

2nd Thursday of Lent
March 24, 2011
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Text in blue font was omitted for brevity in the preached homily.

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalms 1

Luke 16:19-31

It is a great joy and privilege to be here today, to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving in this impressive oratory. Since the time I arrived in town last night, I have been very impressed with what I have seen here at the campus, it has far exceeded my expectations. As I celebrate this Mass of Thanksgiving for my ordination to the priesthood, I do so with much gratitude for the role that Ave Maria played in my vocational journey. In fact, when I recount the story of how God helped everything fall into place through Ave Maria; and of how my time at Ave Maria gave me a great preparation for the seminary and now to the priesthood, it always brings a big smile to my face.

One of the ways my faith and intellect was transformed during my time at Ave Maria was how the Bible became much more real to me. In various courses, especially in typology, I learned how Catholics are to read the Bible; in particular, the 4-fold senses of scripture. That not only is the Bible true in the properly-understood literal sense; but that the Holy Spirit also inspired the Biblical authors in ways beyond what they could have ever known, by including deep truths that can be found in the anagogical, allegorical and moral senses of scripture. With this recognition, we can understand today's gospel parable not only as a story about the reversal of fortunes across the divide between Earth and eternity of the previously-ignored poor man and the rich man who failed to care for him and Abraham's unwillingness to send a special messenger to warn the rich man's brothers so that they do not end in the same fate. Through the allegorical sense, we can also understand that this is a story about Jesus. About His relationship with those who were more concerned with their status, riches, or power than with concern for those in need in their midst. It tells of the elites of Israel who ignored the message of the prophets over the centuries before Jesus, and how they are ignoring Jesus' message of freedom, love and truth; and will continue to ignore the message even after Jesus dies and rises from the dead. Furthermore, its meaning is not limited to the elite of Israel; today's gospel speaks to all people throughout history who have acted in persistent injustice in the spite of Jesus' preaching. It also speaks of those more generally who have refused to accept Him as their savior.

A second great fruit of my learning at Ave Maria was coming to know the life of St. Maria Goretti. The catalyst for this learning was my service as the last Student Government President at the Ave Maria College campus up in Michigan. In the course of the challenges involved in Ave Maria's transition to Florida, I came to recognize ever more deeply the importance of forgiveness. In fact, the primary objective of my student government presidency was to be an instrument of reconciliation, and as I prayed about how to do that, I felt inspired to do so under the patronage of Maria Goretti, a saint about whom I knew little, actually nothing, when I began.

Since I realize that some of you, too, might not be familiar with Maria's story, let me give you a thumbnail sketch. Maria was a devout girl who lived in Italy at the turn of the 20th

Century. Her parents were peasant farmers. Due to their poverty, they had to share a house with another family, who had an older boy. Unfortunately, that boy, Alessandro, was ensnared in an addiction to pornography and through it, came to objectify his 11-year old housemate Maria. After several failed attempts to lure her into sexual acts, one day when all the adults were in the fields working and he was alone with Maria in the home, he resorted to force. When she was unwilling to engage in sin with him; he stabbed her 14 times, and she died hours later. During her painful last few hours, Maria, following the example of Jesus, forgave Alessandro and prayed for his conversion. Alessandro was soon convicted for her murder and expressed no remorse. A number of years later, however, in his jail cell, the hardened Alessandro had a vision experience of Maria visiting him in her heavenly glory. This appearance led to an incredible conversion. Upon his release from prison, Alessandro lived a life of penitence. He apologized to Maria's mother, became a monk, and was present with her mother in St. Peter's Square when Maria was canonized a saint almost 50 years after her death. It is a beautiful story of conversion catalyzed by Maria's forgiveness.

What called the story of Maria to mind in preparing this homily was how God gave Alessandro the vision of Maria for the sake of his conversion. This stands in sharp contrast to the gospel parable, in which the tormented rich man's plea for a beyond-the-grave message to his family members was denied. This divergence, in turn, raises questions. Why would God allow a message from beyond the grave from Maria to Alessandro, but not in the parable?

Let me propose two reasons. The first is the motivation for the request. As Maria was dying, her plea for the conversion of Alessandro's soul was the highest form of charity. A true act of Christian love. One of the best imitations of Jesus that can be seen. In contrast, the request of the rich man in hell is more self-centered, albeit in many ways still noble. It can be a bit jarring to the listener, in fact, that his request is denied. But his selfish attitude becomes most clear when he begins by asking for Lazarus to come from heaven and serve him in hell. We can also speculate on motives of family honor, etc. that would lead the tormented man to desire his family's conversion for less than fully selfless reasons.

The second is that While I could think of several reasons for the difference, one is found in our first reading: that the Lord probes and knows our hearts. God does not desire that anyone be damned, although He does give us that option in love; in love because He gave us the gift of free will and respects our decisions. He will often go to great lengths to give us additional chances to repent and turn to Him. But because God knows us through and through, He knows what is pointless and what is possible when it comes to conversion. What God knows about us is sometimes a surprise to those on the outside. After all, from the outside, one would assume that highly educated, highly religious Pharisees would convert long before an uneducated, pornography addict, failed rapist turned murderer. Yet God knows our human hearts. Just as God knew the heart of David when he guided Samuel to select Jesse's youngest son of 8 as the next king, God knew that the hearts of certain religious and cultural leaders were hardened to the core, that they would not even repent when a prophet, when the fulfillment of the scriptures that they knew inside and out, rose from the dead. He also knew that the seemingly hardened criminal had a heart that could be converted when placed in contact with the miraculous.

This can serve as a powerful lesson to those engaged in studies at a thoroughly Catholic university that ultimately it is not how much theology or philosophy that we know in our head which pleases God... although knowing more should lead us to what God really wants from us.

God wants us to know Him in His Trinitarian fullness in our hearts, and then to live out what we know by living holy lives in faith; following His commands; and following the promptings of the Holy Spirit by living-out His voice in our unique lives; fulfilling the vocation for which He created us in love.

The life of St. Maria Goretti gives us [two](#) additional lessons that make her an excellent example of following Christ in our day, [especially for those not yet married](#).

The first is Maria's Christ-like example of forgiveness. Echoing the words of Jesus dying on the cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" Maria on her deathbed prayed for the conversion of her attacker, her murderer Alessandro. And while it took longer for him to convert than it did for St. Longinus, the Roman soldier who thrust the lance into the side of Jesus on the cross and then became a Christian; through Maria's prayers and her intercession, Alessandro did ultimately convert. In every age there is evil; and our age is no exception. We don't have to look far to see people being treated unjustly. We don't have to look far to see people used in various ways; and at times even killed. Wounds in need of forgiveness can also be inflicted when people of good will and good intentions, but of different vision, come in conflict with one another. A world based upon strict justice and revenge, which is what our natural hearts desire, would be a world of escalating violence and great misery. The only way to break what could become a cycle of violence is to forgive. When someone like Maria is able to forgive, it impacts others. In fact, we see this in Maria's life. Years after her death, when Alessandro requested forgiveness from Maria's mother; her response was: "If Maria could forgive you, how can I not."

I had also intended to speak of how Maria is a witness for our time of sexual purity. However, since I understand that some of you need to get to lunch and class, I will refrain from that today. [Second, Maria is a beautiful witness of sexual purity. Maria could have easily lived as long as she did not actively repel Alessandro's forceful advance. One could ask, why die to remain a virgin? In the culture in which we live, a culture in which many teenagers of Maria's age or not much older are at least figuratively dying to lose their virginity, why could she not have just let it happen to her? Maria, although not schooled in the Theology of the Body, knew that she possessed fundamental dignity as a young woman and did not want to sin gravely, did not want her nor Alessandro to go to hell. As such, she is a great role model in a culture in which young women, and young men for that matter, do not understand their dignity nor the significance of their sexuality. We furthermore live in a culture in which modesty is in even more scarcely practiced than virginity until marriage, even by those who live out the latter. With this in mind, it is my pastoral aspiration that someday, unmarried young women and men will, in a more formal way, come together in Christian brotherhood and sisterhood under the patronage of St. Maria Goretti to encourage one another, to help support one another to live out the life of virtue, modesty, and virginal dignity that God desires for all who are not married. God does desire modesty and virtue of married persons as well, just lived out in a different way.](#)

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist, a word that means Thanksgiving, let me conclude this homily with a couple more words of thanksgiving for the great preparation for the priesthood that I received at Ave Maria. First, gratitude for the many faithful students with whom I learned, including my pre-theology roommate who will be ordained to the priesthood in May. Gratitude, as well, for the many dedicated staff members and excellent faculty from whom I learned and grew in faith at Ave Maria. Gratitude to Fr. Ed Fride, who served as a role model to many of us

as the AMC pre-theology director during my era, and who is also celebrating his birthday today. Gratitude to Carole Carpenter, still here at Ave Maria, who was God's special instrument in helping me find my path to the priesthood through Ave Maria. And last but certainly not least, gratitude to Chancellor Mognahan for his great vision and great generosity in establishing Ave Maria.

My hope and prayer is that each of the students here at Ave Maria, and for that matter all who are here today to celebrate Mass, will open your hearts ever more fully to what God wants to teach you: to how God wants to work through you; so that someday you are able to return here in one way or another and testify to how during your years at Ave Maria you were well-prepared for fulfilling the wonderful vocation that God has lovingly given you, whatever that might be. Furthermore, let us leave here today resolved to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, and of His modern disciple St. Maria Goretti. Let us follow the example of forgiveness; let us follow the example of purity. With our minds and hearts formed by what we have learned at Ave Maria, let us be joyful and forgiving instruments and witnesses of God's faith, hope and love to all who we meet.