



St Gerard Majella

Gerard was born in Muro Lucano in southern Italy, a small town about 50 miles south east of Naples on 6th April 1726 the youngest of five children. He was apparently frail from birth so his parents had him baptised the day he was born. From his parents he learned the love of prayer and sacrifice. His father Domenico Majella, a tailor who died when Gerard was 12 years old, left the family in poverty. His mother, Benedetta Galella, then sent him as her only son to her brother so that he could teach Gerard to sew and follow in his father's footsteps as a tailor to support the family.

However, the foreman of the tailor's firm he joined did not stop the abusive and bullying from other apprentices that Gerard suffered that made his life a misery. Gerard accepted his situation in silence but when his uncle discovered the truth he dismissed the foreman. After four years Gerard aged 16 finished his apprenticeship but instead of taking up work as a tailor he took a job as a servant to work for the local Bishop of Lacedonia, Monsignor Claudio Albini, due to his interest in the

Church and the religious life. The bishop was harsh and severe and often gave out irrational punishments to those in his service. Gerard spent three years absorbing punishment and humiliation which he took with the same equanimity he had shown in the tailor's workshop.

When the bishop died in 1745, Gerard aged 19 returned to his trade as a tailor, working first as a journeyman and then on his own account sharing his income with his mother and the poor in the area. He tried to join the *Capuchin Order* but his poor health, often caused by austere living, penances and fasting, led to continual refusals. When missionaries visited his town he persisted in asking to join them. In 1749 aged 23 he was finally accepted by the *Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*, known as the *Redemptorists*, as a lay Brother. The Order had been recently set up in 1732 by Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787) at Scala near Naples and dedicated to preaching the word of God to the poor as well as leading missions and retreats. Through practical work, prayer, humility and strict observance of the Redemptorist rule he was soon a great asset to the Order. In his journeys with the missionaries he served those around him with remarkable generosity.

During his life, Gerard developed a close bond with the Neapolitan peasant community helping them in many ways both spiritual and practical. He was deeply united to Jesus in prayer, penance and meditation. In his work with the Redemptorist community as a lay Brother he showed he had a variety of practical skills to help develop the Order. He took on tasks with his skills as a tailor to make Redemptorist habits, as a sacristan preparing the church for Mass, work in the infirmary with the sick, manning the door of the monastery, so aiding those who came seeking help. Gerard saw to the practical needs of the monastery as a gardener, a porter, a cook, a carpenter and finally a clerk of works on the new building of a monastery at Caposele east of Naples. He had a particular skill at collecting money from rich people to help the poor and vulnerable. Gerard was remarkable for his apostolic zeal, patience in sickness, deep humility and love of those in need and his ministry and example encouraged many people to return to the Church and the sacraments.

What makes Gerard remarkable in his role as a lay brother is the way he approached his work. He took on the most menial tasks with a quality of attention and joy that the other brothers found striking. He would, when no one was watching, prostrate himself before the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel for hours. He fasted with an intensity that alarmed his superiors, slept little and prayed constantly. Many witnesses testified that during periods of deep prayer and meditation, particularly during Mass or when contemplating the Eucharist, Gerard's body was observed rising several feet above the ground. These episodes of levitation accompanied states of ecstasy for which he was embarrassed rather than being proud. It is also claimed he had power as a mystic of bilocation, being in two places at the same time. One account has him appearing suddenly before his superior Alphonsus Liguori in the rectory at Pagani in response to a summons while Gerard was physically located elsewhere. Alphonsus, who was cautious about extraordinary phenomena and would not have recorded such an event lightly.

Neria Caggiano was a young woman from Lacedonia whom Gerard had helped to enter the Convent of San Salvatore in Foggia. She lacked the required dowry so Gerard went to considerable effort to arrange for friends to provide it. After three weeks in the convent Neria found the life too demanding and left. To justify her departure and protect her reputation, she began spreading stories about the nuns that people refused to believe. When her stories found no audience she sent a letter to Gerard's superior Alphonsus accusing Gerard of impurity with the daughter of the Cappucci family, a prominent family in Lacedonia with whom Gerard knew well. His superior, Alphonsus Liguori questioned him but to avoid exposing the real person, Gerard accepted the blame silently following the example of Jesus being accused and challenged by Pontius Pilate. He had every opportunity to clear his name but gave no defence and declined any explanation despite being strongly pressed. Consequently Gerard was banned from receiving Holy Communion and forbidden from all contact with people outside the monastery. Sometimes later Neria Caggiano fell dangerously ill and in the face of what she believed was her approaching death, she wrote a letter to Alphonsus confessing that every charge she had brought against Gerard was a fabrication. Alphonsus immediately lifted all restrictions for Gerard and he was restored to full standing in the community.

Gerard wrote numerous letters giving spiritual direction and guidance which have been preserved by the Redemptorists. He died aged 29 of tuberculosis after a fever that lasted a month on 16th October 1755 in Materdomini east of Naples. His last will had been written as a small note on the door of his cell "Here the will of God is done, as God wills, and as long as God wills".

During the six years as a Redemptorist lay Brother many miracles were reported. He restored the life to a boy who had fallen from a high cliff. After blessing the scant supply of wheat belonging to a poor family he made it last until the next harvest. Several times he miraculously multiplied the bread that he was distributing to the poor. One day Gerard walked across the water to lead a boatload of fishermen through stormy waves to the safety of the shore. He was reputed to have had the ability to read souls to find hidden sins, which frequently led people to make complete and honest confessions. Even before joining the Redemptorists a miracle was reported when he worked as a servant to the Bishop of Lacedonia. Gerard accidentally dropped a heavy house key down a deep well. He lowered a small statue of the infant Jesus into the water and when he pulled it back up the key was clasped in the hand of Jesus.

Gerard seems to have had a strange knack for consoling couples desperate for children that their prayers would soon be answered. One alleged miracle in particular explains how Gerard subsequently became known as the special patron of mothers, "the mother's saint". A few months before his death, he visited the Pirofalo family and accidentally dropped his handkerchief. One of the Pirofalo girls spotted the handkerchief moments after he had left the house and she ran after Gerard to return it to him. However, he told her to keep it in case she might need it someday. Years later, when the girl, now a married woman, was on the verge of dying in childbirth, she remembered his earlier words. She asked for the handkerchief to be brought to her. Immediately the pain disappeared and she gave birth to a healthy child. Word of the apparent miracle spread quickly. During the long process for the beatification of Gerard, one witness testified that he was known as "il santo dei felice parti", the saint of happy childbirths. At that time in the 18th century only about one third of pregnancies resulted in a live birth. After his death his prayers are sought for children, for unborn children, women in childbirth, mothers, expectant mothers, motherhood, falsely accused people, good confessions, lay Brothers and Muro Lucano where he was born.

Gerard Majella was beatified in Rome on 29th January 1893 by Pope Leo XIII. He was canonised less than 12 years later on 11th December 1904 by Pope Pius X. Four years later St Gerard's, a Redemptorist church in Wellington, New Zealand was dedicated to him, the first in the world of the many that followed. The *Sanctuary of San Gerardo Majella* is a basilica in Materdomini, Italy where he died is dedicated to him. This is a major shrine to him and the walls are covered with pictures of babies and the ceiling is a sea of pink and blue ribbons pinned up by parents in thanksgiving.

To mark the 300th anniversary of his birth in 2026, the Redemptorists are taking his relics on a tour visiting every diocese in England and Wales.

The feast day of St Gerard Majella is on 16th October, the date of his death. He is particularly venerated in North America and Canada.