

love. So much did they come to love her that they took the extraordinary step of welcoming her into the order. Usually, it was well-off older women — mostly widows — who joined. But here was Margaret, a young, homeless, unmarried woman with multiple disabilities professing her vows and accepting the Dominican habit.

With her entry into the larger Dominican family, Margaret was welcomed among some of the city's noble families. Not long after her profession, the wealthy Venturino family invited her to live with them. At first, they put Margaret up in the most comfortable of their guest rooms. But Margaret wanted to live out the poverty she professed, so she pressed them to let her move into the much smaller and more spartan garret just under the roof. At last Margaret had found a home, a family, and a place in the Church. She couldn't be happier.

A NEW MISSION

You would think that Margaret might take this new chapter in her life as an opportunity to rest and enjoy at least some measure of comfort. But this didn't even occur to her. For as soon as she was settled in her new home, she began going out to care for the poor of Città di Castello.

This woman, who had lived in abject poverty and who had been cast aside by those who should have loved her best, poured herself out for the needy and forgotten around her. She nursed the sick. She begged food for them. She taught their daughters the catechism. She visited the impoverished inmates in the prison, offering words of comfort and praying with them. And everywhere she went, she brought the love of Christ.



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Margaret spent the rest of her short life caring for the poor and imprisoned of her adopted hometown. When she died in 1320, at the age of thirty-three, the entire city turned out to mourn her passing. Margaret was so beloved by the people that they begged her parish priest to bend the rules and allow her to be buried within the church itself. It didn't hurt that a child with disabilities was miraculously healed even as the people were arguing with the pastor!

After Margaret's death, the miracles kept flowing. In fact, more than two hundred have been attributed to her intercession. She was beatified in 1609, and on April 24, 2021, Pope Francis declared her a saint.

MARGARET'S MESSAGE

Margaret of Castello's deep faith, her trust in God's providence, and her determination to serve the poor and abandoned continue to inspire millions throughout the world who experience disabilities. But her reach isn't limited to just one group. She urges those without disabilities to see people like her as equal partners in spreading the Gospel. She shows that disability is not the same as inability, and that everyone is capable of serving the Lord and his people.

Beyond the issue of serving the Lord, Margaret reveals an even more fundamental truth: Everyone can have a deep, life-giving relationship with Jesus. She is a model of perseverance and faith for anyone who experiences any challenge in their lives — in other words, for all of us. She urges us to press on in faith through whatever darkness we are experiencing because God is faithful. If we rely on the logic of divine love as Margaret did, we can trust that our heavenly Father will see us through, and that in the end we will know his presence and love.



Margaret of Castello by Andrea di Bartolo (c. 1394-98), Wikimedia Commons

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SAINT MARGARET of Castello



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If we were to look at the life of Margaret of Castello with the cold eye of human logic, we might come away asking one simple question: How is this woman even possible? She was born with multiple disabilities, her parents treated her with cruel indifference, and she was forced to begin her adult years as a homeless beggar on the streets of a strange city. Human logic would tell us that, given all she endured, Margaret should have grown into a woman filled either with bitterness and anger or with anxiety, depression, and despair.

But neither of these happened. Instead, Margaret grew into a compassionate and loving woman who always left people happier than when she met them. That's because she discovered a different kind of logic — the logic of divine love.

A CHILD REJECTED

Margaret was born in 1287 to Parisio and Emilia, a proud couple of the Castle Metolo near Perugia, Italy. They were eagerly looking forward to the arrival of their first child, but when the time came, they were horrified at what they saw. The girl was very small, she had a curvature in her spine that left her with a hunched back, and one leg was shorter than the other. She was also blind.

This was not at all what the couple expected, and they were determined to hide their daughter from public view. They let it out that she had died in childbirth. If it weren't for the compassion of one of the servants in the castle, Margaret would never have been baptized. Together with Fra Giacomo Cappellano, the castle chaplain, this servant taught Margaret how to navigate the castle. They taught her the Faith as well, and they recruited other servants

to help shield her from visitors who might discover her parents' secret.

Over time, Margaret's natural curiosity took her into the more public areas of the castle. After one close call, when some visiting dignitaries happened upon the tiny, blind girl bent over a walking stick, Parisio took swift action. He had Margaret — who was only six years old at the time — enclosed in a small room adjacent to a nearby chapel. Fra Cappellano was allowed to visit her, and a servant was tasked with bringing her daily meals. Her cell had a window that opened to the chapel so she could hear daily Mass and the singing of matins and vespers. But for the rest of the time, little Margaret was completely alone with her thoughts and her God.

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FINDING GOD IN SOLITUDE

During Margaret's thirteen years in the enclosure, she developed a deep faith and abandonment to God's will. But when news came of an imminent invasion, her father ordered that she be imprisoned in a small, dank basement cell in a nearby castle. Fra Cappellano, her only true companion, could no longer visit her, and she couldn't hear Mass or have the comfort of being near Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Her only human interaction was with the servant who brought her food every day.

It is believed that Margaret spent the next two years in what was essentially solitary confinement. Throughout this time, she relied on all she had learned from Fra Cappellano, especially his lessons about surrendering to God and trusting in his care and providence.

When it became clear that no invasion was coming, Parisio and Emilia decided to take Margaret to the tomb of a recently deceased Franciscan friar in the town of Città di Castello. Miracles had been reported there, so they made the pilgrimage in the hopes that Margaret might be healed. Margaret's parents joined her for morning Mass at the tomb, and then instructed her to remain there all day and beseech the Lord to heal her. Filled with hope, and no doubt grateful to be out of her prison, Margaret eagerly complied.

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A NEW FAMILY

But nothing happened. When Margaret's parents returned that evening, they saw their hunched, blind, "deformed" daughter kneeling, still in prayer. Believing they had done all they could, they decided to leave her there. They slipped away quietly without saying good-bye or providing her with any money or means to care for herself. Margaret was abandoned, left alone to fend for herself in a strange city.

Margaret was heartbroken that her parents had deserted her, but she quickly discovered a new kind of family in the homeless of Città de Castello. Much like the servants in her parents' castle, these men and women offered her support and companionship. They taught her the streets and alleyways of the city. They shared food with her, taught her how to beg for her own food, and showed her the safest places where she could rest at night or take shelter from the wind and the rain. Margaret had trusted that God would take care of her, and he did — in the actions of the poor and homeless.

Courtesy photo / Blessed Margaret Guild and Shrine



Saint Margaret of Castello has long been honored as a model and patron for persons with disabilities, and for that reason she is especially dear to the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD). Rooted in Gospel values that affirm the dignity of every person, NCPD seeks to work collaboratively to ensure meaningful participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of the life of the Church and society. Charleen Katra, NCPD's executive director, believes that Margaret continues to shine a light in the darkness even today. "Her life," says Katra, "was rife with challenges, but she still exemplified unconditional love and a total dependence on God in all circumstances. God fashioned Margaret to forever represent his artistry in our diversity."

May we seek to be as holy and humble a servant for God as she was. Saint Margaret, pray for us!

A NEW HOME

Every morning, Margaret would make her way to the Chiesa della Carità, a church run by the Dominicans of the city, to join in morning Mass. It was there that she was introduced to members of the Third Order of St. Dominic. Like her homeless friends, these lay Dominicans came to revere Margaret's prayerfulness, her humility, and her gentle way of sharing Christ's