the lilies did not remain lilies but changed into so many splendid flaming lights. There was a lily turned to purifying flame for every one of the fourteen mortal blows he struck her on the fatal day in Ferriere. Marietta said smilingly, "Alessandro, as I have promised, your soul shall someday reach me in heaven."

Serenelli's conversion began the very next morning. Even his fellow prisoners could not deny what had happened to him. As one of them, a deeply religious Sardinian, told him, "The soul of the girl you slew came to you in that dream with the message that she seeks to save you. She wants to be your intercessor. You are fortunate, Serenelli, and will be saved."

Di Donato says that Pope John XXIII and Cardinal Giuseppe Pizzardo felt that Goretta did not merit being a saint.

A double tragedy

A brutal, callous, would-be rapist and murderer is suddenly converted in his mid-20s while in prison by the appearance of his murder victim in a dream. It's enough to capture the fascination of any Catholic who believes in the power of redemption. I have heard the story used dozens of times in homilies as a profound example of God's grace and forgiveness. I have also seen the story of the murder used as an illustration of the horrors of sin.

Father Wade Menezes, in the introduction to his book, *Overcoming the Evil Within: The Reality of Sin and the Transforming Power of God's Grace and Mercy*, uses the story to illustrate how Maria chose death to save Serenelli from sin. Writes Menezes: "So devastating is sin that Maria was seemingly more concerned about Alessandro not committing one than she was about even preserving her life..."

It is a strange take, to put that much on an 11-year-old girl.

And then there is the story from 1962, when Di Donato presented a copy of *The Penitent* to Pope John XXIII and Cardinal Giuseppe Pizzardo (who wrote a glowing letter of support that appeared as the front page to *The Immigrant Saint*). Di Donato says that the pope and cardinal felt that Goretta did not merit being a saint.

"I was shocked," said Di Donato in an interview with Matthew Diomedes for the latter's 1990 book, *Pietro Di Donato, the Master Builder*. "If she would have given in," he was told by the pope and cardinal, "she would have been alive. Two lives would not have been destroyed and there would have been children; they would be all Catholic. He would have married her."

Maria's body, after all, was not her own.

Di Donato is clearly disappointed by this response. "It was a culmination which I did not write after the book because that would be anticlimax," he tells Diomedes.

Maria Goretta is now the patron saint of chastity, modesty, rape victims, girls, youth, teenage girls, poverty, purity and forgiveness. Alessandro Serenelli is a symbol of sin redeemed by God's grace and forgiveness. That is what Di Donato appears to be grappling with as he lays in his bed at the Capuchin monastery in Macerata. For none of that is why he set out to write *The Penitent*.

He is wondering who Serenelli is without the "forgiveness and intercession" that salvages his soul. Or who Maria was before the "faith that elevated her to her whole worth." Is Serenelli a monster meant to serve only as a homilist's anecdote about repentance and God's forgiveness? And Maria only as a poster child for chastity and sacrifice in the fight against sin?

As he did so masterfully with his mother, father and extended family of first-generation Italian Americans in *Christ in Concrete*, and Mother Cabrini in *The Immigrant Saint*, Di Donato is interested in people, in inequality and in the poor and marginalized. Maria and Serenelli were exactly those people — peasants from sharecropper families whose chances of rising beyond their station in life were slim to nonexistent. Until, that is, their double tragedy.

“I wrote it because it was a human story,” he told Diomedea. “There was no mythological happening; it was all life as it is.”



Joe Pagetta

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