

# MARGERITA DE BRINCAT

Benefactress of Malta and Gozo  
on the fiftieth anniversary of her death

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Early in the morning of 22 January 1952 – fifty years ago this year – Mother Margerita De Brincat, foundress of the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart, breathed her very last. She was just past her eighty-ninth birthday.

Virginja De Brincat — the founder picked up by God — was born on 28 November, 1862, the eighth child of Mikelang De Brincat and Katerina Gauci. She was christened on the same day at the parish church of Saint George, Rabat, and named Virginja, Guzeppa, Marija Govanna. Her parents were married on 21 June 1842 and they lived at number 3, Strada San Gregorio, in an area known as Taht il-Gifen, a stone's throw from the church of Saint Gregory, Kercem. They had nine children in all, four boys and five girls. As all the children of her time, as soon as she could utter some words, she was instructed to make the sign of the cross, say the Our Father and the Hail Mary, and other simple prayers. Contrary to the custom in the second half of the nineteenth century she also had the good fortune of being sent to school.

Living next to Saint Gregory's, she must have been close to Dun Guzepp Diacono (1847–1924), a priest from Rabat, who became vicegerent in 1875. Virginja was past her twelfth birthday and the arrival of a new

priest could not have gone unnoticed. On the doorstep of puberty, she probably began sharing with him her most intimate thoughts. It was thus sometime after June

1875 that Dun Guzepp and Virginja, destined to undertake together a great mission for the greater glory of God, met for the first time.

## A crown of twelve stars

Between 1673 and 1675, Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690), a Visitation sister at Paray-le-Monial in Burgundy, experienced four visions of Jesus Christ. She was charged to promote the devotion towards His heart as symbolising his love for mankind, which men and women so often reject. In

one of the visions, Jesus directed her: "I want to gather around my heart a crown of twelve stars made up of my most loveable and faithful servants."

Sometime in 1877, through the instigation of Father Pietro Digiorgi, an Italian Jesuit working in Gozo, the first *Twelve-starred Crown* group was formed in Rabat, Gozo. Virginja became a star of the Sacred Heart on 8 December 1877, as attested by a diploma which she treasured all her life. She was just past her fifteenth birthday.

On Friday, 4 January 1878, Dun Guzepp



Diacono, the priest she had known at Kerzem, took over the running of the group. Slowly but surely, the most motivated members were guided to dedicate their whole life to God. On 15 August 1880, the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart was born in a humble house on the outskirts of Rabat, Gozo.

Virginja, though one of the most enthusiastic stars, was not among this group as she was still too young. However, convinced of her determination to dedicate herself to God and to abandon the vanities of the world, Dun Guzepp decided to make an exception. On 5 February 1881, he admitted her as a postulant at the *Casa di Carità*, as the first convent was called. Her parents Mikelang and Katerina led her there in person as a sign of compliance with the will of God and hers.

The postulanship of Virginja lasted only a fortnight. On Sunday, 20 February 1881, in a vesting ceremony organised specifically for her, Dun Guzepp gave the habit to Virginja. She was christened in the Order as *Maestra Virginia della Beata Margerita*.

Attests Mother Pacifika Xuereb, a contemporary: "She was a prompt, enterprising, quick-witted, sensible person and from the beginning of her novitiate she demonstrated signs of a soul favoured by the Lord. She mortified her body, fasted almost the whole week, and was very rigorous towards herself."

Though still a novice, Dun Guzepp trusted her fully and directed her to do secretarial work. That choice was also partly dictated by the fact that she was fluent in both Italian and French. She employed the rest of her time imparting catechism lessons to children and teaching lace-making to the older females; she excelled in lace-making.

### **The kiss of life**

The Congregation in the meantime continued to grow. On 15 January 1882, the sisters were

transferred to a larger house in Strada Palma in the heart of Rabat, where eventually a large convent with a spacious chapel were built. A second house was opened in Qala on 1 January 1885 and a third in Birkirkara on 31 May of the same year.

In the passion narrative, Saint Mark records that Pilate *realised it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over* (Mark 15, 10). The jealousy that led Jesus to the cross was to crucify also Dun Guzepp. Some were jealous of his achievements and went out of their way to distance him from his foundation.

Aggrieved that the bishop had deprived him of all authority over the Congregation he had founded and afflicted by debts, Dun Guzepp began to lose heart. One morning, probably on Saturday, 8 October, 1887, he went to the Mother House and, in a moment of depression and dejection, decided to dismantle the project he had built over the past nine years.

That same day, about eleven in the morning, Virginja De Brincat, who was visiting Birkirkara convent, felt an inner urge to return instantly to the mother house. She sped to the Grand Harbour to catch the afternoon trip of the steamship *Gleneagles* to Gozo. Late in the afternoon, she arrived at the *Casa di Carità* where everything was in utter confusion. Dun Guzepp was evaluating church items so as to sell them and pay the debts. Some sisters had already taken off the habit and put on secular garb to return home. As Dun Guzepp saw Virginja in front of him, he panicked, gave her a piercing glance, and asked her: "Why have come? Who sent for you?" She knelt down and began explaining: "I felt an inner urge to come immediately." Speaking angrily he cut her shortly: "Then see yourself who is going to take care of the community, who is going to pay."

Virginja, still kneeling with her head bowed down, proceeded with a broken voice: "Father, with the help of God, I feel that I can shoulder this responsibility."

At the age of twenty five, Virginja took upon her shoulders the burden of the Congregation, gave it the kiss of life, and saved it from an abrupt end. For all this she has since been considered founder of the present Congregation.

On 10 June 1889, Virginja, then already known as Madre Margerita, was elected by the General Chapter as the first Superior General.

### *In the five continents*

Dun Guzepp did not for one moment regret what he had done; on the contrary: "I bless one thousand times over all that I have done for the community and hope, as long as the Lord helps me to persevere, that I will so remain for as long as it is required,"

he wrote in a letter to Madre Margerita. And he concluded with a really prophetic utterance: "Courage! Entertain no doubts, the Lord will never cease to help you." Virginja herself could not understand at that moment how much she would be in need of God's help.

Under her providential direction, the Congregation continued to spread. The first convent abroad was opened on the Greek island of Corfù on 28 May 1907. The sisters opened a school and ran a hospice to be service to Maltese emigrants that had settled there. A convent was opened in Rome on 21 March 1927. On 18 October 1927, the sisters began missionary work in Sofia, Ethiopia. Several other houses were opened in Italy and Ethiopia. Later they also opened convents in London, Australia, Kenya, Brazil, Pakistan, and Israel. The Congregation has houses in the five continents of the world.

On 2 July 1937, the Holy See granted the Congregation the *Decretum Laudis*, its foundation was formally recognised by the Pope. This was the first locally-founded Congregation to be granted this recognition.

### *Benefactress*

Mother Margerita can indeed be considered as a great benefactor of Malta and Gozo on three counts.

She was the first promoter of women rights, almost a century before the beginning of the women's liberation movement in Malta. She insisted that the sisters of her Congregation impart lessons in several crafts to poor women so that they can earn some extra money to alleviate their poverty and raise their standard of living. Such crafts included lace-making, sewing, embroidery, weaving, and others.

It is due to her, to Dun Guzepp, and to her Congregation, that is a product known as Gozo Lace. Were it not for their promotion of this industry in numerous ways, lace making would have by now been long dead in the wake of mass making lace by sophisticated machinery.

Thirdly, it was Mother Margerita Congregation, and through her insistence, that the sisters opened schools in the poorest areas of Malta and Gozo thus providing a bare education to many that otherwise would not have had such an opportunity.

During her lifetime, Mother Margerita nurtured a great devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She passed long hours in adoration and prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament and often exhorted her sisters: "Let us love, the Love". She was also a great devotee of the Blessed Virgin Mary. When she died fifty years ago just past eighty nine, she had been in religious life for seventy one years, twenty seven of which as Superior General. In 1952, the number of Franciscan Sisters had risen to 450.

The process for her beatification is well under way and at the moment the Congregation of Saints is concluding its examination of a miraculous cure attributed to Mother Margerita.