

Gerard's wit was evident in how he lived the vow of obedience—to a fault. For example, when instructed to “not ride the donkey into town,” Gerard would *walk* the donkey into town and then ride it back home! Or, when the representative of a Duchess once came and announced that she wished to see Brother Gerard, he replied, “I am afraid that I cannot *bring* you that Brother. To tell you the truth, he is only a simpleton and a fool. People, as I find, are strangely mistaken about him here at Naples. Please tell the Duchess so...”

This Duchess herself found Gerard at the church and begged him to cure her sick child. Gerard pointed to the Tabernacle, “There dwells the Giver of all good gifts.” He promised to pray for her. The Duchess was still in the church when her maiden came in to report that the child was well.

During Redemptorist missions, his task was to help prepare penitents for confession. Gerard had a particular ministry of spiritual direction for religious sisters, corresponding with them and preaching to them. At least three convents were reformed in their spiritual life under his care. This fact is quite extraordinary, given that Gerard was not a priest. Yet, due to his character, he was given the necessary permissions. Priests would also consult Gerard for spiritual direction.

Here is an excerpt from among Gerard's many letters:

“There is no need to dwell on the surface of daily events, but rather, to scrutinize them with the eyes of faith. The project and the loving presence of God are real, even beneath the crust of events that at first glance seem to be harsh.” [When we can see that], “it is possible to live always in serenity, knowing well that in God's plan lies our happiness and fulfilment.”

Having grown up in a household of women, Gerard showed a special concern for them. Once, as he was leaving the house of a family he visited, one of the daughters ran after him to let him know that he'd dropped his handkerchief. “Keep it,” he said. “It will be useful to you someday.” Years later, she found herself in a difficult pregnancy and childbirth. Remembering his words, she requested Brother Gerard's handkerchief. Her pain ceased, and the baby was born healthy. Thus, he is the patron of expectant mothers.

He died of tuberculosis. Countless miracles are attributed to his intercession.

### Socials with the Saints

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Sources include biographies by Edward Saint-Omer and O.R. Vassall-Phillips, Redemptorists



## St. Gerard Majella

**Born:** 23 Apr 1725 in Muro, Italy

**Died:** 16 Oct, 1755 in Caposele, Italy

**Feast Day:** October 16

**Canonized:** 11 Dec 1904 by Pope Pius X

**Patron of:** Lay brothers, expectant mothers, children, a good confession, and the falsely accused

From his youngest years, Gerard Majella was frail and suffered ill health. Yet, while contemplative by nature, he also had a great deal of wit and gusto.

Gerard loved to spend time at church from the age of about five years old. He would return home from these visits and hand his mother a loaf of bread. When asked about the source of the bread, Gerard would reply, “A most beautiful boy at church gives it to me.” To investigate, his sister followed him. To her astonishment, the statue of the Christ Child came to life upon Gerard's arrival to the church, jumped out of His Mother's arms, and proceeded to play with Gerard. After some time, Jesus would hand Gerard the bread and return to the arms of the Virgin Mary as before.

Gerard appeared quite younger than his age due to his ill health; so much so that, when he approached the Communion Rail to receive First Communion at the proper age, the priest passed over him. Gerard ran off in tears. The following evening, St. Michael the Archangel came to Gerard and gave him his First Communion. Some time after, the parish priest asked Gerard what he was doing kneeling near the altar. Gerard replied, “A little Child came out of the tabernacle and gave me Holy Communion!” He formally received the Sacrament at age 10, and continued to receive it as often as possible.

When Gerard was 12, his father, a tailor, passed away. To help support his mother and three sisters, Gerard apprenticed with another tailor. The tailor's foreman regularly verbally and physically abused Gerard, who forgave him in the name of Jesus. Eventually, the foreman was fired.

At 16 years old, Gerard was employed by the Bishop's household. The bishop was not cruel, but he did have a temper. Once, Gerard accidentally dropped the bishop's housekey down the water well. After praying about what to do, Gerard fetched a statue of the Child Jesus. He tied a rope around

the statue's waist, and sent Jesus down the well! As he drew him up again, there in the Holy Child's hand was the key.

After the bishop passed away, Gerard worked a couple of other jobs. He would divide up his earnings this way: One-third for the poor, a third for the family, and a third to offer to the church for Masses to be said for the souls in Purgatory. Gerard embraced many bodily sacrifices such as fasting on only bread and wearing a coarse 'hair shirt' under his clothing. He went to extremes at times, to experience the tortures Jesus suffered; such as binding himself to a wooden beam and inhaling smoke from burning rags. His mother often wept to see her already-frail son suffer from such practices.

At twenty years old, Gerard worked as a tailor for a man named Malpiedi, who had opened a school for the children of wealthy families. Gerard would tailor the clothes of the students, who insulted and struck him. Malpiedi sometimes whipped Gerard. Even children in the street would bully him, throwing rocks at him or tying him up with cords and dragging him around.

Gerard applied to the Capuchin friars, but because of his ill health, they did not allow him to enter their order. One day, he passed by some Redemptorists—a religious order founded by St. Alphonsus Liguori, dedicated to bringing the Gospel to the poor and to the most abandoned people. Gerard eagerly inquired with them about entry. Their response was that their rigorous way of life would be too much for his frailty.

However, the following year, after hearing the Redemptorists preach a local parish mission, he begged several times again for entry. His mother sobbed, asking Gerard not to leave her side. The family even locked him in his room. However, he escaped out of the window, leaving them a note that read: "I am going to become a Saint. Think no more of me."

Gerard caught up with the Redemptorists, who had left town and were on their way to another destination. "Try me first," he pleaded with them. The Superior was convinced to give him a chance, sending him to their house in Illiceto with a letter reading, "I am sending you a useless brother."

Upon his return, however, the Superior found that all the brothers praised Gerard's virtue and dedication to work. He was a gardener, then a sacristan. On July 16, 1752, he professed his final vows as a Redemptorist brother: poverty, chastity, obedience, and perseverance—the final of which was unique to the Redemptorists due to their demanding vocation.

Because their community was experiencing a remarkable trial of poverty, Gerard was put to work asking benefactors for their assistance. His holy and happy countenance made him successful.

Once, Gerard gave away all the brothers' bread to the poor. Appalled, another Brother confronted him, and the two went to the rector. Gerard said, "God will provide... Let us go and see. Perhaps there is still some left." The other Brother assured the rector that there most certainly would not be a morsel left, but when they opened the bread cupboard, it was completely filled. Gerard ran to the church to give thanks to God, while the other two men were left amazed. The rector concluded, "Let us then leave Gerard alone, for of a truth Our Lord is pleased to play with him."

Two years after he'd made his vows, a young woman in town began to gossip about Gerard, even claiming he had fathered a child. When his superiors questioned him, he only replied that God knew the truth. He returned to his room, and carved in the doorpost: "Here the will of God is done, as God wills, and as long as God wills." He obediently followed orders that kept him home, away from ministry, and he was denied the Eucharist.

Gerard was at peace. The brothers wondered at this. Was he guilty? Did he have no conscience? After three months, the young woman confessed that she had lied. Her name was Neria, and she'd come from a poor family. Earlier, Gerard had helped her raise money to enter the convent (similar to a dowry at the time). Neria, however, had become homesick, left the convent, and had taken out her embarrassment and upset feelings on Gerard.

Alphonsus Liguori asked Gerard why he hadn't defended himself. Gerard took the Redemptorist Rule and pointed to the section instructing that, if falsely accused, a Redemptorist is not to defend himself. Alphonsus, the moral theologian and former lawyer, would go on to say that Gerard was a better Redemptorist than himself. "Brother Gerard is a saint."

Gerard slept on the bare floor only a couple of hours each night. He continued his typical fasting, and regularly ate bitter herbs as a penance. Until recently, all Redemptorists were to whip themselves with cords as a way to discipline their senses. Gerard would often do so until he bled.

Yet, he was not a dour man. Recent research has found that Brother Gerard liked to play practical jokes. His wit and humor drew people of all vocations to want to spend time with him.