



Image of Saint Maria Goretti, patron saint of youth, young women, purity and victims of rape

### Why name a Patron Saint for our Safe Environment Program?

A core belief of the Catholic faith is the Communion of Saints. This teaching recognizes the reality that love conquers all, including death. Our love for others does not end just because they are no longer living here among us on earth. And their love for us does not end either; those who have gone to be with the Lord now love us perfectly because they are in communion with the perfect love of God. And in that perfect love the Saints continue to love us, to care for us and to desire for us to one day join them. We can turn to them in our greatest need and when we are most challenged to love as Jesus commanded us – to love as He loved us.

Love and Mercy are always mutually present to each other. You cannot lack love and be merciful. You cannot lack mercy and yet love.

The scourge of child sexual abuse is a social evil, rooted in the ancient and ongoing failure of human beings to recognize the dignity and worth of each person as all are created in the image and likeness of God. That fundamental failure is then manifested in seeing others, not as persons, but as objects that can be used for personal gratification. And so there is no love, no mercy when one person chooses to sexually abuse another, especially when the person abused is a child who is dependent on and vulnerable to the abuser to love and protect them.

And so, we turn to the Communion of Saints for their help to bring love and mercy to the painful reality of child sexual abuse. For in love and mercy, victims of child sexual abuse find hope for healing from the trauma that abuse inflicted on them. In love and mercy we accompany victims in their journey towards healing. In love and mercy those who may be inclined to abuse others can find conversion of heart and rescue from a life of despair and emptiness of soul.

### Why choose Maria Goretti?

When Maria Goretti was just 12 years old, she was brutally attacked by a neighbor who failed in his attempt to rape her, but in his anger he repeatedly stabbed her, left her for dead and fled. The horrific details of this attack speak to the reality already mentioned above about the total lack of love and mercy in the heart of anyone who would abuse another, especially sexually abuse another. This is not an act of lust or even sexual desire. It is an act of anger, a loveless, merciless act of asserting complete dominance over another for self-gratification.

The attack on Maria also clearly demonstrates for us another reality that is almost always missed. No one can take another's innocence. No one can take another's dignity. God's image is still there. Harm inflicted on another does not change the reality that they are still a beloved child of God. When we, society, see victims of sexual abuse as damaged goods we victimize them a second time. Maria was still perfect, still innocent in God's eyes in spite of her many stab wounds. Maria would have been still perfect, still innocent in God's eyes even if her attacker would have been successful in raping her before he killed her.

Before she died Maria said that she wanted that one day her attacker would join her in Heaven. Maria brought love and mercy to her situation. It was what she could control; it was what she could choose to do. Was that easy for her? Is that a choice that all victims are emotionally and spiritually ready to do in the moment? Likely not! Did God meet her in that moment with His grace? Likely yes! This is what the saints do for us – they inspire us to what is possible with God. And already in that moment it brought peace to Maria's own heart.

And as love and mercy always flow outward, after years of incarceration with no remorse, no repentance, her attacker did eventually face the reality of his actions. Upon release from prison he

sought the forgiveness of Maria's mother who said, "If my daughter can forgive him, who am I to withhold forgiveness?" And so Maria's mother was freed from the burden of anger. Her attacker, Alessandro Serenelli, later became a lay brother of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, where he lived in a monastery and worked as its receptionist and gardener until his death. Through Maria's love and mercy and through Maria's mother's love and mercy Alessandro found God's love and mercy.

Maria Goretti brings example for us all to the harsh reality of child sexual abuse. She brings a face to our ongoing efforts to protect the most vulnerable among us, so that we never forget that this is not just a program, not just about compliance. She brings the reality that the fight against evil is a supernatural battle that can only be won by turning for help from supernatural love. Safe Environment is about protecting our children, God's children, and all individuals at risk. May we do all in our power to prevent physical, emotional and spiritual harm from being inflicted on them so that within our ministries done in the name of Jesus and His Church God's love and mercy flows ever outward, ever life-giving, and ever life-sustaining.

Saint Maria Goretti, pray for us.